

# Two Sides of the Road in Mozambique

by Lisa Selvidge

I had never really wanted to go to Africa. I know something of what the white people did there, particularly under apartheid in South Africa. I know about the Whites' Only doors, the Whites' Only buses, the Whites' Only beaches. I know how the land was stolen by White people. To say nothing of the slave trade. I am White. Post-colonial guilt hangs over me and Africa.

Fortunately, when I land in Maputo on December 14, 2009, I am so exhausted after a ten-hour flight from Lisbon that post-colonial guilt is the last thing on my mind. My only thought as I get out of the plane is that, for some reason, I hadn't expected Mozambique to be so green. The baggage arrives and a man with gold epaulettes, a round face and a big smile stamps my passport.

My friend, Paul, and I get some meticaís, the local currency, from an ATM at a Millennium Bank and go to a café and order a *café com leite* and an *agua das pedras* – just like in Portugal (where I live most of the time).

'Hello, how are you?' A young boy appears hawking CDs speaks to me in Portuguese.

'I'm fine,' I say, buying *Top Moz 2009* and *Passada 2009*. The boy smiles.

We go to get the car. It is still early but already hot.

'How are the roads?' I ask the suited man in the Europe car shed.

He tips his hand from side to side.

'Would a car do?'

'A jeep is better.' He smiles.

We get a Ford pick-up, throw our bags in the back, and drive out of the airport, keeping left, with instructions on how to find the main north-south highway.

Women, immaculately dressed in colourful sarongs, carry crates of Coca-Cola, plastic bowls, firewood and suitcases on their heads. Young men and boys push carts loaded with everything from papayas to mattresses. Toyota pick-ups and trucks zig-zag through the traffic, piled high with baggage and people. Crumbling buildings are painted with advertisements for 2M, Colgate, Nestlé, Milo and Palmolive while Vodacom seems to have painted every wall and kiosk blue and white, its slogan, *Todo bom Vodacom*. MCell (the other mobile network) has gone for the whole building approach, yellow with smiley faces. Hundreds of tyres lie by the side of the road in the red dust. Why tyres, I wonder? I read the names of the kiosks: Zama-Zama, Woxa-Woxa, Tuckshop, Baracca Ponto Final, Tropical 007, Loja de Frelimo...

'Are Frelimo still in power?' I ask Paul. I think they fought for Independence against the Portuguese before 1974.

Paul nods. 'They switched to a market economy in the nineties which saved them from Renamo and another civil war.'

He begins to tell me the history of Frelimo as we follow the heaving buses, lorries and *chapas* (the Toyota pick-ups turned into public transport) out of Maputo. Shanty towns become green fields and the half concrete half tin shacks are replaced by *rondaveis*, round huts with thatched roofs, in villages set back from the road. Red earth

paths connect the main road with the villages and the people walk back and forth and along the road, as if in a choreographed dance. Women pause at wells to fill yellow water containers. Occasionally, a dark 4WD zips by pulling a white boat. Paul tells me that Guebuza won the 1994 elections.

A few potholes appear in the road. We pass a broken Toyota, one haunch slouched into the road. Six people gather around the collapsed tyre, a dozen others sit on the side of the road. Further on a lorry has overturned – a burst tyre. Aha. There are now almost only pick-ups and other 4WDs left on the roads – Toyotas, of course, Nissans, Fords, and the monster American Freightliner lorries with their growling faces. Peanuts hang in bags from trees and rows of bright red bottles of piri-piri line the road. Every so often wooden carvings stand tall, like the people walking by them. The tarmac on the road becomes less. It takes us four hours to do 150 km.

We stop at Inhambane, outside a Barclays Bank, and drink Coca-Cola (it is at least 40°C) and watch dhows on the river. It has a timeless feel, its wide tree-lined avenues and faded buildings remind me of towns in Portugal, Grandola perhaps. '*Terra da boa gente*', 'Land of good people' was, apparently, what Vasco da Gama called the place when he arrived here in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The tarmac on the road to Vilankulo disappears completely. Only a red bumpy track rolls up and down the undulating landscape. Coconut palms grow in abundance. An occasional machine with Chinese written on the side rests by the side of the road.

'It can't be down here,' I say, as we bounce along a deep sand track that no car would be able to pass.

I ask someone and he tells me that it is. He asks for a ride and gets in the open back. We pick up some more people and bounce along some more, 7 km more, until we reach our accommodation.

Vilankulo is the almost perfect tourist destination with its white beaches, translucent sea and restaurants. We dutifully do the tourist things: swim, ride, see angel fish and dolphins, sail out on a dhow to one of the Bazaruto islands. It is stunningly beautiful – and expensive. I want to go inland.

On the lonely red dust road a family of baboons attempts to cross in front of us. We stop. The baboons indignantly scatter and regroup behind us and cross again, carefully, like children on a pedestrian crossing. Birds cry out from trees with trunks as big as houses, palms prod the deep blue sky. Occasionally we pass a village, a man on a bicycle, a woman walking with the yellow water container on her head but the deeper we go, the fewer the people. I feel like Kurtz going into the heart of Africa. And then, as the sun is setting in front of us, we come to Mabote.

'Can I see the room?' I ask a young woman in the café.

She links my arm and shows me three basic rooms, each with single beds. I find a room with two unbroken beds. There is a cockroach the size of rat in the bathroom and no running water. It costs 250 meticaís, 6 euros. I smile.

Mabote is built up on both sides of the dusty street. Not a lot happens. There are three cafes, a yellow building (compliments of MCEL) and there is electricity between 6 p.m. - 9 p.m.. We eat omelette and chips and drink 2M (beer). Everyone is friendly and intrigued that we speak Portuguese. A young man under pressure to marry and have children is keen to talk to us.

'I want to live my life,' he says. 'Not what others want.'

We sleep to the sounds of ‘Wassa Wassa’ and ‘Uh la la la’ but the batteries don’t last for long.

After a breakfast of fresh hot rolls, cheese and tea (in a teapot) and Ricoffy with condensed milk, we bump in the direction of Zimbabwe, deeper and deeper into the bush. I am sure lions are going to jump out, but there is nothing. Only silence. The track narrows and the bushes claw the car on either side. It gets hotter and hotter.

We eventually come to a sign that says Zimbabwe National Park; two hours later we reach the main camp and are greeted by monkeys. We speak to an old man who introduces us to the Chief. He welcomes us and the old man gets in the jeep to lead us down to the river Save. He shows us recent hippo tracks in the sand and then we hear them bark. He decides it’s better we go back. I agree. He also shows us the ruins of an old camp destroyed by floods a few years previous. They had tried to build a tourist centre. Now no one goes there.

Towards the end of the trip we head to Ponta D’Ouro, 100 km south of Maputo. There are few signs and numerous sand tracks. The landscape is empty except for rolling grassland, sand and a big blue sky. Five hours later we find our destination – and hundreds of white South Africans on quad bikes.

‘How did they get here!’ I say indignantly.

Paul tells me it is only 7 km from the border where there is a good road. I feel cheated.

In the evening we go to a popular restaurant. We are seated by a large table of Afrikaans. A woman wearing gold jewellery, heavy make-up and a low-cut flimsy dress over her large body shouts at a waiter. There is some mix-up with the garlic bread. The restaurant fills up – with white people. To someone who has lived in London, I find this scene incongruous. How is it possible? Don’t white people in South Africa have black friends or relatives?

‘Economic apartheid,’ Paul says.

That in itself is bad enough.

After our meal, I go to the toilet. There is a queue. A young man (white) comes out of the men’s and approaches a member of staff (black) and says,

‘Clean the toilet for Christ’s sake. We’ll be swimming soon.’

For the first time since arriving in Mozambique I feel guilty.