

Episode 62: Great Zimbabwe

Summary

Nick and Wendy visit the archeological site called Great Zimbabwe in the country of Zimbabwe. They talk about the atmospheric nature of Great Zimbabwe and the things they liked about it.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from Zimbabwe as we continue our travels in southern Africa. And a few days ago we visited the most famous historic site in Zimbabwe, which is called Great Zimbabwe. So it has the same name as the country.

Wendy: Yes, but in fact it was Great Zimbabwe that came first and then when the country - which used to be known as Rhodesia when it was a colony - when it gained its independence, they actually chose the name Zimbabwe because of this very important historical site known as Great Zimbabwe that is part of the country and that the people are very proud of.

Nick: And so Great Zimbabwe is an archeological site. It's often referred to as 'the greatest medieval city in sub-Saharan Africa'. I don't really like that designation¹. Umm, just because it's contemporaneous with the European Middle Ages, it doesn't really make it medieval in and of itself², but that's neither here nor there³. Uhh, so, it's a site which dates from the thirteenth century, uhh, through to the seventeenth century and, in fact, there are a lot of these *zimbabwes* scattered throughout the country and maybe even outside the modern borders of Zimbabwe, where this culture had influence. But this particular one, Great Zimbabwe, is the biggest and the most famous of them and so it functioned, I guess, as a sort of capital, uhh, and the influence then spread further around the country and beyond.

Wendy: Right, because the word *zimbabwe* actually means 'great stone house' or something to that effect⁴. And so Great Zimbabwe was the great, great stone house, but, yes, there were smaller ones that were built, yeah, not just inside the borders of the current country of Zimbabwe but also in Mozambique and I believe

¹ designation: name, label, title

² in and of itself (fixed expression): intrinsically, per se (Latin)

³ that's neither here nor there (fixed expression): that's not relevant to the current discussion

⁴ or something to that effect (fixed expression): or something similar

Botswana and other neighbouring countries as well. It was part of a whole empire, uhh, that was controlled by the same tribe.

Nick: And so when you go today there are a few things to visit. There are two main areas of the site. One is called the Great Enclosure, which is this oval or circular walled section with then other buildings inside it, and the other is a hilltop area, uhh, where there are walls and buildings that are together with a lot of stones and boulders⁵ that are on top of the hill. And so it's a very atmospheric site. And, you know, I really liked it. And I think for a few different reasons. I think there was a lot of discovery about it for us. And for a few reasons as well. And the first is that we didn't really have any idea what the site looked like before we went to it.

Wendy: No, and I know that that's something that you try to do. You always try to avoid seeing photographs of places before you visit them. Umm, and I'm not as, uhh, conscientious⁶ about that as you are, so I usually have seen a photo at some point of a place before I visit it, especially really famous places, you know, like the Pyramids of Egypt or the Eiffel Tower or the Colosseum in Rome, you know, almost everyone knows what these places look like. But Great Zimbabwe, I'd never seen a photo of before. And, you know, even ... sometimes if you're trying to avoid photographs it can be really difficult because once you arrive in a country then, you know, everywhere you go you have these photos on the walls in the hotels and, you know, they're trying to promote these places that they're very proud of. But we hadn't been in Zimbabwe for very long before going to Great Zimbabwe. We had only been to Harare, to the capital. And, so, yeah, we managed never to see a photograph and I really had no idea what to expect, so that was really fun to walk in and it be completely unknown.

Nick: Yeah, and I think even when we walked in, it's also a site that reveals itself gradually in stages and that was another part of the discovery. So you mentioned the Pyramids, which I think is a good example. I mean, firstly the Pyramids is a much greater, uhh, and more impressive site than Great Zimbabwe, but, yeah, like you said, everyone knows what the Pyramids looks like ... look like. And, you know, when you go in, you see them from afar and then you kind of get closer and closer and they become more and more impressive, but it's a kind of gradual thing. Umm, but in Great Zimbabwe, it's not like that. So for example, in the Great Enclosure, you have these walls that are quite high. I'm guessing now but I would say at least five-six metres high, probably higher, maybe eight-to-ten metres high. So you have no idea what's inside. And the wall goes ... it's a complete wall the entire way around. And so you go through this one entrance, and then you're inside and suddenly you see this tower and you see these other walls and from the outside you have no idea what's awaiting you⁷ on the inside. And so that was cool as well, I felt like, you know, we made these little discoveries step-by-step as we were going.

⁵ boulders: large, round rocks

⁶ conscientious: careful, particular, scrupulous

⁷ awaiting you: waiting for you

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. And also when we walked in to the Great Enclosure, we were the only ones there. And so that was really special too, because I kind of felt like we were, you know, explorers and we were discovering it for the first time.

Nick: Right, because the site is in the bush, umm, and there's no city or town that's near it really. And so, yes, you can have this, umm, you know, this little myth that you're the first people to discover it or something like that. It really is one of those places that feels like that, an Indiana Jones type of archeological site. Umm, shortly after we entered the Great Enclosure, though, there was a local school group that we encountered. They were very friendly, they were polite. Umm, a lot of them, at least twenty of them, said, 'Good afternoon' to me. Umm, some of the boys took off their hats as they did so. And it was quite funny, there was just this procession of them and they just all kept saying, 'Good afternoon, good afternoon.' And so then I ... their teacher was at the end and I told her that the students were very polite and so she was happy about that. Umm, but it's very interesting in this Great Enclosure, there's an interior wall and a very narrow passage between the exterior wall and the interior wall and so you can barely fit through and if you have a bag or backpack it's quite hard to get through. It's really that narrow. And the other interesting thing was that it was very cool in that one section because you had the stone walls on either side and it was quite a hot afternoon, umm, but it was very cool in that one section so that was a nice little bonus.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, that was very noticeable, the drop in the temperature as soon as we walked in between those two walls.

Nick: And so then after visiting the Great Enclosure we went to this other major complex of Great Zimbabwe, which is up on the hill, so you have to climb up some steps. They gave you two ways, or three ways actually: an ancient path, a modern path and a terraced path. So we took the ancient path and so we were walking up these stone steps and even as you were walking up, umm, there were some walls on either side. And again, from the bottom of the hill and you can see some walls in among the much larger boulders and rocks, but that's it. You don't really know what's up there and you think, 'OK, maybe we just go up and see one wall and come back.' But then once you get up to the top, again you go inside a gateway through the wall and then it just opens up and then there are these different rooms and these different stairs and lots of different sections and so that was again a nice discovery for us.

Wendy: Yeah, and I really loved how, particularly in that part, in the hill enclosure, the walls and all of the man-made parts really integrated so well with the natural landscape. Because you had these very large boulders and, yeah, the walls were also curved and they seemed to kind of follow the lines, the contours⁸ of the boulders and the other natural rock that they were next to. And I thought it was really beautiful.

⁸ contours: outlines

Nick: Yeah, you can really imagine - there was one room in particular, which I think was a kind of ceremonial room and that's where there was a wall on one side and these great big boulders which were much higher than the wall on the other side. And you can see how the spiritual aspect of the place would have been important to the people who were living there at that time. And there are also a lot of birds who fly between the boulders and I think that some of these would have been sacred birds and things like that. And so it was really great to be up there. Unfortunately, it started raining...

Wendy: It did.

Nick: ...just as we were about to leave, and it was the beginning of the rainy season.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, we'll see, uhh, as we continue our trip, uhh, whether the rains have really come in full force or whether that was just kind of an anomaly⁹. Umm, but yeah, the wind really picked up while we were up there. It started blowing a really strong wind and it was just drizzling¹⁰ rain but not really raining very hard until we started walking down and then it really started raining hard. And we actually came back the next morning because they told us that we could come back using our same ticket and we thought, 'OK, we've got one more chance to see it, uhh, when it's sunny,' because we hadn't really seen it in the sun yet. But unfortunately it rained the next morning as well while we were there. So it wasn't great weather but I thought it was still very atmospheric and, uhh, a highlight of the trip for me so far.

⁹ anomaly: exception, abnormality

¹⁰ drizzling: light rain, sprinkling

Comprehension Questions

1. What were the two reasons Nick gave for feeling like Great Zimbabwe was a 'discovery'?
2. What was unusual about the narrow corridor between two walls in the Great Enclosure?
3. What did Wendy like about the hilltop part of Great Zimbabwe?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. I forget to bring an umbrella but it was only _____ so I didn't get too wet.
2. She's a very _____ child. She always double checks her work and gets good grades in school.
3. The city isn't that interesting _____, but it's close to mountains and lakes, so there are lots of great trips that you can do if you base yourself there.
4. We had a terrible service experience at our favourite restaurant last night. The service is usually excellent so hopefully this time was just an _____.
5. After you climb the mountain to the lodge at the top, a spa and massage will be _____. The hard climb will have been worth it.
6. The _____ of the mountains created a lovely silhouette at sunset.
7. I don't know what the president should do about the rebels. In fact, I don't even think he should be the president in the first place, but _____.
8. "Kids, don't climb on top of the _____. Their surface is slippery so you could fall off and hurt yourself."
9. She said that she didn't think their relationship was going to last very long, _____. In any case, she wasn't optimistic about it.
10. He's called the black sheep* of the family because he got into some trouble when he was younger, but I don't think that's a fair _____.

**black sheep: someone who isn't like the rest of the family and is perceived as naughty or troublesome*

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Are you interested in visiting Great Zimbabwe? Why or why not?
2. Have you been anywhere where you felt like you were 'discovering' an unknown place, like Nick and Wendy felt at Great Zimbabwe?
3. Do you prefer to see photos of places before you visit them so you know what to expect, or do you try to avoid seeing photos like Nick does so you can be surprised when you get there?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. That he didn't know what it looked like before he went, and that a lot of the site suddenly reveals itself to you in a dramatic way once you go through the walls.
2. The temperature was much cooler there than at the rest of the site.
3. That the walls and other man-made structures are integrated with the boulders and the other natural parts.

Exercises

1. drizzling
2. conscientious
3. in and of itself
4. anomaly
5. awaiting you
6. contours
7. that's neither here nor there
8. boulders
9. or something to that effect
10. designation