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What I Learned from Visiting All 54 African Countries

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Author and explorer Francis Tapon (MBA 1997) on finding the “unseen Africa” and other reflections from his five-year journey through the continent

Hi, this is Dan Morrell, host of Skydeck. We're about a year and a half into Skydeck, and I just want to thank you all for your continued support of what we're doing here. It means a great deal to us. But I wanted to ask a favor, too. Please take a second to rate us and review us in iTunes. We would love to hear from you. We think it will help us reach even more of you. OK, on to the show.

Francis Tapon was off to a bright tech career after HBS, working at a Silicon Valley startup before stints at Hitachi and Microsoft. But his penchant for travel became irrepressible, and he left the corporate world to pursue that passion full time. His long list of travels includes hiking the Appalachian Trail, walking from Mexico to Canada and back on the Continental Divide, and completing two three-year tours of all 25 Eastern European countries.

We caught up with him recently in Tanzania, where he was wrapping up perhaps his most ambitious project yet, a five-year tour of Africa, which included visits to all 54 countries on the continent.

Francis, was your interest in travel something you always had, or was it a kind of revelation?

TAPON: It was in my DNA from the start, because my mom is from Chile. My father is French. And I was born in the United States. And so, right from the get go, I was a little baby, I would be sent off to France, and then we went to Chile many times in my childhood. My mom and my dad spoke to me in Spanish at home. They sent me to a French school in San Francisco. It was a bilingual school, but all the classes were taught in French. All the professors were French. And then I was in America. So, three languages right from the get go. It was my destiny, I think, to have a lot of wanderlust.

What made you want to travel to all 54 countries in Africa? What was the sort of motivation for this undertaking?

TAPON: I had never been to Africa before, and I had this grand ambition to visit all the countries in the world. There's 193 countries. And I had been at that point to about 50 or something. And so Africa was going to knock off 54 countries. So, I decided right from the get go, I'm going to see all of them at in one big trip. I figured, OK, I need about three weeks per country. And I think that should be enough. But in the end, I needed about five weeks per country, and that turned into about a five-year trip.

How did you travel? I mean, in other words, were you driving most of the time? Did you travel with fixers? Did you feel your way through it? How did that work?

TAPON: I didn't have any fixers anywhere. I did it all by myself. I had a car. I bought a car in Madrid in Spain, and then I drove it across the Strait of Gibraltar, entered Morocco, and from there, I never let go of the car. I went all the way to all the 54 countries. Now there's seven island nations in Africa, things like Cape Verde and Sao Tome, and Madagascar, so those ones I actually flew to and left the car back on the mainland. And when I would travel around there, I would take buses. Also, sometimes my car needed to be repaired, and I had these moments where I was without a car, and there again, I would take buses. I would hitchhike. And I would take motorcycle taxis and things like that.





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And one more thing I'd add. I picked up 3,000 hitchhikers, which might surprise people. I just didn't want to be in a bubble. I think a lot of times a car can create kind of a bubble effect, where you're disconnected. And I really want to get to know the Africans, and so I ended up picking many people up every day, all the time, and that was my experience for getting to know the Africans themselves.

Francis, you're working on a book and a potential TV show, both with the title *Unseen Africa*. How do you define "unseen Africa"?

TAPON: That's a very, very good question, because I know I'm going to let down a lot of people, just superficially say, well, wait a second, none of this stuff is unseen. I've lived in Africa or I traveled all over Africa. Well maybe for you, but I define unseen Africa is for most people who are like tourists, who've been there. They go on a safari in Kenya and Tanzania, or they go see the pyramids of Egypt. They go see Victoria Falls in Zambia or Zimbabwe. Or they watch CNN, or they watch National Geographic. And when they do talk about certain countries that are like the bad news affairs, like the Somalia and the Central African Republic and the Congos, and those types of things, it's just bad news that we hear, or AIDS and epidemics and things like that, Sierra Leone, Liberia with Ebola.

So, what I'm trying to do is talk about things that are outside those things that we always hear about. Also, even Africans or expats who've lived five, 10 years in Africa or more, they tend to just know one area. So, somebody who went in Kenya or Nairobi, they may not know too much about West Africa. So, there's a lot of unseen pockets of Africa for different people.

But I don't want to pretend like what I'm doing is a complete revelation and never been seen before. That's for sure.

You traveled through 54 countries. How much trouble were the border crossings?

TAPON: Yeah, in fact, you think about it, you're really hitting 108 border crossings in a way, because you have to deal with the authorities on both sides of the border. So it's 54 times two, and it's a real pain in the ass, and this is one of the things that really is hurting, I think, tourism in Africa and is really hurting commerce in Africa. The borders are extremely inefficient and painstaking. I mean, it took me, let's say, going from Nigeria to Cameroon, it took me seven hours to cross the border. Getting a visa to Nigeria once took me a couple of months. It's very inefficient.

And that's, in fact, the worst part about traveling in Africa are the borders and the visas. It is really a pain. But they are making progress in this area. They're coming out within the next decade, they're going to come out with an African passport. I think they're already relaxing some of the visa restrictions and making more countries, let's say Mozambique, is now making a visa upon arrival, and several of the countries that used to not allow visa on arrival are starting to do that.

Things are getting better slowly, slowly. It definitely is the biggest challenge, I think, in traveling.

Was there ever a point where you wanted to give up, where you were like 'I'm running out of steam', or 'this doesn't feel safe', or maybe 'I just don't want to complete this'?

TAPON: No, I definitely didn't have that for a second. I kind of go all in on these things. I've walked across America four times when. I'm a pretty stubborn guy. I've walked across Spain twice. When I set on these big, big goals, I walked once from Mexico to Canada and back down to Mexico again. I'm a stubborn idiot. That's just my persistence that I have. And so, I kind of knew, there's no way I'm going to stop.

Now, Francis, you're finishing your tour of Africa. Tell me when it is you leave Africa.





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TAPON: Should be in September of 2018.

And that will be the first time you've left the continent in how long?

TAPON: Since February of 2013. So, it will be of over five years some, nearly five and a half years since I left the continent. Like I say, I go all in on these things. I love continuity and just becoming immersed in something, and I think too often travelers, they just jump in, jump out, they get to use their frequent flyer miles, and they show up in Singapore, and the next moment, they're in South America. There's no continuity. And I like the fluidity of going over land. I have the luxury of time, so that is definitely one thing, and I don't have too many responsibilities.

So, you've been on this continent for five and half years. How do you think the experience has changed you?

It's made me a lot more patient. I mean I'm a pretty patient person to begin with, but definitely became a lot more patient. That's one thing that changed for me. Much more forgiving. I mean, one of the things I really admire a lot about the Africans, they are the most forgiving continent around, because I think they understand that they're imperfect and everybody's imperfect. And when you compare to societies, let's say like Switzerland or Singapore or Germany, that are so exacting and precise, even Americans are this way to a certain extent. They demand almost perfection all the time. And Africans don't. And so, as a result, they're forgiving when people are imperfect. And that's something that I've become, I think, a bit better at. And it's changed me in that way as well.

Part of your upcoming plans include a return to the States. What are you looking forward to about your return to the States? And similarly, what are you dreading?

TAPON: I'm looking forward to consistent utilities. In other words, internet that always works, hot water that's always there, or in fact, just any water. Electricity that's consistent. These things are surprisingly hard to find in many parts of Africa. Again, what happens is that I think a lot or—some people are listening to this and saying, wait a second, I've been to Africa, it's just great. I always had electricity and water and everything. Yeah, because you went to a nice five-star tourist resort, for example, or you went to South Africa, one of the richest countries in Africa. You didn't go to Burkina Faso. You didn't go to Benin. You didn't stay in these certain places. You didn't live with the villagers themselves. That's sometimes the disconnect that I have with people that they may not understand what I'm saying.

Some of the things I've been dreading is just the internet nutheads and just the constant speed that America goes at. Something that's nice about Africa is that they just are not operating at this crazy level of speed. So as a result, things they go a little bit more slowly, which is a love-hate relationship, but that's one of the things I kind of dread, is just that in America, it's hard to breathe.

Francis, I know you met your wife during your time in Africa. How did you two meet, and how has she sort of furthered your cultural understanding?

It was fascinating. We just met in an app called Badoo, which is kind of like a Tinder app, and we met in Cameroon, and then we got married in Zimbabwe right near Victoria Falls, and then we traveled to almost 30 countries together. So, my wife gave me several insights because of the fact that one, she's obviously a woman, and so in certain countries, let's say North Africa, especially, in these very strong Islamic cultures, there's a separation between men and women. They can't mingle together, and so she got to hang out with women. I got to hang out with the men, and we'd come back together at the end of the evening and trade stories. And so she could give me some insights of things I would never know.





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Secondly, because she's black, I could see the discriminations that Africans have against other Africans and how they're very prejudiced. There's definitely white male privilege. As a white person there, all sorts of doors open up to you. For example, she was trying to get a visa to Tanzania, and she was getting asked all these types of questions and very suspicious, and then I showed up about in the middle of the interview, and the interviewers, they said 'Oh! Who is this person?', and she said 'My husband'. 'OK, well then, fine'. And then no more questions.

Wow.

TAPON: That kind of stuff happened constantly. Traveling alone was very hard for her. But when she was traveling with me, no problem. Part of it is because I'm a man, but also because I'm a white man, so it really makes a difference in Africa. And also, the third thing is just because she's from a village in the northern part of Cameroon, I could really see how African society works in the sense that there's a huge entanglement that the family structure has where people really depend on each other. So whenever you're successful, other people demand on you. And that can have a big impact on society.

On the one hand, it's a nice safety net to have. On the other hand, I think it impedes ambition to a certain extent, because what happens in many African societies if you're doing super, super well, then your whole extended family, and your extended family could be hundreds of people, will start making demands on your life and asking for money and asking for help and all sorts of stuff. We don't experience that in America at all. And I never realized how tough that is for an African, who is successful and the burden it puts on that person.

You've built a business around this work. You write. You create all sorts of multimedia content. You run a safari business. You ever feel like, 'hey, this is getting sort of dangerously close to the job I left'?

TAPON: Yeah, there's certain things like that. I agree. It sometimes can get in that danger zone where I'm like this is becoming a job that I regret. But a job, to me, like the connotation of a job, when people say a job is what they're saying, is that's something I don't really want to do. I'm only doing this because I'm being paid. And still, luckily for me, I've structured my life so that I'm still doing almost everything I do is not something, I would do anyway whether I was being paid or not. And I know that for a fact, because I'm being paid very, very little. The fact is that it proves that I would be doing this even for free, because I'm almost doing it all for free at this point.

You are wrapping up this trip, and you must be doing some reflection about the trip itself, and you know what you've learned. When you reflect it, what are some of your favorite memories?

So, one epiphany that sums it up is when I was going through Guinea and I was picking up hitchhikers all day long, I picked up probably about 20 hitchhikers that day. And at the end of the day, a group of hitchhikers were saying, 'hey, where are you going to be staying tonight? The sun is setting'. I said 'well, I have no idea'. And they said, 'well, why don't you come stay at our place'? And that's what I did. It was just a great experience.

This happened to me over and over again. Like I mentioned, I picked up about 3,000 hitchhikers, and I was able to see this constantly, because a lot of the hitchhikers would invite me to their house. This, to me, was the unseen Africa. This is what I was living for, and this is what I came to Africa to see and experience. And for that, I'm always grateful.

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