

Travelog 2

I kind of left you hanging. Lost in Bulawayo bus park and hoping to find the station and better still a ticket.

After using the worst urinal I have ever seen, I began to get my bearings. Well I found my way out of the bus park! I saw a small group of guys standing on the roadside and figured they would be able to help me with directions. They could..... Not only did they know the way to the station. It turned out they knew Asafa and were members of the youth team of one of the local Bulawayo Baptist churches. A coincidence????

I had been warned and had read depressing articles on blogs about trying to get a rail ticket in Zimbabwe. Don't listen to the skeptics. Within 5 minutes I had a ticket for that evening, all computerized, at half the price I had expected. After that I sat in the impressive if faded Station café for lunch. There was an extensive menu on the wall but only meat and sadza available. I had meat and sadza !!

I had a few hours to kill before departure so took myself in to town for walkabout. It would seem that Bulawayo has survived the economics better than some. I rate towns on the quality of their coffee shops. Bulawayo scored an 8! (Or maybe I was being kind as I was still recovering from a traumatizing bus trip)

The ancient train is lightless due to electrical problems. It took a while to find my carriage and the dingy little compartment I will spend the long night in. My cabin mates, one Zimbabwean and one Zambian seem friendly enough and we have a few minutes of camaraderie attempting to set up the bunks in the dark. Then the whistle blows and we chug into the night.

By morning, and feeling more rested than I expected, we had reached the Hwange National Park. The train continued on through the bush dropping slowly towards the Zambezi valley. Long before reaching the journey's end a curious cloud in the distance heralded Victoria Falls (the smoke that thunders) It was for me one of life's historic moments to pull into this famous station. I confidently headed into town to look for breakfast and 'Beans', my host for the night (Beans had kindly offered me a night's stay. She is Odette's sister in law)

Finding breakfast was easy. Finding Beans was not. Let's survey the information I had. A mobile phone number (but no network for past few days in the area...TIA) her nickname, (not helpful unless someone I met was a personal friend) and the fact that she lives in a thatched house (which narrows it down not a lot in this part of the world) My search eventually introduced me to a very friendly backpackers' hostel where the owner had the surname Beans! But not the Beans I'm looking for. But I did notice a thatched house opposite.....occupied by.....Beans..... How does this happen?

In the afternoon I paid my entry and went on foot to see the falls. Nothing can prepare you for this. The falls are awe inspiring, beautiful, enormous.....and the best part for me is that I had them almost to myself. No coach loads of tourists waving video cameras. I was pretty much alone and felt privileged.

I had a great night in Beans' thatched cottage along with her children. In the evening we took sundowners at the sailing club down by the Zambezi, the favourite haunt of the local English/Zimbabwe crowd.

The following morning I was sad to leave Vic Falls and equally sad to be leaving Zimbabwe. Despite the bad press it is a great country to visit. Welcoming, friendly and overflowing with natural beauty.

I hiked across the iconic Zambezi gorge bridge into Zambia and checked into 'Jolly Boys' backpackers for the night, ready for the bus to Lusaka early the following day.

Is this bus African? Departing on time with working air conditioning. The driver carefully explained the journey to us, how long it will take, where we will stop for a break etc. Then the conductor came around to make sure we were all belted into our seats and also to offer us complimentary cake and soda for the trip!!! As we had been assured on departure we arrived on time in Lusaka after a smooth and comfortable journey through what seems to be endless miles of bush. Zambia appears to be very under populated. Arrival in Lusaka was rather uninspiring. I was not sad to board the Mpulungu bus. This is a 1200km overnight journey that takes me right across the country to the southern tip of Lake Tanganyika.

I survived it with a stiff neck and sore backside. I was very happy to reach the sleepy lakeside village of Mpulungu, surrounded by the rift valley hills. The lake looked enticing in the morning light and I felt a sense of 'arrival', of being on the edge of an adventure. This funny little one donkey town is a frontier (if you travel by lake) between South, East and West Africa. Its port, though small, is a trading hub for Zambia, DRC, Tanzania and Burundi. The many small ports up the lake serve both rail and road bridgeheads deep into the African interior in all directions.

Now I need to be careful as I write the next part of this tale that I don't repeat things I mentioned in earlier stages. You will have gleaned, if you read part 1, that I spent a little longer in Mpulungu than I had intended.

After a long rest into the morning I got up and felt human, human enough to go and explore the area and check out the port for when the Tanzanian ferry would be arriving. As I walked along the lake shore I thought how this would make a great spot to stop a few days. Little did I know how prophetic that thought would be. As it turned out I spent almost a week at the eccentric but peaceful Nkupi lodge; becalmed, transportless and a bit confused as to how to get on to Burundi in time for the plans that were set in my diary.

The options: Every week on Friday the MV Liemba passenger ferry is supposed to dock in Mpulungu then depart again in the evening up to Kigoma. From there it is a bus hop over the border and through Burundi up to Bujumbura. This option died for me on Friday when the ship didn't come and the harbor master told me that the UN had commandeered it to move Congolese refugees !!

Option 2: Take a bus back about 600km to intersect the main road to Dar Es Salaam (1000km ish) then take the Central line train to Kigoma (2 nights and a day on the train) to then connect up to Bujumbura. For one as travel weary as I was at this point option 2 was depressing!!

Option 3: Wait.....and wait a bit more.....and ask around.....and then ask someone else.....then check again.....then meet a French speaking captain of a Burundian cargo ship who had space for me to go all the way to Bujumbura. But he was not sure when he was leaving (at least I think that's what he said because my French is rusty and his is fast and furious) Naturally I decided on option 3 !!!

The next few days were both relaxing and periodically tense. I had lots of time to lie on the bed in my Nkupi cottage, consider life and take gentle strolls around steamy, languid Mpulungu. The tense parts were my daily visits to the port, never knowing if I would need to run for my bags or book another night at Nkupi.

The sun rose on my final day in Mpulungu. This time at the port there was a frenzy of activity. The final cargo was being loaded and I was told to gather my things together and be ready in one hour. This had to include my provisions for the next couple of days as no food was provided on board. I scouted the village and ended up with: A fresh meat pie, one bag of bread, a bunch of bananas, some bottles of water and (weird for a place like this) 1 packet of cream crackers and one small tin of corned beef!!

N.B. I ate the crackers and corned beef on night 2 of the voyage and it felt like supper at the Savoy.

I joined the ship along with a small crowd (8 in total) of fellow passengers. Most were returnees from economic exile in South Africa heading back to a now peaceful Burundi.

Mid afternoon our little vessel set out up the lake. The beginning of my epic 750km voyage through the mountainous and almost unpopulated heart of Africa. The crew insisted on me having the spare captain's cabin (there were 2 cabins so I didn't feel too guilty saying yes) and I was welcome on the bridge any time for interesting conversations in a bizarre blend of English/French/Kiswahili and gesticulation. There is something immensely satisfying and peaceful about lake travel. A sense of becoming part of the gently passing landscape. An environment that brings clarity of thought and perspective to life. Tanganyika is a huge body of water. At night the ship was rocked by tropical storms, the lightning whipping through the dark sky and the lake stirred into a frenzy. The mornings glowed red as the sun pushed up under the receding storm clouds.

As darkness drew in for night 2 the lights of Kigoma winked like fireflies on the eastern shore. At the point where they seemed closest I noticed a single band on my mobile phone as my Ugandan system locked into a Tanzanian network. I got a tired Florent about to sleep in Bujumbura and was able to warn him that some time the following day I would be arriving in Bujumbura without visa at a non official point of entry. Then the line cut and the network disappeared, as did the lights of Kigoma !

The final run up the lake into Bujumbura was exciting. After so many hours of uninhabited shoreline, densely vegetated Burundi was bustling with life. Village after village was waking to a new day and the lake was littered with tiny wooden boats, the fishermen standing, balancing as they hauled in nets. It

was an exuberant, almost celebratory scene that maybe has not changed much as history rolled on and the rest of the world charged forward.

As I saw Bujumbura come into view mid morning I felt I was coming home. After the weeks of travel I would have my feet back in East Africa. This was countered by a slight unease knowing I was entering illegally! Little did I know the reception waiting for me on the dock....

As the ship pulled up to the wharf I noticed men in uniform and what looked like a police vehicle, plus various customs staff moving around. This all seemed a bit excessive with only 9 passengers on board. My slight unease began to extend into vague panic. Had some message got through to paranoid authorities that a white man was trying to enter Burundi without papers? Had they decided I was a mercenary planning to overthrow the government ???

Then the splendidly uniformed deputy police commander of Burundi started waving happily and calling out my name..... When I had supper with Didier last year he forgot to mention his rank and position. I thought he was just a friend of Florent. Now, as central character in my surreal entry into Bujumbura, he was cast as saviour. I was helped ashore, chauffeured by police van to the immigration hut and had a visa stamped in my passport within minutes. My fellow passengers looked on bemused.

Cape Town to Bujumbura. I won't write about the bus back to Kampala. That would be old news as I have done that journey so often. A journey full of amazing helpful people, problems solved in unusual ways, sights, sounds, smells to keep in the memory. Too many places I need to return to. It is clichéd to say that Africa gets under the skin. But if there is one thing that has come out of the trip it is this:

In South Africa they promote the country, culture and tourism with the slogan 'Proudly South African'. I now realize that no matter where my origins may lie, I am now 'Proudly East African'.