

Tim Cahill

## Therapeutic Perambulation,

in the former French Congo

Irritation, it seemed, had become the central fact of my life.

We were four days into a five-week walk across the northern region of the Republic of the Congo, moving roughly from the Sangha River to the Mataba. It wasn't the swamps or the sucking mud bogs or the tangled forest or the heat or the torrential rains that bothered me. It was the bees. Great swarms of them were ever present. There were honey bees and bumblebees and long thin waspy bees and blue-black bees and great clouds of stingless little fruit-fly-looking bees that filled the nose and mouth with every breath.

'These bees,' I informed my companions, 'are driving me mad.'

The American biologist in charge of the expedition explained that there was precious little salt in the forests of equatorial Africa, that salt was essential to life, and that, as I tended to sweat like a pig, the bees were focused on me. In addition, I presented the largest salt surface in our party. The biologist was a wiry individual – I outweighed him by forty pounds – and our guides and scouts were, for the most part, Bambenjele pygmies, men who topped the scales at about a hundred pounds apiece, which was less than half my weight.



Our mission was to make a rough count of the animals in the uninhabited Ndoki forest – there were gorillas and chimps and elephants and leopards – and then report back to the Congolese government. Up to this point, I hadn't been able to see the chimps for the bees.

'I'm getting stung about half a dozen times a day,' I complained.

The biologist advised me that the bees only reacted to dorsal pressure. 'Don't touch them on the back,' he said, 'and they won't sting.'

I tried, but the bees covered me in layers. They got under my T-shirt and stung me in the armpits; they stung me on the butt when I sat down, or on the back when I leaned up against a tree. I had to live through another thirty days of this, and I felt like screaming. The biologist said I was suffering from 'insect stress.'

Gradually, in the midst of this existential agony, it occurred to me that bees seldom torment a moving target. And so, for the next month, I walked. I walked an average of ten hours a day, from dawn to dusk. When the others took breaks or stopped for lunch or made camp early, I shucked off my pack and strolled down our back trail. I never stopped. I walked constantly.

Walking, I discovered, cures insect stress.

I write about travel in remote areas for a living. My doctor, who is a personal friend, likes to see me immediately upon my return. I provide an opportunity for him to treat, for instance, malaria, in Montana. After my long walk through Africa, he seemed disappointed in my physical condition.

'You look great,' he said sadly. 'How much weight did you lose?'

'Almost twenty-five pounds.'

'Blood pressure's way down,' he noted reluctantly. 'Heartbeat's strong and slow.'



'And I haven't had any anxiety attacks for a couple of months now.'

'That's good,' my doctor said, and speaking as my friend, he meant it. A year or so before, I'd made a serious mistake in love. When it all fell apart, I began having the attacks: periods of intense and unfocused fear, accompanied by a jack-hammer heartbeat, flushed skin, and hopeless depression. I didn't go out much. Tears came easily in those days.

'So you're over her?'

'I think so.'

The truth was, I'd never felt better in my life.

I thought about this sudden reversal of emotional and physical fortune. The weight loss was easily calibrated. An individual weighing 200 pounds burns up about 7.8 calories per minute walking at a 4-mile-an-hour pace. We weren't walking that fast in the Ndoke, but I figured the exertion involved in crawling under thorny vegetation and wading through knee-deep mud put us somewhere on that level. So: 7.8 calories, times 60 minutes, is a total of 468 calories burned per hour. Multiply by 10 hours for a total of 4,680 calories lost per day of walking. Divide calories lost (4,680) by the number of calories in a pound (3,200) for a total of 1.46 pounds walked off per day. Given the fact that we were on low rations – rice, nuts, vegetables, and a doughy concoction of powdered root called fu-fu – a weight loss of twenty-five pounds in a little over thirty days seemed right on the money.

Dropping some excess weight tends to lower blood pressure, of course, but I felt there was more to it than that. The walking, I thought, was a kind of natural tranquilizer. Every day, about an hour into the trek, I'd drop off into a state I thought of as automatic pilot. My senses, it seemed, were preternaturally sharp. I could hear the



distant pant-hoot of chimpanzees, the vaguely electronic chortle of the mangabey monkey, the scream of the crested eagle, the grunts of bush pigs, the trumpeting of forest elephants splashing in a nearby stream. Without conscious thought, I stepped over columns of fierce driver ants, and noted the acrid ammonia scent of a nearby silverback gorilla. In the visually limited world of the dense forest, I knew, without thinking about it, where everyone was; I knew my place.

Occasionally, we encountered elephant trails running in our general direction: great wide footpaths straight as any road in North Dakota. The elephants, nature's bulldozers, had cleared away the foliage that otherwise twisted around our ankles or bloodied our arms with thorns. We called these NAT paths: No Arm Touch. Walking along the elephant interstates was an atavistic pleasure. The pygmies chatted quietly among themselves in Sangha, a language I didn't know. It was, to my ear, a kind of sibilant spoken music. And above, sounding in counterpoint to our various conversations in French and Sangha and English, the monkeys, who were bedded down in the midday sun, chattered softly in the canopy. The sounds of man and monkey were not dissimilar. I felt we belonged here, and wondered vaguely about my love affair with the internal combustion engine.

In the evenings, I tried to stay awake in my tent listening for the strange humming sound of leopards beyond the fire. Every few hours, I'd hear the pygmies laughing. They never slept, or so it seemed, and they were as happy as any group of men I'd ever met.

Which hadn't been the case in the village where we'd hired them. Pygmies are the aboriginal people of the forest. They were hunters and gatherers, but about five hundred years ago, Bantu agriculturists moved in along the rivers. In the past centuries, the pygmies have



TIM CAHILL

gravitated to the Bantu villages, where they lead lives as second-class citizens. They are in fact near slaves, trading their lives for fu-fu and alcohol. Especially alcohol.

I thought about the pygmies. In the village, they had been dissatisfied and drunk. They wanted things that seemed to them beyond their grasp: They wanted radios and colorful T-shirts. They wanted to ride in cars and buses. They wanted jobs running forklifts for the lumber companies that were cutting down their forests. Instead, a local policeman had recently come around and burned down their small huts, made of bent-over saplings and leaves. The pygmies were told to build regular houses, like normal people. And so they got drunk and sullen, and they fought viciously among themselves.

But here, walking in rhythm with the forest, they were happy, immune to the stinging calculus of want. I listened for the leopards and realized that I, too, for the first time in some years, was delighted with my life. And why not? Compared to the Bambenjele people, my own collision with civilization and its discontents seemed minor, almost insignificant. My suffering, such as it was, amounted to little more than a matter of cultural insect stress.

And walking, of course, cures that stress.