

## Episode 64: Africa by Train

### Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about their first two train trips in sub-Saharan Africa: an overnight train in Zimbabwe and a day train in Mozambique.

### Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you once again from Zimbabwe. We are in the town of Victoria Falls, which is, obviously, next to the very famous Victoria Falls waterfall. And so we're going to see that tomorrow for the first time. Umm, but we actually arrived here today by train, and it's not often that you get to take trains in sub-Saharan Africa. And we like train travel, but, in fact, we realised a few weeks ago that we had never taken a train in sub-Saharan Africa, even on our previous two major trips here.

Wendy: Yeah, we've been to quite a few African countries. We've spent quite a lot of time on the continent, but we had never taken a train. Taken lots of buses and lots of minibuses and backs of pick-up trucks and all different kinds of transport, but never a train.

Nick: But we've now we've taken two, and so we can tell you a little bit about travel ... train travel in Africa. And so this train that we took last night was quite interesting. It was an overnight train from Bulawayo, which is the second largest city in Zimbabwe. And you have the option - you could take a bus, and it's supposed to take about six hours to get to Victoria Falls, or you can take this overnight train. So it's a lot longer, but it's a train! And trains are more romantic, and it's just, I don't know, it's a way to travel that we find more interesting and it gives you a little bit more variety instead of just another bus, umm, like you mentioned.

Wendy: I particularly love overnight trains as well. I really love sleeping in the train and it had been a long time since we had done that. I was trying to remember when the last time was. I think it was probably in China, which would have been nine years ago, something like that. We used to travel by overnight train a lot when we travelled in India, and that's ... most of my memories of overnight train travel come from India. And I really love, umm, being kind of rocked to sleep by the motion of the train. And there's something about it that is just very appealing. And also you get free accommodation, so when you're travelling on a budget<sup>1</sup>,

---

<sup>1</sup> on a budget: cheaply, not spending much money

particularly this train was really good value, I have to say. It was the cheapest accommodation that we've had on our trip so far. Normally we've been paying something like forty dollars for a hotel room, and the train ticket was only twelve dollars per person. So, uhh, we had a double room for twenty-four dollars plus the train trip.

Nick: Right, so 'double room', we might have to explain that a little bit more. So it was a cabin which had two bunk beds - and just for ourselves. And so we got a first-class ticket, which we would never do in Europe on a train but, uhh, the first-class ticket was twelve dollars, the second-class ticket was ten dollars. And with the ten-dollar ticket, you just get a seat, and with the twelve-dollar ticket, you get a sleeper berth<sup>2</sup>. And some of these were in cabins of four bunks, umm, but we were able to get a cabin of two bunks. It was very small, but it was a cute little, uhh, place to spend the night.

Wendy: Yeah, I really liked it. When we first arrived on the platform, it was quite confusing to figure out<sup>3</sup>, you know, which, uhh, car we were supposed to be in. There was no one around to ask and we got into the train and it was completely dark. There were no lights. So, yeah, it was a little bit disconcerting<sup>4</sup> at first, and because there were no lights we couldn't really see what the cabin was like and it felt a bit scary. But once we settled in, then, yeah, it was quite comfortable. It was nice to have our own private area, umm, where we could ... we had a table that we could pull out and eat the food that we had brought with us. And, then, you know, we each had our own berth. I took the top berth and you took the lower berth and ... so we could spread out<sup>5</sup> and sleep for the night, and I thought it was great.

Nick: So the train was supposed to leave at seven-thirty. It actually left at ten-thirty, at night, so there was a three-hour delay from the beginning. And we'd heard that there are very often delays on this train. But we thought, 'OK, it doesn't matter, as long as we arrive the next day, that's all fine.' So, I was actually already asleep by the time we started moving, because in Africa we tend to go to sleep early and wake up early. So we started moving at ten-thirty. It was a little bit difficult to sleep while we were moving because it was quite rocky for a train ride.

Wendy: Yeah, it was, that's true. Umm, I know I said that I enjoyed being rocked to sleep but, yeah, it was maybe a bit bumpier<sup>6</sup> than other trains, if that's possible. Umm, but I still enjoyed the experience. Even though I didn't get a great night's sleep, umm, I was really happy to be on the train.

---

<sup>2</sup> berth: a cabin bed on a train or a ship

<sup>3</sup> figure out (phrasal verb): determine, understand, solve

<sup>4</sup> disconcerting: upsetting, confusing

<sup>5</sup> spread out (phrasal verb): move parts of the body away from each other. See Episodes 50 and 59 for the same phrasal verb with a different context and meaning.

<sup>6</sup> bumpier (comparative): rockier, less smooth. *Note: two-syllable words ending in -y take the -er ending for the comparative (e.g. busier, easier, heavier etc).*

Nick: And the real bonus of this train is that by the time it got light, and again it gets light very early, around five-thirty or six, we were actually travelling through a national park on the train.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And so we had a little mini safari out of our window because we saw elephants.

Wendy: We did.

Nick: We saw two types of antelope.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. Impala and, I believe, kudu. I believe the other one was a kudu.

Nick: I think during a time when you were taking a little nap I saw some baboons from the train as well, and so that was great! You don't usually get to see elephants from your train window.

Wendy: No, that has never happened before. I'm not sure that we'll ever have that experience again, but it was pretty magical.

Nick: And it's quite a large park, so for several hours we were travelling through this park. And it's really interesting that they laid track where they did, uhh, and you just look out onto the bush. It's very nice African bush scenery and then, yeah, occasionally you get to see a herd of elephants. And in fact the park has the highest population of elephants in the world.

Wendy: I believe so, yeah.

Nick: And so there are about forty thousand elephants in the park. We saw eight of them, I think, so ... but that was enough for us. So that was a great bonus as we said.

Wendy: Yeah, and so these were ... the areas that we were travelling through were not heavily populated with humans at all. It was really just travelling through the bush, so, whereas normally you might expect to find, uhh, people coming up the train trying to sell you things at each stop, you didn't have that on this particular train ride. It was really just the nature that we were seeing.

Nick: Right, and so that's quite a contrast with the previous train ride that we took a few weeks ago in Mozambique, and that was also really interesting for its own reasons. Umm, it was a train from Nampula, which is a fairly large city, to Cuamba, which is a town close-ish to the border with Malawi. And that's the direction we were going in anyway, and so we thought, 'OK, let's take this train.' And so the train left at four o'clock in the morning, which is the time that all long distance

travel (transport) in Mozambique leaves, which is very frustrating, and it was never explained to us in an adequate<sup>7</sup> way, why this happens. But we had to wake up at about three a.m. to get this train. It was actually the second day in a row that we had woken up at that time to get transportation. And so we bought the ticket the day before, they told us to arrive at three-thirty, and so we did that. And there were already ... it was nearly full already, with local people. So I'm not sure what time they started arriving but it must have been a fair bit earlier than that. And, again, this was a train that had no lights. It was quite a modern train actually, but it didn't have lights, or the lights weren't working. And so everybody was just kind of sitting in the dark, waiting for the train to go. Umm, and so we found seats for ourselves, and just before it was about to leave, one of the, uhh, conductors or one of the people who works for the train, got up and stood in the aisle<sup>8</sup> and gave all these instructions, or all these rules for the train. And so it was quite surreal<sup>9</sup> listening to these rules in the dark with everybody else, and some of them were quite interesting rules.

Wendy: Well, yeah, some of them didn't make that much sense at the time. Like, he was talking about sugar cane, and saying that it's not allowed to eat sugar cane in the train, and we didn't understand why that would be a rule. And then later, like an hour or two into the journey, we saw all of these people coming up to the train, when we stopped, and selling sugar cane. And there were lots of people inside the train that did actually buy the sugar cane. I don't know if they ate it while they were in the train, because I think that was the rule. I think it was OK to buy it and then, you know, put it away. You just couldn't eat it while you were on the train.

Nick: Yeah, and so I think the interesting thing about this train was that it began in a very orderly way with these rules. Everybody was seated. Quite a modern train as I said. And then as the hours went by, it kind of gradually descended into a more typical African transport experience, which is that lots of new people started to get on. They were standing in the aisles, the aisles were packed. Umm, and then, you know, the rules didn't matter anymore because a lot of these people hadn't heard the rules and then, like you said, there were all these people at the window selling food and other things. And, as always on African transport, people seem to have these huge bags full of things. I remember the guy sitting opposite us was buying just huge bags of food at every stop.

Wendy: He bought so much, yeah.

Nick: He bought a huge bag of cassava at one stop, onions at another stop. And he seemed to know exactly where the best stop was for the different items that he wanted.

---

<sup>7</sup> adequate: sufficient, satisfactory

<sup>8</sup> aisle: corridor between seats on a train, plane, bus etc. The s is silent.

<sup>9</sup> surreal: unreal, dreamlike, strange

Wendy: Yeah, I guess, you know, it was a way of buying wholesale<sup>10</sup> produce at discounted prices. And it's probably, you know, good, fresh produce because you're getting it right from the source. It's the farmers who are coming right up to the train, uhh, selling the goods, the produce that they've actually, umm, raised themselves. So, I have no idea how he got all of that stuff off the train, because he bought so many bags of food.

Nick: Yep, for sure. And so that was our first experience on a train in sub-Saharan Africa. No elephants on that train, but then we got the nice elephant experience last night, seeing them on our second train.

---

<sup>10</sup> wholesale: goods purchased directly from the producer at a cheaper price than retail (goods purchased at a shop).

## Comprehension Questions

1. Why does Wendy like overnight trains?
2. What was the difference in price and in comfort between the first and second class options for the Zimbabwe train?
3. What was the one rule in particular on the Mozambican train that Nick and Wendy talked about?

## Exercises

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

1. Let's all meet up at the café for breakfast on Saturday morning, and then we can \_\_\_\_\_ what we're going to do for the rest of the weekend.
2. If you go to the factory outlet, you can often find clothes at \_\_\_\_\_ prices.
3. We need to get a large hotel room so that everyone can \_\_\_\_\_ and we won't crowd each other.
4. He didn't give an \_\_\_\_\_ response as to why the money went missing, so his boss had no choice but to fire him.
5. Most people like the window seat on a plane, but I like the \_\_\_\_\_, because then I have more room to spread out my feet.
6. If you go on a trip to Antarctica, you have to pay extra to have your own \_\_\_\_\_. Otherwise, you share a cabin with one other person.
7. They're travelling \_\_\_\_\_, so they are staying in hostels, using public transport and self-catering. That way, they can save a lot of money.
8. It was quite \_\_\_\_\_ to hear that the new president plans to raise taxes next year. The previous one did too!
9. They repaved the road but it's even \_\_\_\_\_ than before! They didn't do a very good job.
10. It was \_\_\_\_\_ to see an American-style coffee shop in a small town in Myanmar. It didn't belong at all!

## Discussion Questions

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

1. Do you like train travel? Why or why not?
2. Are there trains in your country and if so, are trains a popular way of travelling? If not, do you think train tracks should be installed? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever taken an overnight train? If so, can you describe the experience?

## Answers

### Comprehension Questions

1. She likes being rocked to sleep by the motion of the train.
2. First class cost twelve dollars and had sleeper berths; second class cost ten dollars and had just a seat.
3. That passengers aren't allowed to eat sugar cane on the train.

### Exercises

1. figure out
2. wholesale
3. spread out
4. adequate
5. aisle
6. berth
7. on a budget
8. disconcerting
9. bumpier
10. surreal