

CONFESSIONS – BIOPHILE 7 - MARCH 2008

A VERY EXPENSIVE JOL

All that effort, all that angst, ruined in just ten days' of hedonistic revelry. And I'd been doing so well, damn it, conscientiously tidying up my life in expectation of a gold star on my enviro homework.

Month by month I'd addressed my destructive ways. I'd thought six times before buying anything new, and used jerseys rather than heaters all winter. I'd changed to energy-saving light bulbs, recycled my garbage and used the dry-cleaner sparingly. I'd forgone avos imported from Israel, and when I had to fly on business I'd noted the mileage so as to have a meticulous record of how many trees I owed the earth by way of recompense. I'd coordinated my chores in order to use the car less, and of course my veganism alone had reduced my carbon emissions for the year by a whole one-and-a-half tons! Yessss! I was surely close to saving at least three geckos in the Amazon Rainforest. Stand back for Saint Patty.

And then I go and spoil it all by doing something stupid like a sh-ip tr-ip (to be sung like Frank Sinatra or Robbie Williams, depending on your age).

Some very kind souls in Florida invited me to lecture on one of their most august cruise liners in exchange for a 10 day holiday around Zanzibar, The Comoros and The Seychelles. It seemed like a good idea at the time (to be sung like Mike Batt and the London Philharmonic – do your best!) I packed my entire wardrobe and eventually staggered up to the gang plank with 34kgs' worth of non-designer clothing and not even a Cubic Zirconia to sport for 'formal night'. Well, my maiden dinner revealed in no uncertain terms what a vain hope it was to think I could even enter the ring with the sartorial heavyweights that 'do' cruises. Diamonds the size of decanter stoppers nestled in bosoms covered in skin so sun-damaged it resembled the leather suitcases of 1940s New World immigrants. Chandelier-sized earrings gouged holes in octogenarian earlobes as big as those of my grandmother's old Zulu cook, Mtuti. And you can imagine, I trust, how my request for a vegan meal went down with the Maitre D – used to taking orders for foie gras and veal cordon bleu. I felt like Oliver Twist on his first night at the poor house: "You want whaaaat?"

This was the world of the indulged and the indolent – folk who'd (apparently) never heard of global warming or the plight of pigs. This was the universe of the let-them-eat-cakers and the fiddlers-while-Rome-burns. And while they nonchalantly puffed on their Cuban cigars, I smoked my sustainability brownie points in one of the world's most atmospherically pricy cocktail bars. Later that night, I lay awake in percale cotton sheets, fretting about what the great, rumbling engine underneath my mattress was costing our children - and all to get us to our next exotic beach party. For the record, 400g of carbon per passenger per kilometre is emitted on a passenger liner. That's *three times more* than a passenger on a Boeing 747. But then again, you don't do your laundry, go to the gym or boogie till dawn on Virgin Atlantic from Joeys to London, so I guess you are getting more bang for your planetary buck on board ship.

To be fair (and to be serious for just a min), shipping is responsible for less than 2% of carbon dioxide emissions worldwide, and oceangoing vessels use something called 'bunker fuel' - a low cost product that remains once gas and high-grade fuels have been refined from crude oil. Trouble is, it's very dirty and contributes a large share of Sulphur Oxides and Nitrogen Oxides to the global emissions mix (a cocktail which results in acid rain). And then there's the Hobson's choice about what to do with on-board waste and sewerage. Some liners dump this after processing it (following strict rules). Others take it back to shore for disposal. Dumping impacts the ocean, while processing produces harmful gasses. So they're damned if they do and damned if they don't.

What to do, then, other than stay at home and endure Jacob Zuma's interminable and embarrassing gaffs. Well, there are shipping lines which recycle religiously, have smokeless gas-turbine engines, use their own water purification systems and don't change clients' sheets and towels *every day*, as ours did. (See www.sustainableshipping.com and www.flyless.info) Some greenies advance the theory that you should restrict your travel to cargo ships. That way you're getting to your destination on board a vessel that was going there anyway – a neat way of accompanying your Weber to your new home in Perth!

None of which solves how I'm going to reduce my boot-sized carbon footprint to the dainty slipper it was before the February cruise. So I've decided to board up the house, live in a tent by the swimming pool and transport my dogs to the park in a rickshaw.