JUNGLE TREKKING IN LIBERIA

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In the middle of the night high above the Atlantic I looked down at my airline dinner of white fish recalling that over forty years before the English novelist Graham Greene had faced the very same dish in a railway dining car as he started forth on *his* Liberian journey. Pondering this I wondered whether the Liberia through which Greene so relentlessly trudged was still to be found. Had modern ways penetrated to the backwaters of this West African land, altering its face forever?

As it turned out we were spared most of the discomforts and dangers he described in his *Journey Without Maps*, but paging through this marvelous travel book, surrounded by restlessly sleeping kids and lulled by the steady drone of the jet engines, I couldn't avoid wondering what really lay in store for us. Having read Greene's account of fierce rats and voracious cockroaches, armies of fever-carrying mosquitoes and unstoppable columns of driver ants, drenching rains and suffocating heat, masked devil worshippers and black magic, it was not an easy mental feat to look ahead without at least some misgivings.

Another quite different concern was bothering me as well: Just how well would 15 students, none older than 15 years, pull through on an expedition in an unfamiliar country far from the comforts of home and family?

"Why don't you come along with us," Dan had asked months before. I had traveled extensively in Africa and the prospect of going back again, even for three weeks, was immediately appealing. But I had some nagging doubts about being off in the bush with young boys. I had had no experience with them, first of all. More importantly, would the adults—there were eight of us—end up as little more than nursemaids? Would there be grumbling and foot slogging and homesickness?

"You'll be surprised," Dan assured me. "These kids are so excited about the trip. They're too young to be overwhelmed by culture shock. You'll see, first thing into a village they'll be off and running with the native kids, darting in and out of huts, asking countless questions and generally displaying few of the inhibitions that you and I will have." I made a show of agreeing but I still wasn't so sure.

I first came to know Dan Senecal through the Explorers Club, to which we both belong, and the Expedition Training Institute, a non-profit organization that works to put students in the field with scientific expeditions. Widely-traveled (and in the most interesting way), his enthusiasm for new and more challenging adventures is both genuine and infectious. It was his idea to go to Liberia; he organized and was now leading the expedition. A teacher at a private school in suburban Boston, Dan saw the undertaking as an educational experience in the broadest sense. A group of his students, diverse as to background and age, would

be exposed to new peoples, new environments and new values. They couldn't fail to learn from this exposure something about the world at large and in a more subtle way about themselves as individuals. What better way for boys to gain a sense of their limits and capabilities? We as adults would, of course, also learn from the boys and, it was hoped, so would the Liberians we were about to come in contact with.

It seemed an ambitious and worthy plan. Unique as well for this was probably the first time that such young Americans would attempt a real-life expedition in such a far-off and little known area of the world.

These were the thoughts playing in my mind as the first morning light filtered through the windows of the plane and those around me began to stir. Gradually descending we soon broke through the cloud layer and excited voices called out, "There's Africa!" Sure enough, below us stretching far into the distance was a thin yellow strip of beach backed up by endless miles of dense green. We had indeed arrived.

Moments later as we walked to the terminal building at Roberts Field my first sensations were of moist early morning heat—winter was still lingering on in Boston—mixed with that sweet indescribable fragrance, neither pleasant nor disagreeable, which seems so characteristic of tropical Africa. The formalities of customs and immigration were accomplished with surprising ease and soon we and our multicolored collection of mostly untried backpacks were squeezed into a small bus bearing the name *Black Mose* (no Liberian bus or taxi remains nameless).

As we pulled away from the airport on our way to the capital of Monrovia, 40 miles up the coast, one of the boys close to me shouted, "Look, a Firebird!" Quickly aiming his camera he snapped his first African photograph, catching on film a sleek new Pontiac!

Drawing nearer to Monrovia, a city of close to 150,000 people, our senses began to pick out the distinctive traits and flavors of West Africa: The bold and colorful dress of the women; the heavy loads skillfully balanced atop padded heads; the sleeping babies closely wrapped to their mothers' backs; the young hawkers with their trays of cigarettes and candy; the jumble of stucco walls and corrugated tin roofs; the narrow roadside paths worn bare and packed hard by the constant parade of feet; the bustling activity and almost medieval air of the markets.

Monrovia lacks the appeal and sophistication of French-speaking Abijan or Dakar, and there's little surface evidence of a growing prosperity such as one sees in Nairobi. Few international tourists ever make their way here. Most visitors are businessmen or engineers passing through on their way to or from the backcountry iron mines or Firestone's extensive rubber plantations. There's a certain calm and stability to be found in Liberia that's not at all usual elsewhere in Africa. This may grow out of its long history of independence. With the exception of Ethiopia it's the only African country that has never experienced the trauma of colonialization. For the most part the strident nationalism we so often read about in the newspapers is absent here. Moreover, Liberians are very receptive to American ways, for us a happy situation when it came to securing official

recognition for the expedition. Settled in 1822 by slaves repatriated from America, Liberia has long enjoyed special ties with the United States, even to the extent of adopting the American dollar as the official currency.
Expedition planning is frustratingly difficult to do from a distance of thousands of miles, doubly so in the case of Africa where misinformation is usually the rule and communications are irksome at best. About all we were able to do beforehand was to book some rooms at "The Travelers Roost," a small hotel over a row of shops on the main thoroughfare. The limited number of rooms necessitated some pushing and cramming with the final effect being one of wall-to-wall boys and backpacks.

Although anxious to get upcountry with as little delay as possible, we had a long list of things that needed doing first. At this point we instituted a division of labor of the sort that is vital to the success of any expedition. The boys would now get their first lesson in the importance of working together toward a common end. Some helped with the production-line completion of immigration papers while others scoured the town for last minute odds and ends of equipment. Winter clothes worn on the trip over needed to be packed and stored. Information and advice had to be tracked down, officials consulted, maps obtained and studied, transport arranged. Once away from the coast we would pretty much be playing it by ear so it was especially important to be prepared. Such a seemingly casual approach to things was really quite purposeful. Dan took the view that a far greater sense of adventure, challenge and ultimately accomplishment would result if the expedition were not so structured or so planned out that all perception of confronting the unknown and unexpected was extinguished.

Finally, all details had been attended to and nothing stood in the way of our departure. We had decided to make for the northeast on Liberia's only proper road, driving straight through to the small town of Bakiedu not far from the Guinea border, a trip of 250 rough and dusty miles. The main population centers are well served by a vast armada of competing transport companies. Japanese trucks somewhat larger than vans are fitted out with benches inside and luggage racks on top. The sides are left open but with pull-down canvas flaps as protection alternatively against the choking red dust or heavy tropical downpours. I was both amazed and amused at the number of people—and occasionally animals—that were loaded into these vehicles. Seemingly without complaint the passengers are sardined in by young men referred to as "Cowboys," an almost fearless breed who are very adept at scrambling in, out and over the vehicles as they speed dangerously along. I suppose it's a romantic and highly enviable occupation in the eyes of most backcountry Liberian youngsters.

Having arranged for a truck all to ourselves we escaped somewhat the horrors of Liberian public transportation. But the fit was by any other standard still tight: 23 in a space more appropriate for a dozen. The name of our vehicle, *Why Hurray*, in no way reflected the intentions of our driver. We started off fast and with the exception of a blow-out sped on for a full 12 hours. By universal agreement it was a 12 hours best forgotten. There were few opportunities to take in the changing scenery: the dense jungle punctuated here and there by towering trees or, where cleared, the precisely sited rubber trees carpeting the rolling hills;

the roadside string of huts every few miles; the occasional crossing of a sluggish river. The heavy corrugation of the road surface kept us in continual vibration and the stray unavoidable pothole shot us upward *en masse* to the low roof. Not risky for the boys perhaps but worrisome for this taller balding adult. It was discomforting to notice the evidence of earlier journeys: The metal roof struts inches above my head were bent and daubed with dried blood!

As midnight approached and we turned onto the narrow side road leading to Bakiedu, the air suddenly cooled and a steady rain began to fall. With the terrain becoming steeper the road degenerated to little more than a rutted path. We were in and out of *Why Hurray* several times in order to lighten the load and get us over the worst stretches. Finally, just as exhaustion and cramped muscles were giving way to impatience and irritability, we came to a halt. Although looking like the middle of nowhere, we were actually just outside Bakiedu, the end of the road. Because of the late hour, however, it seemed wisest to save our potentially unsettling, certainly puzzling entrance to the town for the following morning. In a clearing off to one side was an elementary school—as it happened modern western-style building in the district— the only which was equipped with a spacious and protected verandah, a welcomed sight in the rainy darkness. Within no more than 10 minutes we had hauled our equipment down from the truck, were out of our wet clothes and into our sleeping bags. It was a weary but contented crew that dozed off to the sound of rain on the tin roof.

We were awoken early next day by the rising sun and soon were up rearranging and stowing our gear. As we did so several natives passed by on the way to their farms. Waving machetes they calmly hailed us with the word *Asoma*, good morning. It was difficult not to marvel at such placid acceptance of what couldn't possibly have been an everyday sight: 23 total strangers camped in the local schoolyard. Although always curious we never found the Liberians overly startled or suspicious of our presence. I had a pretty good idea of how we would react at home in a comparable situation.

Rip and Jay, two of the adults, had earlier walked into the town to survey the scene and to announce and explain our arrival. Along with delicious hot loaves of bread for breakfast, they brought back the good news that the town chief was pleased that we had come to visit and that a grand welcome was at that moment being prepared. Evidently the citizenry were busily changing into their finery.

With packs on our back for the first time and a certain trepidation we started towards Bakiedu which in a few moments came into view ahead, a hilltop collection of cinderblock tin-roofed houses set off by the occasional circular mud and thatch hut of traditional design. Just where the road entered the town I could make out a large throng of people; the entire population had turned out to greet us.

I felt a sort of goldfish bowl self-consciousness walking into the midst of those friendly yet reserved Africans. Protocol and ceremony are important here so considerable time was spent with speeches of welcome and by the chief and town elders countered by effusive outpourings of appreciation by Dan.

Chief Camou Dali, elderly and with an unmistakable air of dignified authority, seemed genuinely pleased to have us in his town. After a round of handshaking that reminded me of a wedding reception back home we were led to the town hall nearby where a second cycle of speeches and lofty utterances got underway. For the local citizens the oddest bit of the proceedings must have been the impromptu karate demonstration staged by Greg Palandjian, a skillful brown belt. Although I'm sure the elders had never witnessed anything quite like it

before, it wasn't lost on the young boys of the town: For the next few days they never tired of imitating the graceful motions and maneuvers.

Our intention was to stay in Bakiedu for at least three days so the boys could acclimatize to the surroundings and obtain as well a sense of African village life. Additionally, we needed to find out as much as possible about the neighboring tribes, the local traveling conditions, terrain and walking times, the availability of food and water, and all the other knowledge so essential to the intelligent planning of a jungle trek. As our party included a film crew of two we would also need to recruit a number of porters to help with the mass of heavy photographic equipment.

Camou Dali assured us of his cooperation in all this which made things infinitely easier. We were also invited to make the town hall our temporary home, because of the nightly rains a convenience we were grateful for. Of course this had its drawbacks particularly in terms of privacy. From sun up to well into the evening the open windows were lined with curious faces that took in and commented upon each and every motion, activity, piece of equipment and article of clothing. The open doorways proved a bother, too. In the depths of night our peaceful slumbers were more than once interrupted by startled goats prancing over our even more startled bodies. I seem to have a dim remembrance of a cow wandering in as well. And situated only a few feet away was the mosque where every morning at 4 a.m. the townspeople would gather to pray and chant. Thus our stay at the Bakiedu town hall, although colorful and memorable, could not be termed tranquil.

As Dan had predicted weeks earlier the boys were off every which way once the initial spate of greetings had subsided. Although we adults might be a bit cautious and inhibited, they surely weren't and within no time they had cased out most of the town, struck up relationships with some of the local kids and, as was inevitable, become familiar with the entire edible and drinkable stock of the three or four small shops.

Down below the town at the foot of the hill flowed the Lofa, one of Liberia's major rivers. Rising in neighboring Guinea and running to the sea north of Monrovia, it's the town's *raison d'etre*: its water supply, laundry, food source and swimming hole. Even though the dry season had caused the water level to drop and the current to weaken, the Lofa's sandy banks were still the ideal place to escape the 90° afternoon heat. It was the river that became the setting for the most obvious interplay between the boys of Boston and those of Bakiedu. The swimming, splashing and horseplay were intensified by the frisbees and small footballs that had been brought from home. The speed with which the native boys picked up the techniques of American play was remarkable. I spent a good bit of my time observing this active and happy scene while suspended in my string hammock in the shade of the giant trees along the river's edge.

The staple food of this area is rice flavored with whatever is at hand: fish from the river, vegetables, bouillon cubes or on special occasions chicken or tinned meats. Rather than do our own cooking—which would have been awkward with the little equipment we had—the chief arranged for one of the women in his family to do it for us. Really only one cooked meal a day was necessary. Breakfast was fresh bread hot from the bakery; lunch, fruits such as bananas,

papaya or delicious pineapple. At the end of the day our dinner would arrive in a large decorated basin perched atop the head of our cook. The rice was filling and there was always plenty of it, but soon even the most stolid among us were plagued by visions of more appetizing fare.

We were able to duplicate these arrangements at each of the villages we visited; taking our own rice with us we never had difficulty in finding a willing cook to oversee its preparation. I had at first been skeptical of our ability to eat properly without packing in most of our own food and equipment. After all it's a lot to expect a tiny village to be able to feed 23 people arriving suddenly out of nowhere. To my surprise, however, it was never a problem and I suppose we could have gone on indefinitely in the same manner. Drinking water was another thing entirely. We never encountered cool and clear springwater. it was always river water and it generally was cloudy in appearance. Consequently much time and effort had to be devoted to fetching, transporting and purifying, tasks we were reluctant to leave to others out of hygienic considerations.

Something should be said about the people of this region. Most are Mandingo, an ethnolinguistic group that is concentrated in adjacent areas of Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. On the tall side, very black and typically with delicate facial features, they are overwhelmingly Muslim which is reflected in their preference for the loose ankle-length robes and skull caps associated with the peoples of North Africa. Although once great and far-ranging traders, the Mandingo are now mostly farmers, each working a small patch of jungle within a mile or so of their village. These have been laboriously cleared in a slash and burn fashion and though never fully groomed are adequate for the cultivation of fruits, palm trees, corn and millet. The making of palm oil is the major agricultural industry. Produced from palm kernels by an involved process of oxidation, pounding, shredding and boiling, the oil, used locally in cooking, is exported chiefly to soap manufacturers.

The day we arrived in Bakiedu was a day for resting and orienting ourselves to the town's way of life. By the following day, however, Dan thought it time to get the boys out into the bush so that they could see what the country was like and adjust themselves to the heat. We needed as well a brisk workout to shape us up for the trek ahead. Without packs we waded across the Lofa, scrambled up the far bank and onto a narrow well-worn path that we were told led to the village of Busu, judging from the map about 2-1/2 miles away. Though an easy walk in terms of terrain it was surprising how we, particularly the adults, reacted to being at last in the jungle and by ourselves. By the end of the expedition the jungle held no fear for us at all. We would dart off the path and into the dense undergrowth without a second thought. On this first occasion, however, the jungle held a mystique that was somehow discomforting. Realizing this to be largely a psychological product of countless adventure stories and Hollywood movies helped somewhat to allay such qualms but not entirely so. After all who could say whether a deadly black mamba might not be laying in wait just off the path?

Reaching Busu we received a warm welcome but again there was no undue surprise shown over our unannounced appearance. We had a short palaver with the chief and elders, were plied with bunches of ripe bananas, smiled back and

forth and proudly showed off our recently perfected Liberian handshakes (a long shake flowing into a fingersnapping release), and then departed as casually as we had arrived. Within a couple of hours we were back again on the Lofa enjoying a refreshing late afternoon swim.

That evening as we went over the events of the day one very sobering fact hit home. During our time in the jungle we had not once seen or heard any wildlife, no tracks even or tell-tale rustles or far-off calls. Rip, during part of each year a professional Maine guide and tracker, was disappointed. "This country's dead; I've seen more game in my backyard!" He was in a good position to tell, too. That morning he had gone off hunting with two Bakiedu men. Armed with ancient and highly questionable single-barreled shotguns, they not only had covered far more ground than we but had cut right into the jungle away from the trails and scattered farms. Except for some birds they had spotted nothing at all. The land, though never having the concentration of game found in, say, East Africa, had apparently been hunted out long ago. Of course we knew they were quite rare, but we had come with high hopes of glimpsing a pygmy hippopotamus, possibly an elephant. By the end of the expedition the best we could claim was a colony of bats and a small squirrel-like creature. The only "face-to-face" encounters were with overly eager driver ants. Poor Hakan, intently hoping to capture a bush baby, had struggled throughout the entire trip with a bulky Hav-a-Hart trap half as big as himself. All to no avail; there wasn't a nibble.

The following day we were off again on a second reconnaissance walk, this time up the Lofa a distance of about five miles. Already our strength seemed to be improving, certainly we were feeling more at home in the hot and humid surroundings.

The people of Bakiedu and the chief in particular were taking a growing interest in our plans. This was just as we had hoped because his influence and prestige spread considerably beyond the confines of Bakiedu, and his active involvement would in part smooth the way for us in the days to come. The upshot of this was that his son, Sekou Dali, agreed to act as our guide and interpreter—at $5 a day—and would, in addition, recruit and oversee four young men from the town who would carry the film equipment. A heavyset extrovert of 35 or so, Sekou was to prove invaluable in attending to details of protocol in each of the villages, in arranging the cooking, in advising on routes. We spent considerable time with him and other town leaders pouring over our 1:125,000 scale U. S. Department of Defense topographic maps trying to decide upon a sensible itinerary that would be interesting and diversified without at the same time being either too easy or too difficult. At first these criteria posed some problems but after several sessions a consensus was arrived at and all seem satisfied.

Although the original objective formulated months before had us following the course of the Lofa downstream from Bakiedu for as far as time would allow—in fact we had all along referred to the undertaking as the "Lofa Probe"—we now learned that local conditions would make this a formidable and uninteresting route. Thus we shifted our sights to the opposite direction. We would travel upstream for at least two days then cut back and northward

intending eventually to reach Voinjama, a provincial center from which we could easily arrange transport back to the coast. With agreement reached we decided to start off early the next morning.

That afternoon in a scene that was to be repeated in each village we stayed in the boys dug into their packs and brought forth an amazing selection of rings, necklaces, baubles and bangles, picked up at Woolworths or discarded by their mothers, and in what to us was a somewhat humorous ceremony presented them to Chief Camou Dali for distribution to his wives and other women of the town. Reading the chief's face it was impossible for me to tell whether he was similarly amused, pleased, perplexed or mildly insulted. We had learned during our short stay that these people are far more sophisticated and discerning than surface appearances might suggest.

We were out of our sleeping bags shortly after daybreak the next morning and following a hurried breakfast and a once-over-lightly cleanup of the town hall, we hauled on our packs and made our way through the town for the last time, down the hill to the banks of the Lofa. With Sekou and the four porters in the lead we crossed the river and with a rousing schoolboy cheer back across to the assembled people of Bakiedu, we filtered single file into the green rain forest. The terrain was very manageable at the outset and the early morning coolness remained with us for a time. However, Dan and I both knew that the first day would be the hardest for everyone. Up to now we had been carrying packs only over short distances and at least half the boys suffered from bothersome sunburns that lingered on from a too long day at a beach outside Monrovia. With the hills now growing more frequent and the sun hotter, the pace began to slow, the rest stops increase and the backs and shoulders ache. Just in those few short hours the boys learned a valuable lesson on the discomforts of thirst and the preciousness of water. And by the time we reached the village of Tusu, seven miles and five hours later, I'm sure they fully appreciated the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that comes from attaining an objective through hard sometimes painful plodding.

Here we were met with the same friendly receiving line as at Bakiedu and Busu. And the same palavering, exaggerated compliments, speeches and handshakes. Again we were escorted to the town hall, a traditional thatch hut with open sides and a dirt floor, that would serve as our home for the night. Except that it was far smaller and somewhat less westernized, Tusu was not unlike Bakiedu, perched on a hilltop above the Lofa. The people were Mandingo and seemed to carry on in the same manner as their neighbors down the river.

On any trip there's always a tendency to bring along more than is really required. No matter how lightly one travels, inevitably there's something that could just as well have been left behind. After our first day on the move a number of us reached that very conclusion. Boys only 13 or 14 years old were straining under loads heavier than mine. Excess clothing, camping gadgets and gear of questionable use, even giant jars of peanut butter were among the culprits. The time had come for some judicious weeding out. The porters, carrying the heaviest loads of all, had made their own unique adjustments: They now found that a far more satisfactory place for a backpack is atop one's head!

The second day's march was considerably shorter, just under four miles. Winding along a trail overhung with heavy foliage, far from any village, we were surprised to come upon a sawmill. Nothing automated, you understand, just a long handsaw with a remarkably muscular man at either end. One stood on top of the two-foot thick log that rested on a high platform, the other on the ground below. The scene was reminiscent of the sawpits of colonial America. All day, every day the two would push and pull at a slow but regular rate. They were able to finish in a day three sometimes four boards which were sold in Tusu for $2 each.

We were welcomed into Jamuyol in the usual friendly fashion—the pattern was unchanging—and once again found ourselves in sole possession of the town hall, this one the best yet: smooth concrete floor, shaded by cool trees, high walls that were more difficult for curious eyes to line. As at was not far past noon we had more than enough time to enjoy a leisurely swim, to do our laundry, to wander about the village.

In the evening after a rice and rooster dinner we were treated to a musicale, a hundred or so chanting men, women and children swaying and dancing in place to the rhythm of drums and curious instruments that were plucked. A fine prelude to a restful night.

On our third day out we left the course of the Lofa and headed northwesterly through a succession of shaded dells. The vegetation though less dense at ground level was far more spectacular. The gigantic bana trees with their distinctive fluted bases seemed to stretch nearly out of sight above our heads. We made particularly good time for the first three hours until we reached the hamlet of Womuna. Resting just outside by a sluggish stream we were visited by the chief who came bearing bananas and a live chicken and who invited us to spend the night. Anxious to push on we declined his offer with thanks. Apparently our refusal, polite though it was, constituted a serious breach of etiquette and we suddenly found ourselves in something of a muddle. The chief and his people felt miffed. We, in turn, felt held up. And Sekou felt pressured from both sides and thus was out of sorts as well. In the end the solution lay in appeasing the chief with both a barrage of apologies and an outpouring of gifts. These worked like magic for as we left Womuna the chief looked supremely pleased by the assortment of trinkets, harmonicas, penny whistles, sweaters, knives and rope surrounding him.

We continued on into the afternoon and by 3 o'clock had arrived at Samodu where we thought it best to halt for the night. It seemed a poorer and less happy village than the others, slightly scruffy and down on its luck. The water was very limited and suspicious looking and there was no place for a swim. The town hall was a disappointment as well considering the heat and humidity. It was entirely enclosed with no ventilation save the door.

Despite having been on the move for only three days there was a growing impatience to up the pace and get on to Voinjama as quickly as possible. Some of us were ailing with shaky digestion, others suffered from throats badly parched by the over-chlorinated drinking water. As we had no alternative but to walk out we couldn't risk an epidemic of ills that might bog us down somewhere for several days.

We decided, then, to be up and off by first light the next morning. After dressing and packing by flashlight we filed quietly out of a still sleeping Samodu and plunged into the cool and dark jungle. Our time over the seven miles was excellent, the best yet; we were like horses nearing the barn. Signs of life and "civilization" became more frequent. By mid-morning we had arrived.

It's unlikely that Voinjama can claim more than eight or nine thousand inhabitants but in contrast to the past week or so in our eyes it was a large and bustling city. The main street was lined with shops; there were even restaurants and bars, not to mention traffic. We herded into the largest of the shops, run as is typical in Liberia by Lebanese traders, and enjoyed our first cold drinks since leaving Monrovia. It's startling what even a short time away from such things can do to one's mental processes: Each of us had for days anxiously dreamt of that moment. As so often turns out the anticipation somehow exceeded the reality.

There's little else to report of our travels. We made our return to Monrovia, again jouncing for twelve hours in the back of a truck. We overindulged ourselves with food and drink in the capital and later relaxed for a few days at the beach. Soon we were once more at Roberts Field and not long after back home again in Boston. Inasmuch as we got there and back without serious mishap the expedition was a success. The educational objectives were realized for the boys were profitably able to experience a different culture and adapt to unfamiliar surroundings. We had demonstrated that it's both practical and safe to expose young boys to primitive and demanding conditions in far-off places. Although we as adults may have felt held back at times, the boys were returning home with a well-deserved sense of achievement. Certainly they had been living an adventure for three weeks that they weren't likely to forget.