

# STRANGE TALES OF WORLD TRAVEL

BY GINA & SCOTT GAILLE

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## FIVE BONUS STORIES

### 51. DIRTY NEEDLES

#### *Angola*

Travelers arriving in most nations must pass through two checkpoints. First, they stop at immigration, where their passports, and in some cases visas, are checked by authorities. Afterwards, they collect their luggage and head through the customs area, where their bags are subject to being searched for imported goods or contraband. Some nations also have a third checkpoint—the health station—where they are checked for contagious diseases and proof of immunization.

This is the case in Luanda, Angola, one of West Africa's oil boom towns. Passengers arriving there are greeted by nurses dressed in white. They are primarily employed to check that travelers have the yellow fever International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis.

Yellow fever is a tropical virus carried by mosquitoes. A small percentage of those infected develop the serious version of the disease, which, as the name suggests, is characterized by a yellow discoloration of the skin and whites of the

eyes. There is no known treatment for it, and about half of those infected with the severe version die within 7-10 days. Even today, about 50,000 people per year perish from yellow fever—90 percent of them in Africa.

Scott visited Angola many times, and always dutifully showed his yellow fever certificate. On one of these trips, however, one of his colleagues managed to lose his certificate en route. This was in 2005, and American mobile phones did not work in Angola. Nor was there any airport WiFi. The oil worker's story revealed that the real purpose of the health check was otherwise.

### *The Oil Worker's Story*

“I had just flown ten hours to Amsterdam, had a four-hour layover there before flying another eleven hours to Johannesburg, followed by another layover and yet another four hours to Luanda. I was completely exhausted and wanted nothing more than to collapse into my bed.

“I fell into the health check line and opened up my briefcase to retrieve my yellow fever immunization card and passport. My passport was there, but my card was missing. As the line steadily advanced, I rifled through my papers, checking every nook and cranny. It was not there. Had I forgotten it at home? Had it fallen out of my bag during one of my three flights? Whatever the case was, I didn't have it.

“When I reached the nurse, I handed her my passport. She handed it back to me, looking angry.

“‘Yellow fever card,’ she demanded.

“‘I lost it on the plane, but I have my yellow fever shot.’

“The nurse promptly grabbed me by the arm and dragged me to a cramped room. ‘Sit here,’ she said.

“I complied, and she left. The room was a small interior office with no window, lit only by a flickering fluorescent ceiling bulb. There was another chair, on the other side of a rusting metal desk, and behind that, a tall metal cabinet with a padlock on it. Next to it was a small refrigerator. It also was padlocked. The walls were bare except for a single poster in Portuguese encouraging condom use to combat AIDS.

“I waited, and waited some more. The room was infested with mosquitoes, and I spent the better part of my wait swatting at them. At least an hour went by before the nurse returned with an older man wearing a military uniform.

“‘I am the chief of medical,’ he said.

“‘At least he spoke decent English, I thought.

“‘I have my yellow fever vaccine but lost my certificate on the plane.’

“‘But if you lost your card, how do I know that what you say is true?’ he asked.

“Since the just-trust-me argument clearly wasn’t going anywhere, I switched to another.

“I pulled my flight itinerary from my briefcase and handed it to him. He pulled a pair of reading glasses from his pocket and examined my papers.

“As you can see, I flew here directly from the United States. There’s no yellow fever in America, so there’s no risk of me having it. Can’t you just let me through?”

“You stopped in South Africa. What if a mosquito bit you there, while you were waiting in the airport?” He pulled off his glasses and smiled at me before continuing. ‘The law is clear—if you have no certificate, then you need to be immunized again.’

“But I already have my shot,’ I pled.

“A second one won’t hurt you,’ he said. Then he turned and said something in Portuguese to the nurse.

“Over the man’s shoulder, I watched as the nurse unlocked the padlock on the steel cabinet and procured a syringe. The syringe was not in a sealed plastic bag. It was an older, reusable variety, with a metal plunger. Then she unlocked the fridge and took out a vial. I watched as she proceeded to stick the needle into the serum and drew some into the syringe. Then she reinjected the serum into its container, and then drew some back again, filling the syringe further.

“‘Roll up your sleeve,’ ordered the chief.

“I was terrified. The wraithlike AIDS victim on the poster was staring down at me, and I imagined all of the infections that might be accompanying the nurse’s reusable needle.

“‘Look, I’m just going to get back on the plane and go home,’ I said.

The chief laughed. ‘It’s too late for that. Your plane already departed back to South Africa.’

“I was sweating profusely by this point. I glanced at the door and actually considered trying to run. Where I would run to, I had no idea.

“As the nurse came closer with her needle, the chief leaned forward and whispered, ‘Maybe there’s another way.’

“I quickly nodded in agreement.

“‘Perhaps you could pay a penalty?’ he continued.

“I didn’t even try to negotiate. I just handed the chief my wallet. He wasn’t greedy, though. He pulled out a single \$100 bill and passed it back to me.

“Later I learned that the crusty old needle was never even used. No one was ever actually vaccinated there. It was all just a shakedown. Oil field workers were often forgetting or losing their yellow fever certificates. It was a most profitable concession for the chief, and rumor had it that he lived in one of the grandest villas in Luanda.”



## 52. WERE TROLLS REAL?

### *Norway*

The geography of Norway is dominated by mountains and fjords. They comprise about 90 percent of the nation. The longest and deepest of the fjords is the Sognefjord, which winds through the country for 127 miles at depths of more than 4,000 feet. Travelers from Oslo usually board cruise ships on the Sognefjord at the port of Flam. In order to reach Flam, they must first ride the Flam railway, one of the steepest in Europe. Its passengers are allowed to disembark for a photo opportunity about halfway down the line at the Kjosfossen waterfall.

On our visit, as the waters tumbled furiously by, a woman in a red dress climbed atop the waterfall and began to dance. Our guide explained to us that the dancer was depicting the legend of Huldra, a seductive troll who sought to mother a human child. Trolls are ubiquitous in Norway. There are statues of them in parks, and every curio shop's shelves are filled with depictions of them. We asked our guide whether he believed in trolls.

### *The Norwegian's Story*

"I grew up in the mountains, and there was a dark forest to the north of our home. We were forbidden from going there because it was inhabited by trolls. Every family who lived near the forest told their children the same tale.

“A family had fallen into debt, and the collectors were going to come to take their home. The only way to save it was to chop down a valuable spruce tree. These trees only grew deeper into the forest, where the trolls lived.

“The father was too old and sick to make the trip, but he had two sons—one strong as an ox and another who was small and weak. At dawn, he sent the big one off into the forest with an axe.

“The first son returned emptyhanded at the end of the day. Even his axe was lost. He explained what had happened: ‘Just as I began to swing my axe, a troll appeared. He was hideous, with a giant nose and heavy brow. “That’s my tree!” shouted the troll. “If you hurt it, I’ll cut you up into little pieces and eat you in my stew.”’

“The younger son, though weak, was clever. ‘Daddy, please let me go to the forest. I can save us,’ he said.

“The second son filled a sheep skin with custard. The next morning, he headed off into the forest with nothing but the sheep carcass and a sharp knife, carefully following his brother’s directions to the big tree. Sure enough, the axe was lying on the ground. As he picked it up, the troll appeared, just as hideous as his brother had described.

“But when the troll threatened to eat him, the boy laughed. ‘I’m stronger than you,’ said the boy. ‘Look how strong I am.’ The boy then started squeezing

and twisting the sheep, which was easy to do since it was just filled with custard.

‘I’ll do the same to you, Mr. Troll, if you do not do as I say.’

“The troll recoiled in fear. ‘What do you want?’ he asked.

“‘I want you to chop down this tree for me and cut it up.’

“The troll picked up the axe, and in no time, he had felled the tree and turned it into orderly stacks of wood.

“‘After all that work, you must be hungry,’ said the boy.

“The troll wiped the sweat from his brow. ‘I’m so hungry.’

“‘I bet I can eat more than you,’ said the boy.

“The troll accepted the challenge and led the boy back to his cave.

“On the hike there, the boy cut open the sheep carcass with his knife and let the custard pour out onto the ground.

“Once at the cave, the boy sat down at the troll’s table, with the sheep skin hidden beneath his coat and the end he had cut open positioned near his neck. The troll served up a giant pot of stew. While the troll gorged himself, the boy only pretended to eat, shoveling the stew into the sheepskin.

“‘I don’t think I can eat anymore,’ the troll said.

“‘I’ll show you my secret for eating more,’ the boy replied.

“With that the boy stood up, pulled out his knife and cut through his coat into the sheep skin, sending a torrent of stew onto the cave floor.

“‘Your turn,’ said the boy, passing the troll his knife.

“The dumb troll sliced into his stomach, killing himself.

“The boy came back with his brother and retrieved the wood. He saved the family farm.

“When human beings reached Europe many years ago, we were the invaders. Europe’s original people were Neanderthals. The mythological description of trolls as stocky and having broad foreheads and big noses closely resembles Neanderthals. The conflict then was smarter humans versus stronger Neanderthals—just as in my forest story.

“As humans prevailed, it’s likely that the remaining Neanderthals retreated to remote areas. Norway’s mountains, forests, and harsh climate would have been a good refuge for the last of their kind.

“Maybe Huldra represented Neanderthal women who realized the best chance for their children was having a human parent. Another troll myth is that of the changeling—in which trolls switch their babies with those of humans.

Neanderthal and human babies may have looked similar. The Neanderthal baby gets raised as a human and then intermarries—thereby giving their descendants a better chance of surviving.

“So, yes, I do believe that trolls once existed—a long, long time ago.”

James Fallows, a writer for *The Atlantic*, reported on the results of his 23andme DNA test: “I have an unusually large share of Neanderthal DNA (5%) in my genetic makeup. Plus, [the test offered] the accompanying revelation that my mitochondrial DNA, showing the lineage on my mother's side, resembled no other samples yet collected in a large-scale study.” Perhaps Mr. Fallows is descended from an ancient Huldra, who seduced a human on his father’s side and managed to pass her genes along to eternity.

And perhaps the tales of trolls are a fading record of the last battles that played out between humans and Neanderthals. As Winston Churchill once said, “History is written by the victors.”

## 53. THE MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

### *Guinea-Bissau*

As a negotiator for oil and gas companies seeking concessions in Africa, Scott has been fortunate enough to visit corners of the world untouched by tourism. The tiny nation of Guinea-Bissau is tucked between Senegal to the north and Guinea to the south. About the only time the nation receives press of any kind is when there is a coup, of which there have been many. The President was even killed in 2009. And another coup resulted in criminal charges being brought against the President—for being “unable to solve the problems” of the nation. Imagine that. What American President has been able to solve its problems? All of this conflict has weighed on the nation’s economy, and at the time of Scott’s visit, Guinea-Bissau was one of the five poorest nations in the world.

### *Scott’s Story*

Guinea-Bissau’s violent history was evident upon my arrival in the capital, called Bissau. As we navigated the potholed streets, we crossed one that was overgrown with vegetation as high as the buildings. The former shops along the boulevard were boarded up and abandoned, and the rusted chassis of an upended truck even had a small tree growing right through the middle of it.

“What happened there?” I asked.

“Land mines from the civil wars,” the driver replied.

I was in town to meet with Guinea-Bissau's Oil Minister regarding rights to drill for oil offshore. As the country had a population of only one and a half million people, a major oil discovery would be transformative. I had arrived early, giving me the weekend to explore. No matter how troubled a nation might be, I believed, there were always bright spots. Business travelers who stayed cocooned in their hotel rooms were missing out.

I had asked my driver to take me deep into the nation, far away from the scars of rebellion. We drove inland for about three hours, until the dirt road dead-ended at a river. The countryside was lush and green, and along the riverbank was a traditional village of thatched circular huts with cone-shaped roofs. My guide walked with me through the village, as its inhabitants went about their business.

On our way back to the land cruiser, a pretty young woman approached me and blocked my way. She was carrying a platter of fish. The woman held it up to me, smiling and speaking rapidly in her local dialect.

I thought that she was trying to sell me a fish, but her proposal was of an entirely different kind.

The driver acted as my interpreter. "She's proposing marriage," he said. "The fish are being offered to show you how hard she works."

The woman spoke again, pressing the fish even closer to me.

"She says that you will never be hungry with her," said my driver.

“Please tell her thank you for the proposal but I am already married.”

My driver conveyed my message to the young lady. She did not look surprised and responded very quickly, speaking over him and hoisting the fish in my direction.

He laughed. “She says, of course, a big man like you already has a wife. She says that one wife is not enough. The more wives a man has, the more respected he is. She is most honored to be your second wife.”

“Please tell her that in my country it is not possible to have more than one wife. The laws allow for only one.”

He spoke to her again, and she pulled her fish back, nodded a goodbye, and walked away.

The next day, I met the Oil Minister for the first time. I told him the story of my marriage proposal from the village beauty. He laughed and grabbed my shoulder.

“Most of the people I meet with,” he said, “see nothing of our country beyond the walls of their hotel room and whatever they happen to drive by between here, the hotel, and the airport. They just want to get their meetings over with and go home. All they want is our oil.

“You are very different from them.”

On the flight back, I thought about what the Minister meant. He was used to meeting with single-minded business people who came to take away the country's natural resources. Yet tourists are often no better. They can be mere collectors of photographs, who check landmarks off their bucket lists as if they were on a scavenger hunt.

All these people are missing out on something special. The right kind of travel affords us the opportunity to feel connected to someplace other than where we live. We can forget who we are, where we come from. We can become a part of someplace else, where for that moment, we are free of our pasts and the obligations that go along with them.

A few months later, I hosted the Oil Minister in Houston as we celebrated the business union between his country and my company. It was a different kind of marriage than the one the young woman on the riverbank sought, but all relationships are based on trust. The Minister explained how he trusted me more than the others—because I had shown a genuine interest in experiencing his country.

## 54. GUESS WHO'S COMING TO BREAKFAST

### *Iguazu Falls*

Near the borders of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay, the Iguazu River tumbles downward from a plateau, creating a series of as many as 300 adjacent waterfalls. The highest of these is almost as high as a football field is long. The tumbling waters are surrounded by lush tropical forests, filled with birds, butterflies, and all variety of South American wildlife.

Scott was staying at the Hotel das Cataratas, which, as its name implies, has panoramic views of the falls. He hiked the trails along the falls with a guide, hoping to see the elusive jaguar. It's the third largest of the cats, and the one with the most powerful bite—adapted to penetrating the skull of its victims. Although there are three dozen of the beasts roaming around Iguazu Falls, Scott could not find one. The only dangerous wildlife he came across was a steady progression of stinging caterpillars—crawling everywhere and dropping from the trees.

On his last morning at the hotel, Scott went down to have breakfast. The restaurant buffet was inside, but most of the guests preferred to dine on tables set up in the courtyard, around the swimming pool. When Scott arrived for breakfast, he was surprised to find the poolside tables empty—food and drinks abandoned, and several chairs turned over. All of the guests were crowded together inside the buffet area. Scott asked a waiter what had happened.

## *The Waiter's Story*

“Everyone was eating breakfast when a jaguar walked out of the rainforest. I was about to head outside with fresh coffee when I saw it. The big cat walked right into the courtyard, navigating around tables filled with guests. Most were too busy eating or chatting to even notice the predator’s presence. It came within inches of them, and they were oblivious. Fortunately, the jaguar also had little interest in the diners. Its mission was a morning drink from the swimming pool.

“I went outside and started asking the guests closest to me to come inside. Even then, they were unaware of the danger and seemed annoyed at my request.

“The first guest to notice was a little American girl, who pointed and shouted, ‘Mommy, look at the pretty kitty!’ Her proclamation was loud enough to cause several tables to look up from their breakfasts.

“A general panic ensued as the diners fled indoors, overturning tables and chairs along the way.

“The jaguar couldn’t have cared less. It knelt at the edge of the pool and lapped away until it was satiated. Then it turned around and slowly walked right back into the jungle.”

While lions, tigers, and leopards have long histories of preying on humans, jaguar attacks are rare. The jaguar’s closest relatives are Asian cloud leopards, and scientists believe that they made their way across the land bridge into North

America before human beings inhabited the continent. The practical result is that humans are not regarded as food. That was fortunate for the guests at the Hotel das Cataratas.

## 55. SINKING BOATS

### *Galápagos Islands*

We all have seen the stunning documentaries from the Galápagos Islands. Their plodding giant tortoises and dancing blue-footed boobies never cease to amaze us. Unless you have been there, though, it is impossible to appreciate how far many of the islands are from one another. We toured the Galápagos in early October, a time known for rough seas. The major El Niño that year made them even higher than usual. For hours each day, our boat pitched and bounced and rolled across formidable swells. As we tried to keep our eyes on the horizon, we asked our guide what was the strangest thing that had ever happened to her on a boat.

### *The Galápagos Guide's Story*

“We were anchored in a small boat in the harbor at Puerto Ayora. It was night, and the crew and our few guests were enjoying dinner below deck in the dining room. Without any warning, the boat lurched violently. The food and drink fell to the floor first, followed by us. It was very disorienting. When I was able to right myself, I realized I was kneeling half on the floor and half on the wall. The boat was leaning badly to one side.

“Then the water came, cascading through the doorway and into the dining room.

“Everyone to the deck,’ ordered the captain. By the time we reached the door, we were thigh deep in cold water.

“The view from the deck confirmed the worst. The boat was listing badly, and its stern was already underwater.

“The captain hastily opened a chest and passed out life vests, which everyone started putting on.

“Then the lights flickered and went out. We were anchored in the middle of the harbor, perhaps fifty yards from shore.

“‘We are going to jump in together and swim for shore together,’ said the captain. ‘Now,’ he ordered. ‘You first!’ he said, pushing one of our guests over the side.

“Everyone quickly followed into the water. ‘Swim hard,’ yelled the captain behind us. About halfway to shore, I looked back to check on our boat. It was gone.

“We all made it safely to shore, where we were helped from the water by witnesses who had seen what happened. We had been sunk by a giant wave, called a rogue wave, which had struck us sideways. It’s unclear what caused the wave, but the same colliding currents that draw the wildlife also make for turbulent and unpredictable seas.

“That was the first time I abandoned ship.”

“There were others?” asked Gina.

“Yes, the second time was on a larger ship. Most of the guests were elderly. The ship was sailing to distant Wolf Island, one of the most remote destinations in the Galápagos. Thousands of hammerhead sharks were schooling there, and the guests were going to scuba dive in the middle of their swarm.

“I was sound asleep in the middle of the night when the fire alarm started going off. I reached over to switch on the lights, but they didn’t work. Then I smelled smoke. I jumped out of bed and struggled in the dark to find my backpack, where I stored a small flashlight. When I turned it on, its beam illuminated the haze of the smoke.

“I quickly put on a pair of jeans and ran out the door. There were already a few guests in the hall, looking confused and disoriented.

“‘Go to the deck,’ I told them.

“Notwithstanding the loud alarm, many of the elderly guests were still sleeping soundly in their beds, oblivious to the alarm without their hearing aids. So I went door-to-door, banging loudly, and using my flashlight to help people get dressed.

“When I finally reached the deck, I looked up to see that a fire was raging on the bridge. Some of the crew were battling the fire while others were deploying lifeboats.

“As guides, our responsibility was evacuating the guests, so we helped them into lifeboats and used our manifest to take count. Only after we had twice counted off and confirmed that the number of heads in the lifeboats was the same as our manifest, did we join in fighting the fire. By the time we reached the crew, they had put out the fire. But the ship was badly damaged—and dead in the water.

“While the crew stayed with the ship to ensure the fire was completely extinguished, we guides descended in another lifeboat and paddled out to our guests. We were lucky that night because the Pacific Ocean was completely still. There were no waves. There was no wind. It was as still as bathwater.

“We sat there all night in the lifeboats, watching our ship emit a vertical plume of smoke into the starry sky. As dawn approached, another cruise ship destined for the same island arrived, and plucked us from the water. All of us slept in blankets on its deck, happy to be alive.

“The two misfortunes have given me a bad reputation among sailors. Some of them will not let me even set foot on their boat because they fear I am bad luck. Sometimes, I lose trips because of what has happened to me.”

On any given day up to 80 passenger boats traverse the waters of the Galápagos Islands. While accidents are rare, a search of articles reveals that unpredictable waves—such as those our guide encountered in her first story—seem to be the greatest risk. One Associated Press article described the sinking of the

unfortunately-named *Moby Dick*: “One moment, elderly American tourists on a chartered cruise to the Galápagos Islands marveled at a picturesque sunset and porpoises swimming below. The next, rough swells tipped their 70-foot boat. Several passengers were pitched overboard, water filled the *Moby Dick* and furniture went tumbling. Within minutes, the ship went down. Two people died, and two more have been missing at sea.”

Perhaps the captains who banned our guide from their vessels should reconsider whether she brings good or bad luck. All of her guests survived the incidents without injury. Maybe that had something to do with her quick thinking and calm demeanor in the face of the emergencies she faced.