

## VICTORIA FALLS

An unexpected benefit from reconnecting with my father came from his friend Mr D, a conductor on the Rhodesia Railway's Bulawayo to Choma (Northern Rhodesia) line. Mr D invited me to go with him on a trip and see the Victoria Falls as the train crossed the bridge connecting the two Rhodesias. Of course, I accepted.

I shared his first-class, four-bunk compartment, two above and two below. I found his meticulous placement of toiletries in an unfolded leather case most impressive, reminding me of someone disassembling a bomb.

His dapper appearance reflected his approach to his work. He prepared everything in a most organised fashion before venturing out to begin his duties. Mr D explained that the more he prepared at the start, the smoother the entire trip would run. He started work at seven, before the night train's departure, and only returned at ten to invite me to walk through the third and fourth-class carriages and experience what he faced each trip.

Apart from the six vinyl-covered bunks with their confined space, the second-class compartments looked much like first class. Both classes boasted fold-down wash basins set between the windows, and luggage racks above the top bunk. All carriages, irrespective of class, possessed a toilet at each end. Europeans occupied most of the first and second-class, while Africans occupied the third and fourth-class carriages. Third-class featured vinyl bench seats, much like the commuter trains in large cities.

Fourth class was the most interesting. The carriages featured slatted wooden benches running along the windows, with two or three large slatted wooden islands occupying the carriage's middle area. Most of the passengers sat on the wooden benches under the long luggage racks, but several sat on the islands intended for storing the travellers' luggage and bundles.

Mr D visited the fourth-class carriages several times on the trip. The train made frequent stops at small stations and sidings, which meant the cohort of passengers was forever changing. In my walk-through of the fourth-class carriages, passengers tugged at my sleeve, pointing to the luggage rack above the benches or to the toilets, suggesting stowaways hid there.

It appeared that those who'd paid for their fares didn't appreciate the freeloaders. The result was an amusing yet sad exposure of the shamefaced culprits. Mr D was alert to all the tricks, and though empathising with the guilty, expelled them at the next stop if they didn't buy a ticket. Not everyone possessed the means to pay.

Later, I found the bedding roll, delivered earlier by the African bedding supervisor, to be most comfortable and cosy. Together with the clickety-clack of the carriage bogies on the rail joints, they produced an irresistible soporific effect. Regular stops at lonely sidings accompanied by shouts of the African passengers boarding or leaving the train added to the trip's romance. The jerking and clanking of the carriages as we resumed the journey did likewise. The lonely, haunting, late-night whistle of the locomotive was an added highlight. And with luck, in the night's silence, you'd hear the chuff, chuff, chuff of the engine. What a joy!

One memorable stop in the early hours of the morning was at Dete with its orange platform lights. I enjoyed watching the energetic chaos of the third and fourth-class passengers getting on and off the train and wondered about the stories behind their various journeys. Wankie, scheduled for two and a half hours later, would also have been interesting, but I slept through that stop.

Friends have complained to me they couldn't sleep on the train, but I experienced no difficulty and relished it. While aware of the stoppages and sounds, they didn't disrupt my night, and I just slept better in between them. I woke refreshed, eager to face the day. Soon, I would see the famous Victoria Falls. Usually, the overnight train arrived at Victoria Falls around nine in the morning, but because of two unscheduled delays, on this occasion, we would arrive only after lunch.

Only the ubiquitous long yellow Matabeleland grass and scrubby bush were visible when the dining car staff alerted me we were nearing the Falls. All I detected was the increasing temperature and humidity, but soon, the yellow grass and scrubby bush gave way to larger trees and greenery. I'd sat in the dining car to view the Falls as we crossed the bridge. But Mr D arrived to suggest I go out onto the open platform at the end of the carriage to get the best experience.

Those who first viewed the Falls from the train's slow bridge crossing will appreciate my feelings as the awe-inspiring site emerged from behind the vegetation. The thundering water presented a scene no photograph or film could convey. A fresh-smelling, cool spray drifted on the breeze across the carriage's open platform. The moment lingers after all these years.

All too soon, the Falls passed, and after a brief halt at Livingstone, the endless long African grass and scrubby bush resumed, giving way to a dreary afternoon. At Choma, Mr D would swap with the conductor on the south-bound train, heading for Bulawayo. Just before one in the morning, he told me to prepare to change trains. No platform or lighting existed at the exchange point. So, carrying our cases, we descended to the rough ground and walked across in the moonlight before climbing up into a carriage of the south-bound train. As is often the case, the return trip lacked the outward journey's excitement, though arriving back in Bulawayo was always a thrill.

Mr D told me I could join him on the trip as often as I wished, and I took him up on his offer once again. It occurred to me that a fleeting glimpse of the Falls from the train, followed by the dreary Northern Rhodesian leg past Livingstone, mightn't be the best use of my time. On these trips, I'd spent much time alone because Mr D was on duty elsewhere on the train. I asked him if I could bring a friend on the next trip, and he generously agreed. I was most appreciative, as it meant I would be less company for him.

On the next trip, I took my cousin, Peter. Soon after the train left Bulawayo Station, we flung open the compartment windows and surveyed the darkness. Suddenly, a heavy thud hit the wooden panel between our two windows. Someone had thrown a rock at us but missed. I can't imagine what might have happened if it had struck one of us.

We shut the windows and noticed the 'Do Not Expectorate' sign above the door. We did not know what that meant but enjoyed ourselves imagining the word in different sentences: 'No, we wouldn't expectorate too much service. What should one expectorate in first class?'

Peter and I left the train at Victoria Falls Station and headed for the Victoria Falls Hotel, only four hundred metres from the station. After checking into our spacious ensuite room, I

bought half a dozen rolls of black and white film from the hotel shop for my mother's Kodak box camera. With limited time before catching the train back to Bulawayo, we headed straight to the Falls.

Because Northern and Southern Rhodesia, together with Nyasaland, formed the Central African Federation, no border restricted our exploration, and no entrance fees discouraged repeat visits to the various sites.

We marvelled at the power of the torrent at Devil's Cataract and admired the Rainforest with its vines and bromeliads. Each bromeliad housed a tiny colourful frog at its centre. The spray poured down like heavy rain as we approached Danger Point with its slippery rocks. By the time we reached Viewpoint Sixteen, near the bridge, our clothes were almost dry in the tropical heat.

Next, we walked over the bridge to the Northern Rhodesian side. We descended the rough steps to the bottom of the Falls at the Boiling Pot, almost within touching distance of the water. After ascending the steps, we walked to Knife's Edge before walking along the Zambezi River's bank. Multiple signs along the bank warned, 'Bathing is Suicidal.' Yes! That appealed to my sense of drama.

I took lots of photos with the Kodak box camera, and later, back at the hotel, I bought another three of the cheap rolls of film. After dinner in the Livingstone Room, the hotel's dining room, we explored the rest of the hotel before bedtime.

Soon enough, we were back on the train on our return journey to Bulawayo. I was impatient to see my photos, so my mother handed them in to a chemist to have them developed.

A week later, my mother came home with the photos from one roll. She said nine rolls would have cost too much. And they all looked the same. That last bit, I found hard to believe. I hadn't realised the rolls were cheap because Kodak made their money on developing the film, and photographers would be reluctant to abandon their beautiful photos.

Who knows where my photos are now? Perhaps hanging in a hotel corridor, or gracing the pages of an old magazine?

On my next trip, I took my schoolfriend, Peter. This time I didn't take the camera, having already covered every conceivable view of the Falls. I still hoped my mother would change her mind about recovering my photos from the chemist.

We visited all the usual Victoria Falls viewing points, but the reduced river flow created little spray, with no visible bromeliads, and dry yellow grass encroaching upon the Rainforest. The experience was so different from the earlier trip with the strong river flow.

The visit with my cousin, followed by the visit with my schoolfriend, allowed me to get to know the Falls and nearby areas. Though both impressive, the majesty of the Falls was most clear at high water.

Near the Boiling Pot, a car lay on its roof down in the gorge. From where we stood, it looked like a Ford Consul. It reminded us that the freedom to roam unhindered by fences and rules carried a risk for the careless.

Peter was keen to go to Livingstone, in Northern Rhodesia. It turned out he wanted to visit a young female entertainer who was a friend of his family. Less enthusiastic about the visit, but eager to see Livingstone, I agreed to get a taxi. When we arrived at her motel, the

glamorous young woman was painting her nails, and seemed pleased to see us. We didn't stay long, and I'm sure she was relieved to be rid of the two fourteen-year-old boys.

We walked down the main street of the sleepy little town, made even more soporific in the mid-afternoon heat and humidity. Pedestrian and motor traffic were light, giving the town a pioneering, bypassed feeling. At peak river flow from April to June, one could view the Falls' spray, only fifteen kilometres away, from the town centre. The Zambezi River itself was only five kilometres distant. With such assets, Livingstone would become an ever-busier tourist destination.

Sadly, that was my last trip with Mr D. Three weeks after that trip, I visited my father's house one morning to find only the servants present. The upset cook told me Mrs D died during an operation in Salisbury, and the entire family, including my father, were still there. Soon after this event, everyone went their separate ways, and my father rented out the house and moved into a private hotel near the railway station, close to his workplace.

Six weeks later, I visited him at the hotel, but it wasn't conducive to social calls. We sat chatting in his tiny first-floor room for an hour before saying goodbye at the hotel entrance. He lit up a cigarette, and as I walked away, I saw him standing between the magnificent, gleaming brass plant pots with their enormous fishbone ferns bracketing the hotel's doorway. Following that visit, I didn't see him over the next few months.

I never again saw Mr D or his son Lew. They vanished, just like my privileged, free train trips to one of the world's greatest natural wonders. But I will always be grateful to Mr D for his generous offer, enabling me to become familiar with the incomparable Victoria Falls.