

# MAPUTO REVISITED



*The Polana Hotel*

As the small plane broke through the low cloud and the outlines of the city below became clearer a wave of elation swept over me. I was coming back to a place which had been home during my formative years after an absence of more than a decade. Nervousness swiftly tempered my excitement. What would I find down there? I thought of the dominant images of Mozambique fed us through the media: the post-colonial "piri-piri" journalism that told of failed revolutions, war, economic collapse and unrelenting human misery. Was the collapse total? Was anything working? A lot of water had gone under the bridge politically since my colonial youth. Would I recognise anything familiar in the new society?

Having successfully negotiated the entry formalities one of the first landmarks of the new Mozambique was Heroes' Square on the road into town from Mavelane airport. An unpretentious low star-shaped structure, it was a stark reminder of the tragic death in October 1986 of Mozambique's President and 33 others in a plane crash under circumstances which have still to be fully explained. The South African trade mission has been repaired, but the Malawi embassy still shows signs of damage inflicted when popular anger against the two regimes erupted into violence after the crash.

Despite the mutual suspicion which characterises official relations I encountered no problems as a visitor from South Africa. To the contrary, I was accepted there as being on legitimate business and made to feel welcome. It was clear that the quarrel was with the apartheid system and its supporters and not with individuals who happened to be from South Africa.

Coming from Durban I was immediately struck by the relaxed atmosphere of Maputo. For a country at war the capital was surprisingly calm. There were no armoured vehicles patrolling and very little evidence

of a military presence on the streets. Mozambicans I met and spoke to in the course of my business and whilst exploring the city were helpful and direct in their dealings with me. The absence of racial tensions and undertones was very marked and came as a real breath of fresh air. Walking around the streets I actually felt safer than I would have in similar situations in Durban. In many respects Maputo has maintained the laid-back Lusitanian feel of colonial Lourenco Marques and has developed in addition its own particular African flavour.

Whilst Maputo's soul is in fine shape its physical infrastructure is not. Symptoms of urban decay are apparent wherever you look. Essential urban services such as water, sewerage, rubbish disposal, electricity and public transport are increasingly fragile. Roads are in need of repair, the telephones are uncertain and lifts in multi-storied buildings suffer from lack of maintenance. Part of the problem is that colonial Lourenco Marques was designed for Portuguese settlers and it was never intended that it should hold a million people



*Maputo*

as Maputo now does.

Massive urbanisation following independence might have been manageable with a healthier economy and peaceful conditions, but Mozambique benefitted from neither of these. The rapid decline of the economy since 1981, occasioned in large measure by the war, has led to considerable hardship for Maputo's residents. The rows of closed shops with no commodities to sell speak of an urban crisis which is linked to the collapse of the agricultural economy. The urban environment depended on an agricultural surplus for food and for foreign exchange to buy fuel, spare parts, manufacturing inputs and imported consumer goods.

From 1982 absolute shortages of basic consumer goods began to be experienced and a black market rapidly developed accompanied by hoarding and speculation. Prices of goods on the black market were beyond the means of ordinary city dwellers unless they too got into the system. The government attempted to cushion urban workers' wages by providing a basic minimum monthly ration at controlled prices through the consumer cooperatives but the quantities allocated were not sufficient and in the end could not be guaranteed.



*Petrol queue*

In 1983 the government instituted "Operation Production" in response to complaints from city dwellers that a large unproductive group of urban immigrants were stretching Maputo's resources to breaking point. In a campaign which lost Frelimo much support influx control was introduced and people unable to provide documentary evidence of their right to be in the city were repatriated, during a "voluntary" phase, or sent to the North to help in the harvest.

It has been accepted that compelling people to leave Maputo in this way was counterproductive, but the problem still remains. Frelimo has shifted its approach and is now tackling the issue on two fronts. It is taking measures to make rural life more attractive to stem the flow of people into the city, and it is encouraging the development of "green zones" around the city producing fruit and vegetables for the urban market.

To do this it has raised producer prices on a range of agricultural commodities and it has decontrolled the



*Children in Maputo*

fresh produce market, allowing prices to find their own level. The result has been that greens are now plentiful in Maputo's municipal market, but prices have moved up to the previous black market level, beyond the pocket of working people. Wages have recently been raised, but the currency has also been devalued by over 400%. Urban housing rentals have also been increased, but employed workers receive a subsidy. This move seems to be designed to limit the population density without using the unpopular administrative methods employed in "Operation Production". To survive economically in this environment working people have to have recourse to a barter economy which inevitably lowers the general rate of productivity.

Those with access to foreign currency — diplomats, aid agency personnel, contract workers and people in the growing private sector do not have the same problems of survival. The Interfranca shops provide a wide range of domestic consumer goods unavailable elsewhere in exchange for dollars or rand. They have an ugly feel about them: they are islands of plenty which attract all sorts of wheelers, from the kids who compete to "protect" customers vehicles outside to the black marketeers and currency speculators cruising inside. They are necessary in order to keep the expatriate community upon which Mozambique depends for aid and expertise, but they help reinforce privileges Frelimo itself fought against.

Observing the salience of aid agencies and expatriate experts in Maputo I felt that although their presence was necessary under the prevailing circumstances it operated to further limit development options for Mozambicans, and that South Africans would do well to avoid travelling so far down this road in a post-apartheid future.

Life in the suburbs for expatriates retains something of the flavour of my colonial childhood. Comfortable accommodation, domestic labour, the family at home for the main midday meal during the two-hour business closure, and now an International School instead of the English one I attended.

Other continuities I saw related to language and culture. Joining the early evening street life of the





*Municipal Market Staff*

suburbs I was struck by the near universal use of Portuguese as the language of informal communication and reflected that in the city at least there was a high level of acculturation.

It was also apparent through my limited dealings with the bureaucracy that much of the Portuguese mode of thinking about and dealing with problems had been accepted and taken over as the dominant rationality. When coupled up to central planning East European style it seemed to me to be a pretty potent recipe for bureaucratic inertia.

Many of the civil servants I saw were young people holding responsible positions and I was impressed by their optimism for the future. For them there was no question that a major part of Maputo's current problems were due to Pretoria's undeclared war and that peace in Mozambique was a distant goal as long as apartheid survived in South Africa.

Throughout my visit I was conscious of South Africa's physical proximity. Listening in to the SABC was like hearing voices from another planet only 120 km away. Everything back home was fine and sport and motor accidents continued as usual. A world of order, plenty and simple formulae beckoned the cosmic traveller back to safe normality. Re-entry was a shock, even after such a brief absence. The contrasts between the two are stark, and yet the future of both is inextricably linked.□



*Shoeshine*