

FAMILY TRIPS

Almost four months since I'd last seen my father, I thought it time to pay him another visit at his private hotel. But when I arrived, the hotel staff told me he'd left, and they didn't have a forwarding address. I had his work phone number at Rhodesia Railways, but when I called, they said he'd moved to another department.

The new telephone number they gave me was incorrect, but after several redirections, I tracked him down. We met after he finished work, and he surprised me when he gave me an envelope with three photos of his wedding. In the period since I last saw him, he'd married a lady, whom I came to know as Aunty Doreen. She also worked for Rhodesia Railways and was a widow with two sons, Rollie and Stephen.

Soon, I visited my father's new family at their house in Richmond, past Northlea School, on the Victoria Falls Road. With an age difference of about four or five years between the brothers, I fitted somewhere in the middle.

Aunty Doreen and my father planned a quick visit to Vumba in Rhodesia's Eastern Highlands during the April school holidays. Rollie, who worked in the Rhodesia Railways engineering workshop, declined to go. Perhaps he didn't have leave or found a holiday with the older folk and his young brother not too appealing, so I took his place.

We left Bulawayo around lunchtime in the family's Morris Minor station wagon and headed out on the Johannesburg Road. Soon, we drove through Essexvale, turning off at Balla Balla towards Filabusi, before passing through Shabani and Mashaba on our way to Fort Victoria. Although we took sandwiches and a flask of tea, we stopped along the way, which added time to the journey. I relished every moment of my first long car trip.

With the sun sinking over the horizon, we pressed on past Fort Victoria. Rhodesian motels stayed open all hours to welcome late-night travellers, so we weren't concerned about finding somewhere to stay overnight. But we soon discovered that little suitable accommodation lay beyond Fort Victoria. Finally, at nine o'clock, just before Birchenough Bridge, we saw a welcome motel sign.

We were starving, but the pleasant motel owner said the kitchen was closed. She offered to make us fried eggs and toast, and we were grateful for her hospitality. Tired out from the long drive, we soon returned to our basic rooms and fell asleep.

The next morning, we made an early start after breakfast. First, we needed to cross the magnificent Birchenough Bridge on the Sabi River, an odd sight, sitting in the middle of nowhere. The drive to picturesque Umtali took only a couple of hours, and after morning tea, we headed for the Leopard Rock Hotel in the Vumba Mountains. A short eighteen-mile drive from the city saw us arrive at the hotel just after lunch.

The grey hotel building, set in the stunning Vumba scenery, was an impressive sight, looking very much like a castle nestled against a mountain backdrop. Spectacular views of the gardens and down the Burma Valley gave the hotel a fairytale setting. Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, on a visit to the hotel, is said to have described Leopard Rock and its surrounds as 'Nowhere more beautiful in Africa.'

The cosy rooms inside the hotel mirrored the old-world curved exterior, making it a building we were eager to explore. But first, following the hotel reception's recommendation,

we walked through the tropical forest growing in a tiny valley at the hotel's rear. The dense tropical growth seemed out of place in the Eastern Highlands' thinner air, but the warm afternoon helped the tropical illusion.

When I visited the hotel about ten years later, the tropical forest was gone. In its place stood a small treeless valley filled with dry yellow Rhodesian grass.

The brief stay at the hotel soon passed. An early start to our trip home saw us complete the return journey to Bulawayo in a single day.

In the August school holidays, Aunty Doreen wanted to visit her sister in Inyanga in Rhodesia's north-east. Once again, Rollie stayed home, and I took his place.

We set off around five-thirty in the evening and headed for the Salisbury Road, passing Brady Barracks and the old Bulawayo Airport on the left. Rhodesian motels stayed open all night for travellers, so leaving after my father finished work wasn't a problem. Those were the days of *knock-knock* jokes, and that's how we occupied our time between Bulawayo and Gwelo.

We turned right at the Midlands Hotel on the corner near the Boggie Clock Tower in Gwelo. One block down, we turned left towards Salisbury and found an Indian restaurant where we ate dinner. After driving on, we spent the night in a motel in Gatooma. Bulawayo to Salisbury was two-hundred-and-sixty-seven miles.

The next morning, we were on our way again, and although the scenery resembled Matabeleland, my focus lay on what might lie just over the horizon. My imagination often saved me from the boredom of uneventful travel, as I have always considered the journey to be a fun part of any trip.

Salisbury appeared on the horizon midway through the dull grey Saturday afternoon. As we approached the city, I looked forward to seeing the city centre, but before we reached it, we turned off into the suburb known as The Avenues. Another relative of Aunty Doreen lived in the inner-city suburb. The elderly lady gave us afternoon tea and biscuits before we left to look for somewhere to stay overnight.

I don't recall where we spent the night, but morning came soon enough. All fresh and ready to go, we headed onto Jameson Avenue and caught a fleeting glimpse of the city before heading out onto the Umtali Road. Ah well! Maybe next time! But now we were on our way to the Inyanga area, where Aunty Doreen's sister lived on a farm with her husband and daughter.

The countryside grew hillier and more picturesque as we drove east. Not at all like the flat, dry Matabeleland bush we'd left behind us. At Rusape, we branched off towards Inyanga. The countryside grew even hillier, especially after we turned off the tarred road onto a dirt road. Aunty Doreen and my father must have received excellent directions, given all the twists and turns and a smaller dirt track before we reached our destination in the early afternoon.

Aunty Doreen's sister lived with her husband and daughter on an isolated farm. Their house stood perched on a high point overlooking the small valleys that comprised their property. It must have been between growing seasons because I couldn't see any sign of crops, though they'd stripped one small valley of rocks and boulders, ready for ploughing.

The elderly couple welcomed us and invited us into their house for tea and something to eat. Inside, their daughter, who looked to be in her early twenties, lurched towards us, giving us a fright. The poor young woman suffered severe brain damage from a forceps birth. She couldn't speak, only uttering shrieks and grunts, and other unintelligible sounds. Nor could she walk properly; instead, she leapt and lurched around the room. Aunty Doreen earlier warned us about her disability, but I did not imagine it to be so severe.

Her parents understood her groans and grunts, but Stephen and I held back. On seeing our hesitation, her mother told us we needn't be afraid as she was harmless and wouldn't hurt us, but I resolved not to be left alone in her company. Although I respected her as a human being, I couldn't communicate with her and was nervous about her appearance and behaviour.

By coincidence, her brother, Barry, who worked in Salisbury, turned up to visit his family. He entertained Stephen and me by taking us for a walk on the farm with his hunting rifle. A bushbuck grazed in a neighbouring field, and Barry took a shot but missed. I suspected he didn't want the hassle of dealing with the carcass just before dusk.

When we arrived back at the farmhouse, we discovered that with Barry's unexpected arrival, we couldn't all sleep in the small house. Aunty Doreen, my father, and I would have to sleep on camp beds in the new house the family was building. It stood at another elevated point on the farm, about two hundred yards away from the existing house.

The incomplete new house had no roof, windows, doors, bathroom, toilet, or separate rooms. Only the external walls stood on a concrete foundation. At dinner, we heard that a leopard patrolled the farm at night. Having just finished reading Jim Corbett's book, *The Man Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, the point was not lost on me.

African leopards are less prone to becoming man-eaters compared to Indian leopards, but they sometimes take African children in the bush. Perhaps that was the reason they kept Stephen in the house that night. I suspected as much. But what about me? I was just a fifteen-year-old skinny kid. What might the leopard make of me?

Aunty Doreen or my father would make a much more satisfying meal than me, but I wouldn't be taking any chances. I put my suitcase in the empty doorway nearest my camp bed. With luck, it might distract the leopard, or it would not bother to jump over the suitcase for the meagre meal I would provide. On the chilly pre-winter night, the blankets were cosy, and I had my emerald-green jumper to keep me warm.

I must have slept well, because it seemed like the next minute the cold rays of dawn aroused me. They didn't call it the Eastern Highlands for nothing.

After a hearty farm breakfast of porridge, fried eggs and bacon, and a hot cup of tea, Barry took Stephen and me for a long exploration of the farm. As any Rhodesian would know, the sun soon warms the morning chill. By late morning, we were sweating in the heat. Soon, on a rocky outcrop, we reached the concrete farm reservoir, which supplied all the house and irrigation needs.

The water looked so inviting; we stripped off our clothes and jumped in. The icy temperature was a shock. We swam as fast as possible across the reservoir and jumped out. I suspect the water at that altitude would have been cold even in summer.

The next day after morning tea, it was time to say goodbye. The family lined up to wave us off, and I felt a little sorry for the couple and their damaged daughter in their remote

location. They purchased the farm hoping it would give their daughter more freedom away from the stares and stresses of the city.

Like all parents of offspring with a disability, they worried about what would happen to their daughter after they passed. At least Barry could care for them in times of need. Imagine how we felt when, two years later, we heard he'd died of a heart attack in Salisbury.

On the way home, we visited the Troutbeck Inn to see the picturesque hotel on the edge of Troutbeck Lake, famed for its rainbow trout. The inviting, cosy open fireplace drew us close, but after tea we needed to be on our way.

Homeward bound, the glimpse of Salisbury from Jameson Avenue was as fleeting as on the outward journey. Salisbury would have to wait.

Rhodesians loved the seaside. For the residents of Salisbury, it most often meant a three-hundred-and-seventy-four-mile trip to Beira in Mozambique, but Bulawayans more often undertook a journey of double the distance to Durban.

Somewhere, I got a comprehensive travel guide to Durban. It was printed on the same coarse paper and of about an equivalent thickness to the foolscap-sized motor car manuals so common in those days. Its pages contained brief articles, maps, and advertisements promoting various hotels and restaurants. The line drawings showing ladies in glamorous evening dresses, and men in tuxedos and bow ties, under a crescent moon, held a special appeal for me.

I read the Durban travel guide with its advertisements many times over and memorised all the city centre streets and approaches. Paradoxically, I knew my way around Durban, which I'd never visited, just as well as Bulawayo, my home town. Little did I know our next family trip would be to that city. When my father gave me the news, I was elated.

We left Bulawayo early, heading for Beitbridge on the South African border. In those days, delays at the border were minimal. Messina, the first town over the border, was a mandatory stop for Rhodesian travellers heading south, so we stopped for lunch before heading off refreshed for the long drive. The picturesque small town of Louis Trichardt, followed by the majestic kopjes of the Northern Transvaal, made the long-distance drive more interesting.

I loved long-distance travel, and with Durban and the Indian Ocean as our destination, it made it even more exciting. We passed through Pietersburg, Potgietersrus, and Pretoria before bypassing Johannesburg and stopping for the night in Springs, a Joburg satellite town.

The next day, we passed through several historical though nondescript small towns in the Eastern Transvaal and Natal. The scenic town of Pietermaritzburg, near the Drakensburg Mountains, proved the exception. After leaving Pietermaritzburg, Durban's proximity together with the scenery held our attention. On the left, we passed the sign for the Valley of a Thousand Hills. I'd see it often over the following years but would never visit it in my haste to reach Durban or head home. Zulu Wars history wasn't my thing then, though I believe in those days, one could pick up souvenirs such as spent bullets.

Around four o'clock, at the start of the rush hour, we drove into Durban. In the heavy traffic, it would have helped to know our way. I was disappointed, though not surprised, my father paid no attention to my directions. Only later did he discover I knew my way around the city.

Given I'd obsessed about Durban to the extent I knew the inner-city layout and streets, it's ironic how little I remember about my first holiday there.

Of course, we went to the beach. I recall Aunty Doreen warning us about sunburn, and how angry local doctors criticised naïve Rhodesians getting dangerous burns from staying too long on the sand or in the water.

I also recall visiting the ice-skating rink, a real novelty for us Rhodesians. Everybody appeared to skate so well, while we stayed close to the surrounding wall, taking tentative steps. My father warned us to clench our fists if we fell, to avoid someone skating over our fingers.

One evening, we found an Indian restaurant on Palmer Street, about two blocks back from the beach. My father loved Indian food, and his face glistened with perspiration the spicy dish caused, but he claimed a good curry needed to be hot.

Thanks to my father and his new family, the year was full of visits to places I'd read about, but never earlier seen. It helped me to get to know more of Rhodesia and South Africa and widened my horizons.

When we weren't travelling, I often spent weekends at the house in Richmond. It made a refreshing change from flat dwelling in town. My father had a large greenhouse in the back garden, which he filled with tropical plants and fish tanks for his tropical fish. He spent most weekends working there. Sometimes, we'd have afternoon tea in the front garden in the shade of a large tree.

The sizeable property of at least an acre gave us plenty of room. A spacious front garden allowed us privacy from the light traffic on the Victoria Falls Road. The back garden was even larger, but apart from the greenhouse, comprised only patches of dry yellow grass. It was a haven for snakes, as evidenced by the turnover of family dogs.

Rollie had bought a motorcycle. He was keen on motor racing, and this bike had grunt, so he invited me to ride pillion on the dirt roads through the Richmond back blocks. We travelled two blocks before he leant the bike over to turn right.

In Bulawayo, the rains can make dirt roads muddy, making them susceptible to deep car-tyre ruts, which dry concrete hard in a few hours of sunlight. The right footrest of Rollie's bike got caught in a rut, and it spun the bike three-hundred-and-sixty degrees. Instead of turning right, we went straight across the intersection as if nothing unusual had happened. Although he didn't show it, it must have unnerved him, because he cut the ride short and we returned to the house.