

Random phenomena
our well-travelled writers
have noticed this month



**BEN
MORISON**

Curiosities

DECK SHOES

A TEAM OF KENYAN CONSERVATIONISTS ARE BUILDING A 45-TONNE BOAT OUT OF WASTE PLASTIC – AND PLOTTING AN ENVIRONMENTAL REVOLUTION IN THE PROCESS

On the island of Lamu off the Kenyan Coast, the epicentre of Swahili culture, we are building an 18-metre dhow out of recycled plastics, with the entire boat covered in 200,000 washed-up flip-flops. The man responsible for collecting them all is Benson Gitari, who brings them back to his shack in the sweltering heat and creates proper magic – he once made a turtle out of thousands of flip-flops, and stood it in front of the Nakumatt supermarket in Diani.

We aim to sail the boat down the east African coast on a three-month journey to Cape Town this December to try and create a sustainable demand for used plastic. →



Curiosities

Ocean plastics may be a trendy topic, but at the moment it's mostly being talked about in communities that are already believers. The biggest emitters of ocean plastics are developing countries. It's these 'new' consumers that will shape the future of this issue, not a conservationist in Holland, or an activist in a conference hall in California. In fast developing countries such as Kenya, just being able to buy and use a plastic bottle of drinking water is often a sign of progress – they're not the ones downloading Leonardo DiCaprio's latest climate change film.

I'm half-Ethiopian, and grew up in Kenya. As a child of someone whose working life was spent with NGOs in Africa, I am familiar with the concept of well-intentioned Western efforts to do good and drive prosperity. But I'm also familiar with the fact that it so often becomes its own form of colonialism, projecting our ideas of what's good for other people. I'm committed to only using local resources and local recycling technology to build our boat. Otherwise, it becomes a vanity project.

Our chief boat-builder, Ali Skanda, is a third-generation Swahili craftsman – his grandfather carved the doors to the Kenyan Houses of Parliament. Ali's the one who has the greatest vision – after Cape Town, he wants to sail our boat up the Thames. Dhows are a pillar of Swahili culture and, by anchoring our project in a traditional skill set, we're creating a way to preserve the old through the new. And, because it's low-tech, we're learning how to recycle in a way that is scalable in local communities. It's one big experiment – nobody has done anything like this before, but the opportunities are incredible.

We're all familiar with the image of a turtle with a plastic bag in its mouth. The narrative may shock westerners, but I don't think it'll engage a young person from, say, Lake Victoria, who doesn't know the coast. Our boat, which will be called *The FlipFlopi*, is fun. Fun is a common denominator: when you're smiling, you're open to engagement. My dream would be to get the *Big Brother* winners from Africa on board – we want new exposure and entertainment, that's how we'll get a plastic revolution. Anybody who sees this giant multi-coloured craft made of flip-flops, either in real life or on the news, will smile.

The FlipFlopi sets sail in December 2018. Support the project at theflipflopi.com/donate



JOHN SIMPSON'S

LETTER FROM BERLIN

WHAT THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS CORRESPONDENT GETS UP TO OFF DUTY

I love Germany, though like many I never seem to come here on holiday – merely on business. For old times' sake I'm staying in East Berlin, and I've wandered into one of the great hotels of Europe to meet a friend and have a drink: the Adlon, on Unter den Linden, rebuilt long after the war in something of its original Kaiser Bill-era style.

One of the reasons I enjoy this place is a darkly comical one. The original Adlon is where PG 'Plum' Wodehouse was brought by his Nazi captors in 1941, when he made some horribly ill-judged broadcasts about his internment experiences. Nowadays it's impossible to imagine people strutting across the lobby in SS uniforms and jackboots, yet it somehow isn't difficult to think of Plum blinking and smiling apologetically as he was taken, a prisoner, to a suite upstairs in the hotel. He was allowed to pay for it out of the frozen German royalties for his books.

The previous year, 1940, he and his wife had been caught by the invading Nazis at their house in Le Touquet, on the Channel coast. He was held in an unpleasant building ("constructed, apparently, by an architect who had seen the Black Hole of Calcutta and admired it") and were eventually taken to an internment camp in Upper Silesia. ("If this is Upper Silesia," he wrote, "imagine what Lower Silesia must be like.") He was playing cricket with some other internees when the Gestapo →