

Report from Zimbabwe 1 - The No 1 Ladies Walking Club

Picked up from the airport by NTZ Chairman Tim who was my host for the first few days, it was clear how much the infrastructure of Harare has deteriorated. "My father was Mayor of Harare in the late '70's" he said " and it would have broken his heart to see how things are now".

Potholes in the roads, fuel shortages, daily power cuts and a seeming breakdown in law and order.

The next morning I was invited to join the ladies on their daily excursion around the suburb. They start at eight before the sun becomes too fierce and complete a mile or two under the shade of jacaranda trees in purple bloom, gathering more walkers as they pass by their electric gated properties. They tell me of the hard times when inflation was 300,000% and there was no food in the shops. One gives me a one hundred trillion Zimbabwe dollar note as a souvenir to use as a bookmark. Things have settled down a little now Zimbabwe has switched to the US dollar but in the tough times money was meaningless and there was no food in the shops. People would collect supplies of whatever they could, wherever they could, and distribute it in the community. Savings and pensions collapsed with the economy. "My husband's lifelong pension was commuted to a lump sum" says Della" and it was just enough to go out and buy a meal".

The older generation seem happy and resilient though, those that are left, and everyone knows everyone else with a white population reduced to just 0.5%. The younger generation are largely gone to live and work now in America, Australia, South Africa or Britain. They have capitalised on their first class, highly valued, traditional education and have dispersed around the globe as they see little future here.

Later in the day I heard the tales from some of the displaced farmers, harrowing tales of being evicted with just a few hours notice to gather up their lifetime belongings and any resistance provoking violence. Some were offered compensation at least for their crops but none have seen a single dollar. Many left the country but the stalwart have stayed because they are third or fourth generation Zimbabweans or have roots that go back even further. Remarkably with the

passage of time they do not seem bitter but just try to carry on as best they can. "The Last Resort - a memoir of Zimbabwe" by Douglas Rogers explains the nuances of it all in a ripping yarn as his parents battled to survive and adapt.

Report from Zimbabwe 2 - The No 2 Shona Ladies Church Outing

I arrived at La Rochelle on Tuesday 4 October. The place is lovely but has such a sad air of neglect.

It was built by Sir Stephen and Lady Virginia Courtauld who lived here in style from 1951 to 1970 and created a beautiful botanical garden. In its day it was a Mecca for important local and overseas guests from all walks of life including politicians, film stars and artists. Sir Stephen was a quiet philanthropist and art collector whilst his adored wife was glamorous and gregarious.

My home for the next few weeks will be in the Peacock lodge which the Courtaulds had built to live in while the main house was under construction.

The next day, alerted by the sound of singing in La Rochelle car park, I went to see what was going on. A group of about 35 ladies from the Mutare Anglican Church had come for a Braai (barbecue) and to meet and talk about the lot of Shona women, husbands, children, health, how to check yourself for breast cancer, how to cope with the menopause and stop your husband running off with a younger woman, which is known as an all too common occurrence. There was frequent singing, a few prayers and lots of laughter.

They invited me to join them and asked me to tell them why I am here and where I come from. They didn't know anything about the National Trust for Zimbabwe or La Rochelle so it was a good opportunity to engage with them, as well as a lot of fun. I am not sure how much they related to my tales of equality in England or that many modern families now share the childcare between husband and wife because women want careers. My session came to an end just before the food was ready and it became apparent that I was expected to lead the prayer of thanks. I managed to stumble out some words of grace from the recesses of my memory but

they nodded in appreciation and then rushed over to the Braai. There was chicken and ribs, salad and I had my first taste of sadza which is a staple grain boiled up to a mashed potato like consistency and eaten with your fingers. They seemed quite impressed that I liked it as most foreigners turn up their noses.

As I left Peter, one of the 6 gardeners here, came rushing up. He had brought the wood for the Braai and shown the ladies where to park their cars. I had been led to believe that the gardeners were untrained and lazy but he seems to be a young man with real potential and enthusiasm. He wanted to talk about his ideas for developing the campsite area as a place for local events to bring in money for some projects in the garden. In its heyday there were 32 gardeners here and now with just six and no equipment it's little wonder things have deteriorated so far.

Report from Zimbabwe 2 - Sleeping Beauty

In the 1950s a rich Englishman and his glamorous wife were searching Africa in their private plane for a paradise in which to build their final retirement home. Born in 1883, Sir Stephen Courtauld was a reserved and quiet philanthropist and art collector. His wife Virginia was the complete opposite; half Italian, half Hungarian, she was a gregarious socialite divorcee who sported a snake tattoo on her ankle. They adored each other and built their first home in the 1930s at Eltham Palace, an Art Deco mansion which housed Stephen's collection of priceless Turner paintings, ceramics and silver.

Now in their 60's, they landed eventually in the Imbeza Valley, in the Eastern Highlands of what was then Rhodesia, and built La Rochelle, an early modern colonial house complete with tower to replicate it's French inspiration. They created a botanical garden with rare specimen trees and collections of orchids, aloes and cycads in which to enjoy their last years in their beloved Africa. They gave generously building theatres, schools, colleges and art galleries and as liberals who foresaw the coming of black rule, the first ZANU constitution was drawn up in their living room.

The elegance has now faded and the roof leaks. It is run as a hotel but guests are a rarity now the tourist industry has collapsed and Zimbabweans have little money to spare. The gardens are neglected and sad. The whole place is under a spell of demoralisation which affects the whole country.

My job here is to help them plan for the future and it is easy to see what needs to be done to restore some of the former glory of La Rochelle. Repairs to the building, marketing the hotel, shaking up the gardeners and exploiting the commercial potential to earn some income to keep it going. The problem is that there is no money to invest and people seem afraid to do anything other than sit tight to wait for a change of fortune.

Report from Zimbabwe 3 - Trip to Nyanga

I took my first solo drive in the old 4x4 supplied with some trepidation. The roads are straight but certainly not even. After half an hour I began to really enjoy myself though, with no other cars to worry about, just the odd cow or goat. Swathes of Msasa trees gradually gave way to softwood plantation as the road climbed. I had been invited to stay for a few days to stay with some of the committee members, a formidable octogenarian mother and sons complete with Moses the cook, in their holiday cottage in the Nyanga.

On day one they took me to an NTZ property the Rhodes Museum, a building which was his old stable block now housing an eclectic collection of local Manyica culture and history and early pioneering agriculture. The young curator Edmore is full of enthusiasm and works for next to nothing, sleeping in an old store room when he can't make the 10k walk home. Next to the museum is the Rhodes hotel (not NTZ) once a thriving tourist and fisherman's lodge but now sadly abandoned until brave new owners can raise finances for the necessary refurbishments. The next stop was World's View, an aptly named escarpment at 3000 metres looking down onto the plains below.

The final stop for the day was to Edone-Anne's for afternoon tea but I hadn't expected a 5k off road experience to get there. Edone is yet another farmer evicted from her home but fortunate enough to have had a holiday home in the Nyanga to move into. She now fills her time with

numerous good works including whipping the local NTZ committee into shape and miraculously getting things done. I feel much encouraged.

Day two was a trip to the Ziwa ruins. These were iron age people who left behind circular defensive pit corrals for their herds of miniature cattle surrounded by housing platforms and a vast series of agricultural terraces on which they grew crops of sorghum and millet. To get there was an even longer bumpy dirt road adventure, navigating badly eroded tracks and a collapsed bridge. Then, in the middle of nowhere, under the shadow of mount Ziwa, stands a well maintained national museum and extensive picnic area. We were the first people to sign the visitors' book for months. A tour of the museum was followed by a guided tour of the extensive site. My lasting memory of this will be the scorching sun giving way to sudden violent thunder storm and the comical way the guide tried to dodge a dramatic burst of lightening. I returned to the car like a drowned rat.

Report from Zimbabwe - 4 - Images of Africa

People walk along the roadside, lining every road from dawn to dusk. They walk to and from work or they walk because they have no work. Unemployment is popularly said to be 94% although according to the government there is no unemployment because everyone is self employed. The statistics probably lie somewhere in between.

Women are very strong, carrying large loads on their heads with loose, elegant deportment. No prams or buggies, they carry their infants on their backs, secured with a square of fabric or a towel. People are very friendly with ready smiles and greetings; in stark contrast however, officials feel they have a duty to be hostile. The children are beautiful with their big brown eyes and immaculately dressed in smart school uniforms. They walk along the roadsides too, travelling miles to and from school. They are unfailingly polite and well behaved. Schooling is very traditional and formal and people sacrifice a great deal to pay to send their children to school because education is so highly valued.

Everything is very colourful: the earth is red; flowers are startlingly bright, lavender jacaranda, red flamboyant, yellow or coral frangipani. My new favourite is a plant called 'yesterday, today

and tomorrow' because its blossom changes from purple to white to faded, all on one plant and it has a wonderful fragrance. Birds come in all shades of red, yellow and blue and a study found over 100 species at La Rochelle. Even the sounds are colourful. Birdsong starts at 5.30 am and continues until dusk at 6pm when the crickets and tree frogs take over. People love to sing too and whenever a group get together they seem to have an innate ability to improvise and harmonise. Even the names can be colourful, I have net Memory, Preacher, Gift and Given, Happy and Charity.

Monkeys come to visit me around teatime. Yesterday as I sat on the veranda a cheeky vervet monkey nipped into my little kitchen and made off with an apple, right under my nose. Now the mystery of the empty fruit bowl last week has been solved.

Report from Zimbabwe No 5 - Murahwa's Hill

The Trust arranged a meeting for the good people of Mutare to consult them on what should be done at Murahwa's Hill. Thirty three people including the mayor turned up at the hill one Sunday morning which was a good turnout for the first event. Unfortunately we only managed to attract 3 from the black community which is really our target audience but it was three more than was expected so it was a start. There was a talk about the archaeology which starts from Stone Age San Bushmen cave paintings through the Iron Age Ziwa culture to the now hidden remains of the Rozvi settlement there in the seventeenth century. Nobody except the speaker, who was the Director of the local museum, knew it was even there. Once everyone also heard about the unique habitat for indigenous trees and birds and butterflies all agreed that the paths need to be opened up again so that it can be used for schools and, when the wider climate in Zimbabwe is right and there is money available, that we need to build an interpretation centre there. All in all it was a good morning's work to raise awareness of the Trust but lots more needs to be done from this small beginning. I wish we had a story to tell for this hill like the one at Tikwiri.

That hill was sacred to Chief Chiduku's people because from the village the sun always set on the top of the mountain. When the more powerful Chief Makani told Chiduku that he must move

his people south, he replied that his people could not leave their sacred hill. Irritated Chief Makani said "then take it with you!"

So they tried. They erected scaffolding on the summit of Tikwiri and dug a trench around the base of the mountain to loosen it. They plaited tree bark into rope and waited for the next new moon. When it rose, low in the sky, they climbed the scaffold to throw their ropes around the crescent to lasso the moon, hoping it would tow the sacred hill south to their new territory. Unfortunately the scaffolding collapsed and many were killed but it was a brave attempt. The trench at the base of the mountain can still be seen today. Now that's the type of story that we need!

Report from Zimbabwe No 6 – Pioneers, Students and Orphans

I had the huge honour to be invited to a meeting of the Rhodesian Pioneer Club. To be a member you have to be a direct descendent of the one of the few hundred members of the very first pioneer columns of Europeans who braved the arduous trek in 1890 from South Africa up into the territory of the fierce chief Lobengula. The stories and tales of adventure, hardship and danger are reminiscent of the old Wild West. Whatever our British perception now of the rights and wrongs of colonialism, it was touching to see how proud these families are of their heritage.

Inevitably I had to sing for my supper and give a talk about the NTZ and La Rochelle. The happy outcome was to sign up at least two volunteers to make a start on a few little projects.

Interestingly, I have since discovered that I may indeed qualify in my own right (well maybe not as a direct descendant but somewhere in my family tree!) The colourful Fanny Pearson (my maiden name), later known as Countess Billy, scandalised Victorian society when she joined the strictly all male vanguard column disguised as a boy companion to the incorrigible Vicompte de la Panouse.

Another trip was to Africa University. It is funded by American Methodists, who do a lot of good work in Zimbabwe supporting educational and AIDS projects. On the road to Nyanga, in the

middle of nowhere accessible, lies a modern, well run university campus drawing students from all over Africa.

I went to meet the Head of the Agricultural Faculty to see if there are any areas of partnership working with the Trust. He invited me to join him at 8am at the Chapel. Why not, I thought, so I trundled off in my bumpy old 4x4 after breakfast on an inevitably sunny morning. I found the chapel full to standing room only with students and staff. The choir was amazing, African gospel style, swaying and improvising. It was difficult actually to tell where the choir ended and the congregation began as the whole event was a musical extravaganza. Even the brief sermon on taking personal responsibility was an amusing delivery by the Desmond Tutu inspired chaplain. It was an uplifting and fun start to the day.

Finally, a sad tale of orphans. I met an amazing Dutch couple at La Rochelle who had arrived on an exciting overlander trip through Africa to check up on their project in support of an Anglican orphanage in nearby Penhalonga. Inspired by Marianne's aunt who had been donating to this charity for many years, they had sent more money, raised through fundraising efforts in Holland, to provide supplies of food and clothing for the children. Unfortunately they discovered that the nuns had seen fit to decide they needed the aid for their own families more than the orphans and had appropriated the supplies for themselves. Some of the older, more vocal orphans had dared to complain and been evicted like modern day Oliver Twists.

Bruised but not undeterred, Marianne and Jaap discovered a local German lady who had also been cheated by the nuns and taken many of the children into her own home, so they decided to join forces to help the children without the corrupt Anglican Church. It made international news that the Anglicans in Zimbabwe are in disarray after Bishop Norbert Kunonga seized mission schools, orphanages and hospitals. A dossier of his abuses of power was presented to his friend Robert Mugabe by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the vain hope that he might intervene.

My Dutch friends are now embarked on a follow up project to help the older children make their way in the world. Chuma wants to be a carpenter, so they have set him up with a rented workshop and some wood so that he can start a business making coffins. Jonah has been

provided with a passport and money to go into Mozambique to buy second hand clothes to re-sell in the local markets. Peter had ended up in Mutare jail for being a vagrant so they have had to pay \$100 for his bail. It's not easy going as the children are prey to exploitation as soon as they get any income despite having a guardian appointed from the local Rotary Club. I left Marianne and Jaap pondering the question of whether they should risk their Dutch funds to buy a house for the boys to save them from unscrupulous landlords. They are understandably worried about pouring more money down a drain.