

Diary of my travels to South  
Africa and Zimbabwe  
04.03.2009 to 14.03.2009

by Beat Lenel

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## Travelling to South Africa

*04.03.2009 Taegerwilen to Madrid* I am working all day long in Taegerwilen. At 15:30h I leave on the train to Zurich Airport. I check in well in time and pass my time editing metatags of my photos on my laptop computer. The flight to Madrid is two hours. All food and drink is only available against cash, and it is very expensive. I arrive in Madrid around 22h. But I cannot find my flight to Johannesburg listed. Eventually I see that my flight is listed at 01:30 hours, a full two hours later than expected. I continue editing metatags, sitting on the floor as there are no plugs near the seats. I am very, very tired.

*05.03.2009 Madrid to Johannesburg* Around 01:30h we are indeed allowed to board the plane. We take off. Supper is served at 2am, a bit late! Next to me is a french-zairian lady, Liliane. I am very tired and quickly fall asleep. When I wake up, they serve breakfast. I chat with Liliane. She has never been to South Africa and will attend to a wedding there. We touch down in Johannesburg around lunchtime. Eugene had volunteered to pick me up at the airport, but I cannot see him anywhere. I try to call his cellphone, but he has no reception. Eventually I get hold of him and he is parked right in front of the entrance. He takes me to his house in Kew, where I get something to eat. In the evening, Sheryl, Christopher and Ashton come in. We go past a motor workshop. They should have serviced one of Eugene's cars and by mistake smashed it in the process.

## South Africa

*06.03.2009 Johannesburg* Eugene takes me to the bank in Balfour Park, where I battle to draw some money from my account. Eventually I succeed. We go past one of his customers (he owns a plastics business), Coca-Cola Canners, and then to Makro. As I see a bicycle for 429 Rand (about \$42) I decide to buy it plus a lock. I test it out driving it down Louis Botha Avenue into town. In Berea, close to the city center, one of the pedals comes loose and I decide to turn around. I make it back home, but the pedal is gone beyond repair.

*07.03.2009 Johannesburg* In the morning I go to Home Affairs. They tell me that my ID-Book was waiting for me in Dar-Es-Salaam in Tanzania. And that I could not apply for another one before I had picked up this. PICKED UP, no sending by mail. They were dead serious. I then cycle into Alexandra Township to have the pedal of my new bike, which had already become loose yesterday, replaced. The cost is minimal. This enables me to cycle into town, where I cycle all over the city centre. I would not do this with a car, but by bicycle there is little risk involved, provided the chain does not fall out. I purposely cycle on the wrong side of the road to bypass the taxis. No problem whatsoever. In the afternoon I visit my old friend Mark Cresswell. We go together to Emmarentia Dam, as beautiful and peaceful as ever. He is doing very well, which is a pleasure to note in a time when things are going wrong in Europe. As rain is threatening and I have no raincover, he takes me and my bike all the way back to Kew.

*08.03.2009 Johannesburg* Sheryl wakes me early and we pack a few picnic things. Then we pick up a Croatian friend of her, Maria, and drive to Suikerbosrand. We hike through the man-tall grass, the paths are barely visible. Maria would like to discuss a legal matter, which I attempt to my best knowledge. After an hours walk we return. As we go back, I notice that I have no more pain in the left ankle. Should I call off the surgery now? Then we drive back, go together with Eugene to the Eastgate Shopping Center and have a lunch buffet. Since the sun seems pretty strong and I have a bad sunburn, I renounce cycling to the city center in the afternoon.

*09.03.2009 Johannesburg* In the morning, I cycle into Balfour Park Shopping Centre to the Internet Cafe. But the internet cafe does not open, so I cycle on to Orange Grove, where I try several internet cafes, but none of them offer Skype. Eventually I give up. I google up the bus companies and cycle to Johannesburg Park Station, where the former white railway station has now been converted into a bus terminal. After many unsuccessful attempts I eventually find cityliner which offer a bus to Masvingo and back, even at a very attractive rate. I buy the ticket from the very flirtatious black lady and then cycle to Constitution Hill, where I visit the Fort, the Constitutional Court (which was designed under the motto of the traditional justice under a tree) and take part in a guided tour of the prison ward number four. For lunch I have a nice bunny chow. I then cycle to Gold Reef City, where I want to visit the Apartheid Museum, but it is closed on a Monday. I cycle back into town. The Africa Museum is closed as well. But I can visit the nearby Oriental Plaza, which I have not been to in a long time. Nothing has changed, there are still exactly the same shops as 25 years ago, only that there are no more touts outside. Now the sky gets menacingly dark and I start cycling home. I notice that I have no more brakes; the stop and go because of the vile driving manners of the taxis have already used up my set of brake pads, in a single week! Shortly after I get home, the electric power cuts out and we play scrabble in the candlelight.

## Zimbabwe

*10.03.2009 Johannesburg to Masvingo, Zimbabwe* I cannot sleep because I am so worried on how to get to the dangerous Park Station area. In the morning I visit the Museum Afrika in Newtown, Johannesburg. Then I take the bicycle to the left luggage. The bus does not appear for 5 hours. When it eventually appears, an entire trailer is filled with stocks of the traders. I fall soon asleep.

*11.03.2009 Masvingo, Zimbabwe* The traders goods hold us up on the Zimbabwean border. When we eventually thought we could leave, we are stopped after 100 metres. Everything is pulled out again, the bribes for the customs officers have to be re-negotiated. I arrive in Masvingo not at 5am, as planned, but at 13h. I then decide to hurry and hire a private vehicle for a royal tariff to take me out to the ruins. The proprietors, Pius and his brother Bennett turn out to be real nice guys. I marvel once again at the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, its tall dry stone walls. Interesting also the many lizards, monkeys etc living in the ruins. After three hours, ample to see it all, I am picked up again by Pius and brought back to the bus stop. I get a good supper and swop my wristwatches against a soapstone carving. To my greatest surprise, the Eagle Liners Bus turns up punctually at eight. But the journey does not go far. 60kms from Beitbridge (the SA border), we run out of Diesel. The driver had forgotten to fuel up. To make matters worse, the bus has no functioning battery, so restarting would be a problem. Pushing out of the question with air brakes. The driver is not too concerned and refuses to inform us what is happening. Eventually I go out of him that he had called Beitbridge to organise help.

*12.03.2009 Masvingo to Johannesburg* Only at 2am, help arrives: A rickety Toyota with some cans of Diesel, but no battery, not even one to start the Toyota! I lose all confidence, jump into a minibus up to Beitbridge. When I arrive there, I find to my greatest surprise the bus. They got helped by a passing lorry who jumpstarted them. The South African side of customs takes forever, but still an hour less than planned. Eventually we reach Johannesburg "only" four hours late. So I can still hold the lecture at the University of Johannesburg at 17h. I go to an internet cafe and do some maintenance on my website. I am dishevelled and unshaven, but there is not enough time to cycle back to Kew and bathe. I then proceed to the University of Johannesburg, where I just about manage to prepare the lecture I am to give tonight. Then Sheryl takes me quickly for a drink, before we get to the auditorium. There are not many students present, many of them stayed at home learning for the upcoming exams. I am to lecture about the use IT technology in a business environment. The lecture goes well, the students seem to be quite happy with it, I even manage to make them laugh a couple of times. After the lecture, Sheryl has a surprise for me: I am to be a guest at one of their posh department dinners. And posh it is! We get food of the best, I am introduced to everyone as the guest lecturer from Switzerland. I am even given a book about economics. We leave early, put the bicycle in the booth of Sheryls car and drive to Kew.

## Back in South Africa

*13.03.2009 Johannesburg* In the morning, I help Eugene burning a DVD of his data. He wants me to help him taking back a car from Randburg at 13h. I promise to call him where to pick me up. Then I cycle to the Apartheid Museum at the other end of town, in Gold Reef City. I wait there for the museum to open and chat with the watchman. I tell him that I intend to sell my bicycle. When the museum opens, I am the first visitor this day. The apartheid museum is most impressive. Not everything, but the majority of the displays are represented fair, there is not so much rhetorics as I expected. The motives of the former government are also shown, so that everyone can make up his or her own opinion. As the materials are immense and there are many highly interesting video displays, half a day is far to little to see it all. Although there are no signs that photography was forbidden, a watchman "catches me" taking a picture. I pay the extra R30 for the Nelson Mandela exhibition, which is far less educating than the Apartheid museum. There the same watchman sees me again with my camera and wants to expel me from the museum, this time completely unjustified, as I really had no taken any pictures in there. As I had anyway called Eugene to pick me up, I leave for the parking, where Eugene arrives shortly after. But in the meantime the other watchman had told everyone about the bicycle I was going to sell so sensationally cheap. So one of the employees wants to buy it for R250. This is very little, but as I am pressed with time, I agree. This done, Eugene and I drive to the workshop in Randburg, where we pick up the freshly serviced Peugeot. The car hardly starts, a bit strange for a freshly serviced car. The battery is flat, the lights must have been on all night long. At an incredible speed, much faster than allowed, we drive to a Nando's, where I treat Eugene to a lunch. We then take both cars home. I walk along Louis Botha Avenue to look for a shoe shop, even find one, but they don't have my size safety shoes in stock. Then I buy two bottles of wine and return. We quickly take some pictures, I get a supper and then we leave to the airport. I say goodbye to Sheryl, check in my luggage and proceed to customs. There I am stopped because of my two bottles of wine and the penknife which I forgot in my pocket. I return to the check-in counters, get a cardboard box and some sticky tape, pack the wine bottles and the penknife and check it in as additional luggage. Then I go through customs again, this

time without a problem and do some shopping with my remaining Rands. Suddenly I remember that I forgot a considerable amount at Sheryls house. I will have to make a plan about this. I buy some gifts for my friends in Switzerland and then proceed to the gate, where they are already checking in. The flight to Madrid is not very comfortable, as the wine I have with the supper does not make me tired as usual, but the opposite and I thus stay awake all night long.

### **Returning to Switzerland**

*14.03.2009 Johannesburg-Madrid-Zurich-Thal* We touch down in Madrid and I proceed to my gate, which is about a mile away from where we got off. The airport looks deserted. I arrive in Zurich around 11am, quickly exchange my remaining Rands and get on the train to St. Gallen. When I arrive in Rheineck, it is pretty cold. Walk to Thal. My postbox is filled to the brim with letters.

**Pictures**



A café in Johannesburg



Barbed wire at the Coca-Cola factory in Johannesburg



Informal car mechanic



Great Zimbabwe, the mountain fortress



The grand enclosure, Great Zimbabwe



The Johannesburg Fort



Panorama of Johannesburg seen from the Johannesburg Fort