

Clean Up the Garbage

“It’s your turn,” I kidded a friendly, 30-something Zimbabwean woman.

“No, I think it’s your turn,” was her reply.

“It’s your country, I insist.”

“Now I wouldn’t be much of a guest if I didn’t let you go next.”

Accepting defeat, I agreed to go next. I put my hand on the temperature control knob of the broken-down oven at my hotel in Harare, Zimbabwe, and turned down the heat. The electric shock from touching the knob was just enough to be painful, but not enough to permanently injure me. There is something intriguing about pathetic situations and life in President Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe for many is pathetic. His “Clean Up the Garbage” program, the people who did not vote for him in the last election are the garbage, has left many of the residents of a once thriving country hungry and homeless.

Crossing the border from relatively prosperous South Africa immediately illustrates the difference. Many Zimbabweans bring televisions and electronics back from South Africa as it is cheaper to purchase them there. The lines of electronic buyers make for slow visa processing at the border. As the bus from the border journeyed north to my destination of Bulawayo, I noticed many small fires on the side of the road. These fires were scraped together by homeless people who were trying to stay warm in the deceptively cool Zimbabwean nights. The lush, green vegetation of euphorbias, palms and aloes would indicate warm temperatures, but at night it became cool. The delay at the border ensured that I did not get to the Bulawayo bus station until 11 pm, which is never a good idea due to the propensity of robberies. Fortunately, a young local man escorted me to my hotel even though it was only thirty feet from the bus station. We rang the hotel bell and woke the hotel manager, who was wearing his pajamas. As he rubbed his eyes and regained his wits after dozing off to sleep, I became concerned whether he would let me in. He was a small man with a small head and a reassuring smile which in turn reassured me. He offered me a room close to both the front door and the hotel courtyard, which was ideal.

To the uninitiated, life in Bulawayo appeared to be normal. People walked to work in the city center, waited at bus stops for the next bus, and enjoyed the city parks. However, I soon became aware of the difficulties of Zimbabwean life. First, there is an unofficial and official currency exchange rate. The unofficial rate, given by street vendors, is three times better than the exchange rate given at the government-controlled banks. Unfortunately, these poor street workers are part of the “garbage” that Mugabe wants to take out and thus exchanging money with these people is illegal and carries a severe penalty, including being fined, jailed or possibly beaten. I coyly asked the friendly hotel staff about the exchange rate and they stuck with the company line. However, I heard an old, male voice from behind the wall of the front desk, who said in an equally coy voice “Come back here”. I slipped 20 US dollars behind the wall and a wad of Zimbabwe dollars at the unofficial rate was returned from behind this magic wall. We never saw each other, we didn’t know each other, but we were both happy with the service the other provided.

Leaving my hotel, I went to one of the chain grocery stores that had four aisles reserved for food, but very little actual food. Upon entering the store, I was followed by a government official. I picked out a small orange juice and biscuits, which cost a

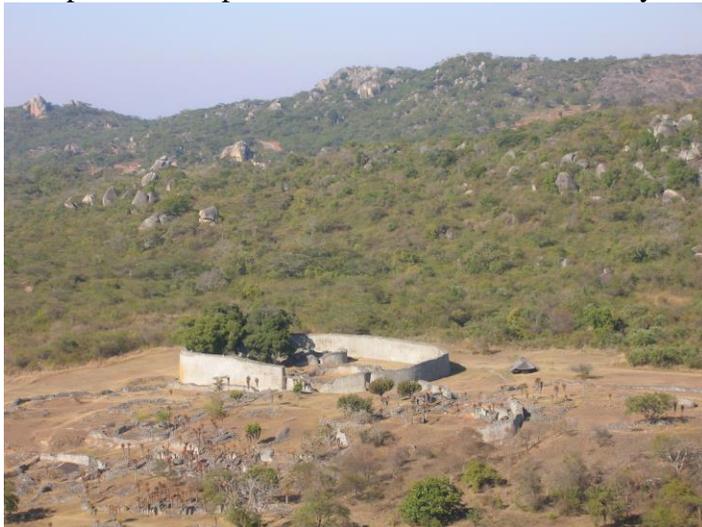
whopping \$8 at the official rate. The government official checked off what I had taken before I purchased the goods at the cashier. The cashier, who was also a government official, gave me a receipt of what I had bought which I had to give to yet another government official who checked my items off her list. The prevalence of government officials was due to President Mugabe's desire to preserve his dictatorship by monitoring the activities of all of Zimbabwe's citizens, even their eating habits. By the afternoon the grocery stores were empty, which explained why people cooked their own food on ovens that gave a painful electric shock.

I returned to my hotel and attempted to regroup so I could enjoy my time in Bulawayo. The hotel had a coffeepot that I used to boil water, which I determined to be a better option than paying \$7 for a liter of water at the scarcely stocked grocery stores. I exchanged more money with the stranger behind the wall and then decided to tackle the attractive, mid – sized city of Bulawayo.

The Douslin House illustrated what an old colonial house looked like and also contained a small art museum of works done by local artists, The National Gallery. Located in Centenary Park is the average Bulawayo Theater and the much more impressive National History Museum. Due to Mugabe's rampage, there were few tourists, so the museum was all for me. The museum looked at traditional life, British colonization and independence. It is also a natural history museum and displayed nearly all animals found in Zimbabwe, including an extensive look at different bugs and colorful butterflies.



Due to gas prices of \$30 a gallon, I decided to hitchhike, which most pedestrians attempted, and most car owners readily accepted in order to help pay for gas. It was a real battle to find a car, but being a white tourist was an advantage in this situation as a local man picked me up because he was interested in my story. I packed into his small car with



three locals and made my way to Masvingo. The city of Masvingo did not have much to offer but it is located close to a World Heritage site, the historically important remains of the Great Zimbabwe, dating to the 11th century. The Great Zimbabwe is considered the greatest city in medieval sub-Saharan Africa and was a capital of an area that covers four modern countries. I nabbed a ride from Masvingo in the back of someone's truck and

walked the final couple of miles to the ruins. Despite the historical importance of these ruins, I was the only one there until I left, when a group of schoolchildren arrived. I enjoyed learning about the architecture of the complex at a museum near the entrance, along with the ruins of the Acropolis and the royal complex called The Great Enclosure. The enclosure is the largest structure in ancient sub-Saharan Africa and includes 30 feet high and 15 feet thick walls.

Although ample evidence existed of how difficult life in Zimbabwe was, the capital of Harare epitomized the difficulties. Behind the bus station, one could see hundreds of homeless people starving to death, merely garbage that had yet to be taken out, according to Mugabe. Getting off the bus, I was met by a couple of locals. The younger, thinner of the two used to carry people's luggage from the bus station to downtown with his wheelbarrow. However, he now was sitting next to his rickety wheelbarrow as government officials had smashed a wheel off and did some damage to the arms of the wheelbarrow. His friend was wandering from city to city looking for work as he, too, was considered garbage and lost his job. His wife and children lived with her parents, but he did not want to be a strain on her family, thus, he wandered. They did not ask me for money; they didn't need to.

Despite the desperate situation in Harare, the peoples' kindness and work ethic were impressive. I met a retired local man on the bus with a well-trimmed gray beard and pressed gray suit on the bus. He was visiting family in Masvingo that he hadn't visited in years, thus he had dressed up for the endeavor. We walked for the three miles from the station to downtown (a taxi would have cost \$30, so we passed). I was stopped by a military officer who was concerned that I was a journalist who was videotaping the "garbage" campaign. My retired friend and I convinced him that I was just a dumb tourist, after which he showed concern for me and wished me luck. We continued on our way and stopped once for ice cream and then we passed by the area around Africa Unity Square. He told me that as a young man he used to be a delivery driver and could only be in this "white" area when he delivered goods. He said things are different now, but from his tone I couldn't tell if he meant it was for the better or not. It is obvious that Harare was prosperous at one time, and when Zimbabwe was colonial Rhodesia it was an economic gem for the British in southern Africa.

Due to the problems in Harare, I decided to stay just one day, which was long enough to get an idea of what life was like. I walked the three miles back to the chaotic and depressing bus station, bought my ticket and wearily walked back to my hotel, where I attempted to cook a gooey, meaty canned mixture on the shocking oven. As the bus was to leave at 6 am and it would be too dangerous to walk to the bus station at that time, I arranged transport to the bus station with the hotel manager. We had agreed on \$15, but gas had doubled that night as did my fare. Fortunately, he had found another person who needed transport, so my share was still \$15. All



three of us push-started his car and we cruised downhill to the bus station. He only turned on his weak car lights at intersections as his battery was nearly dead. I made it to the bus station and left Zimbabwe intrigued by the pathetic situation and with a great respect for the “garbage.”