

The Bulawayo Sharks

The swollen Limpopo River threatened to engulf Beit Bridge as the flood waters continued to rise, but in the end we made it across. The rain had momentarily ceased lashing down upon the bus windows and I looked out dispassionately as we left South Africa and crossed the border into Zimbabwe. An obnoxious Australian who claimed he was a photographer for the *Lonely Planet* let out a cheer and two plastic Danish girls sitting with him let out a few giggles. I gave them a cold stare. The other passengers were all sombre-looking Zimbabweans making their way home.

Not many people travel to Zimbabwe in the rainy season. Malaria and cholera are rampant and the verdant green foliage makes wildlife viewing difficult. In addition to this, the country was experiencing major political turmoil as the tyrannical Robert Mugabe continued to starve his own people, ruin the economy and crush any opposition with brute police force. Despite the warnings, I had made the trip up from Johannesburg on a whim—depressed, reckless and running away from a girl. I thought a little adventure might cure what ails me. And if I didn't make it back, that didn't seem to matter much either.

The bus shuddered to a stop in the mud at the Beitbridge border terminal and we were ordered off the bus for processing by the side of the road. Our luggage was opened up and our underwear put on colourful display. A nonchalant official in a faded khaki uniform came over and idly flipped through my passport. He dryly asked me if I was a drug dealer. Not entirely sure if he was joking, I assured him I was not. He asked me where I was going. "Bulawayo," I said. After

the official was satisfied that I was just a hapless tourist, he cracked a smile and let me back on the bus. Zimbabwe was desperate for tourists. Every service and every tourist attraction in Zimbabwe unashamedly lists two prices: one for locals, and a considerably more exorbitant one for tourists. It was how they kept their economy going.

I was headed for Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, for no other reason than it seemed a good place to start backpacking. Earlier on, I had tried to phone a youth hostel in Bulawayo, but couldn't get through. Later I learned that telephones don't work in Zimbabwe when it rains. And rain it did. An unrelenting downpour had started up again and it wreaked havoc on the bus, causing it to break down several times. As a result we arrived in Bulawayo at dusk, several hours late. As we trundled into the city, I peered through the grimy windows, trying to see where we were going. All I saw was a giant billboard advertising cigarettes. "Hold on to your...Madison," it read.

Suddenly, a burst of thumping sounds erupted against the sides of the bus. It was hundreds of hands. Eager merchants started shoving fresh eggs, burnt corn, warm beer and cheap watches through the windows, hoping for a sale. We had arrived at last. Grabbing my backpack, I clambered off the bus into the mayhem and muggy air. A small crowd of people clustered around me trying to sell me various knick-knacks and animal carvings by shouting into my face. The crowds were stifling and the commotion addled my already groggy brain. Then I heard a lone voice cry out from the crowd—"Hello, hello my friend! Do you need a taxi?" Thank goodness, get me out of here! The taxi driver took my pack and put it in his trunk. I climbed into the car.

Almost immediately, three other men jumped into the car. One in the passenger seat, and one on either side of me. I suddenly felt very nervous. I looked for a taxi meter. There was none. This was no taxi. That was no taxi driver. We peeled off into the darkening night and the driver asked me where I wanted to go. I told him the name of the youth hostel I wanted to go to. He told me he knew a better place and that he would take me there. "Give us \$200," he said. "That's too much," I said, panic rising in my throat. "I don't have that much." His friends were silent and sat tensely in their seats. Suddenly, one of them gently gripped my arm, much as one might take an old lady's arm to help her cross the street. "How much you have? Show us."

I pulled out my wallet and took out the cash. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. They took it all.

Horrible visions of my demise started forming in my head. How could I trust these sharks were even taking me to a youth hostel? Was I being kidnapped? It wouldn't take much for them to slit my throat and dump my body in a ditch somewhere. There weren't many other cars on the road. Zimbabwe was experiencing a fuel crisis and gas was hard to come by. There weren't many streetlamps either. All I could see outside was rain and blackness.

Inexplicably, I thought of the wedding I had just been to in South Africa. The girl I loved married another man. She had looked so happy. I wanted to be happy too.

The car pulled into a driveway and the man who held my arm got out and opened the trunk. I scrambled out, scared and angry. The man handed me my backpack, flashed a big white smile, and leapt into the car. I watched as the

sharks raced off in their rusty car to buy booze, or drugs, or gas. Rain fell soft and soothing and cooled my hot face. I looked at the house in front of me. There was a sign on the door: "Bulawayo Youth Hostel," it said. With a sense of great relief I reached into the money belt strapped to my chest and pulled out my traveller's cheques. They were wet with sweat. This was going to be one hell of a trip.