

SALISBURY – LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Many of us would agree, nowhere can compare to the place we grew up. For me, that place was Bulawayo. In May 2019, I was relieved to find the city little changed after my thirty-four-year absence. But my brief visit didn't allow me the time to assess the industrial decay occasioned by the government's neglect. Even with deteriorating roads and several run-down and grimy buildings, my home town remained recognisable.

Bulawayo, über alles—above all—doesn't mean we fortunate Matabeles cannot recognise the delights of other cities.

The sixties and seventies were a golden age for Rhodesia. If you drove out of Bulawayo on the Salisbury Road for about six hours—the Salisburyites called it the Bulawayo Road—you would arrive at Salisbury's Jameson Avenue. There on the left, the first significant sign of civilisation, Livingstone House, a beautiful office building sparkling in the sunshine—a promising start.

A little farther along, just past the Jameson Hotel, the black-steepled Presbyterian church nestled in the shadow of the majestic Monomotapa Hotel (built 1976). And beyond, on the corner of Kings Crescent, stood Anglo American's Charter House—an impressive red-brick building with a concave-shaped facade angled to the avenue, looking like open arms welcoming motorists to the city. Opposite, on the right, towering over Jameson Avenue, was a row of tall office blocks, including the iconic Pearl Assurance building.

I drove from Bulawayo to Salisbury often and lived there for a time. The city always looked fresh and full of promise. Its delights included the Le Coq D'or nightclub, the Wise Donkey Cafe, the National Art Gallery, and the Meikles Hotel.

In the suburbs one wintry Sunday afternoon, I discovered The Red Fox with its horse brasses and the silky, long-haired Afghan hound that warmed itself in front of the cosy open fireplace. It possessed the atmosphere of an upmarket British pub. I could think of nowhere better for a relaxing Sunday afternoon beer.

For a romantic dinner dance, my favourite spot was the Highlands Park Hotel with the revolving mirror ball above the dance floor. The kaleidoscopic reflections from the dozens of tiny mirrors intensified the beat of the music.

For a more downmarket experience, the Kamfinsa Park Hotel with its beer garden and stage for live music did a fine job. It's where I saw Rhodesia's very own Dyllis Stevenson singing her version of Dark Moon. That song always takes me back to the evening with my university friends at the Kamfinsa Park beer garden.

The George Hotel in Avondale boasted a sizeable lounge for its patrons. It proved popular with my fellow students at the university (UCRN) in nearby Mount Pleasant.

On Manica Road in the CBD were two Chinese restaurants: the Bamboo Inn and the Mandarin. One beautiful balmy summer evening I dined in the former's relaxing, charming atmosphere. The silver serving dishes sat on a stand above burning candles that kept the contents warm. Distracted, I picked up a dish and scalded my hand. I spent the first half of that evening with my burnt right hand in a glass of ice-cold Lion Lager. It worked a charm.

The Taj Mahal Indian restaurant's imposing façade stood at the other end of First Street. On one of my last visits to Salisbury, I found the restaurant gone. But then, I was delighted to

discover its new location in The Avenues. The Taj Mahal now appeared to be a takeaway café catering to an African clientele. I sat at a table on a narrow veranda at the side of the restaurant, but sadly, the ambience and quality of the food fell short of the Taj Mahal I remembered.

I seldom visited the cinema, though I enjoyed *The Odd Couple* with Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau at the Elite Cinema on the corner of Rhodes Avenue and Park Lane. At the Palace Cinema on Union Avenue, I saw the long and boring *The Magus*, starring Anthony Quinn and Michael Caine. On one occasion, I went to the Rhodes Cinema on First Street to see *Cactus Flower* starring Goldie Hawn and Walter Matthau. One cinema I never visited was the Colosseum on the corner of Angwa Street and Manica Road.

Aside from entertainment and dining, Salisbury was well served with overseas goods from Britain and elsewhere. Following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965, locally produced goods dominated, but many overseas goods still found their way into the country.

First Street served as the lively centre for shopping in the CBD with its major department stores: H. M. Barbour, Greatermans, and Meikles, and the smaller Sanders department store. The Haddon and Sly department store stood nearby on Stanley Avenue. I still wear a Scottish-made jumper I bought at Greatermans fifty-seven years ago.

Newcomers to the city soon found their bearing with the saying ‘*Speke to Stanley Gordon about the Bakers’ Union.*’ It proved a clever way of remembering the order of the avenues between Manica Road and Jameson Avenue. I heard it once and have never forgotten it.

The clean, vibrant city catered to young people. Many private residential hotels lay scattered throughout The Avenues and on the northern edge of the CBD. Most were one or two-storey complexes with kitchens and dining rooms, providing hot meals for residents and their guests. A few even boasted communal lounges. The accommodation comprised serviced single rooms with ensuite bathrooms. These private hotels were ideal for young people setting out on their working lives and in need of social interaction. One must wonder how many romances started in those environs.

Given the purpose of these establishments, there would be a steady turnover of residents as they progressed in their careers and relationships. Many moved into the prolific low-rise studio apartments found nearby. Salisbury was a young person’s paradise. In many other cities, young people who left home lived in soulless, high-rise apartment blocks.

Since the golden years of the 1960s and 70s, the places I have mentioned have closed, apart from the office buildings, National Art Gallery, and major hotels—The Meikles, Monomotapa, and Jameson. I was familiar with only a tiny sample of Salisbury’s many attractions, but most of the other iconic establishments also closed with the socioeconomic changes accompanying independence in 1980.

Other cities boast similar attributes, but Salisbury could lay claim to something special. And I’m not just referring to the beautiful weather with its sunny days and summer storms, or the jacaranda-lined avenues. The streets lined with beautiful green trees gave the city a fresh, sparkling appearance. Salisbury lay in the Goldilocks Zone—neither too big, nor too small, but just right.

Bulawayans often referred to Salisbury as Bamba Zonke, which translates as ‘You take it all.’ It’s true that the Rhodesian and Zimbabwean governments favoured Salisbury (Harare)

at the expense of letting Bulawayo, the country's second largest city, languish. Salisbury didn't need to take it all when it already had it all.

For me, Salisbury was love at first sight. A city must be special to gain the grudging admiration of its rivals. The greatest criticism I've heard from any committed Bulawayan is, 'Salisbury is nice, but it's a bit far out of town.'

Since independence, I have seen Harare only once, when I passed through on my way from Johannesburg to Melbourne in 1993. The brief afternoon and evening stopover gave me little time to look around.

First Street, now a pedestrian mall, bustled with Africans. I saw a long queue waiting to use the single public telephone. The African woman talking on the phone didn't appear pressured by the growing line behind her. Zimbabweans have infinite patience, but I don't, so I walked to the Monomotapa Hotel to find a phone. There, I discovered that the better hotels had removed all their public phones to avoid similar long queues forming in their foyers.

Apart from the greater number of African pedestrians, the city looked much the same. I wanted to buy a newspaper but couldn't find one. Finally, a waiter at the Wise Donkey Café sold me his copy, but it espoused government propaganda and rural news, and little else.

Since my visit, the city's infrastructure has deteriorated, including crumbling roads, power outages, and a contaminated water supply leading to cholera outbreaks. Sadly, the jewel that was Salisbury—the Salisbury I knew—is no more.