

Xerophytica 2014 - Plants for our Future | Post-Congress Tours

The previous 4 days felt like a lifetime! The 2 day Congress, Ewanrigg Tour and Great Dyke Tour were over... but there was no time to even reminisce or think about them as we continued full speed ahead with the final leg of the Post-Congress Tours – heading towards the Eastern Highlands, led ably by Rob Jarvis who had planned the full 5 days. To be quite honest, I could barely believe that there was going to be even MORE on the cards!

Some minor admin, like dashing to the bank, filling cars with fuel, etc, was all duly completed and our convoy (now down to 3 cars) met on the road heading out of Harare, distributed cool bottles of Xerophytica water and set off on Day One.

POST-CONGRESS TOUR 3: EASTERN HIGHLANDS : DAY 1

We headed out of town on the Mutare Road, and the traffic was very kind to us. It was strange being back on tarred roads, and much appreciated by the drivers who were all quite weary from the previous evening's drive back from the Great Dyke. Just before Halfway House, we came to our first botanising halt to enjoy the never-ending colony of aloe *greatheadii* with their soft pink/peach flowers peeking out over the long golden winter grass. The tone of the trip was set as we took the identification to a higher level and made sure that we could tell the very slight differences between aloe *greatheadii*, aloe *zebrine* and aloe *carnea*. All the textbook terms came in to play as we wrestled with bracts, inflorescence, racemes, pedicels, perianths and tepals and terms like exserted, recurving, arcuate, pungent, striate and ciliate adding to our skills of identification.



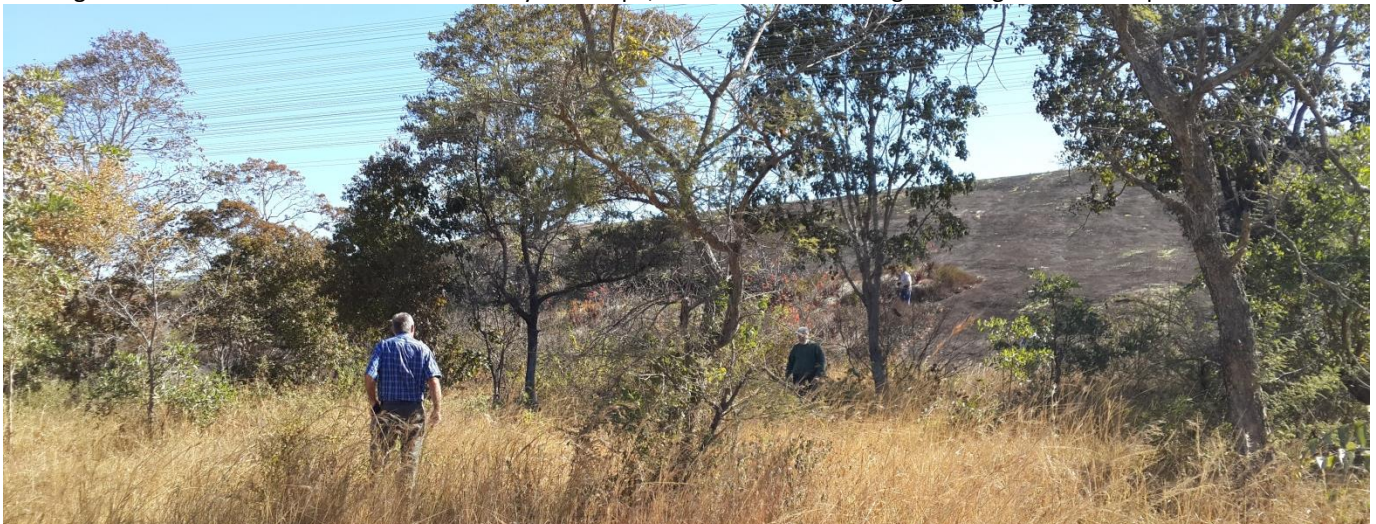
With fewer botanists to herd, we managed to get in and out of vehicles with slightly greater ease. A new term was coined on our tour, as the behaviour of botanisers dashing out the cars once they'd almost come to a halt to collect their identification and photographs, lead to the collective term of "botanising gannets."



Immediately before Halfway House, we veered off onto the first dirt track of the day. A long drive through the old farm areas at the back of Rusape, lead us to the home of Dup and Hannelie Muller, who had laid on a fabulous brunch for us. We revelled in Hannelie's incredible garden collection of encephalartos and enjoyed the beauty of their dam, wild animals and company.



With little time to waste, we drove off in our small convoy of 3 cars, with eyes peeled on anything that may resemble an aloe. At the shout of "STOP" by any of the inhabitants of the car, drivers were expected to comply immediately to allow the next exciting viewing of aloes in their natural habitat. Half way to Rusape, we came across a magnificent granite outcrop with aloe cameronii.





Back in the car and following the dust storms from the 2 cars in front of me. Some high level driving was required to keep up with aloe-hungry explorers! We came back into the main road at Rusape and immediately turned left towards Nyanga. Again, drivers were treated to tarred roads and some normality in the travelling environment. I don't think that conversations stopped at any stage from dawn to dusk and the hilarity of stories, encounters and adventures were shared. When we got to the London Store on the side of the road, we hung a right and drove a distance before meeting up with our Zimbabwean plant legend, Darrel Plowes, and drove up from Mutare to meet us and show us some of his favourite colonies of aloes. Right towards the Bonda Mission and then towards an enormous granite outcrop which simply bowled us over. We continued past, to the site of a magnificent aloe *pretoriensis* – just one lone specimen, before returning to the outcrop.





The outcrop of aloe cameronii var bondana was inconceivably beautiful. Once again, on our tours, we'd caught the late afternoon golden light, that illuminated the incredible form and colours of these unique aloes.



I might have taken the best photograph of my life: bee, laden with pollen, on an aloe cameronii var bondana (with a Samsung Galaxy phone!)



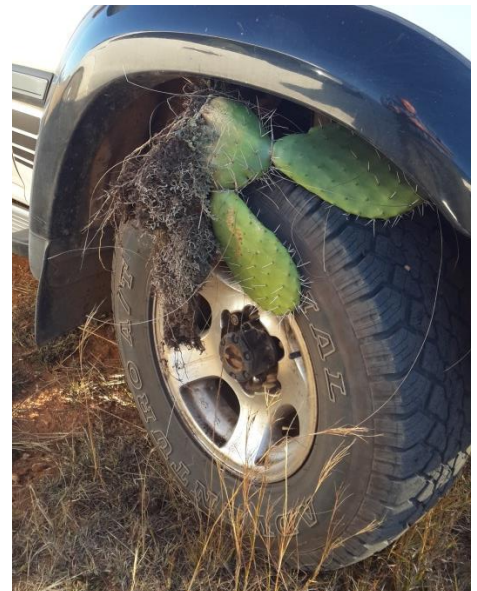
One of Rob Jarvis's reliably arty photos of a reflection of *aloe cameronii* var *bondana* in a rock pool. Reminds me so much of a Gustav Klimt painting!



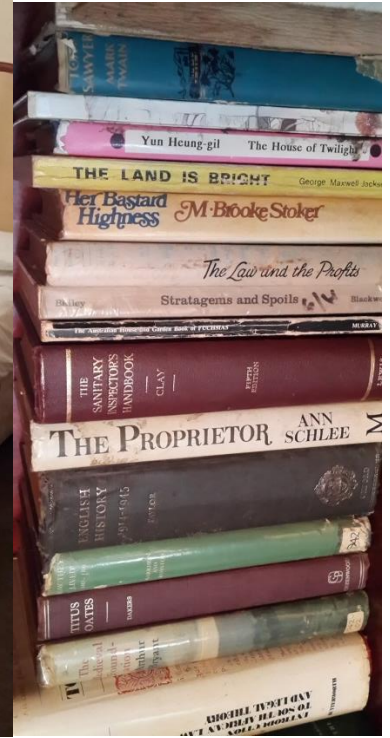
What a magic habitat. It was enlightening also, to see the villagers coming out and telling us NOT to take any plants away, as they belonged to the mountain.



Not only were there incredible aloe experts on our trip, there were also several comedians... and this is what I found when I arrived back at my car!!! The awful and deadly invasive opuntia!



Another heavenly sunset and then drive through to Rhodes Nyanga Hotel just around dusk (absolutely no complaints from anyone after the wonderfully long day, which had just been topped off with the most spectacular collection of aloe I've ever seen.) We arrived at the hotel, checked in to our rooms, set a meeting time of 7pm in the bar, for the dissection of the day, and each headed into the luxury of a bath or shower, clean clothes and a quick unpack.



Warm from baths and spruced up, we all met in the bar and went over each sighting, plant by plant! Reference books appeared from all sorts of bags and details of the plants of the day were hashed, rehashed, debated and in general everyone disagreed! Dinner was very “old-style Nyanga”...! I had a delicious whole trout with lovely vegetables, followed by a lovely apple pie. Back to the bar for more deliberations and laughter, planning for the next day and finally, to bed for a much needed sleep. It was freezing, and in the morning, we found it quite humorous that all our international visitors had put their heaters on in their rooms, and all the Zimbabweans hadn't even seen them, or considered them, being used to no power or such comforts!

POST-CONGRESS TOUR 3: EASTERN HIGHLANDS : DAY 2

We were up early, had breakfast, collected lunch packs, and headed off following Darrel Plowes to find the elusive and endangered aloe collina. It is found on a dolorite cap in the Nyanga area, and after driving back and forth once, we spotted a few on the hill. The normal de-bus from the vehicles and much botanising. Such a precious plant to find (unfortunately, they only flower in Sep – Nov, so we only saw the plants), but a treasure that will hopefully remain there for years to come. After our botanising, Darrel Plowes held court and gave us all a wonderful geology lesson, while we all sat on the road barrier with a sign saying “deadly hazard”.



Back into cars, after a serious de-seeding session between Darrel Plowes and Tom McCoy!

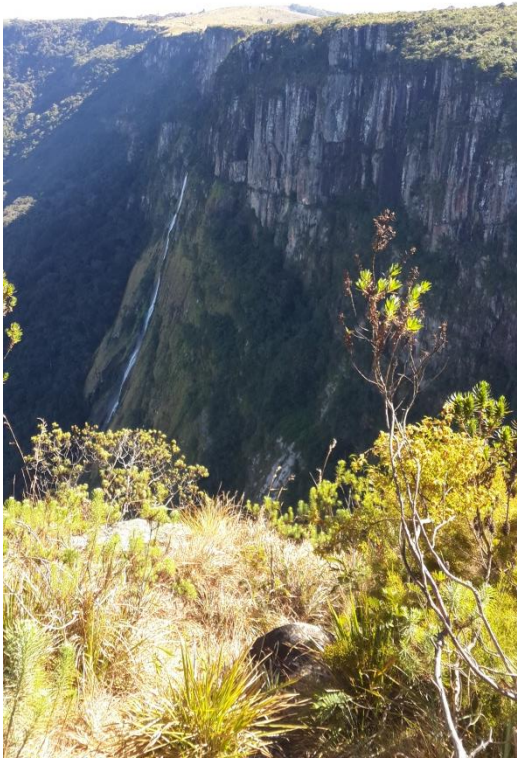


We returned through Juliasdale and turned right towards Mutare. Down through the winding, mountainous roads, until a high bank, which was scattered with the lime green bulging seedpods of *aloe swynnertonii*. They had obviously flowered a month or so earlier (which fits in with the specimen we have at at my home, Sunlands) so we missed the colourful display of capitate flowers, but the number of plants and their copious seedheads were impressive and resulted in much clambering up steep hills!



By this stage, Annah (Curator of Ewanrigg Gardens) and Dominique (Curator of Mutare Botanic Gardens) had joined us from National Parks. They were in their own vehicle, however, not with 4x4, so some juggling of passengers and trips was arranged, to allow them to fit in.

Onwards down through the mountains until a left turn towards Mtaradzi Falls. Back on rough dust roads again, we wound our way through the hills to the fabulous Mtaradzi Falls. They are the second highest falls in the world – two separate watercourses plunging over a sheer rockface that takes your breath away. We all grabbed our packed lunches, and headed down the pathway towards the Falls. As hunger hit each one of us at different times on our journey down to the natural viewing points, we found a suitable position and wolfed our chicken-mayo sandwiches down! Darrel Plowes was very keen to have Tom look at aloes he's seen on the sheer rockface, which he is sure are a new species that need to be 'described'. There has been no successful retrieval of plant material to support this discovery, as to get to the specimens, is purely impossible. I believe that our experts have some very firm opinions on these aloes!



After such a wondrous spectacular, we got back into our cars and headed with a strange quiet, back towards Nyanga. We stopped at the Claremont Kiosk, in an attempt to find *aloe myriacantha* – a very small grass aloe that flowers in February. Every time we go to Nyanga, I have tried to find one of these, with no luck, and again, they eluded us. We did, however, find some good *aloe carnea* and once again much photography, identification and many ‘botanising gannats’.



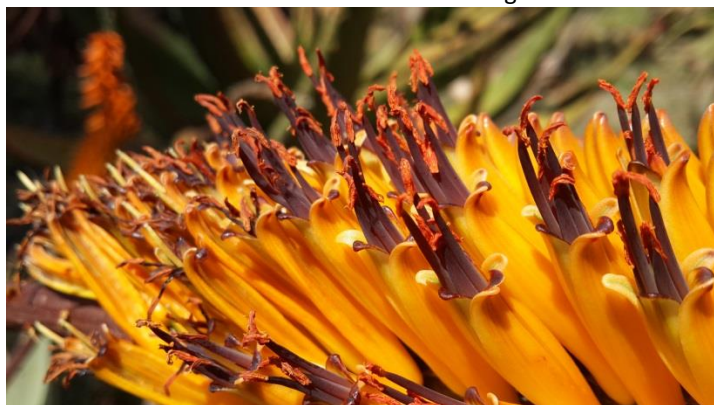
The sun was setting once again, and our timing made stopping off to find *aloe inyangensis* quite tricky. Some of the weary travellers elected to be dropped off at the hotel. My passengers were very eager to find these aloes in habitat, especially being in “Inyanga”, and while another vehicle tripped the long 4x4 route up to Worlds View, I elected to take them to Marabout, where I knew precisely where to find massive clumps of these grass aloes and some even in flower. We were the lucky vehicle, as the others had no luck in finding the aloes, but I had dug up a few specimens from our Nyanga property, and presented live specimens for identification (and as plants to take home) when we congregated in the bar after warm baths and clean clothes.



Lovely dinner, which we all ate on auto-pilot! And early to bed after another magnificent day of exploration and sights.

POST-CONGRESS TOUR 3: EASTERN HIGHLANDS : DAY 3

With a long day ahead of us, we were up and checked out early, had a bite of breakfast and got into cars to head towards Mutare. No stops were allowed, according to our tour leader! We found Stewart Drynen's home, just at the start of Christmas Pass, and spent a couple of hours visiting his wonderful garden, small aloe collection, orchid house, large encephalartos and tree collection. A lovely cuppa tea and cake, loo break and off we went, up the hill and over Christmas Pass, admiring the copiously planted aloe marlothii and one or two aloe ferox. What a sight in full bloom!



Fuel stop in Mutare, and reset of odometers, as our next journey was from Mutare to Birchenough Bridge. Due to the diamond mining, it is not advisable to stop or take photos, so our normal procedure needed a little amending. We were instructed to make up time and drove without delays, merely admiring the euphorbias and countless aloe chabaudii from inside the car, until a while north of Birchenough. There we found the most wondrous colony of aloe globuligemma, trees of these aloes, which are deadly poisonous, even the goats don't eat them, hence their survival. They had just commenced their flowering time and were a sight to behold.





A quick herding of botanists (oxymoron) and we were off to Birchenough Bridge, where we stopped for our packed lunches. Never has a cheese and tomato sarmie tasted so delicious. Finally an opportunity to photograph the aloe chabaudii, that we'd seen so many of on the drive.



We drove the obligatory over the bridge and back again route, and then turned offroad again, along one of our now eagerly-awaited dust roads. Almost immediately, we were met, open-armed by a hill of *aloe aculeata* and several natural hybrids (*aloe aculeata* x *pretoriensis* and x *chabaudii* and x *excelsa*.) Dotted among them were *euphorbias* and *sansevieria*.



The amazing leaves of the *aloe aculeata* have the most interesting white raised marking around the teeth on the underside of their leaves. And the little *euphorbias* in bright yellow flower, were spectacular tucked in between the plants on the arid hillside. At this site, sadly, the kids were desperate to dig up plants and barter them for sweets, which we definitely didn't fall for. There is no way you want to encourage the digging up of this magnificent natural colony.





The botanist herding session was simple this time, as we explained how many things there were still to see before sunset. In the vehicles and on to see fantastic ancient baobabs, palms, sansevieria and sabi stars, all while driving along the edge of the river.



We carried on at quite a pace as there was still a fair drive to get ourselves to Chimanimani. The corrugations were hectic and we all were bounced around while simultaneously keeping eyes wide open, scanning the landscape for aloes, succulents, sansevieria, adenium, and more! Our next obstacle was a river, which required some sincere 4x4 attention. My colleagues were all incredibly polite, and allowed me to lead the way...! Into first gear, 4x4, keeping revs high, making determined decisions as to which part of the river would be marginally shallower than another, we headed through the river with no drama! Apart from a near ejection of one passenger.



The light escaped over the mountains while we were headed up and down and left and right through the hills to get to Chimanimani. I had an incredible lorry driver ahead of me – he obviously knew the road well, and every time a pothole was coming up, he put his hazzards on, his lights were an enormous help as I could see what was a little further ahead, and I was most appreciative of his fantastic driving (not to slow either!)

We arrived at The Farmhouse, in Chimanimani, offloaded bags, and poured a welcome glass of wine. We feasted on a delicious leg of lamb with potatoes and delicious homegrown veggies. Accommodation at The Farmhouse was a welcome relief and a good night's sleep was on everyone's agenda!

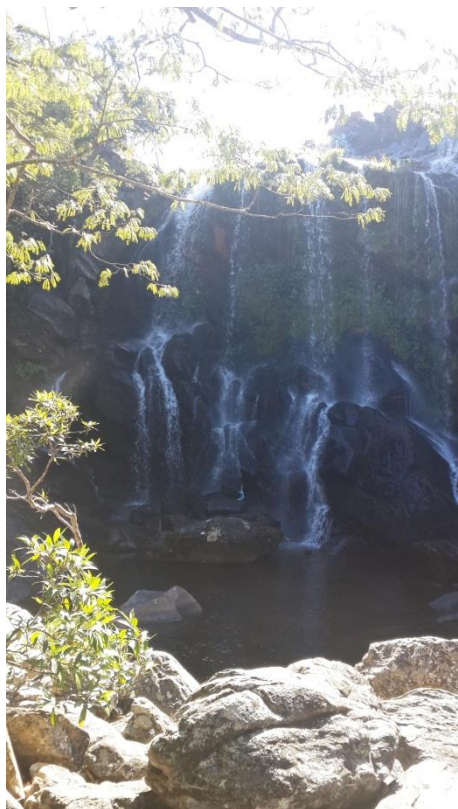


Aloe swynnertonii en masse in the garden at The Farmhouse.

POST-CONGRESS TOUR 3: EASTERN HIGHLANDS : DAY 4

Waking up early, once again, we devoured yoghurts, cereal and fruit, and packed up some lunch for a day of hiking in the Chimanimani Mountains. The drive in to the northern part of the Chimanimani, to “The Corner” is not for the faint-hearted. Nerves of steel and some close negotiations got us all to a parking spot, where we loaded up our lunches, water and backpacks. My takkies performed amazingly once again, as we pranced from rock to rock, through eye-high grass, up and down hills and backwards and forwards across streams and rivers. We had several aloes in mind to capture on camera, the aloe munchii, aloe howmanii, aloe ballii and aloe hazeliana. The likelihood of seeing some of the grass aloes, was very low, especially as they were not in flower. They are all aloes that I’ve never seen, and I was not alone in keeping eyes peeled for any sign of them.

The magnitude of the Chimanimani Mountains and terrain was mind-boggling. The landscape is so beautiful, it takes your breath away – definitely a piece of heaven. We had success in seeing aloe munchii, but no luck with other aloes, apart from the good old faithful aloe chabaudii, which grows like weeds! Most of the flowers were at their end, and just picturing the mad carpet of colour that must have been scattered over the mountain a month prior, was jaw-dropping.



We stopped for lunch (bacon and tomato sandwiches and a juicy nartjie) on the edge of the river, and despite the low temperatures, most of us removed our shoes and dipped our feet into the chilling, running water. A bottle of Springfield "Life from Stone" chardonnay was share around after making cups by using a leatherman to cut empty water bottles in half. I don't think a half swig of chardonnay, with delicious mineral undertones, has ever tasted so magical.



What surprised me was the numbers of orchids and euphorbias that carpeted the landscape. Trees seemed to be clothed in orchids of all types. It was absolutely phenomenal.





Aloe munchii, the elegant ladies standing bolt upright amongst ancient rocks. The timing was perfect as they were in magnificent flower, standing as centuries overlooking the harsh beauty of the Chimanimanis.



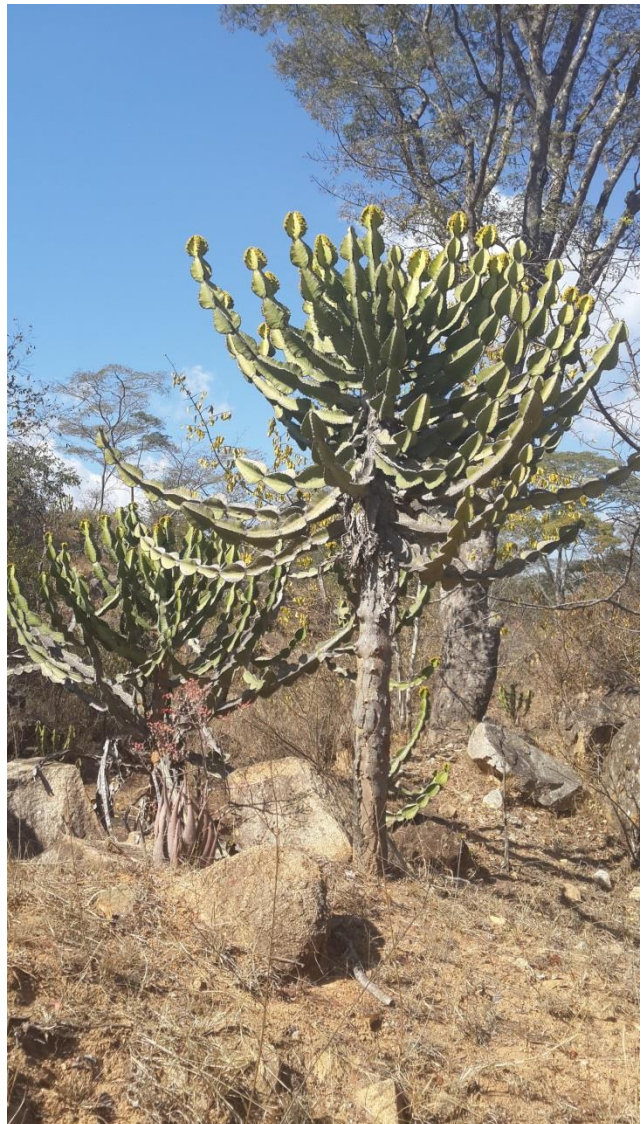
On our way hiking out of the mountains, we found some spectacular rock art, which was yet another treat thrown in for the day! We bundled back into our comfortable vehicles and returned on the wild road from The Corner, to The Farmhouse. We were hoping to see *aloe rhodesiana*, but again, as it is not in flower, our hopes were not that high – we stopped in several perfect looking habitats, with grass taller than ourselves, with no luck. Back to our accommodation for the night, with a delicious dinner of roast chicken, rice and more fabulous home-grown vegetables. Not much conversation, as we had expended every spare ounce of energy during the day! It was an early night and some preparation and packing up for the final day and drive home.

POST-CONGRESS TOUR 3: EASTERN HIGHLANDS : DAY 5

We woke up and wolfed down some breakfast again, before a final re-shuffle of passengers and luggage, so that everyone would be in the right cars for the journey back to Harare. We came out of the Chimanimani and turned Right at the Skyline interchange. Another drive before finding another wonderful colony of *Aloe excelsa* interspersed with *aloe aculeata*. I was very happy to see the amount of *aloe excelsa* babies happily dotted around the hills.



Onward to rejoin the Mutare Road, with the many roadblocks once again. The light was spectacular on the euphorbia cooperi, and aloe chabaudii abounded! We managed to find a secure spot in between the roadblocks to get some photos of the euphorbia, aloes and sansevieria.





The remainder of the journey was retracing our tracks back to Harare, and involved a slightly lighter quantity of chatter while admiring the landscape flying by. Final drop-offs of all passengers to their relevant homes and places of accommodation. An epic adventure!