

THE MATOPOS

A beautiful Bulawayo Sunday morning. Mornings in Rhodesia were consistently bright and beautiful in both summer and winter. Breakfast would be ProNutro, Shredded Wheat, Grape Nuts, Maltabella, or Jungle Oats — whatever was available. Perhaps followed by fried eggs and bacon or just toast and marmalade. A hot cup of tea to finish.

Often, a Sunday meant a visit to the Matopos. I'd hurry to brush my teeth before the gang arrived to collect me.

Most times, there'd be five of us: me, my cousins Peter and Jean, Terry, our benevolent driver, and a fifth person who often varied. Terry, the proud owner of the car, had left school and started work. I don't recall his ever asking for a contribution towards the cost of the petrol for our long drives.

Upon their arrival, three would crowd into the back seat, with Jean, often the only girl in the group, sitting in the passenger front seat. There were no seat belts then, but we were young and bulletproof. But bad things sometimes happened to others, especially on the Matopos Road. Dave, a popular boy in my class, died in a motor accident in the Matopos, leaving his classmates subdued for days.

The Monday edition of the Bulawayo Chronicle often carried tragic news of young people killed in car crashes on the weekend. Many Bulawayo families would have sad memories of the popular weekend drive on that road. Despite this, the renowned national park would draw us in weekend after weekend.

Once out on the Matopos Road, with the road toll furthest from our minds, we'd soon pass Saddleback Ranch on the left. Farther on, the Matopos Hotel with the Matopos Dam across the road, low on the right, was our sign we'd entered the national park. From the crowded hotel veranda, we could watch the small yachts on the dam, while sipping our Cokes or cups of tea.

After passing the Matopos Hotel, a favourite destination of ours was the Maleme Dam. We'd enter the site via a narrow dirt road, where once, we stopped in front of a huge python, as thick as a man's thigh, crossing the track. Its head and tail lay hidden from sight on either side of the road. It took over a minute to complete its crossing into the long yellow grass.

On another occasion, I accompanied different friends to a nighttime braai at Maleme Dam. We sat around an open fire and cooked sausages and steaks. With the fire being the only source of light, the stars sparkled with a brilliance I've seldom seen. It says a lot about the Rhodesia we knew that five young people could feel safe in such a remote spot late at night.

Often, we'd explore the jumble of giant boulders in the riverbed below the dam wall. Some of them were twelve to fifteen feet tall. On one occasion, our friend Terry jumped down onto a boulder lower than the one on which Peter and I stood. Once down there, surrounded by giant boulders and deep crevices between them, he realised he was trapped. He'd imagined a simple descent to the dry riverbed, but it was quite a drop to the next boulder. Even if he survived the jump uninjured, there was no guarantee he'd be able to extricate himself from that location.

The smooth rock face with few handholds prevented him from climbing up to us. A misstep could see him disappear down one of the cavernous dark holes between the boulders. We didn't know what to do. Going for help seemed a protracted solution, and it was getting late. After much debate among the three of us, we considered forming a two-man chain to reach down and pull Terry up onto our boulder. We were apprehensive because we weren't sure we were strong enough for the task and risked joining him on the boulder below. With the added strength provided by adrenaline and desperation, and the aid of Terry's synthetic-soled Bata veldskoens, the plan worked.

Visitors needed to tackle a steep road on the opposite side of the dam when leaving Maleme. I recall an occasion when a Mercedes Benz saloon attracted everybody's attention when it failed in three attempts to ascend the slope. Fourth time lucky, it reversed all the way to the top.

Of course, we visited not only the Maleme Dam in the Matopos but also the Mtshelale and Toghwana dams. Someone suggested that the Mpopoma Dam was a good fishing site stocked with bass. One weekend we headed out to the dam and camped on its flat edge. One member of the party was skilled in casting the fishing line a long distance. After a little instruction, my casting improved. Ever more confident, I put all my energy into a cast, trying for a personal distance record.

As always, brute force does not trump technique. I must have forgotten what I'd learnt because the hook ended up stuck on my nose, an inch from my eye. With no goggles or glasses to protect my eyes, there ended the casting lesson. As it turned out, we caught not a single fish that weekend. The master caster, for all the distance he achieved, fared no better than anyone else.

Aside from the dams, we'd visit the San Bushmen cave and rock paintings. Although time and the weather had faded a few, others looked fresh. Matopos holds the largest concentration of rock paintings in Southern Africa. Many dated back to the Stone Age, and at the more important sites, park rangers guarded them against vandals and souvenir hunters.

On our way home from a day in the Matopos, we'd often climb the granite rock to Rhodes's grave at World's View, or Malindidzimu as the Karanga and Matabele (Ndebele) called their sacred site. I thought it was a silent, lonely spot to be buried, though the graves of Leander Starr Jameson and Sir Charles Coghlan, the first prime minister of Rhodesia, lay nearby. Also nearby was the Shangani memorial to Alan Wilson and his men, who, in pursuit of Lobengula, found themselves trapped by three thousand Matabele on the bank of the Shangani River. None of the Shangani Patrol survived.

On our descent from the gravesite, we'd break off pieces of the dried resurrection plant to place in a glass of water at home and watch the leaves unfold. Although it took a few hours for the plant to reveal its full glory, the signs of life stirring were almost immediate.

We visited the Matopos countless times in our youth. Today, both local and international visitors must pay for the privilege and then pay a further fee to see the grave of Cecil John Rhodes. It is this source of income that keeps Rhodes resting peacefully in his grave. Locals are fiercely protective of the site against arguments to exhume his remains and return them to England.