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Excerpts from Nigel's African diary

I am sure most of you still remember Bernadette Hunkeler Brown and her husband Nigel. We in Wellington had the good fortune to count them among our members. They were great fun – and a tremendous help, be it with doing the dishes at our functions, be it with the yearly Garage Sale. It was with great sadness that we farewelled them. They spent three years in Mozambique, stationed in the capital Maputo. We tried to keep in contact. The Hunkeler Browns sent us their end of the year-letter, and with their permission we publish some excerpts over the next Helvetias. Bernadette and Nigel live in Dublin now.

And that's what Nigel wrote:

Bernadette was working her little heart out as usual. But on 19 January we loaded the car and headed off for a break. We managed to get as far as the Maputo tollgate (10km) before the driver's window motor seized with the window open in our old 1998 Land-Rover Freelander. An hour later, Richard our mechanic (Swiss of course!) had done some remedial work with a hammer & some cable ties and we were off again! Happily, this was not another false start and we made it through Swaziland and over the border into South Africa at Golela and found our first night's accommodation at Pongola before nightfall (you are warned not to drive after dark in rural SA). The next day we drove off through the KwaZulu-Natal canefields. It was lovely undulating country and we were amazed by the large number of birds there. After Vryheid the hills increased in stature and became mesas & buttes like those you can see in classic geomorphology textbooks... We over-nighted at Winburg, a town synonymous with the Great Trek of the Boers – our guesthouse was just across the street from the house where Churchill was reputedly held after the armoured train ambush... In an effort to see the

McNaught comet before it faded (we finally saw it 2 nights later), we drove up to the Valley of Desolation at dusk but only had the benefit of the beautiful surroundings, a few nervous Kudu and a wonderful sunset before we had to return to the gate of the National Park before lock-up.

In rain the next morning we headed South but by mid-morning it had ceased and we drove 85km through Prince Alfred's Pass, a wonderful gravel road crossing several ranges of rugged mountains and designed in the mid-19th Century along elephant tracks, which take the easy route and minimise gradients – smart engineering! – to Knysna in the Western Cape – our destination...

The political situation in Zimbabwe was deteriorating all this time. Attacks on opposition politicians & activists became more serious, blatant and unacceptable to all but the political elite that has ruined the country. They blame the period of colonial rule as an excuse for taking the land back from "foreigners". Then why are lands purchased by foreigners after Mugabe came to power also being re-appropriated? His government is as racist as any in the past. What a sad, sad place it is (these are my own views and do not represent those of the Swiss government in any way). And the international community lets this continue!! Shame on us all.

On 22 March the military magazine at Malhazine, situated just N of the airport in Maputo blew up. It sounded like distant thunder at first but escalated and continued for 3 hours before gradually dying down. Although 9 km away from our house, during this time it was shaken, doors and windows rattled and a couple of things fell over. We had a missile explode close to our house and others exploded close to the embassy on the other side of the city. The minister responsible made a radio address,

calling for calm and instructing people to close all their windows – and they believed him!! He changed his advice about 10 minutes later but it was too late for many people who needed to buy more glass! The final death-toll is guessed at somewhere over 115, with more than 500 injured. We found out later that projectiles & rockets could theoretically have flown up to 30 km. How did this happen – especially as whilst we were away in late January a part of the same facility blew up, killing a few people. The government and some NGO's were working on a plan to destroy the old rockets, shells & other explosive devices but these things take time – more than 13 years in fact. To cap it all off, the deep respect the government feels for its people was illustrated by the fact that the Minister for Defence (rumoured to be related to the president) announced immediately afterwards that the government would not pay compensation to the families of those killed, injured or whose property was damaged or destroyed. It is in times like these that I felt it was time we left that poor, sad country. However, the government did change its plans a few days later after a huge outcry and payment began, somewhat belatedly.

The next day the airport was reopened and we were able to leave for Cape Town on the direct Friday flight as Bernadette had to attend a consular conference and undertake other work-related issues on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday morning. I went along for the break at the request of the ambassador & his wife (at my own cost of course). How could I refuse!?! The place is laid-back due to the large numbers of retirees - life is more of a holiday there and the shops & restaurants reflect that. We had a great weekend to enjoy the sights of Cape Point, the penguin colony and meeting up with friends currently based in Cyprus. Our flights back through Johannesburg were good and our bags arrived with us – which is always a pleasant end to a trip!