

Episode 90a: Driving Through Africa, 1976 (Part 1)

Summary

Our guest Reg talks about living in Apartheid-era South Africa in the 1970s and the challenges he faced and experiences he had driving across Africa in 1976.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Reg. And, Reg, you're English but you've lived all over the world, and today we're talking about the time that you spent in Africa in the 1970s.

Reg: Yep.

Nick: And Wendy and I were in Africa recently, so it's a topic of interest for us and I'm sure we went to many of the same countries. So how did you wind up¹ in Africa in the first place?

Reg: Well, I, umm, was recruited, umm, by a newspaper called The Rand Daily Mail, which at the time, in South Africa, was, umm, a progressive, anti-Apartheid newspaper. Uhh, and it seemed quite attractive, having worked in England after university on two newspapers, the Sunderland Echo up in the northeast and the Yorkshire Post. So after about three years on the Yorkshire Post, uhh, we decided that it would be nice to travel a little bit. And I got this offer and, umm, we flew down to Johannesburg in September 1971.

Nick: And so being an anti-Apartheid paper, was it ... it must have been difficult for it to operate during that era?

Reg: It was very difficult. Umm, there were colleagues of mine who were locked up. Umm, our phones were definitely, uhh, bugged². And, umm, it was interesting because we were quite apolitical. Umm, I wouldn't have gone to South Africa if I was virulently anti-Apartheid. Umm, what it taught us after five years there was that we, uhh, would never live under an Apartheid regime (again), umm, because it was quite horrifying in the way it discriminated against the black majority.

¹ wind up (phrasal verb): to end up, to find oneself (in this example; there are other meanings too)

² bugged: tapped, being recorded

Nick: And I guess at the time that you were probably about to leave, that was when tensions were really flaring up³, right, because you had the Soweto uprising in '76.

Reg: It was just before the Soweto riots. Umm, and these were riots about the education system and the fact that they had to learn Afrikaans. So we'd already planned to leave, but it was quite, umm, it was quite propitious⁴ that when we arrived in Botswana, the, uhh, the riots broke out in Soweto.

Nick: OK, so you got out just in the nick of time, I guess you could say.

Reg: Indeed. But we'd done quite a bit of planning. Because unlike driving from England to South Africa, driving the other way, you're driving through black African countries and you have to expunge⁵ all evidence that you had actually come from South Africa.

Nick: Ahh, OK. So that was your plan then, was to drive all the way back to England?

Reg: Yep, yep. It was something we felt we had to do, 'cause having lived in South Africa for five years, there was a certain guilt that, you know, we had a very privileged lifestyle as a white in the Apartheid system. And we thought it would be, uhh, almost a cleansing⁶, to drive through other black African countries to see the way of life, umm, of countries that, you know, were democratic and did have a black majority.

Nick: And how did you go about planning this without, you know, before Internet, before even guidebooks, probably, to these countries? How did you know whether you could cross certain borders and what you would expect?

Reg: It's a very good question because, umm, in those days in the mid-seventies, there were quite a few countries that were going through their own internal changes. Umm, so we could not predict that we'd get actually the whole way. But we certainly planned a route that we thought was the safest. Umm, and I bought a Kombi, umm, van, uhh, and I converted it, umm, putting things like grills underneath to protect the engine, uhh, a large roof rack where we put all the petrol cans. So a lot of the planning had to be done, umm, in order to drive, with a Kombi van, off-road. So, uhh, that was interesting, and we both did a three-month, uhh, course in engine maintenance and servicing.

³ flaring up: becoming dangerous (in this case) or angry

⁴ propitious (low frequency): favourable, presenting favourable conditions (in this case, Reg means that it was fortunate that he had left Johannesburg when the riots began)

⁵ expunge: erase, wipe out, destroy

⁶ cleansing: purifying (note that the pronunciation of the first vowel is different in *cleanse* and *clean*)

Nick: Wow, so you very prepared, as much as you could be I guess, given the circumstances.

Reg: I learnt how to, uhh, remove a Kombi engine and reinstall a Kombi engine. So, we went with a level of confidence that if we broke down, we could actually get ourselves on the road again. And we got a sponsor, uhh, who provided all the dried food, uhh, for our trip back through Africa, you know, on the premise⁷ that we might not be able to buy food. Umm, so a lot of the planning was done, right down to expunging 'Made in South Africa' from the tyres of the Kombi.

Nick: Wow!

Reg: So it was interesting, umm, because on the road, we met people coming from England who just got in their car and just starting driving. And managed to get through. The other way, you had to persuade, umm, the various passport controls of the countries that we, in fact, had not come from South Africa. So much so⁸ that I had to sell my car in Botswana, or sell the Kombi in Botswana, repurchase it so that I could get Botswana registration plates.

Nick: That's amazing. Certainly a very different era. So Botswana was the first country you went into?

Reg: We went into Botswana from Northern Transvaal in South Africa. Umm, uhh, but to get into Botswana, we went through Southern Rhodesia.

Nick: OK.

Reg: In Southern Rhodesia they don't stamp your passport, they stamp a piece of paper.

Nick: And so that's what's now Zimbabwe or part of what's now Zimbabwe, at the time.

Reg: Yeah, it was Salisbury then, the capital, it's now Harare. So that was, you know, a first, sort of, confrontation with a problem, umm, and the concomitant⁹ of that was that when we arrived in Botswana, umm, we had passports that obviously had South Africa in them even though they didn't have Southern Rhodesia. So we pretended that our passports were stolen in Francistown and we got new passports posted to us from Gaborone, uhh, new British passports that were totally virgin. So when we arrived in the first black African country, Zambia, we arrived with new passports. Uhh, and they knew, and we knew that they knew we had actually come from South Africa, but there was absolutely no proof that we

⁷ premise: assumption, proposition

⁸ so much so: to such an extent

⁹ concomitant (low frequency): accompanying or concurrent event, parallel to

had. We just said they were stolen in Botswana and we got new ones. And that was in fact the passports we went through Africa on.

Nick: That's amazing, the level of detail, everything you had to go through just to hide this South African thing.

Reg: Because each passport control - and we we must have gone through, what? ten, fifteen countries - could have easily said, 'I'm sorry, go back.' But they didn't. We got through every passport control without ... with a bit of bribing as well, because there's a bit of - as you well know, from Africa - bribery is an endemic¹⁰ part of the system. We consider it bribery, they just see it a way of life. So when you went through passport control, you put money into the passports, and everybody accepted that's they way you did it.

Nick: Right, so you said earlier that you wanted to experience these black majority countries, so after Zambia and these other countries, did you get the kind of, uhh, experience that you'd hoped for?

Reg: Yeah, it was very interesting. I mean, ironically, the standard of living in the countries we went through, uhh, was far inferior in terms of development than South Africa. South Africa was almost a ~~third world country~~ first world country, run by a very efficient, white, Apartheid regime. And things worked. You know, in a lot of the countries we went through, things just didn't work. You know, they were still finding their feet, uhh, as newly independent black African nations. Umm, which was a bit of, I suppose it was a bit of an eye-opener because we were hoping that we'd see a similar lifestyle in Tanzania and Zambia. I mean, Zambia for example, the first town we hit in Zambia was Livingstone. And Livingstone, we went into a supermarket to stock up, and there was basically nothing on the shelves. Umm, one of the things that was on the shelf, ironically again, was the copy of a magazine, uhh, that I'd worked for in Cape Town.

Nick: Well there you go.

Reg: Which is about all they had. So, umm, in terms of, you know, sophistication of the way of life, South Africa was far ahead, and that meant, even for the black majority, they had, you know, supermarkets that were stocked full. Umm...

Nick: And that's still true. The gap is obviously closer than it was then, but that's still true today.

Reg: Yes, it is true, yes.

Nick: And then did you end up getting all the way to England?

Reg: Yeah, we had already planned that we'd go up the east side because it was safer. But, you know, we couldn't get through countries like Zaire, which were in,

¹⁰ endemic: natural or native to a particular place. See also: Episodes 34 and 82.

which was then I think the Congo, and that was basically a bit of a mess. So we avoided that because we thought it was too dangerous. And we stayed in Kenya for two or three months because we liked it a lot.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Reg move to South Africa in 1971?
2. Why did Reg get a new passport in Botswana?
3. What did Reg describe as an eye-opener when he arrived in some other African countries, having lived in South Africa?

Exercises

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

1. She had huge problems with her boss, _____ that she had to quit her job.
2. Kangaroos are _____ to Australia (and Papua New Guinea!).
3. In the Watergate scandal in the United States in the 1970s, offices and phones were _____, among other things.
4. The timing was _____, because as soon as they went inside, it started pouring.
5. After a short ceasefire in the region, things are _____ again. It looks like a sustainable peace will be hard to achieve.
6. Genocide is one of the potential consequences of ethnic _____.
7. Most people agree with the _____ that humans are causing climate change, but some people still disagree.
8. In Roman times, some emperors would _____ the name of their defeated rivals from all records so that no trace of that person existed anymore.
9. Our plan is to work and save for the next two years and then take a year off to travel. If everything goes right, we'll _____ somewhere in Asia.
10. Patients recovering from surgery often receive a _____ treatment of medication and physical therapy.

Discussion Questions

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

1. What surprised you the most about Reg's stories of Africa in the 1970s?
2. Reg described bribery as a way of life in some African countries he went through. What do you think about this?
3. Would you like to do the type of trip through Africa that Reg did in 1976, even now? Why or why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. He was offered a job at a newspaper in South Africa.
2. He pretended his old one was stolen, so that he could get a new one without South African stamps in it, so that other African countries would let him cross their borders.
3. That the level of development was much lower and that it was hard to find even basic products in the supermarkets.

Exercises

1. so much so
2. endemic
3. bugged
4. propitious
5. flaring up
6. cleansing
7. premise
8. expunge
9. wind up
10. concomitant