

By train (3rd class) to Victoria Falls

After enjoying the icy-cold Sparletta Apple, I decided to step outside and sit on the floor of the veranda of the cream-white railway building. People were starting to arrive at the station as I sat contemplating the coming night in third class.

By sheer coincidence this was going to be the third time I would be taking the Bulawayo–Vic Falls train. The first two times were in the late nineties and on both occasions I travelled first class. I had, in fact, made the Bulawayo–Vic Falls return journey twice in three months. I had come up to Zimbabwe to bungee jump, but at Victoria Falls I was told that they did not take credit cards, only cold cash, and in US dollars *no gal*. So, a bit disappointed, I went back to Durban, where I was living at the time, and returned two months later. The fact that I was now going to use third class was making me slightly uneasy, but I had no choice: Lusaka was waiting for me.

At 18:30 the railways official opened the main door which lead through the first-class reservations office to the platforms. A board at the side of the reservations office announced that the Victoria Falls-bound train was departing from platform four at 20:00. Even though there was no pre-booked seating in third class, I couldn't understand why some people were running and others walking very fast towards the train, given that there was still an hour and a half before the time of departure. So I continued sauntering at a leisurely pace as people rushed past me.

Their behaviour made sense when I eventually got to the train. The first reason was immediately obvious: there were bad coaches and there were awful ones, and it was to your advantage to get there first and pick yourself a bad one. The second reason dawned on me a bit later: people wanted to sit next to the window so they could rest their heads on the sill during the night because the seat backs were too low for you to rest your head. A third reason appeared only when it was too late: people walked up and down the aisle all night, making sleep impossible for anyone sitting on an aisle seat.

I moved through four coaches, two of which were bad and two of which

were worse – dirty, grimy and smelling terrible. People had nevertheless already occupied some seats in all four coaches. The next coach looked far better than the previous four, but all the seats had been taken. I decided I was going to take a seat on the following coach, irrespective of how it looked or smelled because by now I knew I was not going to find a decent coach.

Indeed, the next coach, because it was bad, was not full, but all the window seats had been taken. I sat down next to Washington, a youngster who was also headed for Livingstone. We were right at the front (or at the back, depending on which way you look at it) of the coach, which meant I was going to be sitting right next to the toilet for the whole night. In fact, my seat was next to two toilets, one opposite the other.

The toilets smelled strongly of urine. There were whiffs of an even stronger smell – but for shit's sake, let's not go there. The good news is that my broad, round African nose adapts very quickly. Within a few minutes it had done just that and, in no time, I started detecting whiffs of lavender and citrus – which reminded me of my flight back from Namibia to Johannesburg on the company private jet, a Cessna Citation Excel, four days earlier. The Citation takes eight passengers, but on that occasion there had been only five of us. The whole experience of being flown in a private jet can be overwhelming at first: being ushered past check-in counters by the pilot (so no queues), and on board the plane enjoying the sheer luxury of ultra-comfortable swinging reclining chairs and personal service, as well as a well-stocked bar. And of course sweet-smelling loos. It is how flying should be, but then again, just like sleeping with a beautiful woman, the novelty soon wears off.

Anyway, that is how life is: one day you are literally flying high in a private jet, and the next week you are sitting right next to a shit-stained, stinking toilet.

It was not even ten minutes before my torn seat with protruding springs and bits of sponge coming out started to feel very uncomfortable. From that moment on I knew that it was going to be a very long night. I checked the time. It was 19:05. There was still almost an hour left before we were due to depart, and I was already tired of sitting on the broken seat.

The number of people walking up and down the aisle looking for desirable seats increased. As the coach filled up, I realised how close to each

other the seats actually were and how cramped we were. The seat configuration was such that you had rows of three people seated facing each other on both sides of the aisle. The only exception was the two-seaters right at the end of the coach next to the toilets, one of which Washington and I had occupied. Facing us on a three-seater sat a young girl of about sixteen with an infant on her lap and an elderly couple. With the seats so close to one another, it was impossible to stretch your legs without stepping on the feet of the person sitting opposite you. The best way was to turn slightly to one side so that your legs went between the two pairs of legs opposite. It was like rubbing salt in a wound.

The train left on time and we started our trek in a north-westerly direction. I did a quick headcount. There were twenty-eight of us, although, as I had been told earlier by the cashier, the coach could “comfortably hold thirty-two people”. At the first two stations more passengers came on board, and fairly soon our coach was chock-a-block.

What made the situation worse was that most (if not all) passengers wanted the windows closed. I knew that the best way to survive this stuffy, uncomfortable, unhealthy environment was to fall asleep. So, in an attempt to sleep, I closed my eyes. But sleeping was all but impossible with the constant moving of people up and down the aisle, especially drunk youngsters who were singing at the top of their voices. A permanent bright light on the ceiling of the coach was not helping either. Against all odds, however, I dozed off and had a relatively good sleep. When I woke up it felt like I had been asleep for a very long time. I checked my watch. It was 21:37. I had been in dreamland for about forty-five minutes.

Most people were sleeping as if everything looked and felt pretty normal to them. Only one elderly grey-headed man was talking non-stop to two other elderly men. He spoke in Ndebele, so I could easily follow: he had been a chef in one of the hotels at Victoria Falls until he was retrenched because “these white people from overseas stopped visiting”. He was promised a year’s salary but he had not yet received his money for the previous two months. Hence he was on his way to Victoria Falls to find out why.

The former chef was one of those people who are comfortable talking out loud to strangers about personal issues. He mentioned that after being retrenched he had taken to being a full-time traditional healer, a gift from his ancestors that he had ignored for a long time because of his job.

He was blessed with the ability to make barren women fall pregnant, he explained, and boasted how he himself had impregnated married women who had been struggling to conceive. After sleeping with him, they all fell pregnant. The good news, he said, was that their husbands thought the babies were theirs.

The beauty of travelling by public transport is that you meet a lot of different and sometimes very interesting people. This elderly man with grey hair, grey beard and nicely trimmed moustache also talked about the great time he had had sleeping with foreign tourists at the hotel where he used to work.

One of the two men who had been listening attentively to him all this time asked if he made tourists pregnant as well. "I do not know," he replied. "They always insisted on condoms, except when they were too drunk."

In the middle of nowhere, just after leaving Somisi station, the train suddenly stopped. After a few minutes the ticket examiner came to our coach and said in Ndebele: "There is one person who controls the traffic of trains on this line. He has left his office because he had to go and sort out something with the technician. So in order to ensure the safety of everyone we will wait until he comes back and gives us the go-ahead. It may take a few minutes, an hour or a few hours."

He left to address the people in the next coach. So the waiting began. It was now around 11 p.m. Some passengers, mostly youngsters, got off the train while others continued sleeping. A few opened their *padkos*, consisting mainly of *pap* and cabbage.

Fully awake now, I decided to buy myself a 300-ml bottle of Sprite from a young man who was selling cooldrinks and biscuits. The drink cost z\$2 000, but since he did not have change he took my z\$10 000 note and promised to return with the change in five minutes. The only thing I noticed about him was that he was wearing a T-shirt promoting Simba Makoni, a chemist-turned-politician who, although he had long been a senior member of Mugabe's ZANU-PF, entered the March 2008 elections as an independent candidate and received 8.3 per cent of the national vote.

Another wait began. The train had not moved for more than an hour and, having been robbed of my z\$8 000 change by a youngster, I was definitely not having a good time. I remained in my seat, trying unsuccessfully to get some sleep. It was even more frustrating now that the train

was standing still. I tried bending and putting my head on my knees. It did not work. But I kept my eyes shut.

I started thinking about Zimbabwe and the plight of her people and of Mbeki's failed quiet diplomacy. Our ex-president must hold the world record for a head of state visiting another country the most times within a specified period. His failed attempts at solving the impasse in Zimbabwe reminded me of a soccer player who misses a lot of goal-scoring opportunities throughout the season until his team ends up being relegated from the Premier League.

Suddenly I felt somebody tapping me on the shoulder. It was the youngster with my z\$8 000 change. Again the issue of not trusting other people had come back to haunt me. I'm not sure if I'm just paranoid by nature or whether it is because I live in Johannesburg, but at the back of my mind I'm forever conscious of the possibility of becoming a victim of crime. Throughout the trip it would strike me repeatedly how much we South Africans are living in a mental prison. And how, irrespective of how often we vote in general elections, we are not free from all sorts of anxieties.

At 13:20 the train sounded its horn and after two hours we were on our way again. The blinding ceiling light was proving to be such a nuisance that I decided to get a hat from my backpack which I had stored on the overhead rack. I normally use the balaclava to keep my head warm during cold nights, but this time I was going to cover my eyes with it.

At long last it was dark and I could get some sleep. I half woke up now and then when youngsters came singing and laughing up and down the aisle. I was set to get some decent sleep after the last lout seemed to have fallen silent; but then the baby of the young girl sitting opposite us started crying and wouldn't stop. The elderly woman next to her finally suggested that she check the baby's nappy. Wow, that infant had shit a storm. However much my nose had adapted to sitting next to the toilet, the stinky poo just about gave me a headache. The nappy was changed, and because it was not one of those disposable types it was put in a small black plastic bag and stored on the overhead rack too. Peace and quiet was restored.

I attempted to doze off again, but in no time it was dawn and the train pulled into a station where quite a few people jumped off. Then several passengers started brushing their teeth and spitting through the open windows of the moving train. This looked like a normal thing to do. Quite

a few people were doing it, but the ones who were not did not look surprised at all. The good thing was that fresh air now came into the coach. Even better, some of the windows were left open.

As the sun started rising in the east I could see and somehow feel that we were approaching Victoria Falls. It warmed up and soon an unpleasantly hot wind was coming in through the open windows. The train stopped more often now and people got off while others climbed aboard on their way to Vic Falls. The scenery outside was beautiful. We were travelling through the Hwange National Park. I even saw elephants strolling amongst the green trees.

For some reason we just never seemed to reach Victoria Falls. The train would stop and I would think: Well, this is it. Only to find we were not at our final destination yet.

It took fourteen and a half hours to cover the 451 kilometres between Bulawayo and Victoria Falls.