

The Return

Confessions of a “terminal expat” upon returning to the homeland after thirty years....

In November 1981, just minutes after the South African Airways Boeing 747 made a sharp left turn over the South Atlantic Ocean heading for the African continent I had my first glimpse of the southern African coastline. I left Washington DC for a three – year contract in South Africa – and was to stay 30 years. The sight of the mainland was welcome after the long ocean flight from New York with a refueling stop in the Cape Verde Islands and bringing tears of amazement to my eyes, the vast sea of sand and rock seemed to stretch to infinity across South West Africa (Namibia). A few years before, aboard a dusty clanking Sudan Railways sleeping car I had crossed the rock desert wastelands of the Nubian Desert but I was not prepared for this sight of the endless Kalahari sands blanketing more than half of the width of the African continent. This was the beginning of my African and Central Asian adventures; three decades living overseas – it also marked a thirty year period of estrangement from my home country. It was a very satisfying adventure with short – term consulting assignments around the world eventually culminating in the accomplishment of my fantasy rail journey, from Cape Town to Cairo. But recently, due to personal circumstances, I made the difficult decision to return to the United States; still I sometimes suffer pangs of regret and uncertainty.

That same November evening, I arrived at my hotel in Pretoria with my worldly possessions plus a suitcase full of old books recently purchased in London: “*The Story of the Cape to Cairo Railway and River Route 1887 – 1922*” and a dream to fulfill that rail journey. I was to spend nearly nine years in South Africa before venturing into East Africa and South East Asia, keeping my base in Pretoria first, then Cape Town. I was not a tourist in these countries; I was not shielded from local realities like many company/government employees...I immersed myself in living a life in South Africa, with its complex government requirements, growing corruption, payment of taxes....it could not be any other way.

During my infrequent return visits to the US, the country seemed strange compared with my newly – adopted country, yet vaguely familiar. This vagabond existence over so many years made everyplace I visit as temporary, a rootless feeling of belonging nowhere; but soon South Africa became truly “home”. With a base of operations in Cape Town, I had worked in more than 40 countries from Central Asia to the Far East, Eastern Europe to East Africa. The United States appears differently from abroad and I had embraced that “distant” perspective and returned only occasionally as a temporary visitor. But, family obligations and security concerns prompted my departure from South Africa and to become an American resident once again. Administratively, it was easy to buy a condominium in Florida, obtain a driver’s license, to open bank accounts, department store credit cards.... but emotionally, I became haunted with the pangs of regret, leaving my adopted country after having made it my home for so long. Coming to America to live is the dream of so many people living overseas...but for my return, I was filled with uncertainty and anxiety. So I began to wonder, is living the American Dream only for foreigners while for “overseas Americans” it is only a distant second choice?

I used my home in South Africa primarily as a “safe haven” for short trips into the “real Africa”; it was easy to do this and I could travel to many African countries during the dark days of *Apartheid* closed to many South Africans, with my US passport. I used this to my advantage, quickly becoming a regional expert with first – hand experience in countries most South Africans can only read about. These forays into the “real Africa” were for a few days or weeks on consulting assignments for clients from South Africa as well as for foreign governments. Many enterprising airlines offices in Johannesburg could issue air tickets originating in neighboring countries showing only a transfer at Jan Smuts airport (Johannesburg) complete with an issuing stamp showing “Gaborone” or “Manzini” (in neighboring Botswana and Swaziland), from neighboring Botswana and Swaziland; this allowed me to visit countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia whose governments were strictly opposed to the then white government of South Africa, and for anyone travelling from that country. For example, during the early 1980’s in Nairobi there was a passport check of passengers disembarking from flights that originated in Johannesburg – if any passenger had a passport with evidence of having visited South Africa, he was promptly frog marched back on board and the airline had to provide these passengers with onward travel at the carrier’s expense. I travelled with two passports during those times – one for travel over the South African border and another one for travel throughout the rest of Africa (legal for US passport holders). These “adventures” were not without risks, though this made these adventures even more exciting and attractive to me. Soon these consulting sojourns began to include South East Asia, Eastern Europe and the emerging former Soviet Union territories of Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan.

But, I have been haunted by the dichotomy: if life in the US is so much easier and comfortable than overseas, what is the attraction that continues to pull me to spend time in these other countries, and to feel pangs of regret about moving back to my home country? I suppose the attraction is of contrasting cultures and languages of these far off places that draw me into their orbit. Though I can with no stretch of the imagination say that I am fluent, I can be understood in Russian, Japanese, Spanish, Dutch (Afrikaans) and some Chinese (mandarin); practicing these with native speakers increases my confidence and, though many mistakes, strengthens the “pull” of being in far off lands.

Since leaving the US in 1981, my “roots” have developed strongest first in South Africa, then during several visits to Uzbekistan. I have tried to analyze the reasons for these countries’ attractions to me....I went to South Africa by choice and started a new life; my Uzbekistan trips started with a consulting assignment in 1997, and grew to many succeeding trips where I was to meet my future wife.

South Africa – Strong positive beginning but descending into corruption and uncontrolled lawlessness

Nelson Mandela’s presidency united the country in 1994, his policies focusing on reconciliation and combating poverty and inequality in the new nation, rather than retribution for the injustices the white minority had inflicted upon the blacks. In South Africa, he is often known as *Madiba*, his Xhosa clan name, or Tata (“father” in Xhosa language). Nelson Mandela actually has royal blood, belonging to the cadet branch of the Thembu dynasty, which reigns in the Transkei region of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. His given name Rolihlahla means “to pull the branch of the tree” or more colloquially, “troublemaker”. He was the first member of his family to attend school, where his teacher gave him the

English name "Nelson". His second wife is the widow of the former leader of neighboring Mozambique, Graca Machel.

Unfortunately, his successors have undone much of his strong unification efforts and as unemployment and government corruption grew, popular support has deteriorated.

"The guys at the top steal so much; why don't they steal a bit less and give some to me?" has been repeated to me several times by frustrated young black unemployed South Africans.

"Townships" consisting of homemade tin shacks have sprung up throughout the country, many very close to affluent suburbs, presenting the obvious temptation for housebreaking and car theft, performing their own brand of "wealth distribution". These events occur on a daily basis in some neighborhoods and local law enforcement is unable to provide adequate preventive measures. My house was broken into only once (a neighbor had his house burgled 5 times....) and copper pipes/fittings stolen from the exterior on three occasions.

Thieves are becoming more brazen, with many burglaries taking place while owners are at home, sparking some paranoia among residents who now watch young black men walking slowly through neighborhoods, carefully observing each house and transmit this information immediately through neighborhood watch networks. In spite of this vigilance (combined with a certain number of false accusations) incidences occur with alarming frequency.

Woken up this morning at around 3am by loud hammering; thieves/thief were trying to dig up the underground copper pipes and not being very quiet about it. Called SAPS (South African Police Services) who arrived promptly and found their backpack and tools. All my garden tools were also in a big bag on the property next door ready to be hauled off, the lock had been broken off the tool box.

Just to let you know, we had an intruder about 15 min ago at 2.15am. Heard a thump and our alarm went off. Someone had wrenched French doors open but had apparently run off when alarm went off & we switched lights on. Chubb responded and checked the outside of the premises. Intruder had gone up through the garden & onto fire break. Will notify the Police in the morning.

Wed Lunchtime: I did notice 3 African men just after lunch sitting on the bench in the dune area just above the car park & railway line near the whale watching point – overlooking Glencairn beach. At that point being unaware of this alert – nothing suspicious save for looking distinctly unemployed

Dear Residents,

Police need your help to identify the car being driven by a black gentleman who takes photographs of houses. He has been seen to do so in Fish Hoek and was visiting Welcome Glen on yesterday, Wed, 9 Feb. When asked why he was taking photos he answered 'I just like houses'. Although reported to the police, they have not been able to apprehend him and believe he may have a car to leave the area. Please keep an eye

out for him and especially the car and registration number and report to ST Police Station's 24hr number 0217868646 or 47 as soon as you see him!

Hiker was attacked by three black males in mountain just off Blackhill Parking on 25 Sept and robbed of camera, I phone, shoes, car keys etc. . My son and his friend were on horseback and rushed at the guys who then split up and ran up mountain. They were armed with knives and one of them pulled a knife on my son. Please don't hike or run on your own in mountains!

South Africa abounds in natural beauty with dramatic sea and landscapes, but the reality now is living with the growing violence that has spread to residential areas and the need to be constantly on guard. Car hijackings are rampant in Johannesburg and Pretoria with videos showing cars stopped at a traffic light and thieves distracting the attention of the vehicle occupants on the passenger side then the second thief drives a brick through the driver's window, steals the keys and orders occupants out and commandeers the car.

While living in the "new" South Africa, with increased security issues and risks, the perspective of this situation is quite different for long - time South African residents, compared with new visitors/residents in the country. New visitors/residents will typically react quickly to these increased risks and make plans to relocate elsewhere, usually to their home country. Long - time residents, as well as South Africans, generally adapt to the new situation and in some cases, turn a blind eye to the new security situation in the country. One such long - time resident, originally from the UK, stayed with his home in Pretoria until one evening he and his wife were attacked by intruders, who stole their car, but otherwise left the residents unharmed. Within one week, this gentleman quickly accepted a pending job offer overseas and sold his South African property and left the country.

Relations between the races has always been complex; there are "Whites", "Coloreds", "Indians" and from the days of Apartheid, the term used to group all blacks, "Bantu". Nearly all "white" households had (many still do) black servants, working as housekeepers, gardeners, and nannies. In the north central part of the country, Afrikaans was the predominant language among whites; in that region, all blacks spoke their home language, mostly Xhosa, but also spoke Afrikaans when communicating with their "bosses". However in Natal on the eastern coast of the country (major city: Durban) the home language of blacks is Zulu. During my years in the country I was a regular visitor to Durban and other parts of Natal, nearly all whites when speaking to blacks spoke in Zulu.

An interesting superstition stemming from Zulu mythology is in the Tokolosh; a small mischievous creature that causes trouble whenever he can. The only way to avoid these creatures is to put a brick under the leg of the bed, as they are so short, they cannot jump on the bed and the sleeping person is therefore spared from his wrath.

But South Africa was appealing to me during my early days in that country, due to my intense interest in railways. It was the home of what was known as the World's Greatest Steam Route between Kimberley and De Aar, where hundreds of trains each day were hauled by puffing steam locomotives - one of the few places in the world at that time where steam locomotives prospered. South Africa was always a

great railway country (“Land of Black Locomotives driven by White Men”) and my life – long interest in railways made this attraction stronger.

But my work began taking me further from South Africa – first to the Far East including Indonesia, Thailand and China, then to Central Asia where I discovered a part of the world that is largely ignored. Formerly part of the vast Soviet empire the nations of Central Asia comprise a large part of that continent (Kazakhstan alone accounts for 2% of the earth’s surface) these newly – independent countries have turned gradually towards China and to a certain extent, abandon historical ties to Russia for their growth technology, markets and international assistance.

Uzbekistan – Former Soviet Republic but where “Perestroika”¹ is still a dream....

Uzbekistan was formed upon the collapse of the Soviet Union on 1 September 1991. Islam Karimov, leader of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan since 1989 became president and, together with his family members, has kept a tight hold on power and the Uzbek people since that time. His daughter, Gulnara Karimova, has amassed a fortune and foreign diplomats described her as "the single most hated person in the country". The 38-year-old eldest daughter of Uzbekistan's brutal president launched a pop career as Googoosha (<http://googoosha.uz>), singing a duet with Spanish crooner Julio Iglesias. She has launched her own jewelry and fashion brand, [Guli](#), with products available in Moscow and Tashkent. Most Uzbeks see Karimova as a greedy, power-hungry individual who uses her father to crush business people or anyone else who stands in her way. She reportedly bought a large stake in Zeromax, then a crude oil trader, in "a deal with a local mafia boss," in 2005. Zeromax went on to buyout scores of businesses in Uzbekistan over the last decade, before being declared bankrupt last year. She is Uzbekistan’s permanent representative to the United Nations in Geneva, where she now lives.

Though the official language of Uzbekistan is the Turkish – based Uzbek language, Russian has been the de facto common language in all Central Asian countries. However, during recent years, the Uzbek government is enacting measures to marginalize the Russian language: all official signs at the Tashkent International Airport are in English and Uzbek; new Uzbek passports now are also only in English and Uzbek; signs at all new government buildings also avoid the use of Russian. In fact, many young Uzbeks speak Russian at best, badly, and focus on English as a foreign language.

Life in Uzbekistan is fraught with many administrative difficulties for the visitor; even after obtaining a visa and entering the country legally, all visitors need to have “registration”, either at the hotel where staying or with the local police in the neighborhood if staying at a private residence. This registration procedure may or may not involve payment of bribes, but it does require spending long hours at the

1 The movement of economic and political reform in the Soviet Union initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986; “*Perestroika basically is creating material incentives for the individual. Some of the comrades deny that, but I can't see it any other way. In that sense human nature kinda goes backwards. It's a step backwards. You have to realize the people weren't quite ready for a socialist production system*”. Gus Hall, US General Secretary of the Communist Party of the United States; May 1990

local OVIR (Office of Visas and Registration) office, where the inviting party needs to submit proof of ownership of residence, passport and many other documents. Many times I found myself in the pushing, shoving crowd in OVIR pressing for a brief audience with the officer responsible for issuing my registration. The mob outside the office door is self-monitoring; each newcomer is advised who is next to be granted the audience. An easier method is to find a “friendly” local hotel that will provide registration as if you were staying at their establishment, for a fee...typically about \$20/day. In fact, even Uzbek citizens need to have a registration stamped in their passport in the region where they live; they even have to have an exit visa stamped in their passport (typically valid for 2 years) that “allows” them to leave the country.

Daily life for Uzbekistan citizens is largely consumed with abiding by the myriad of complex regulations and restrictions, or attempts to circumvent them. Many administrative tasks that can be done by phone or on line in other countries in a matter of minutes must be done in person in Uzbekistan, and in cash, taking hours and in some cases, days to complete transactions. On a cold grey January morning I remember my freezing toes and fingers while changing money at the room of the small shoe-seller at our local bazaar in suburban Tashkent (changing money on the black market brings about 40% more local currency than in banks at the official rate), then moving back to the Building Committee Office consisting of an unheated room on the ground floor of the Soviet-era concrete apartment building, waiting in the snow to pre-pay electricity for our apartment during the coming year. However, as I counted out the hundreds of Soums to make these payments, I realized that my money-changer had given me the incorrect amount for my dollars, forgetting several hundred thousand Soums. Rushing back to the bazaar, the money-changer realized his mistake and readily made up the difference.

Due to high import surcharges on vehicles and low local salaries, many Tashkent residents do not own a car and must travel around the city using busses, pirate taxis and “marshrutkas” which are mini-busses operating a defined route, typically connecting with the underground Metro system which serves parts of the city well, and others, not at all.

Uzbekistan has the highest population in Central Asia with just over 28 million inhabitants with 24% of the people less than 14 years of age. Uzbekistan also has a significant Korean population numbering about 184,000 people. These Koryo-Saram (literally: “Korean People”) which were frog-marched by Stalin from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia during 1937-38 as the NKVD reported that the Japanese had infiltrated the Korean population and posed a significant threat to security during the upcoming World War which would pit Russia against the Japanese, among others. Central Asian Koreans generally follow Russian traditions, though Korean cuisine endures and is quite popular in the region. One difference between Russian and Korean traditions is that Korean women generally retain their surname instead of adopting the husband’s surname, as is the Russian tradition.

But the time spent in Uzbekistan consisted of many trips of relatively short duration....no more than one or two months’ for each trip. Long term visas were (and are) very difficult to obtain and the recipient must have either a long term employment contract with a well-known (or well-connected) company or be willing to pay substantial bribes at the local OVIR office. As I had neither, I returned to my home in South Africa, then to the United States.

Now back “home” but still not content...

And now the house in South Africa is sold and I have now created a new “home base” in the US. But the years of living abroad and travelling for my profession have been solidly ingrained. While the comforts of living in the US are many, and with time I will probably grow accustomed to this new “home” life, I find that that the keen sense of anticipation and real spark in my brain are ignited only by the prospect of an upcoming overseas assignment, the longer the distance the better. Travel and working overseas still holds for me a strong fascination and interest; it is not merely a “job” but an opportunity to successfully accomplish a task; to investigate a problem, explore options and to weave a logical solution in the form of a professional report; and to thoroughly enjoy doing it.

People ask me: “when will you retire”? If that means to abruptly stop doing that which fulfills me and which is thoroughly enjoyable, then my reply is “never”. If it means to reduce the frequency and duration of overseas sojourns then maybe.