

June '98



LETTER FROM AFRICA ANGUS BEGG

"MUGABE's no good," says Edward, the driver of my taxi in Bulawayo. "We've just had an increase in maize, bread and milk."

Wherever I go in Zimbabwe, word on the street has it that it won't be long before the petrol price also takes a hike.

Peasants and businessmen are deeply worried about the plummeting Zimbabwean dollar, the government's predilection for taxes and its seeming paralysis in dealing with the country's economic woes.

"The outlook for Zimbabwe is pretty grim," says University of Zimbabwe political analyst Dr John Makumbe.

"The economy is in trouble, there is civil strife and unhappiness with the political leadership. Things are generally uncertain, unpredictable."

The problem, says Makumbe, lies in Mugabe himself.

He says citizens, both in rural and urban areas, have lost patience with him.

"Many think he doesn't know how to run a modern state, especially in light of the structural adjustment programme, the unleashing of market forces and the abandonment of socialism as a means of production."

"The capitalist state Zimbabwe is meant to be is an unknown quantity to a person like Mugabe, who has an old-fashioned, obsolete notion of state sovereignty and ownership of the means of production."

But those living in Zimbabwe's rural areas are not interested in political theories. It's the failure to earn a living that's left them unhappy with the state of affairs.

Those concerned with eking out a daily existence are not the only ones disenchanted with the Zimbabwean president — in diplomatic circles it is well known that the IMF and World Bank, among others on the international circuit, would like to see a change in political leadership. Often in conversations with representatives of foreign countries, Makumbe says, Zimbabwe's post of finance minister comes up as the country's main problem.

"If the finance minister had free rein and could make policy decisions that would be observed and respected, there would be less trouble. For example, the war veterans were recently granted lump sums of Z\$50 000 and Z\$2 000 a month for the rest of their lives without anyone saying, 'Hey, what's in the treasury?'"

The upshot of that decision has been that three other groups involved directly or otherwise in the "Rhodesian War" — the returnees and detainees, the war collaborators and the widows of war veterans — have also made demands on the state's purse.

Makumbe says if Mugabe had a good team around him the government could still function. "But it's largely believed he has surrounded himself with ... a whole team that is out of touch with reality and is apparently afraid to challenge their leader. Cabinet ministers ... are scared of suggesting ideas that may be construed as being weird, unpatriotic and selling out to the IMF."

This is a factor which, he says, features strongly in Mugabe's thinking. "He is very unhappy about being controlled, dictated to by the IMF, World Bank or international donors, even though he needs the money for Zimbabwe to survive."

Add to this litany of problems the issue of widespread corruption, and the scenario looks increasingly bleak. "The latest report ... indicates top public officials dipped their fingers into the War Victims' Fund to the tune of Z\$450-million. Hopefully it gets to Parliament." To illustrate his point, Makumbe mentions the reported Z\$6,5-million that Mugabe's wife is believed to have spent on building a 30-room mansion. "She claims to

have repaid this amount, but we have seen little proof."

If the situation in Zimbabwe is so bad, why is it that the International Finance Corporation, the World Bank's private arm, recently took a combined 41 percent stake in the Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe? "Zimbabwe is still a reasonably viable economy, and among African economies, outside SA, it has the most diverse economy, with a developed infrastructure, where things work."

Makumbe believes investors looking for a good bargain will go to Zimbabwe, although they "won't invest lots and will stick with established industries".

After the recent riots in Zimbabwe, demonstrating students were reported as saying that Mugabe was leading the country towards "another Indonesia", in an obvious reference to the events that led to the recent resignation of President Suharto. But the students, says Makumbe, would need support from workers. "They have wooed the Zimbabwean Council of Trade Unions, so far unsuccessfully, but if the petrol price is raised then I believe they'll get that support."

Add to this the emergence of a new political party — the General Conference of Patriots (all of whom are under 40), which is intent on working for a change in government — and you have a scenario that will doubtless give Mugabe and his colleagues something substantial to chew over at their regular Tuesday cabinet meetings.

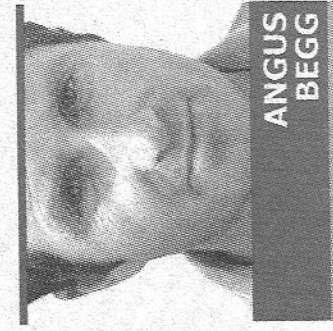
● *Begg is a travel and current affairs writer based in Johannesburg*

Flattening out over a British hill makes one feel one's arrived

GOOD morning ladies and gentlemen, I trust you had a good night's sleep. Just letting you there is a queue above ow and we will be holding Biggin Hill as we await our land."

I'm one of those who usually can't sleep on an aircraft, so an announcement is usually met with a grin and a yawn, both sleepy and stiff. Whether one of the cattle in my class or barons in business just can't get comfortable; neck, hips and legs battling for space — a challenge when at the same torso.

I wasn't just any baron on the flight; I was the king enjoying the flatbed experience. I had contracted to do a job, and, like most others in the cabin doing the same, I was not to look über cool and relaxed with themselves, I



hadn't paid for the ticket. Somehow I'd always thought my first flatbed trip would be with Virgin or some exotic eastern airline, but this was — courtesy of my paymaster — the conservative, highly professional and sometimes standoffish British Airways (BA).

With my mind conjuring up an image of our plane hovering, alien-style, above the quaintly named mound of earth referred to by the pilot while we awaited our turn to land, I thought of how polite and calm British pilots always manage to sound, a delivery one imagines wouldn't be too dissimilar if the aircraft were minutes away from plunging into the Channel.

Luxury is all relative really, especially at an airport business departure lounge, as all it really means is that you get your own comfortable seat, a fair choice of newspapers and an unlimited supply of wine, soft drinks and those

little triangular sandwiches you normally wouldn't touch.

The real pleasure on this visit to the lounge was first glimpsing, and then, 30 minutes after I had worked up the courage to be a fawning idiot, meeting my boyhood idol, former Liverpool and Scotland footballer Kenny Dalglish. He and the chairman of the Premier League had been out to SA for the revamp of a SuperSport channel, followed by the obligatory visit to a game lodge.

We spoke of lions and Liverpool teams past and present until we had to board the aircraft, where we were seated at opposite ends of the cabin, me with a fairly disgruntled bloke working on a laptop in the flatbed seat opposite. Fortunately the angle and the blind, not unlike a Chinese fan, sealed our separation.

The flatbed has been in use on BA (they say they were the first air-

line to use it, but Air France disagrees) for some time already, a remarkably complex piece of ergonomics that allows a passenger to assume a position closest in the airline world to that of a natural night's sleep.

The configuration works something like this: the back support slides down and back while the seat eases forward towards what is in essence a foot rest. And, voila! When they meet, the flatbed is complete.

I usually find the cabin staff on BA to be as professional as they come (although let it be said every airline has its dragons); cool and detached or, when they're finished doing yet another round of French champers and cheeses, usually keen for a chat.

But it's the facilities in the arrivals lounge at your destination that really count, especially if you've got a bit of hanging around

to do. The hot breakfast and what I can only describe as a "designer power-shower" in the Heathrow arrivals lounge resurrected the human in me, preparing me for the onward connection.

I was ruined. Years of economy crush and conventional business class seats had not prepared me for the closest thing I'd experienced on an aircraft to a real night's rest. It was almost as good as stretching out across the middle row of five in economy.

What I didn't know at the time, while fiddling with the various buttons that send the seat into full recline mode, was just how seating was still to evolve, how much better it was going to get.

That fancy seat/bed is old hat now, and my next flight over Biggin Hill, only a year later, found me on an even flatter bed, this time courtesy of Tricky Dicky Branson. But more about that another time.

Nights of danger and excitement, South African-style

OME in Mike!" says the slightly pimply, khaki-clad novice guide with the Madonna-type head-microphone.

u got any visuals of last madoda ndlovu?" we just set off on a mid-game-drive in a trusty Land 110 somewhere in the rather abi Sands area. Mike, at the end of the line, has been g at the lodge for almost ears now, boasting a fair bit rience.

uses occasional Shangaan ices to identify big five ls so as not to alert the to their presence.

firmative ... the madoda is g through the hlathini, to cross the ndlela near Old crackles Mike over the stat-ch Khaki Boy thinks makes sound like Spitfire pilots g bandits. "We've been fol- g; a couple of ngala stalking rathi." Although wrapped in

blankets, the collection of guests in the two-tiered seating behind Khaki Boy are more interested in keeping themselves warm than his coded conversation.

They represent what has long been the typical guest profile at such lodges, bite-sized chunks of the world community: a 40-something married couple from São Paulo; a couple of staffers from the Italian embassy; and a rare Dutch couple.

It is a great feature of our game reserves — apart from the wildlife, the peace and braais (or cuisine of the itty-bitsy variety at the more swanky lodges) — that you get to meet interesting people who often might as well inhabit another planet. Consider for a moment the life of an average nine-to-five worker living and working in the likes of Manhattan; the odds are that for much of the year people struggle to make acquaintance with the setting sun let alone get to see wild, open spaces, while the

privileged few are lucky enough to flee across the Brooklyn Bridge to the Hamptons.

The topic of conversation, though, is guaranteed: crime. The Italians, hands waving, tell their vehicle-bound companions how (unfortunately) familiar they have become with terms like "hitjack" and "electric fencing" and how they miss Rome, where being mugged by a horde of six-year-old gypsies is the biggest concern. Khaki Boy, doing his bit for tourism, chips in with "someone I know was driving home when these guys ..." It doesn't have a happy ending.

A cluster of Swainson's francolin scream their way out of the thicket into which the tracker, Phineas, has thrown the dregs of his coffee.

Phineas is a walking pair of binoculars and, with his knitted skull-cap shoved jauntily above his ears, he points casually to a kudun bull in the trees and a yellow

hornbill — doing its best to go incognito — on a branch some 50m distant.

Truth be told, unless I was a squillionaire, able to enjoy the best of a city and escape at the blink of a lizard's eye, I'd rather be weekend bush-bound than in Manhattan — cold, grey days in any large city are thoroughly crap. And unless you have a thing for kangaroos, frilly-throated lizards and their reptilian kin, Australia is a tad boring for the wildlife buff. In fact, much like Canada, its detractors label Australia "boring," full stop.

Although if I was to allow the devil's advocate free rein, I believe a good many such accusers, when faced with a gun tickling their nose-hairs, would opt for boring rather than dead.

Death was no doubt in the minds of the rest of the vehicle a few minutes later, once the fold-out table had been packed away and the Italian diplomat had relieved himself behind the vehicle.

Continuing with our drive, we'd come down a bank, crossed the ubiquitous dry river-bed and roared up the other side when, at the crest of the hill, we came nose-to-nose with an elephant — or rather, Phineas did.

For, as at many such lodges, Phineas was sitting on a fold-out stool mounted at the front of the vehicle, which allows him to better follow tracks on the dirt road.

With Khaki Boy in a bit of a tizz, whispering frantically, loudly and losing his hands between the steering wheel and the gears, Phineas motioned in international crisis situation sign-language — the authoritative book on the subject says the motion resembles "slowly patting a dog's head" — for him to calm down, and coolly slid off the vehicle, taking a seat next to the Brazilian's wife.

They had found Mike's madoda ndlovu. Just a taste of the preferable version of danger and excitement, Sud Africa-style.



ANGUS BEGGS

"I'd rather be weekend bush-bound than in Manhattan — cold, grey days in any large city are thoroughly crap"

A blessing (sort of) and tea in the Himalayas

I BECKONED for me to come over and, sitting cross-legged with a very solemn expression in vaguely ET-fashion, heaned out his arm, placing his against my forehead. It felt y wet, and although I r't see it, I knew I had a red the type worn and favoured ndu devotees, slap-bang in tre of my forehead.

Adding his head laterally, not the universal doggie in the window of a car, hands resting upwards, on his knees, ced the vital question that either forward or retard my ment along the spiritual 'And now?'

lay, a little more empowered ne average medieval peasant ope, I wasn't about to pay for ing. And anyway, I thought, ve enough beggars at home ould do with the cash. The on him being a priest were



ANGUS BEGG

remote at best, a fair distance from those I'd met at the nearby Yoga Choling Buddhist monastery, which, incidentally, is one of the oldest in India.

My hotel room on this particular day was in Darjeeling, on top of a mountain in west Bengal state, northern India, part of and surrounded by the Himalayas.

My plan for the morning had been to get to Tiger Hill; a 45-minute drive from Darjeeling, which is apparently the point — unless you're climbing — from which Kunchenjunga, the third-highest peak in the world, is best seen. The peak is also visible, quite dramatically, through a break in the pine trees on a road below the hotel, and I was imagining the scene that would present itself. There's something incredibly cool about looking out at what is pretty much the top of the world.

But my 4am wake-up call had brought depressing news, carried

by the inexplicably enthusiastic voice at the other end of the line, down the 19th-century stairs at the front desk.

Soft rain outside was accompanied by surrounding grey skies, of the blanket variety. My driver had arrived, but after a brief discussion, he in anorak and me in a passing version of pyjamas, we agreed there was no point in making the trip, especially along winding, dirt mountain roads made all the more challenging by the drivers encountered.

So, unable to get back to sleep for all the colour and images packed into my memory of the past few days, I found myself on an early-morning walk around Darjeeling. Founded by the adventurous (and, yes, somewhat exploitative) English of the 19th century, in search of cooler climes as an escape from a steamy Calcutta, this must rank as one of the prettier Indian mountain towns.

Perched near the top of the hill, the scene — visible from my hotel, a heritage establishment called The Elgin — qualifies as what could be called both "chocolate-box" and "picture-perfect". Unexpectedly cosmopolitan too, populated as it is by various mountain tribes-people, others from the plains outside Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), and the generations born to those who settled there after fleeing the Chinese invasion of their homeland in 1957.

If an example was needed of what makes India such a remarkable destination, Darjeeling pretty much qualifies, although, much as we would direct tourists to bypass Plett and Knysna in favour of some less-visited part of the Garden Route, the better-travelled Indians I met told me of their favourite parts of the mountains. Which, I suppose, isn't surprising as the Himalayas are as expansive as they are large.

I once visited a tea estate below the eastern slopes of the Soutpansberg (a magnificent, lush area of subtropical vegetation which I hear is now in a state of land-claim disaster), so I felt a visit to the 120-year-old tea bushes in the valley below the town was in order.

The boss was a bit of an unfriendly sod — busy with his accounts so understandable perhaps — but sent me off into the sheds, where various obliging types offered me and my guide of Tibetan descent the run of the clearing shed.

Which essentially means that I got to taste leaves plucked off bushes of varying maturity.

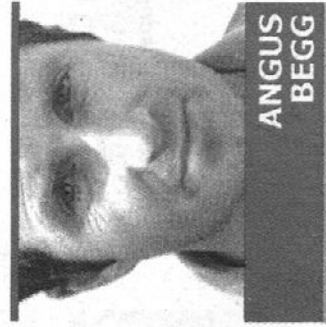
Much like learning some years back in the back-streets of Milan about the different cultivars used to make up grappa, I took this to be an invaluable continuation of my travelling education. A bit like meeting the wannabe monk seated outside the temple.

Smoke and the business of bees before half-time

LEASED to meet you," he said, squeezing his way into the last available space in the bar, just the TV screen. "My name is dark, close-cropped hair, Mediterranean complexion, a ripped, wide-collared shirt open at the neck and a medallion filling the gap, it's pretty obvious that Omar is a rugby fan.

course he was. Where else you expect to find a Turkish consultant.

king a bit like he was off to the late Dodi Fayed's he admitted he knew nothing about rugby and took the news in terms of his seating arrangement, firmly between English and African supporters, say, but wanted the best team to be a Marlboro Light.



No, Omar wasn't helping the Tanzanian government with instituting a form of affirmative action. While such a notion would have Turkey's Kurdish separatists laughing all the way from their mountain hideouts to the Bosphorus, Omar was quite serious about his work.

He was helping the Tanzanians sort out their bee industry and this was his fifth visit to the country this year (the 12th in the past 24 months, he noted). There was clearly a lot to be done with Tanzania's bees.

"Yes," he declared to a spellbound audience of two, while the camera tracked past an English prop thundering his wish for God to save his gracious queen, "there are less bees today."

Not just in Tanzania, but on earth. Which had me thinking about an insert on Special Assignment on SABC3 last week about the negative effect of cellphone

masts (and the microwaves they emit) on the bee population.

Johnny Wilkinson had just kicked off. "Yaaay," came the united, albeit feeble roar from the English expats, making up a weak third of the entire bar.

"There is a shortage of bees all over the world," said Omar, explaining that he was helping the Tanzanians make the most of theirs. On one of his trips to Tanzania, it emerged, he had spent 35 days travelling the country in order to gauge the health of the bee industry.

With us was a South African-Italian who had been working in Tanzania for six years.

She said the honey from Zanzibar was "the best" in that typically South African manner that means it's just lekker, not really the best.

Now, much like Pooh, I am addicted to honey and as I collect honey from around the world

(Ghana and Rwanda producing lovely stuff, Gujarat not so good), I was already making plans to get some of Tanzania's.

But Omar was sceptical. SA was being pushed back in the scrum and Omar was on a roll.

"Their equipment is old, dirty and often rusted," he said, referring to the honey found not just on Zanzibar, but on mainland Tanzania as well. My heart sank.

For a moment I had thought he was about to say that the separatist-inclined Zanzibaris were producing a much harder-working bee and better honey.

Focus, I muttered to myself as Os du Randt's head sank into the turf; you need some bloody focus. But it was difficult.

Omar was moving on to value-added bee products and, with Percy already slotting in his first penalty in under 10 minutes, I was juggling politeness with an intense interest in us wallowing

the English, remembering he they'd walloped us in 2002. Memories of a dirty Kamp Staaldraai inspired game back then crowded faded with images of T-shirts with Kilimanjaro Bees Are Happy Be emblazoned across the chest.

There's only so much you can say about bees and by half-time had bummed one of Omar's Marlboro Lights, instantly reminding myself of the awful taste of smoked

I asked him if he'd seen the great movie Smoke, with Harvey Keitel and William Hurt, and said he didn't think it had made it to Istanbul.

"So what's up with the Tur attacking the Kurds in northern Iraq?" I asked, as the second half got under way.

"We warned the Iraqis that we must sort them out, or we will said Omar.

The moral of the story is, still to bees and rugby when talking a friendly Turk in a bar.

OCT 7 '06

They're Khoisan and they'll wear khaki if they want to

ALAKI sets a brisk pace, bare-buttocked and walking a bit like a flat-footed ballerina on a breezy autumn Kalamorning. He is, like his friend colleague" Dagam, wearing additional skins. Once belonged to an old springbok, they are a little more than a suede bikini.

Malaki's wrinkled skin reveals spent under Botswana's scorching sun. Both have a bow quiver of arrows slung over their shoulders. I make up the decked out in hat, shades, shorts and a khaki top; take the camera, and I almost he part. (When it gets cold, it tells me, they sometimes chaki too.)

The issue of quite how to address these quintessential people is bush, whether to refer to

them as bushmen — as they've long been known — or by their contemporary moniker in PC circles, Khoisan, is quite sensitive. For all intents and purposes, as any academic worth his Kalahari salt will tell you, Malaki, Dagam and their ilk are the San people. But it's all Greek to Malaki, who states in his soft-spoken, matter-of-fact manner, "We are bushmen," further explaining, in rather good English, that it describes what they do and who they are.

In much the same way as the UK is synonymous with Big Ben, fish 'n chips and the FA Cup, so too is Botswana known for a few givens; De Beers, a monopolistic bushmen and, perhaps best of all, the Okavango Delta. Whereas the Delta is an aquatic miracle in the desert that makes the region the attraction that it is, any waters in the central Kalahari vanished

millions of years ago, according to academics, when the Makgadikgadi Pan to the east was an inland sea the size of Switzerland, and rivers ran south. Which left the region a touch arid. Very hot, and very dry.

But just as with the Namib to the west, there's magic to be found in such extremes, and it was a young cattle farmer, rooted for generations in Ghanzi in central Botswana, who some years back opted to take a gamble: with his wife and a few partners, Braam Badenhorst bought a roughly 15 000ha chunk of land and opened a lodge next to the Central Kalahari Game Reserve.

Rather flat and with not a drop of surface water to speak of, from above it appears frighteningly monotonous. Bluntly put, the main "attractions" were to be the bushmen and the wildlife, which naturally give rise to nasty thoughts of theme parks and

exploitation. Happily, in as much as I trust research and well-honed instincts, I am more than confident that this isn't the case.

Braam grew up with a passion for the surrounding Kalahari. He grew up with a liking and respect for his childhood playmates — a line often used by farmers, with varying degrees of truth — in this case the bushmen. It's a sentiment reciprocated by Malaki and Dagam.

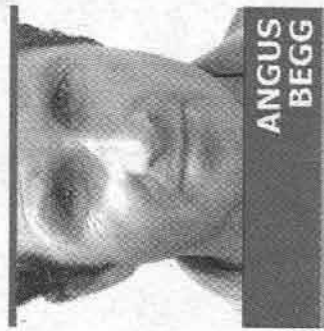
After he married Susan (pronounced Sussanne), they opened the Deception Valley Lodge about 10 years ago, providing work for a people stretched by pressures of globalisation and greed.

These Kalahari bushmen do not "perform" at the lodge, they work there; in the kitchen, office and out in the bush as guides, "translating" the landscape and its creatures, including visiting lion prides, for guests.

Although they are men in their 40s, there is a childlike quality to Malaki and Dagam, and whether digging up dry roots or coming across the tracks of a bird that escaped their trap, while going about their tasks in the bush over the few days that I'm with them, they occasionally get quite animated, clucking and giggling to themselves.

On a walk one morning, off to practise shooting arrows into a Nama melon, I put it to Malaki that I never notice a harsh word or exclamation among them; I can't imagine them using the bow and arrow as a weapon.

He chuckles, and nods. Caught between preservation of ancient culture and the modern world's obsession with "progress," some two hours by air from the bump, crash and grind of a Johannesburg existence, these are rare humans indeed.



ANGUS BEGG

"Malaki states in his soft-spoken, matter-of-fact manner, 'We are bushmen,' explaining it describes what they do and who they are"