



First Friday News & Views

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The Monthly Newsletter
of the First Friday
Breakfast Club, Inc.

COVER: Three Queens and One Prince(ss) in Africa

by Jonathan Wilson

Three Queens and One Prince(ss) in Africa

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Our African safari adventure to Tanzania took us flying over Eastern Europe, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia, some of the most homophobic countries on the planet. An emergency landing in any of them could turn into a different sort of emergency for the four of us who share intimacy with those of the same gender. It was therefore a double blessing to land safely in Dar es Salaam.

The safari began in earnest with a cab ride from our hotel to the airport. As we rode along in insane traffic, a vivid rainbow appeared in the northern sky; I don't know how Africa could have made four gay men feel more welcome.

At the airport we boarded a small, single-engine plane to fly us to our first destination, the Ruaha River Lodge located high above the Rufiji River. November is the end of the dry season, so the landscape is arid brown speckled with a variety of leafless trees punctuated by greenery that is not palatable to the wildlife. Anything palatable is consumed while the animals struggle to survive until the rainy season explodes the terrain with lush green grasses and trees.

The dry conditions maximize the opportunity for game viewing; there's less cover for hiding and what water there is is in isolated pools and a trickle of a river. These attract the animals out of necessity, and out in the open.

The pecking order of predator and prey is readily apparent even to a casual observer. Carnivores and tourists alike are treated to a parade of varied species fit for consumption and photography. Although the lion is popularly crowned the king of the jungle, and they certainly are at the top of the carnivore food chain, they seldom mess with the elephants. The massive, elegant elephants rule, and they are highly protective of their young until the young have grown to a self-preserving size.

Our small plane landed in the middle of nowhere on a clay/dirt runway. High on the pilot's flight checklist here is to check for animals that may have wondered onto the runway. If seen, the pilot must "buzz" the landing strip, circle back, and land. Neither man nor beast wants to "meet" during a landing or take-off. Luggage is limited to 33 pounds per passenger; no matter apparently the weight of the passenger.

We were met by our driver/guide and escorted on an initial game drive to the lodge. We were seeing all manner of wildlife every few minutes and countless impala constantly. Impala provide a whole new definition to the term "fast food." Our guide would dutifully stop to allow our excited photography of animals he had seen countless times before. Before the safari ended we'd gotten pictures of almost every animal on the

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Calendar

▼ The next FFBC Meeting is 7:00am, Friday, January 8, 2016, at Hoyt Sherman Place, 15th & Woodland, Des Moines, IA

▼ RSVP by January 6 to JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com, or phone 515-288-2500

typical tourist checklist and stopped taking pictures unless the angle, activity, or lighting was superior to the photo we already had. We were free simply to be witnesses and absorb the experience.

The guides are a wealth of information about animals, plants, terrain, and geologic history of the region. Quite remarkable really; no question was treated as trivial or tiresome (even though we suspected both about our inquiries more than once). We learned much. For example, if you see a piece of tail in a tree, it's likely attached to a leopard. And we saw and photographed several of those.

While none of the four of us was "flaming," we made no secret of the fact that we were same-sex couples. At neither of the safari camps we visited, and nowhere in Tanzania, did we sense any negative or judgmental interactions. To the contrary, just the opposite. Folks aren't as homophobic as they think they're supposed to be, in African or America, especially when they're being paid to act enlightened.

There were certainly opportunities for an adrenalin rush, as when two lions eyed us six feet from our open-air jeep. Up close you can read murder in those eyes. Elephants, on the other hand, when near enough for a close-up picture of their eyes, give an adrenalin rush too, but they look back in complete confidence and contentment. It's actually soothing to be in their presence; they don't care one whit about "gay." Oh that the GOP they have been used to symbolize could embrace such wisdom.

The final adrenalin rush comes with the take-offs and especially the landings of those tiny planes using clay/dirt landing strips. Both are jaw jarring. With each we were one engine, one pilot, and one heartbeat away from a headline, "Four Gay Iowans Die in African Plane Crash." Better that, I guess, than one that reads "Four Gay Iowans Executed After an Emergency Landing in Iran."

We still have a lot of work to do before our fellow human beings around the world have gained the wisdom of African animals.



Briefs & Shorts

Be sure to RSVP for the **January 8** meeting no later than January 6. Contact Jonathan at 288-2500 or email him at JonathanWilson@DavisBrownLaw.com. Our scheduled speaker will be Governor Martin O'Malley, candidate for President.

Thanks to Tim Schreck for his introduction of our December speaker, John Clayton, a representative of the Al Gore Foundation: The Climate Reality Project.

Volunteers Needed!!!! Our traditional Red Party fundraiser that means everything to our fundraising efforts to generate resources for our scholarship program is being re-formatted in 2016. It will, again, be on the first Friday of February 2016, but it will be held as an Open House Reception at the home of Jonathan Wilson and Scott Kuknyo. Volunteers are needed for set-up, clean-up, and logistics in between. Volunteers attend at no charge. Contact Rick Miller or Jonathan Wilson.



Be sure to peruse the front table for a book you might like to read. Book donations are always welcome. **Please check around your home for books borrowed and not yet returned or for other books you'd be**

willing to share through the exchange. Thanks to Scott Kuknyo for helping coordinate the book exchange.

Consider a tax deductible contribution to the FFBC scholarship fund, or a tax exempt testamentary gift, or both. Contact Jonathan Wilson for details.

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many dislike the USA because its citizens elect the politicians who control the world economy, and even decide country boundaries in their part of the world.

We have addressed some of what we consider the most significant aspects of this trip. Obviously there were other experiences much too numerous to describe.

Often we feel a high level of frustration with our government but, in traveling, we do return home recognizing that our lives and opportunities are still better than in the rest of the world.

Travel in the Balkans

By Allen Vander Linden and Michael Thompson

For 5 ½ weeks this Fall, we drove 4200 miles through SE Europe, known as the Balkan Peninsula. This was probably the most extensive, challenging and ambitious of our nearly annual trips out of country. We did our own planning and traveling without a tour group. The countries we visited included Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria.

Except for 5 nights in an Athens gay hotel, we stayed in apartments of Airbnb or Misterbnb (gay) hosts-22 different locations. With most hosts we were able to have significant in-depth conversations including topics of culture, life, politics, and the Balkan wars.

The biggest challenge of going on our own in a rental car related to border crossings where often different forms were needed. At least 3 times a bribe got us through (hey, the bribe was not our idea). GPS was wonderful except when it wasn't, like sending us down a one lane road with huge mud/water holes; no turning back.

The scenery along the way was incredible; amazing mountains with lots of fall color. Very fascinating was exiting the expressways and driving on secondary roads to observe people working in the countryside and how the many small towns function. We often saw horse or oxen drawn wagons hauling produce or a family alongside modern vehicles.

Most of our destination cities had an assortment of mundane buildings and streetscapes, including communism period structures, scattered throughout. However, they also had surprisingly modern structures and amazing old buildings which were beautifully restored. Many were built during the Ottoman (Turkish control) period and remain in amazingly good condition. In some countries there were scattered ancient Roman and Greek ruins, particularly in Athens.

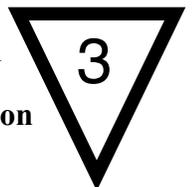
The most significant experiences came from personal interactions with our Airbnb hosts. Over coffee or dinner we learned of their lives, struggles, and joys. Often they spoke of their experiences during the Balkan wars.

Economy and Government: Corruption in government, the struggling economies, and high unemployment were common concerns. Frustration is high over limited individual earnings (even with a college degree), unless one has a government job.

Example, our very attractive 40 year old gay host in Zagreb, Croatia, an aviation attorney, can't find a job that pays more than 450 Euros a month. He could go to Germany and face a risk of not finding a job because a qualified German would be hired before a Croatian. Coffee shops are filled with unemployed people, largely young. No one expressed optimism about their situation changing anytime soon. We asked if things were better under communism. Generally, the younger responded that it is better now because at least there are freedoms. Some middle aged and older said that communism was better; everyone had work.

The Balkan Wars: We both had some awareness of the 1990s Balkan wars but not a clear understanding of what it was all about. People were certainly willing to talk about it, always beginning with, "it's complicated." There were clear differences in individual perspectives according to who, what, and from where the storyteller was. It can be said that it was a traumatic time for all. Serbians, with ally Montenegro, were seen as the bad guys because they killed so many and destroyed buildings and towns. They were fighting to keep the former Yugoslavian country as one. Those seeming to have suffered the most were Bosnians, Kosovos, and Albanians. What we didn't know was that people didn't necessarily live in their country of origin. For example, Serbs lived in Bosnia as neighbors and friends for generations. But they were still Serbs. Also religion has a lot to do with people's identity. When a conflict arises, neighbor takes arms against neighbor. When asking Serbs about the killings, they said that the genocide was *those* people then, not us now. The people are getting along now but still with some tension. Serbia still does not recognize Kosovo (neighbors to the south) as a country. This description is simplified but is the gist of what was expressed.

Greece: Because Greece has been a part of the EU for some time and was not directly involved in the Balkan wars, it was a somewhat different experience. When we shared our understanding that they were in economic trouble due to their high benefits and a short work week, the response was yes, but the people have no problem making those changes. The real problem was corruption in their government. Also the USA is, supposedly, to blame for much of their problems. It began with the lack of the US control of big banks and their failure in 2008 which affected banking in Greece. Also,
Travel in the Balkans (Continued on Page 2)





SOUND BUDGETING GIVES IOWA A GOOD OUTLOOK FOR 2016

As we move toward the 2016 session, the careful budget-making strategy adopted by the Legislature will allow us to maintain our investments in expanding Iowa's middle class in all 99 counties. This includes affordable higher education, 21st Century job training and a good education for our schoolchildren.

That's because we balance the state budget in a fiscally responsible way. Under Iowa law, we never budget for more than 99 percent of what the state takes in, and often significantly less. We use a cautious approach to determining how much to spend by looking at recent revenue estimates of a nonpartisan panel of experts.

Each year, at least 1 percent of the state budget goes into savings accounts, which include a cash reserve fund and an economic emergency fund. This is the money that gets us by in hard times, such as an economic recession or a natural disaster. We currently have more than \$700 million in our reserve funds, the largest amount in state history.

Iowa's approach to budgeting wins widespread praise:

- Based on a comprehensive review of data, 24/7 Wall St. rates the 50 states by how well they're run. In its most recent study, Iowa ranked number four in the nation. Among our state's attributes: low debt, a strong credit rating and a well-managed budget.
- Iowa consistently earns a Triple A credit rating from Standard and Poor's. This top rating means the state of Iowa has an "extremely strong capacity to meet financial commitments" in full and on time.
- Iowa's rainy day funds equal about 10 percent of the state budget and are among the strongest in the country, according to the Tax Foundation.
- Iowa is one of only eight states to receive an "A" grade from the U.S. Public Interest Research Group because we make it easy for Iowans to see how their tax dollars are spent.

Additional information

This is a legislative update from Senator Matt McCoy, representing west part of Des Moines, portions of West Des Moines and Cumming in northwest Warren County. For newsletters, photos and further information, go to www.senate.iowa.gov/senator/mccoy.

To contact Senator McCoy during the week, call the Senate Switchboard at 515-281-3371. Otherwise he can be reached at home at 515-274-0561. E-mail him at matt.mccoy@legis.iowa.gov.



Senator McCoy is an Assistant Senate Majority Leader, chair of the Commerce Committee and chair of the Transportation & Infrastructure Budget Subcommittee. He also serves on the Appropriations, State Government, Transportation and Ways & Means committees.



December's Guest Speaker, John Clayton

by Bruce Carr

Our guest speaker on Friday morning, December 4, 2015, was John Clayton, who gave us a broad-brush but compelling outline of what is happening to our globe and its atmosphere – a very timely topic just as the United Nations Conference on Climate Change was getting underway in Paris. His slide-show, demonstrations, and words were all pointed to his urgent message: *It Is Bad; It Is Us; but, There Is Hope.*

John clearly demonstrated how the enormous increase of carbon emissions released from the world's soil into its atmosphere has led to alarming consequences, from the rise in ocean levels to extreme global weather patterns and many more; and he sparked an unusually lively discussion from our group that amply illustrated our acquaintance and concern with the details of this problem and the search for solutions. But we will solve this, he said, citing response to the depletion of the ozone layer, first brought to worldwide attention in the mid-1980s and now being reversed though international scientific and industrial cooperation: a return to normal levels is expected by the year 2040. "So there is hope," he said.

John Clayton grew up on a farm near Brooklyn, Iowa, where his parents believed in conservation that saved soil from erosion and helped to maintain habitat and food for native insects, small mammals, reptiles, and song birds. He attended the University of Iowa, where he was an exemplary scholar and student activist, including leadership in gay organizations and issues. John became a high-school teacher and taught in Texas and other places for over 27 years. He retired several years ago and moved back to the family farm, where he has continued his parent's legacy of protecting the native environment. He now lives in Grinnell and gives lectures throughout the Midwest on environmental issues and climate change. He also packages and sells prairie wildflower seed over the Internet, each year offering a new package of beautiful and interesting prairie flowers. His farm, Broad View Garden, is a demonstration garden which is also used for research. The Garden is expanding with new wildflower species being planted each year. John Clayton can be reached via broadviewwildflowerseed.com.

Ponder This



Nothing is over until you stop trying.

Roe v. Wade was not the beginning of women getting abortions; it was the end of women

dying from abortions. I know personally a wonderful person who, before Roe v. Wade, nearly died from a botched abortion and had to have a hysterectomy in order to avoid dying from an infection.

The biggest lie that I tell myself daily . . . "I don't need to write that down, I'll remember it."

In school you're taught a lesson and then given a test; in life you're given a test that's supposed to teach you a lesson.

About a third of all human pregnancies end in miscarriage. If God is involved in every conception, from the moment of conception, God must also have some responsibility for every miscarriage, making God the most prolific abortionist that there is. Services of Planned Parenthood pale by comparison. The lesson I take from this is that termination of a pregnancy is part of God's plan.

After being touched inappropriately in her work place, a woman said to her assailant that she would have him fired. He replied, "The joke's on you; I don't even work here."



FFBC

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Des Moines, Iowa

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First Friday
Breakfast Club

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MADE ON A  MAC

MY M.O. (MONTHLY OBSERVATIONS)

by Steve Person
PUNISHABLE BY DEATH
By Steve Person

As a member of the Royal Oak Foundation (the American non-profit brother of England's National Trust), I try to visit as many of the Trust's properties as possible when I do my yearly visits to the UK. In October, I traveled to Kingston Lacy, a 300-year-old country house in Dorset owned by the Bankes family until 1981 when the National Trust acquired it.

The history of the family, the house, and the art treasures, as well as William Bankes's sad and fascinating story are chronicled in **The Exiled Collector: William Bankes and the Making of an English Country House** by Anne Sebba. William transformed the original brick structure, built by his ancestors, into a magnificent Italian palazzo in the 1840s and 50s.

What made this transformation even more incredible was that Bankes oversaw the work from Venice—and occasionally France—over a fourteen-year period. But why not in person?

Bankes, unfortunately, was caught in Green Park in London having sexual contact with a soldier of the Foot Guards on August 30, 1841. Says Sebba, "Sodomy was a capital offense in England until 1861.... During the first thirty-five years of the nineteenth century more than thirty-five men were hanged for sodomy in England."

Rather than face a humiliating trial and a certain death sentence, Bankes hurriedly fled to the Continent. He left his property and money in the care of his brother, George, and other family members. In the eyes of the court, Bankes was officially labeled an outlaw. Extradition laws were rare in those days and spottily enforced where they did exist. Venice provided the needed anonymity for him, and it was from there that he acquired and shipped marble, paintings, mosaics, and statuary to be placed in Kingston Lacy. His exacting directions and drawings of where each item was to go are preserved in the Kingston Lacy archives.

Plagued by declining health, Bankes daringly planned a surreptitious visit to England in 1854 to check on the progress of the work on his beloved country house. Not placing his trust in his family, he concocted a plan with one William Castleman, a powerful and ambitious man from the nearby town of Wimborne. William did get to see the work that had taken place in his exile, but much more work was needed. He did return to the Continent and died in Venice in 1855.

Fascinating story.