



“Strandlooping”

Recently, we have been staying down on the KwaZulu-Natal coast, at the estuary of the Inhlanhlinhlu River. The name *Inhlanhlinhlu* is a bit of a mouthful, and probably refers to the name of the trees that grow on the river bank.

The estuary has the same shape as most of the other estuaries that flow into the East Coast. In the dry winter months, the river meanders down to the sea, and sand bars build up, only to be washed away in the summer, when the waters come barrelling down after the summer storms in the interior.

The sand bar at *Inhlanhlinhlu* makes a lagoon which is rich in bird life. One early morning, I was sitting on the verandah, when a large adult fish eagle arrived to sit high up on the dead branch of a tall tree overlooking the lagoon. He let out a piercing cry that echoed over the water. When fish eagles cry out, they throw their heads back, and then forwards, as they let out their calls. It was like someone sounding the reveille. It reminded me that it was time for my early morning walk along the beach.

When we are down at the coast, I slip out each morning, and then again, in the evenings at sunset, for some strandlooping. Strandlooping is an excellent treatment for the burn out of medical practice, and for deep thinking, as I get into both the rhythm of the walking, and the rhythm of the waves. It is best done as a solitary activity, like sitting on the loo, or playing the trombone. I walk along the water's edge with the wet sand underfoot, and the waves swishing and hissing in and out. The waves tend to be flatter in the morning, and then higher and rougher in the evenings, as they have been whipped up by the afternoon winds.

If there are large outcrops of rocks, I clamber up on them, just short of getting soaked by the crashing waves. I then look out to sea, and think even deeper thoughts.

During this stay, I met a man, in the early morning, carrying driftwood, and we fell into conversation as we strandloopers are prone to do. We discussed the important things in life, such as the best sort of wood to collect for the evening fire. The black hard wood is the best, and lasts a long time, whereas the softer yellow wood is not worth collecting as it crumbles, and the fire soon goes out. We decided that the best wood is *dorninghout* from Acacia thorn trees, and the absolute very best is *kameeldorninghout* (camel or giraffe thorn tree wood). It has that deep, dark red colour, and can be as hard as a rock, and you know it is going to burn all evening. The other activity that goes well with strandlooping is firegazing. Firegazing is not so much a cardiovascular activity, as a soul activity. The best equipment for this is a comfortable camp chair, good company, and a chilled bottle of chardonnay from the Cape of Good Hope. You then put on the *dorninghout*, and gaze into the flames of the evening fire as the sparks flick upwards into the night sky.

Along with this, is one of the most evocative of sensations, and that is the smell of the smoke, as it spirals up from the wood.

There is an African proverb that, roughly translated, says that to smell the smoke from an African fire, you have to live in Africa. Amen to that.

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