

Photo caption: *The tracks of the Border Express run along the border between South Africa and Lesotho*

Credit: *Photo: Peter Pauls*

## The Saviour on the Border Express

How a mobile phone was lost and found again in South Africa and how such everyday stories are what bring this amazing country to life.

By Peter Pauls

The two steam locomotives of the Border Express huff and puff their way uphill. As they begin to slow down, Ben Nkosinathi jumps off. In the light of the low sun he runs along the railway track separating a field of sunflowers with hanging heads from a meadow of brilliant violet Cosmos. The narrow strip of track disappears into the distance. Clouds of dust create yellow streaks across the landscape with the Maluti Mountains of the Kingdom of Lesotho visible in the distance.

I click the shutter on my camera. Not just because this scene so wonderfully captures the evening atmosphere in the South African Free State province, but also because at this moment in time, Ben is very important to me. He is going to look for my iPhone. Not long before, while taking a photograph, my phone slipped from my hand and fell out of the old train as it clattered along through this arid landscape in the middle of nowhere. We keep half of our lives on our phones these days – and now mine was gone. Ben offered to help me.

I'm travelling around Jacob Zuma's South Africa. The entire country is getting itself ready to protest against his presidency. Zuma has let half of his cabinet go in order to keep his personal financial backers happy. Accusations that he is doing things for personal gain are constantly being made and recently this has even been determined to be the case by a court. When the president wanted to buy new cars for his wives – he has several – he took the money from the budget for police vehicles. That's how it's going in South Africa – the former ANC freedom movement has been doing more bad in government than good for the last 23 years.

For me without my phone, however, my attention is elsewhere. The demonstrations that have been called for across the country recede into the background. All my hope rests on Ben. I don't know him at all, he simply happened to be looking out of the window as my iPhone fell from my hand. He approached me and said: "Don't worry, I know this line and roughly where it fell".

***"I watched, amazed, as Ben walked along the track looking for my phone"***

I felt thoroughly miserable. But now a ray of hope had appeared. I watched Ben as he walked along the track, amazed at his willingness to help. The image we have of a country is a puzzle made up of many pieces. These include not just the important political events, but also the happenings of daily life. When a complete stranger goes looking for my 800-euro phone, this is a piece of that puzzle – a small, yet special piece. Even the most unassuming and familiar places that have been visited many

times make up part of this image. Jagersfontein may just be a small speck in the middle of South Africa on the edge of what is described as the “largest man-made hole in the world”, but I have been here many times. At one time, the lure of diamonds resulted in this mighty crater being dug. This historic mine is now closed, but the spirit of the old days runs through the dusty streets of the town with its avenues and silver-coloured, lion-headed fire hydrants. They stand as a weather-beaten testament to more prosperous times.

Jagersfontein began to grow in 1870 with the promise of quick money. The town had its own theatre, newspaper, bars and restaurants, shops, buildings with English Victorian facades and at least a dozen churches. Jagersfontein is built around a large park, in the middle of which the mighty town hall has stood for over 100 years.

It’s all long gone. Youths have burnt down the historic land registry office. Curtained display windows tell of empty stores. Churches with wonderful stained glass windows are slowly crumbling. As a symbol of this decay, in the centre of town stands a municipal services building covered in filth, with smashed windows. Next to it is a growing mound of rubbish.

South Africa is falling apart: in the glistening buildings of Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town as well as the neglected rural regions where life is only possible for those who can be self-sufficient, generate their own solar power and collect water in tanks or small reservoirs. In Jagersfontein over the last few weeks water has only been available for an hour or two at a time. People living without a nearby well, predominantly those living in black townships, must get water from the streams. The same thing that a couple of decades ago caused a scandal (“Apartheid regime refuses water to blacks”) now simply sees people shrug their shoulders. While I see people like Ben as the embodiment of hope and confidence, the remote mining town stands for decline and bad government. The situation in Jagersfontein is common in the countryside.

I certainly feel qualified to make this judgement. Once a year I travel through South Africa with my friend Alastair from Johannesburg. We like the rural villages, small shops, quirky restaurants and the stands where farmers’ wives sell home-made ginger beer, baked goods and preserves. However, more and more people are moving away. The local doctor dies, the schools and banks close and even the bars are shutting up shop. Taxes are also rising – for those who are still paying taxes at least. Alastair is a cartoonist for a South African daily newspaper. Even when things look bleak, he is still able to come up with something original. He finds the village shop to be a stage full of varied characters. Alastair loves the things you find in normal daily life, but even he has to make more of an effort to add a few small highlights. We are on the way back to Johannesburg in a somewhat depressed mood. It’s starting to get dark as a late summer storm appears. The pot holes in the road turn the car journey into a lottery – just when will we get stuck with a flat tyre? A road sign finally indicates the way to a tourist lodge on the Shaftfontein farm owned by Shani and Keith Ward. “Could we spend the night here?” we ask. Unfortunately not, say the farmers, as the old lodgings are currently being renovated. “But we have enough bedrooms in our house” says Keith after a short pause. “Just sort yourselves out”. The couple are going out as they have been invited to dinner. “There’s beer in the fridge”, shouts Keith, “We’ll see you tomorrow”. And there we were, two complete strangers left alone in the house with all their belongings.

When I was a newspaper correspondent in Germany, Austria and Switzerland in the 90s there was little room for reporting on daily life and people like the Wards and Ben Nkosinathi Masuku. Too

many reports from Africa revolved around wars and massacres. The ordinary people reveal a very different face to this country than that of its president. I often lamented the fact that I literally couldn't find space in the newspaper to write about them.

Neither Ben, who went looking for my phone, nor the Wards can break the power of Jacob Zuma. However, they do show that he does not represent all that South Africa now is. It's the changes of perspective that make very clear how friendly people can be. This is why travel is such a multi-faceted experience. The stark contrasts to the political reality highlight even more strongly the power of a civil society – a society that can be open and looks out for others. The message being conveyed by the news on TV and by the politics pages of the newspapers is just the frame in which the whole picture is set. The picture itself is made up of the small things we experience in daily life.

***“I don't want to be paid for helping” he asserts. I tell him that I really want to express my gratitude to him***

On the evening of the day I lost my phone, I'm sitting down to eat with Alastair. We are on Sandstone Farm. Here, near the border with Lesotho, the steam festival takes place every two years. This is when Sandstone owner Wilfred E. Mole opens up his sheds for 10 days to exhibit his huge number of historic narrow gauge locomotives, steam-powered buses, steam-powered tractors and ox wagons. Anything that is old, gives off steam, moves or flies, such as the historic Tiger Moth, is on show. The farm also has its own 20 km railway track. Ben is suddenly back standing in front of us, covered in sweat and worn out. I can see from his quietly triumphal look that he has found my phone. I feel the weight lifted from my mind. I take his hand and offer him some money. “I don't want to be paid for helping”, he asserts. I tell him that I really want to express my gratitude to him and that he must let me do something for him in return for helping me out.

Ben doesn't want to sit with us. He is sweaty and needs a shower. Ben is an electrician and has come to Sandstone Farm from Johannesburg with his colleague Amos. He is taking care of everything electrical. He is riding the Border Express for the same reason we are – he is curious and likes trains. That is, at least, until the moment my phone fell out the window. Ben talked about what happened after he jumped from the train and how he reached the crossroads where the phone must have fallen into the grass. He said there were children playing nearby and he feared they might have found it and taken it. Fortunately, he then noticed it lying on the ground in its black case. He hurried so that he could make it back to me and return the iPhone. He apparently had no intention of keeping the device for himself, or selling it on – a phone worth twice his monthly salary. We continue to talk for a while as I'd like to know more about him. He comes from Bulawayo in Zimbabwe where the Ndebele people live. Like thousands of well-educated people from his country, Ben works in South Africa. The money he sends home keeps the ailing Mugabe regime alive. His wife and two sons, 14 and 4 years old, are waiting for him back home.

I feel a little ashamed and helpless that I am unable to reciprocate. Men like Jacob Zuma in South Africa and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe may have the power and make the headlines, but Ben has shown me just how much greatness there can be in one person. I will not forget him.

## **The Free State – A retreat for a colourful nation**

The Free State (Freistaat) is a province with some of the most scenic landscapes in South Africa. It borders the Kingdom of Lesotho and is characterised by agriculture, but also has several gold and diamond mines. Every two years, the Steam Festival takes place on the Sandstone Estates farm near the border town of Ficksburg. The festival showcases historic railways and steam-powered vehicles of all types. The vastness of the Free State is a place of refuge for many: Black peoples who fled the Zulu king Shaka around 1800 and the arch-conservative Boers who at that time found Cape Town to be far too liberal. More recently, hippies have arrived at the Rustlers Valley Farm neighbouring the “valley of healers”, where natural healers and spiritual leaders live.

### Map Names (from top)

Harare

Zimbabwe

Namibia

Bulawayo

Botswana

Pretoria

Swaziland

Johannesburg

Ficksburg

Durban

South Africa

Lesotho

Indian Ocean

Cape Town