**Sample Translation**

**Between the Lines:  
Life and Death along the Equator and the Polar Circles**

By

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**Foreword**

Forest fires, floods, heatwaves, storms and extreme rainfall events are no longer the exception but part of the new normal that we now face pretty much wherever we are.

For years, we have been bombarded weekly by reports, research and articles telling or warning us about the effects of global warming. You’ve barely seen one before the next one distracts you from it. But I think there’s something missing: the view of non-scientists on the ground. That’s why I decided to take a trip around the world to talk to ordinary people.

The best, most important and most memorable thing about travelling is the people you meet along the way. Communication and closer cross-border friendships don’t just help reduce conflict levels between ourselves and the “unknown”; they also help us pull our heads out of the sand, or out of the safe Western bubble we are privileged and blessed enough to call home. Forming bonds across borders, cultures, religions and backgrounds better enables us to understand connections and to see ourselves from the outside. When meeting people on their home territory, I have tried to be humble, open and enquiring. Unfortunately, it’s all too easy to adopt the role of an observer when travelling rather than seeking out participation and local knowledge. Locals are experts on their region and their circumstances. Only through dialogue can we gain an insider’s view on the what, where, who, how, why and when. My aim was to find out whether their lives have altered as a result of climate change and if so, how. My wife, Jacqui Kunz, joined many of the journeys.

Choosing an itinerary proved something of a challenge. There are so many ways to travel around the world. But why not make it literal and follow the equator?

Actually circling around the centre of the planet we live on is totally surreal: No circle on Earth is larger. Yet the equator is not alone. There are three main imaginary circles around the Earth, all related to the sun. The equator divides the planet into northern and southern hemispheres, and that line marks where, in theory, day and night are almost equally long. In practice, the day is roughly fourteen minutes longer than the night, since sunrise starts when the upper part of the sun peeps over the horizon rather than the centre of the fiery orb, while sunset happens when the upper edge takes its leave. The name of this central circle comes from the Latin term, *circulus aequator diei et noctis*, or ‘circle equalising day and night.’ The verb *aequare* means to make equal. The equator’s position is close to stable, although it moves within a belt that is roughly nine metres wide every year.

To the north and south are the far more volatile polar circles, also known as the Arctic and Antarctic circles. The distinguishing feature they share is that both regions experience at least twenty-four hours of total darkness and twenty-four hours of midnight sun each year. Unfortunately for long-distance and sometimes mildly bewildered tourists, this never happens at the same time. Funnily enough, the word Artic comes from the Greek word *arktikos*, which means ‘close to the bear.’ Antarctic, meanwhile, means ‘not close to the bear.’ As we all know, polar bears live in the north and penguins in the south.

I am not including the two lines that lie north and south of the equator. These mark the outer margins of the tropics, where the sun reaches the zenith at least once a year.

My journey will therefore take me thrice around the globe. I will visit all twenty-one countries that lie along these three circles as well as the Antarctic and try to understand what is happening to the climate in absolutely concrete terms in the places where we might expect climate change to hit hardest; to see whether the people living there have noticed anything out of the ordinary.

The starting-point of the journey is actually random, unless I use on another well-known but imaginary line: the prime meridian, whose location in Greenwich was originally decreed in 1884. During the preceding century, nationalistic cartographers elsewhere had placed it in Stockholm, Rome, Washington D.C: and Beijing, but the world’s biggest colonial and naval power won out in the end. It happened at the International Meridian Conference, where thirty-five delegates from twenty countries eventually settled the matter. Well, more or less: France abstained, and on French maps, the prime meridian continued to pass through Paris for several decades afterwards.

The ultimate prime meridian on Earth might be said to be 0°00’00,0”N 0°00’00,0”S, the location of an island called Null. Well, ‘island’ is stretching it a bit. A buoy known as ‘Station 13010 – Soul’ that is anchored to the seabed 4,940 metres below is used as the basis for GPS navigation systems. If an address or geographic coordinate doesn’t exist, this is where GPS users end up – off the western coast of Africa. One consequence of our digital age is that people have logged jogging trips, geo-located images or sold property on Null.

The intersection between the prime meridian and the equator may not be such a great starting point though, mainly on logistical grounds – such as the lack of regular ferry services to that destination. But let’s start as close to it as possible.

The equator cuts across Rolas, the smallest of the three main islands in the island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe, and the only one not mentioned in the country’s name. Of the thirteen countries crossed by the equator, São Tomé and Príncipe is, by chance, the one that boasts the shortest stretch: 888 land-based equatorial metres.

Equally by chance, the location of Rolas allows me to get a bit personal: it lies 6,843 kilometres south of Skei in Sunnfjord municipality, the region where I grew up. I’ll take the fact that Skei’s post code happens to be 6843 and that it is 68.43 kilometres away from my hometown of Naustdal as a not insignificant added bonus.

Gunnar Garfors

Oslo, March 2025

**Equator**The author Mark Twain once took a round-the-world trip, crossing the equator several times in the course of his journey. He later published *Following the Equator*, a brick of a book that ran to 712 pages. The first crossing took place at around lunchtime on 5 September 1895 and was described thus:

*Afternoon*. Crossed the equator. In the distance it looked like a blue ribbon stretched across the ocean. Several passengers kodak’d it.

He was probably allowing himself a little artistic freedom here, or else he saw the smoke of a crossing steamship because the equator is, sadly, unmarked by any blue line on land or sea. Now *that* would be a proper tourist attraction! As it is, we have to content ourselves with a variety of markers that show where the equator runs – roughly. The first equatorial marker we know of was set up in Ecuador in 1936.

On just two days a year, the spring and autumn equinox, the sun stands directly above the line. On those days, day and night are equally long over the entire earth. The temperature at the equator is high, but it still is not the hottest place on earth, as the relatively high atmospheric humidity has a cooling effect. Animals and plants do particularly well close to the line, apparently best of all in the forests of the Amazon, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia, which jointly account for more than half of the world’s rainforests. All three places have an enormously varied biodiversity. One hectare or 10,000 square metres of Brazilian rainforest can contain more than 750 plant and 1,500 insect species, while the baking savannahs of Kenya and the far cooler Andes in Ecuador are teeming with various mammals. Lions, leopards, elephants, zebras and gazelles stick to the lowlands while llamas, alpacas, panthers, bears and condors thrive in the thinner air of higher elevations. The tropical rainforest, meanwhile, depends on long, hot rainy seasons, although it generally rains throughout the year.

Around the equator, there is no dawn or dusk. The twilight before sunrise and right after sunset occurs when sunlight is dispersed and reflected onward by gases and dust in the atmosphere, lighting up the lower atmosphere and the surface of the Earth. An old Norwegian name for these twilight hours is *tussmørkeret* or troll darkness owing to the special, often magical atmosphere that makes our imagination run wild. It’s the time when every tree or bush suddenly looks like a troll or a goblin. During summer in the northern parts of the world, this twilight can last from sunset to sunrise, while on the equator, day turns into night and vice versa in less than twenty minutes. Nowhere else in the world do people have less time to adjust, and nowhere else in the world is the sun higher in the sky at midday for so many days of the year. Sunrises and sunsets are also quickest along the equator. With so few minutes at your disposal, it makes sense to order your sundowner in good time.

Logically enough, the longest straight line in the world is the one that runs around the planet at its thickest point. In the middle, in other words, since the planet is slightly flattened at the poles. All the other lines of latitudes run around the world in parallel, and are measured in degrees from 0°, the equator itself, to 90°N, which is the North Pole, and 90°S, which is the South Pole. The degrees of latitude run parallel to the equator and help us specify where on the planet a given point lies in a north-south direction. The degrees of longitude, meanwhile, stretch vertically from pole to pole and show where a point lies in an east-west direction.

The equator’s 40,075 kilometre length may sound impressive, but it’s actually less than half the length of the Norwegian coastline, which is the second longest in the world after Canada. The length of Norway’s coastline is largely down to all its islands and skerries, which outnumber those of any other country.

**[1] A rainless rainy season in São Tomé and Príncipe**‘Our country was God’s laboratory. This is where he developed perfection for the world,’ a middle-aged waitress told me the first time I visited São Tomé and Príncipe.

I could see exactly what she meant. The island nation, a former Portuguese colony south of Nigeria and west of Gabon, is small, varied and picture perfect, with glorious beaches, excellent surfing, luscious flavours and frothing waterfalls. Yet very few tourists arrive each year, despite plentiful environmentally friendly accommodation, direct flights from Lisbon and three African cities, and few if any visa requirements or entry restrictions. The problem is that ‘no one’ has heard of the country, even though it’s one of those most vulnerable to climate change.

The 1.5-degree threshold of the Paris Agreement has already been reached here. Between 1950 and 2010, the temperature on the small islands rose precisely one-and-a-half degrees Celsius. The inhabitants are increasingly being hit by more intense rainfall in the form of unheralded showers. And, ironically enough, more drought. These changes affect farming and fishing, the main businesses, and that, in turn, affects workers and their wages. A third of the country’s 200,000 inhabitants live below the UN poverty threshold, forced to get by on less than three dollars a day. The ecosystem is small and incapable of absorbing or adjusting to erosion and landslides. High volcanoes with steep, almost vertical slopes and precipices lead to heavy flooding, which thins the topsoil. In several places, people are plagued by alternating floods and landslides up to ten times a year. But, being Africa’s smallest economy, the country has no financial muscle to bring to the table; structural change is expensive and rarely implemented. Now ever more inhabitants are demanding change. They’ve had enough. The mood among the people is now more irritable and aggressive than the first times I came here. And I’m not the only one to have noticed. The fact that this may threaten a growing economic sector is enough to make even the politicians pay attention. This being the world’s twentieth-least-visited country, tourism doesn’t yet earn enormous amounts of dollars for the local economy, yet the 21,000 annual visitors do bring in enough money to get travel companies rubbing their hands. If tourists are scared off by disturbances or violence, it’ll be a long time before they come back, as we saw in Tunisia after the mass shooting in 2015.

Jacqui is no stranger to unrest either, having moved from New York to Khartoum in Sudan at the age of 23. After war broke out in April 2023, the world witnessed one of the largest refugee crises in history, and my wife lost one of her two cats, her flat, her job and everything she owned. After tramping around in the baking hot capital, São Tomé, Jacqui’s keen to read a book, shaded from the October sun, but I’m still on the restless side. When strolling past the Portuguese fort that was once the islands main defence, I meet a woman aged around forty who asks where I come from. She quickly apologises for her poor English and suggests I contact an acquaintance of hers called Franca instead. I get his number and text him.

‘Nice to hear from you again! What are you doing here this time?’ he asks a few minutes later. It turns out that ‘everyone’ knows Franca, and that I’d had contact with him on my last trip in 2018. We didn’t manage to meet up that time.

This time, Franca suggests a chat at Xico’s Café, an old-school eatery right in the heart of the capital. The walls are randomly decorated with an assortment of fishing gear, shells and café fixtures from the past. No interior designer appears to have had any say in where things have been placed or hung. That gives the place a cosy feel, and Jacqui and I find a seat at one of the small brown wooden tables. The woman who runs the place is quick off the mark with the menus and serves us coffee in two minutes flat. As she does, two guys in their late thirties walk in. Franca has brought along his colleague, Marty Pereira, and they too are served their caffeine hit right away. We hit it off instantly, and I soon find out that Franca is the surname of the tall 39-year-old.

Franca and Marty are both producers at a media company that produces films, nature photos and books about São Tomé and Príncipe. They love their homeland and want to make it more widely known. They let me leaf through *Chasing Waterfalls in São Tomé and Príncipe*, a coffee-table book that will come out in a few weeks’ time. Few of the permanent inhabitants are familiar with more than two or three waterfalls, but the producers have travelled around São Tomé snapping more than thirty of them, sometimes using drones. The spectacular photos depict cascading water amid mountain formations and dense jungle. I’m visibly impressed.

‘This is our gift to the country. Hardly anyone who lives here understands the potential of tourism, recognition and value creation. We have to get more people to understand why we need to protect our environment. Perhaps taking care of nature and natural resources can become an instinct rather than the result of panicked hindsight,’ Franca muses philosophically.

He wants more people to make use of the island’s nature – not just the lakes and wild rivers. But perhaps the climate will put a spoke in his wheels. The transition from fossil fuels to greener power sources may mean that the waterfalls will be channelled into pipes. But Marty thinks the water flows are too low for that and is more convinced by solar panels and wind turbines. There’s plenty of wind in the South Atlantic. At the same time, he and many other people are troubled by changes in the seasons.