

9. Lourenco Marques 1973-74

During 1973-77 I lived in Swaziland (now Eswatini), working in what was the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS). Swaziland's economy was largely dependent on tourism, and specifically on young white men visiting from the Transvaal and Orange Free State. And why did they travel East, to this poor rural land? A country which gave safe haven to their government's enemies the ANC (the Abdullah Ibrahim jazz CD *Blues for a Hip King* is dedicated to the Swazi monarch Sobhuza II, then 75 years old)?

Because the apartheid laws of their homeland prohibiting interracial sex no longer applied here (later they could go to Sun City, in the nominally independent homeland of Bophutatswana – but that's another story).

So where did the expatriates living in Swaziland go when they wanted some R&R? Why, further East – to Lourenco Marques, capital of the then Portuguese colony of Mozambique.

Despite being one of the smallest countries in Africa, Eswatini is blessed with a range of climates. When you enter from the Transvaal and drive east, you pass through the Highveldt: pine forests and winter frosts, with the capital Mbabane. Then down the Ezulwini valley to the Middleveldt: lush hills, pineapple fields and avocado trees. Luckily the University was established here, outside the second town, Manzini. After Manzini the tar road peters out, and it's dirt all the way through the Lowveldt: uninhabited dry bush, with bilharzia in the riverbeds and malaria in the air (I recall that, in a belt-and-braces approach to road safety, the single-lane bridges across the rivers had 'Give Way' signs at both ends). Finally you ascend the Lebombo mountains and cross the border to the sleepy town of Namaacha. From there it's a tar road again, through lush jungle until the glittering Indian Ocean comes into view, lying beyond the gleaming white city of Lourenco Marques (LM). I tried to describe it in *Conjecture*, when Hugh glimpses it from the airship on his journey to England. You can see it at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqyWMVc9Gus>

My first visit was at Christmas 1973; I know the date because Portugal, both Metropolitan and in the colonies, was in official mourning for the Spanish Prime Minister Carrero Blanco, assassinated by a bomb laid by the ETA Basque separatist group. In retrospect this event is recognised as starting the collapse of the Francoist and Salazarist fascist regimes, but I saw no sign of grief beyond the screaming newspaper headlines.

Soon I was sitting in a bustling restaurant. Ceiling fans turned languidly above, and at the surrounding tables charcoal-suited businessmen were sweating in the tropical heat discussing animatedly while picking giant piri-piri prawns from heaped plates, expertly shelling them and sucking the juice from the heads before discarding the remains on the paper tablecloths. All washed down with carafes of strong white wine (shipped in

barrels from Lisbon and sold at highly subsidised prices to support the colonial empire). After that visit I returned several times in 1974, either by the weekly bus, cadging a lift with Canadian friends, or hitchhiking.

Once, the university asked for a volunteer to lead a student exchange trip to LM. I jumped at the chance. So our bus with 30 excited Swazi students made the journey. In the city we all needed to change money. Mozambique had its own currency, the Mozambican escudo, worthless outside the colony. The exchange process was simple: you went to the Municipal Market and found the shop selling piri-piri cashew nuts. You handed over your wad of SA rand or US dollars (no-one was interested in pounds) and the storekeeper retired to a back room, returning with a large tin – I still have one – with your escudos inside. But one student refused on principle; he wanted to exchange his rands officially at a bank (The SA rand was at that time the official currency in Swaziland. In 1974 the government introduced their own currency, the lilangeni (plural emalangeni), pegged at parity with the rand so that the only difference was that it had a portrait of King Sobhuza on one side, and on the reverse a line-up of bare-breasted Swazi maidens performing the Reed Dance – the world's only pornographic banknotes. Anyway, I had to take this student to a branch of Standard Bank. He approached the counter and presented his money to the teller. But the teller pushed the notes back and told him to meet him outside. There he exchanged the money from his own pocket at black market rates.

On the journey back, we stopped at a small fried chicken cafe just before the border. We ordered chicken for 30. No problem, we were told; we sat outside in the dust to wait. Soon, from behind the cafe, a panicked squawking began...

But in 1975 the city changed, after the Carnation Revolution back in Lisbon – but that's another story.