



By Christine W. Wanjala featured in the Uganda Daily Monitor Wednesday March 6 2013.

What does it take for a truck carrying goods to get from the port of Mombasa to Kampala? What challenges does the driver face? Our reporter hopped onto one of the trucks at the coastal city and here is her story.

It is hardly something one thinks about, say when they pick up that slice of bread. Or when in their Japanese reconditioned car, or even buying that piece of imported furniture at the showroom. What does it take to get these products and many more from overseas to that shop or factory in Uganda? Well, no prizes for guessing that a treacherous sea journey is most likely involved seeing as air transport is severely limited, expensive and all but locks out bulk. But Uganda is landlocked and the nearest port is approximately 1,200 kilometres away. So what is the journey from Mombasa to Kampala like?

I went out seeking and discovered it takes an almost three-day journey if you are lucky, practically living in a truck, eight weighbridges, delays at the border that can be anything from one day to a week, breakdowns and much more.

1. Set a tuk tuk to catch a truck

We wait for three days to load. Each evening we are assured that they will surely load during the night, only to wake up and there is nothing. By “we”, I mean Richard the driver who offered to let me skip all the red tape of getting authorisation and give me a lift in his truck to Uganda. Tall and probably middle aged Richard has the swaggering gait of a 20-year-old. He does not seem bothered by the delay that could be caused by anything, from the client who contracts the transport company delaying to finalise, to long lines of trucks awaiting loading, and the transport company not finalising all the documents needed for the consignment to travel. Ours is wheat from Russia headed for one of the milling companies in Uganda.

I am relieved when the call comes. We are loaded and ready to go. Never mind that I have to chase the truck by tuk tuk (a three wheeled vehicle that I can only compare to a boda boda since in Mombasa they do all the dangerous things your average Kampala boda boda will do. Also they sort of make that sound when they move). Richard is trying to beat the heavy truck jam that one is bound to encounter on their way out of Mombasa, or rather start sooner than later. I, who had gone

on a jaunt in town, will catch up with him at Mazaras, a little way up the road and away from the traffic jam.

It is a few metres from the truck that I see my first accident. The driver is just wriggling out of the cabin which is in a ditch while the rest of the truck, the container, lies on the kerb. Somebody somewhere who was hoping their container will arrive on time, will have to wait. "He was trying to avoid ramming into a matatu that stopped right in front of him so he swerved and ended in the ditch," explains Richard.

2. Of gross weights, axle weights and ado about nothing

We leave Mazaras at 4am on Tuesday morning and start towards the first weigh-bridge. Richard is worried about finding a long line at the weigh-bridge. His worries are justified since after two hours, we are at the tail end of a line that could be over a mile long. It is interesting how certain business seems to thrive right here in the traffic jam.

Water selling for one, then there are the ladies selling coconuts and cashew nuts. The biggest business of all though seems to be the brokers who dart between the trucks, asking the drivers if they could take their papers to get stamped. "In return for saving you the walk, you give him a little something," says Richard. "A little something" can be anything from Kshs100- Shs200 (about Shs3,000 - Shs6,000).

As we snake our way towards the bridge, I take time to learn a little more about the weigh-bridges.

"The limit used to be 80 tonnes gross weight .Now they use the axle weight method and each wheel is not supposed to bear more than eight tonnes," my all too eager educator tells me. This may have been a step to harmonise the weigh-bridges on the Mombasa to Kampala route. Just last year, Uganda Busitema weigh-bridge was using axle load weighing method while most other weigh-bridges on the Kenyan side were using gross weight. "You could get through all the weigh-bridges only to get to Busitema and be told you are overloaded," says Richard.

Speaking of overload, there are a number of trucks that are getting off the line and parking on the shoulder.

"Those are overloaded, and are waiting for money to give so they are let through," says Richard in explaining the sole reason roads have ruts from overuse by overweight vehicles. The money is usually sent by the owner of the consignment most times or the transporters, who then add it on the costs of bringing in the goods. Richards's employer has invested in their own weigh-bridge as from papers he shows me, they ensure that the truck is within the limit before setting off. If they said I was overloaded we will have to go to court to contest that."

Surprisingly for all the jam and ado, the weigh-bridge is simply a matter of driving over some sort of sensors, slowly and we are back on the road.

3. Watch out for elephants and drive with your lights off

Richard who has driven trucks on this same road for 16 years tells me of the possible dangers. Like elephants that lumber into the road without warning.

"If you are speeding, you will just hit it or lose control when trying to avoid it," he warns. He has barely finished saying this when we see a dark shape on the side of the road. It looks like a tall bush but when the car headlights fall on it, it is grey and poised to make a move. An elephant.

I have heard stories of recklessly driven trucks but so far so good, until we find this truck that is moving like it is in a slalom race. It veers off to one side only to drift back to the middle of the road and off to the other side. Richard thinks the driver is asleep and waits for him to drift to the left before overtaking him while honking loudly. He starts because he honks back. What I wasn't sure is

whether he stayed awake or dozed off again. At about 11pm we stop at Ndi, a hamlet within Tsavo National Park that is little more than a few shops and buildings and the trucks parked in the front. It offers cheap food and boarding, and ample parking space for the trucks not to mention security. Richard, however, intends to cover a few more kilometres before calling it a night.

Back on the road, he is concerned that several trucks also carrying wheat and headed for the same place will get to Kampala before him. So he decides to drive all night to get ahead. I flashback at the sleeping driver but can hardly do anything about it. At midnight and we are not yet in Voi which is the first major town after Mombasa. I am fighting off sleep but Richard seems alert. Apparently, this place is notorious for thieves.

“They do anything from laying stones and nails on the road to clambering the back of your truck as you go uphill. They will unseal the container and help themselves to whatever you are carrying before the driver even realises what is going on,” he says. A place called Salama seems to be the worst bit on that stretch as we drive with the headlights off for a bit. It is easier to see if someone climbs on the back that way,” explains Richard when I almost jump out of my skin. When Richard declares it safe, I succumb to sleep and climb onto the pallet behind my seat. When I wake up, the sun has come up. Richard seems none worse for the wear except for his red rimmed eyes and that probably has more to do with the bundle of khat he must have started chewing when I was asleep and less to do with sleep.

4. Join the line at the diversion

Despite the supper we had the night before, I am starving and would kill for a hot shower. But Richard seems to be in a race of sorts. The next stop will be in two and a half hours if we maintain the speed, and only for late breakfast.

Turns out fate has other plans. We find a diversion. While the matatus and buses and small cars can use the nearly complete road, trucks are too heavy and have to wait to be flagged off in the narrow dirt road, one lane at a time. This takes all of my hope of getting something in my stomach soon and 40 minutes just sitting by the dusty road side.

I was pretty confident we would not have any problems on the road, now it seems we are just running from one to the other.

Just after we come out of the worst of the diversion, the truck stops halfway uphill. Luckily it is something Richard can fix but it takes another 30 minutes before we can start moving again.

When we get to Burnt Forest where we have the tea in a wooden shack that only has two items on the menu, extremely hot tea and some cold mandazi, I hope Richard will at least take a breather. He doesn't. Instead he insists that we just gulp our tea and go. Today, we are sleeping at the border.

Time check is 1pm or thereabouts and we are in Eldoret where Richard wanted to catch up with a distant relative. However, he cannot find parking for the truck in the town. No wonder truckers gravitate towards smaller towns with ample space for their vehicles. Anyway, we head for Malaba border. The road is not so good but I am positive we will be in Malaba before nightfall.

From my experience so far, it is weigh-bridges that make the journey seem longer. The Webuye weigh-bridge is not different. If I were to put together the time we have spent at weigh-bridges up to Malaba, it is not less than three hours and that is without factoring in the time we would have spent at Mlolongo near Nairobi which Richard tells me we skipped.

5. Open border

The border turns out to be a bit lucky for us. Even if we find trucks jam several kilometres outside the town, they are moving, slowly yes, but surely.

According to Richard, this is a good sign. There is parking on the Ugandan side which means trucks are being cleared fast. Passing through Kenya customs is a matter of minutes, a broker takes the papers and rushes them to the clearing agents and we look for parking.

While Malaba does not seem to sleep, the area behind the trucks seems to have more activity at a certain point in the night. There are women peddling items like handkerchiefs and boxers. There are the drivers themselves conversing with each other. There are the youths looking for the odd washing job and the ladies with their ripe bananas. There are giggling girls crisscrossing in and out of the spaces between the trucks.

“The truck drivers lack nothing,” says Richard cheekily motioning at the girls. We saw them the previous night in those little “truck towns” hugging themselves near the trucks awaiting their next customers, but Malaba seems to be the place where they all go. Some barely look 18 but they brazenly approach the truckers in pairs or threes. Only a handful is skimpily dressed, most would pass for girls on the way to the shop or even church.

It seems a good number of drivers in an attempt to save money sleep rough in the trucks. There is a shower for hire nearby probably to serve their ablution needs.

Though he had said he didn't need a room and would have been comfortable in the pallet in the truck cabin, next morning I have to literally bang down his door before he wakes up, only for him to tell me that we are not likely to be cleared before 11am.

I stroll towards the parking since I have nothing else to do. Here I find two men who have called that parking lot home for the past one week. Why? Their load, which is a decomposing agent, has not been cleared.

“Every day the agent tells us, ‘let's wait and see’,” says the friendlier one adding he is not sure whether it is the owner of the consignment who has not sent the money or whether the clearing agent is encountering problems clearing that particular product.

6. Breakdown at the border

There seems to be a lot of waiting around at the border. Some longer than others but waiting nonetheless. Richard who later joins me is not worried as long as the others trucks headed to the same place are also waiting. He only gets skittish when one belonging to another transporter is cleared. Our papers come at 1pm and Richard practically races to the truck only to find that it won't start.

Let me just say I have been really patient on this journey, eating in shacks, barely showering but after an hour of Richard's tinkering on the gear box and me handing him the wrong tools to no avail, I think it is too much. We are not likely to leave Malaba anytime soon. The prospects look even grimmer when the mechanic Richard calls takes one look and says we are not likely to get out of there before the next day.

But my driver probably from experience or just stubborn determination decides he will at least try before spending another night in Malaba.

It is the drivers from the next truck, the ones who have been there for over a week who pitch in and make the mechanic at least take a look before making conclusions.

Just when we were about to give up and head back to the hotel, the engine starts. We leave Malaba at 5pm exhausted, dusty and hungry. I did my part by helping bring down the cabin to its original position so I am not just a useless spectator.

7. Shs50,000 equals five tonnes

The next stop is at the Busitema weighbridge where thankfully there is no line. On the side there are trucks like at all the other weighbridges waiting for a way to go around the weight limit. Even to an untrained eye, some of those trucks are clearly overloaded.

One of them catches up with us at Idudi (just before Iganga) where we stop for a meal and intimates that he was five tonnes above limit.

“We gave them 50,000 and were let to go,” he says jubilantly.

Right after Idudi is another place truck drivers are weary of. According to Richard the thieves here even use roadblocks so the vehicles stop or slow down thinking it is the police. Thankfully we keep our lights on but Richard is very watchful.

The journey to Kampala is more like a race to catch up on lost time and make sure no more trucks which may be carrying wheat pass us.

I am more than glad to come to the end of the journey and pity Richard who has to wait for at least another day for his truck to be unloaded and then take the trip back. I have to make one more trip of the same then we will be done with that order and it will be another client,” he says. But it his job, just like it is my job to write this story.

+++++