

## Into Africa

It sounds like a straightforward assignment, as international consulting goes. Fly to Europe, change planes, fly to a conference in southern Africa, then on to a longer training project in a neighboring country. What could possibly go wrong?

The year was 1985, still deep in the apartheid era. It would be five more years before Nelson Mandela was out of jail, nine years until he became president of a free South Africa. Meanwhile, I was going to a conference in Luanda, the capital of Angola. It was sponsored by the Southern African Development Coordinating Committee (SADCC), the organization of “front-line states” that opposed the apartheid regime in South Africa. The longer-term project was in Zambia, another SADCC member.

## Angola

The first clue that something was wrong could have been my lack of a visa to visit Angola. The United States and Angola did not have diplomatic relations at that point. In fact, the United States and South Africa were supporting the rebels who wanted to overthrow the government of Angola; the country was ruled by the national liberation front that had won its independence from Portugal a decade earlier. In lieu of a visa, I had only a telex message (a 1980s precursor of a fax), saying that I would be met at the Luanda airport by someone with my visa.

One overnight flight got me from Boston to Rome, where I had an all-day layover before the evening flight on TAAG (Air Angola) from Rome to Luanda. I had never been in Rome and wasn't going to spend the day in the airport. A mad dash through the historic center, Piazza Navona, Roman Forum, Coliseum, back to the airport two hours before the *scheduled* departure time.

I was in time to see the TAAG staff packing up for the night, since the flight had just left. The schedule had changed on the first of the month, and they hadn't updated all their partner airlines – for instance, my Rome-Luanda ticket was written by Alitalia, the Italian national airline. A long argument in Italian, presumably about what to do about me being stranded there, resulted in the happy outcome that Alitalia (rather than TAAG) was responsible for my further travels.

This led to a night in a motel near the Rome airport, followed by a morning flight from Rome to Paris – because the next scheduled flight from anywhere in Europe to Luanda was leaving from Paris. Another great city I had never seen, another all-day layover: Eiffel Tower, Champs Elysees, Arc du Triomphe, back to the airport three hours before departure time; this one took off late. Many of the passengers seemed to work for American oil companies, which were drilling for oil in remote areas of Angola. Paris airport security accepted my telex message as evidence that I could travel to Angola.

And then: arrival at dawn in Luanda. It was now three nights into the trip (Boston-Rome; motel in Rome; Paris-Luanda). The airport was run by rude young men, all carrying impressive rifles, none of whom admitted to speaking or understanding English. No one was there with a visa for me, and no one was willing or able to read my telex. They made it clear that I should wait in the departure lounge, which also stored the airport's collected garbage from the previous day. At 6:00 AM, the bar in the lounge offered no food or coffee, only alcoholic beverages.

The other passengers from our flight disappeared, many on local planes to the oilfields. Soon it was just me and one forlorn Dutch businessman, who unfortunately did not speak English. He worked for a company that had a contract to dredge the Luanda harbor; there was some dispute about the contract terms. He had come to Luanda a week earlier, with a telex message about a visa, just like mine. They had held him in this very lounge for many hours, then put him on a flight returning to Europe. Someone had talked him into trying it again, and here he was back in the same lounge... It was the same all over Africa, he said, the Negroes are ruining everything. Except, he explained, it wasn't the same everywhere: in any other country in Africa he would of course bribe his way out of the airport, but in Angola they would put you in jail for attempting to bribe anyone.

I was released from this epic tale of racism and despair by the arrival of a confident young man who was ready to drive me to the conference. He thought 8:30 AM was a much better time to come to the airport than 6:00 AM. Quick conversations ensued in Portuguese; no sign of a visa, no one inspected my passport or bags, and I was in the car, heading for town.

My first view of Africa: red clay soil, palm trees, women carrying bundles on their heads as they walked – and as they jumped out of our way, since my driver preferred to use the horn rather than the brakes. The speedometer said 150, I tried some deep breathing while thinking about kilometers (that's still fast, around 90 mph).

No need to check reservations in advance, the driver knew the hotel where they always send international visitors. But it turned out I wasn't staying there. Back in the car, driving to the other side of the center city, to the second international hotel where I did have a room. Now we were in a hurry: the conference was about to start, next door to the first hotel. Another drive through downtown traffic.

More well-armed young men surrounded the conference, but this time they were happy to create a photo ID for me, explaining that the photo's background color meant that I was an honored guest of the Angolan revolution. (I wore it every moment that I was awake in Angola.) Then into the – astonishingly air-conditioned – conference. Where to sit?

My ID and registration said I was from ESRG (Energy Systems Research Group). No one there had heard of ESRG, but the acronym sounded like it could be an important multinational European group. My assigned seat was in the front row: national representatives, arranged alphabetically from Angola to Zimbabwe; then ESRG; then the World Bank. I barely had time to say hello to Zimbabwe and the World Bank, before the opening ceremony got going.

A member of the Central Committee of the ruling party of Angola was greeting us, thanking us for our support in the struggle against apartheid, wishing us success in the conference. He ended with the ubiquitous national slogan, the translators always skipped it because everyone understood it: *a luta continua; vitória é certa* [the struggle continues; victory is certain]. Welcome to Angola.

The conference organizers soon figured out that I belonged in the much humbler seating reserved for foreign consultants. I gave my talk, showcasing our Swedish-sponsored long-range energy planning software for developing countries. European aid programs made generous contributions to the front-line states in those days – often with the hope or expectation that some of the aid would be spent on experts, firms, or software from the donor country. I was one of the few audience members who understood the very technical presentation from a Belgian energy planning firm. The decision about

which energy planning software to adopt was likely to depend on the size of the aid packages from Sweden vs. Belgium, not the merits of either software package per se.

I spent several days in Luanda, with ample opportunities to talk with government officials. Great to have access to them, but there was also something missing. I wondered whether, after so many years of war – first against Portugal, then against the rebels and their supporters – all the most honorable and dedicated leadership could have ended up in the military, leaving the civilian government in more opportunistic hands. Who knows if victory was certain, but it did occur: the Angolan government and its Cuban supporters won on the battlefield, decisively defeating the rebels and their foreign friends. But it is sadly not surprising that the top levels of the ruling party were eventually corrupted by oil money, abandoning any revolutionary or egalitarian promises along the way.

In a war-torn city and country, there was not much scope for tourism or night life, aside from drinking in hotel rooms. The only people I've ever met who drank more than Angolans were foreigners stationed in Angola. To get to my next stop, in Zambia, some people thought the fastest way to travel was via Rome (look at a map; this would add at least 14 hours in the air). But TAAG had once-weekly flights visiting many of the SADCC nations. The departure time for the flight to Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, was "Tuesday." Just go to the airport and plan on spending the day waiting. It did eventually work.

## **Zambia**

The former British colony of Northern Rhodesia became independent, and renamed itself Zambia, in 1964. Richly endowed with copper mines, but not much else, the Zambian economy followed the price of copper up and down. It was down when I was there in the mid/late 1980s. The government announced a day of prayer for economic recovery; not all prayers are answered.

I was there for three weeks, working with a group of Danish advisors, to train the staff of the national Department of Energy in use of our energy planning software. In retrospect I believe I accomplished more by demonstrating word processing and general computer use to first-time users. Sophisticated energy planning was not on the critical path to development for Zambia, where hydropower already provided ample supplies of electricity. Nonetheless, I tried, and at least a couple of the local staff engaged with and started to use our energy planning framework.

The Department of Energy was in a humble office building near other government agencies. Our building had no running water; sinks and toilets were available across the street in a better-funded agency building. We were surrounded by a few tropical plants, a lot of dust, and lizards watching it all.

We had window fans, not air conditioning. And it was hot. More than once, early afternoon temperatures were high enough that our computer hard drives abruptly stopped working. At that point, it was possible to aim all the window fans at a computer, reviving it for long enough to save any work in progress. And then we realized that everyone had slowed way down in the heat, and little more was going to be accomplished that day.

One of the Zambian staff members invited me to his home for dinner. The staple food of Zambia was a very thick cornmeal mush, called nshima. You pick up a small handful of nshima, shape it into a ball or spoon, then dip it into dishes of meat, vegetables, sauces. (Commitment to this diet seemed strong; a

newspaper story about a cornmeal shortage in one province reported the horrifying news that people were being forced to subsist on mangoes and fish. Bags of cornmeal were quickly airlifted to the affected province.) I was fascinated, though also happy to have other food choices on other days. Opportunities for cultural misunderstanding were all around us: one of the Danish advisors recalled inviting a Zambian family to dinner and serving soup; the family's school-aged children had never used a spoon and had no idea what to do with it.

Lusaka was a sleepy, mid-sized city. I was impressed by the amount of labor required to distribute products via open-air markets, rather than stores. In the markets, many people spend their days waiting for the occasional customer. Some of the customers at the central market would take their purchases and sit by the side of the road at smaller suburban markets, again waiting for customers. It was impossible for me to explore the market in any detail, since my presence disrupted the market. The vendors all immediately started following me, calling out their wares to me. There weren't a lot of white tourists in Lusaka.

During the apartheid years Lusaka was home to South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) leadership in exile. Through a friend of a friend, I met a white American woman who had married a black South African member of the ANC. They invited me to an evening at an outdoor restaurant to talk with them and their colleagues about South Africa, America, and the world. It was a wonderful event, in a magically comfortable setting – except for the mosquitos, more than you could swat away.

I woke up sick the next morning, staggered down to the hotel desk, and was ushered into a side of the hotel that most guests never see: the clinic. A 30-second examination confirmed that I had malaria. Differing from the better-known West African malaria, this was a Southern African strain, sometimes compared to equine encephalitis – deadly if not treated soon, but fully curable (not lingering or recurring) with treatment. The clinic's understandable bias was toward rapid diagnosis and treatment.

At the time, chloroquine was the standard remedy for malaria. I had been taking moderate doses as a preventative measure; the treatment for the disease was intramuscular injection of a massive dose of chloroquine. The only problem was the clinic staff's insistence that I had to eat a large meal before the treatment; food of any sort seemed so utterly unappetizing at that point. The people the clinic usually treats (hotel staff, not guests) may often be undernourished and need to eat more in order to withstand the treatment.

I could feel the fever breaking within a few hours of the injection. I missed only two days of work, back in the office on the third day, with no remaining signs of malaria.

I made two more trips to Zambia over the next few years, working in side trips to see Victoria Falls, and to see the animals. A question I once got right in Trivial Pursuit, based on this: which of several African animals is the most dangerous? In the opinion of our driver, the answer was water buffalos, the animal he was most determined to stay away from. One water buffalo might not be so formidable, but you won't meet one water buffalo. Where do a few hundred water buffalos sit down? Anywhere they like.

Toward the end of my first trip to Zambia, I was informally taking stock of what I had accomplished. The project went much more slowly than I had expected. But I reminded myself, this was Africa. Shedding first-world urgency and impatience was key to making anything happen, at the modest pace that now seemed realistic. I then met with one of the Danish advisors, who was gushing with enthusiasm about

how well the training had gone, he had rarely seen the Zambian staff so energized and hard-working, my visit must have inspired them.

Zambia was strange but should have been even stranger. The people, the ecology, the available options for energy planning and development all differed from those available to us in high-income northern countries. At the same time, cultural aspirations and styles from the north were pasted on, regardless of whether they fit well. In my hotel in Lusaka, the house band played classic rock-and-roll with nonstop enthusiasm, pounding out the Beach Boys' "California Girls" at least once per night. Picture the scene:

- Four very dark-skinned musicians (Africans are often much darker than African-Americans) repeatedly singing about California blonds
- Their songs celebrate beach culture and swimming, in a landlocked country far from the ocean
- Thanks to crocodiles and hippos, swimming is not a popular sport in Zambia
- Yet the band plays on: I wish they all could see California, I wish they all could be California girls

Surely there must be a future better fitted to Zambia than wishing for California. My attempt at a poem, "Technical Advisor", echoes this dilemma – but does not offer any final answers.

### **Technical Advisor**

You return with pockets clogged with the spare change of the world  
A clutter of kwachas and quarters, pence and centimes  
You hold multinational capital in lower-case quantities  
Money out of proper place, a moving violation

You go, and the music follows you around the globe  
Rock and roll, raucous herald of imperial culture triumphant  
Far from the Nile, the radio wants to walk like an Egyptian  
Far from the beach, the band wishes they all could see California

You stare at unfamiliar trees flowering in November  
At a city crowded onto improbable dying minibuses  
At the lizards outside the Ministry windows  
Who watch your computer modeling from their perch in the dust

Foreign advisors live with their servants, behind their high walls  
If you stayed, you would become them  
Jogging, making pate by their grandmothers' recipes  
They build invisible islands of Denmark in the southern sun

You can only see the society through a distant lens  
As you saw the scenery, exotic and remote  
You can only hope for a future in which  
The band no longer wishes they all could be California