

The great unblocking of

Sean Christie headed to Mozambique to follow up rumours of Portuguese sabotage. What he found was an impressive undertaking to clean up Beira's long-disused sewers

A dinner party gone wrong drew me to Beira. The dinner, hosted by a Zimbabwean friend at his house in Harare, was showing all the signs of being a success when an Anglophile Zimbabwean began debating with the ambassador for Portugal the cruder aspects of the British and Portuguese legacies in Africa.

The harangue boiled over when the Zimbabwean declared that, whatever the British administrations had been on those exciting eves of independence from colonial dominion, they were never the kind to begin sabotaging infrastructure, as the fleeing Portuguese are widely believed to have done in Mozambique.

Not satisfied with generalities, this Rhodie (as in Rhodesian, unreconstructed white Zimbabwean) cited the case of Beira where, he claimed, the settlers had poured wet cement down the city's drains as a parting gift. The ambassador stormed off, leaving his jacket behind.

I was acquainted with the infamous 20-24 decree of 1975, issued by incumbent Mozambican President Armando Guebuza, who was then the minister of the interior for the newly victorious Frelimo government. It gave the Portuguese in Mozambique 24 hours to leave the country with no more than 20kg of luggage.

But I had not heard about this mischief to do with cement, so I decided to go to Beira to see what I could find out.

Had I done my homework first I suspect I would have stayed home, for immersion in the literature on Mozambique would have revealed only the vaguest references to sabotage by the settlers, and most of these would have pertained to either the Portuguese evacuation from Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) to the south, or from Luanda on the opposite coast of Africa, where, in the words of American hack Tom Zoellner, "Sports cars ... were crashed in daredevil games and abandoned on the street", while "copper wiring was pried from the cores of buildings".

But rumours about cement and sabotage were still alive and well in Beira, as I discovered in a formerly "white's only" beach bar called Biques.

"They were smarter than us, those Portuguese," said a short but fierce-looking Zimbabwean woman, recovering, with beer, from her third bout of malaria in three years. "We just handed it all over — army, buildings, businesses. Look where that got us."

A Lusophone businessman who had fled Beira in the 1970s only to return in the late 1990s said: "The people who flooded into the city after the evacuation would have messed things up anyway. They were rural folk who didn't know



Not so grand: Young residents of Beira's once-famous Grande Hotel hang out together in front of the building at nightfall Photo: Lisa King

what toilets were for. To begin with, they drank from the bidets..."

For evidence of this unfamiliarity with urban etiquette, I was told to visit the Grande Hotel on the southern end of the Beira promenade — the chief post-colonial wreck in a line of once-luxurious buildings that now stare empty-eyed at the ocean.

South African photographer Guy Tillim nailed panoramas of The Grande into his gritty book *Avenue Patrice Lumumba* but, where his photographs are unpopulated and strangely sanitary in a dusty-museum kind of way, I found the Art Deco ruin to be a maze of litter and faeces, inhabited by 3700 people.

"The first settlers here ripped out the toilets to make extra living space," said Joao Goncalves, the building's ad-hoc mayor. "I have secured a piece of beach for a toilet for the people here but at night, you know, they just go anywhere."

Children standing on the helix of the hotel staircase shouted "fuck you! fuck you! *vovo vou te tadar*" while my translator explained that many of Beira's infrastructural headaches stemmed from Renamo's long

There are a lot of things in those drains. Snakes, rocks, air-conditioning units, oil, dogs, fish. You must understand that they have not been used in 30 years

political tenure of the city.

"Frelimo liberated the country from the Portuguese and then defeated Renamo in the civil war. The city was broken when the war finished but Frelimo let Beira fall even further because the Sofala Province, in which Beira is located, was once a stronghold of Renamo, the right-wing force backed by neighbouring white dictatorships.

"In revenge, everything important in the economy of Mozambique now gets moved to Maputo to the south and Beira gets nothing. That's why people voted Renamo before and now MDM [Democratic Movement of Mozambique]."

"Nobody is doing anything for us here," added Goncalves.

But these accounts of political dereliction ignore some major developments taking place, as I discovered in a nearby Iberian-style square when I nearly ran into the back of a high-tech truck. A diminutive man with nut-brown skin was peering down a manhole with one hand on a thick blue pipe.

"*No comprehendere*," he said, when I asked him if he was clearing cement from the drains.

Just then a Mozambican crawled from the sewers in a white suit, removed a gas mask and explained that his associate was a drain-relining expert from Parma, whose company — Forever Pipe — had been contracted by the ministry of public works to reopen Beira's sewers and drains. The European Union had allocated €62-million for the job.

A few phone calls later I was booked on a day-long inspection of the works with Paolo Oscar, a bald but relentlessly energetic engineer with the *departemento de saneamento*.

The tour began at the Forever Pipe



Knee deep: Unblocking Beira's sewers has required the skills of a nation well acquainted with the problem — Italy, whose sewers were once regarded as the 'most compromised anywhere'

headquarters where, Oscar said, the Italians, whose own sewers were generally regarded as "the most compromised drains anywhere" after World War 2, were well equipped to bring Beira's inner workings back to life after 30 years of neglect.

"Was it because of the cement poured down there by the fleeing Portuguese?" I asked, but received nothing more in return from the assembled engineers than a wall of uncomprehending looks.

"There are a lot of things in those drains," said Oscar, over a double espresso. "Snakes, rocks, air-conditioning units, oil, dogs, fish ... You must understand they have not been used in 30 years."

"When the Italians came they had to use metal detectors to find the manholes, which had been tarred over many times."

A young Portuguese engineer,

Amandino Silva, shot his boss a deferential look before interjecting.

"The answer is no, the drains in Beira were not sabotaged by the Portuguese. The sabotage happened at a place called Mutua beyond Dondo, about 60km from the city.

"I know, because I helped rehabilitate it in 2007. All of Beira's water used to come from there in one pipe and, as it crossed many farms, the Renamo guerrillas were able to explode it with mines in places, cutting the water supply to the city for many years."

Even if the Portuguese settlers did perpetrate some last-minute sabotage, these acts appear to have been isolated and negligible.

The collapse of Beira's plumbing had far more to do with the skills flight triggered by independence and Guebuza's hostile edicts, and with unnaturally rapid rates of

Beira

urbanisation driven by the civil war.

And then there's the inconvenient fact that much of Beira, which hugs the Pungwe River, lies up to 4m below sea level.

"At high tide," said Oscar, "you can fish down the manholes in the centre of town — just ask Francisco from Forever Pipe. He tried sucking the water out with the truck one day. Suddenly all these fish started coming in the container."

In the rainy season, floodwaters barrelling down the storm drains meet the high tide coming in, with predictable results. "The whole city becomes a rice paddy. We get floods, cholera, malaria."

Swapping the air-conditioned offices for the broken roads and insane humidity of inner-city Beira, we went looking for the Italian drain surgeons. The pictures in the project brochures I had been given showed the Italian contractors wearing nothing but boots and "hot pants", a uniform that had offended a passing minister the month before.

"Now they must wear clothes," said Oscar. "I will be honest, they do not like it here — they are working 12 hours a day, seven days a week, just so they can hurry up and go home."



Dumped: What was once the famous Grande Hotel's kitchen is now used as a latrine and rubbish dump. Photo: Lisa King

We caught up with their futuristic trucks on Rua Kruss Gomes, a litter-strewn street that abuts the canal down which the city's sewerage oozes untreated to the sea.

Team leader Fabrizio (who asked that his surname not be used; his company is wary of head-hunters) explained that Forever Pipe had divided the 20km-long sewerage and drainage system into 5000 sections not more than 40m in length.

After locating the manholes — "some of which we find in peoples' back yards and even their houses" — the section of piping is cleared by a PIGG — a ram with a steel head, powered by highly pressurised water. In many sections bilge and tons of oil that have been dumped underground over the years by workshops and garages must be pumped out. Rocks have to be teased out with specialised tools.

Where the pipes are too small for people to work in, or there is noxious gas, a €1.2-million robot is sent down to perform a high-resolution endoscopy. Then the trucks come into their own.

"In most cases," said Fabrizio, "we are not replacing the pipes. We are relining them with flat felt tubes into which we pump a thermo-activated resin. To make sure the resin does not harden before we get the tubes inside the pipes, we must keep the resin-filled tubes at seven degrees at all times, even when we are transporting them to site.

"When the tube arrives, we attach one end to the pipe that needs to be lined, and then we fire the tube in using highly pressurised water heated to 80°C by the trucks.

"The tube is basically turned inside out by the water pressure. We keep the pressure going until the resin is hard and, *voilà!* you get a perfectly relined pipe with a 30-year guarantee."

A new water-treatment plant is being built concurrently and when it and the sewers are finished, the municipality aims to extend plumbing beyond the colonial city centre and coastal suburbs to areas where overcrowding, poor sanitation and annual flooding are responsible for

some of the highest rates of malaria and cholera on the continent.

Already the floodwaters are a thing of the past in Beira. A sense of civic pride, where previously there was none, is palpable, though Afro-optimism is still alive and well.

"Wait and see what happens when the expatriate engineers and experts leave" was one of the cheerier choruses I heard about the place, often paired with: "Where will the money to maintain it all come from once the foreign sponsorship has run out?"

These people have clearly not seen how Oscar bends people to his will (when he's not running them off the road in his white twin-cab). I made the mistake of asking him if he was Portuguese.

"I am Mozambican," he said, very slowly.

To get around Beira's skills shortages, Oscar has contracted engineers like Silva to help local municipal workers to make technical, pricing and population payment capacity studies, while also helping them to access the hardware required for the

maintenance of the rehabilitated systems.

Criticism of the project is ballasted by the well-documented economic mismanagement of post-colonial times, but critics fail to recognise that the country is changing fast — that the younger generations of Mozambicans are less interested in paying fealty to the 1975 revolution than they are in seeing tangible positives derive from the country's significant and largely untapped mineral, oil and gas reserves.

Beira is now under the sway of rising political star Daviz Simango's MDM, which sailed to power on a bluster of developmental and anti-corruption rhetoric.

Out of ammunition for the moment, some of the cynics I spoke to, the same ones who apparently treasure the rumour of Portuguese sabotage, complained that the smell downtown had become unbearable "since the sewers started flowing again". It is a view that overlooks the fact that the streets themselves are now largely turd-free.



Dr Marcelino Eurico de Sales Lucas

Guiding the fight against cholera

Born in 1967, Dr Marcelino Eurico de Sales Lucas's formative years corresponded with his country's long and harrowing descent into civil war.

Nevertheless he attained a degree in biology at Maputo's Eduardo Modlane University in 1991 and was soon employing it — and several subsequent qualifications in environmental health — in the fight against cholera.

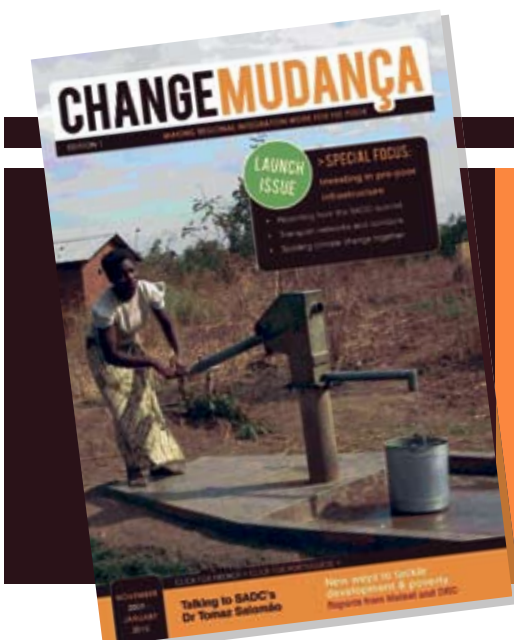
He has done research on Beira's water supply and the faecal contamination of its wells, and an assessment of the management system of its solid wastes.

Most notably Lucas coordinated and was a leading scientist on a 2002 collaboration between the Mozambican government, the World Health Organisation, Doctors without Borders and the International Vaccine Institute, which resulted in the development of Dukorol, a vaccine that has all but vanquished cholera in Beira and now plays a leading role in the combat of cholera worldwide.

Lucas also helped to develop an alternative water-treatment product called Certeza ("being sure") and was instrumental in launching a public education campaign aimed at mitigating water-borne diseases in Beira.

As head of the department of environmental health and coordinator of the infectious disease risk-management project in Beira, he was instrumental in setting up cholera wards in the city's central hospital. His dedication saw him appointed director of planning, statistics and cooperation at the ministry of science and technology in 2005.

— Sean Christie



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