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The Rhino Story

Everyone likes a bargain and I always enjoyed bartering with local vendors to get the best deal possible. In every country we have visited, there are always those souvenir stores which sell mass-produced items typically made in China for the tourists. I always tried to find unique items made locally. In our recent trip to South Africa this year, we went to Cape Town and travelled north doing African safaris along the way to see the iconic Victoria Falls. This was on our bucket list. We have been to the very commercialized Niagara Falls in Canada and we did see the expansive Iguassu Falls in Brazil/Argentina. There was the towering Victoria Falls left. As our tour bus travelled from the Zimbabwe airport to our hotel, we passed by a massive open market place where many African animal carvings were visibly displayed. I've never seen such a gigantic collection of elephants, lions, leopards, hippos, rhinos, giraffes, antelopes and cape buffaloes spread all over the place. Some of these carvings were so large that you couldn't miss seeing them from afar. I asked the tour operator, "Are we going to be able to shop there?" The bus driver, who was a local resident, answered, "Sure. But you need to be careful as the vendors can be quite aggressive. The market is divided into two sections, one run by the women who are selling locally-made linens and decorative houseware items. The ladies are much easier to deal with when you are bargaining with them. All the animal carvings are run by the men and they can be very persistent." Later in the afternoon after we had settled into our hotel rooms, a group of 16 tourists boarded the bus to "do some serious shopping." Except for Pat and I, everyone else went to the women side to look for souvenirs. There were no other tourists looking to buy anything on the men side. I was undeterred as I wanted to get an original African animal carving directly from the source.

There were seven vendors selling animal carvings which were all displayed openly on the ground or on makeshift tables. The selection of different sizes and types of animals was so great that one could easily be overwhelmed as to where to start. But I had a plan which seemed to work. You must be focused on a key item you want and not be dissuaded into looking at anything else. As we entered, the men converged on us wanting us to be first in seeing their wares. Peter introduced himself and he was my first encounter. I said to him, "Peter, a few days ago on safari, I saw a big black rhinoceros bursting out from the bushes. It was a magnificent creature! I had to get a carving to remind me of it! Do you have any carvings of rhinos?" Peter nodded in agreement. Of course he had. I continued, "Are you the artist who carved your animals?" Of course he was! I found out later that there were companies in Zimbabwe who cut out the basic shapes of the animals which the local carvers would then buy to finish off the piece. I asked Peter to show me some of his best works which wasn't too big or bulky for me to carry back home. He showed me a carving made out of dark ebony wood which wasn't too bad. I took the piece and held it up against the clear sky and said to Peter. "As an artist, you will understand that when something is so good, you have to buy it on the spot." I could see a smile on Peter's face when I said this. "However, this carving is nice, but it doesn't speak to me!" Peter was visibly disappointed but he continued to show me the rest of his rhino carvings. But none were as good as the first one he showed me. He tried to pivot me to see some other animal carvings he had, but I was insistent that I had to get the rhino first. While we were doing this, all of his other six fellow vendors were jockeying to get my attention to go see their carvings next. I asked them to be patient as I will see all of them in turn after finishing with Peter.

I used the same technique and saw all their rhinos. Some were good, but most were too big or too small, too fat, too skinny, too rough; others were downright ugly and definitely not good enough for me. I think I managed to see hundreds of carved wooden rhinos displayed there. The last vendor, Thomas, was patiently watching me go through my routine with his colleagues. He was the last one in turn to show me his rhino carvings. He already knew that his wooden carvings probably wouldn't do, but he was very entrepreneurial. He asked me, "How about a stone carving?" "You cut rhinos out of stone?" I was definitely intrigued. Thomas picked out his best rhino carving cut out of some local green stone. He could

see the interest in my eyes and he asked whether I wanted to know his price. "I can give you a very good price." he said. "Wait, Thomas. My wife is here. Let me show it to her." Pat had been watching me all this time interacting with the vendors. "What do you think of this rhino?" I asked. She took one look and blurted out "EEUW! It's green!" Then she made a grimacing face, turned and walked away! Thomas had a dumbfounded look on his face. He certainly didn't expect such a negative reaction. "Oh oh", I said, "Look's like my wife doesn't like it, but I still do. I like the green color stone. What's your price?" Maybe Thomas thought he could sell one of his best carvings for \$100US. But after seeing my wife's reaction, he opened with a \$70US price. Our tour bus driver had told the group shopping to always bargain with the locals starting at half the quoted price. But the local vendors knew this too, so they would jack up the asking price. It's a game, so I knew Thomas would probably be happy with \$30 to \$35US. I countered with a very low offer of \$20US and Thomas frowned at me when he lowered his price immediately to \$40US, hoping to get at least \$30US. I raised it only to \$22US saying to Thomas, "This is the best I can do. You saw the look on my wife's face. If I bought it at any higher price, I will be sleeping on the couch for the next two weeks!" Thomas thought about it and he did see that look on my wife's face. It was a very persuasive image! He accepted my price. In hindsight, I should have given poor Thomas more, but I was caught in the excitement of the bargaining process. Besides, I think I am inherently a cheapskate! I showed my carving to our tour guide team and they said that I did very well. When we were flying out from the Johannesburg airport, I saw some local stone carvings for sale in a souvenir shop and a piece like mine would easily sell for \$200US! I did very well indeed thanks to my wife. I have attached photos of this impressive rhino carving which measure about 6"x4". A great souvenir and a story to boot!

