STEEL SAFARI

HOW THE RAILWAYS MADE MODERN AFRICA

Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship 2009

Passengers on the Victoria Falls to Bulawayo train, Zimbabwe

Melissa Shales

www.steel-safari.co.uk
THE CONCEPT OF MY FELLOWSHIP

There have been books on individual railway lines in Africa before. Many people over the decades have made the long journey from Cape–Cairo by plane, train, bike, car, horse, or on foot. Some have written it up or filmed it en route. No one has ever stopped to look at the social history of the train builders across the vast span of Africa, their impact on the continent and their legacy. I proposed to do just that.

The railways have been fundamental in spreading religion and politics. They have played their part in educating the young, building cities, toppling colonialism and corrupt dictators. This is a tale of missionaries and man-eating lions, prophets, preachers and prisoners of war. It encompasses the Great Game and the day-to-day lives of the workers, their families and the villagers along the tracks.

With the British firmly ensconced at either end of the African continent, Cecil Rhodes, great visionary or megalomaniac, depending on your point of view, dreamed of colouring the map of Africa red and of running a railway line the length of the continent, through British territory the whole way – from Cairo to Cape Town. He didn’t quite succeed, although he annexed half of Africa in the attempt. With the creation of the Tazara railway in the 1970s, the route was almost completed. The story however is not that simple.

Each of the main lines along the route was built for a different purpose. The Desert Railway in Sudan was thrown together in haste to help Kitchener get his troops to Khartoum in his epic battle against the Mahdi. Kenya’s Lunatic Line was built inland from Mombasa across virgin territory because someone had said that there was some good agricultural land near Lake Victoria and it
seemed like a good idea at the time. Cecil Rhodes, locked in an imperial 100m sprint with the German empire towards the gold fields and diamond pipes of the Boer Republics, covered southern Africa in a web of railway lines. Along the way, Indians were imported to run the railways, the Afrikaans-speaking mixed-raced communities in South Africa were created, and hotbeds of labour resistance were founded in Atbara in the Sudan. Alexandria in Egypt boasted (and still boasts) one of the world’s oldest trams. It was a mechanical and social revolution led by British engineers that quite literally transformed a continent.

What I hadn’t expected, when I started the project, was that it would also look to the future. As soon as I set foot back in Africa I discovered I had arrived at an extraordinary moment in history. The Chinese, as the new Victorians, are spending their way into a brave – and controversial – new world of vast new capital projects. Amongst them are many proposed new rail networks that could, quite literally rewrite the history of the continent once again.

ABOUT ME

Africa has always had a special place in my heart. Although I was born in London, I was brought up in Zimbabwe and as a professional travel writer, I have written extensively on the continent, including writing guidebooks to South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Kenya. It was writing these books and an initial degree in History and Archaeology sparked my interest in the railways and the crucial role they played in the opening up of the continent.
MY TRIPS

I asked Winston Churchill for a travel grant to cover 8 weeks travel down southwards through Africa on local trains (wherever possible). It wasn’t physically possible to do the whole journey overland by train or even by public transport. Nor was it possible for me to do the whole journey in one trip, due to work commitments, much as I would have love to have done so. In the event, I stretched the award to cover 9 weeks travel but made the decision to go only as far as Zimbabwe, covering the most difficult areas of the route. South Africa has the continent’s largest and most complex rail network and will take longer to research. However it also the country the most sophisticated in tourism terms and I have work contacts that will allow me to complete my research.

Trip 1
Kenya

My first trip, in October 2009, was to Kenya. Probably the most famous line in Africa, Kenya’s Lunatic Line from Mombasa to Nairobi and on to Lake Victoria was built by the British in the 1890s. The whole country was quite literally created by the building of the railway. The British were determined to secure the headwaters of the Nile at Lake Victoria and the promised rich agricultural lands of Uganda before the Germans could get there. The best way they could see of doing so was to build a £5 million railway across the virgin bush. Nairobi was founded when they reached the edge of the Rift Valley and had to set up camp while they worked out what to do next. I spent
time in Nairobi, researching at the excellent Nairobi Railway Museum, where I also met splendid self-appointed tour guide and self-taught ‘artist’, David Gitundu, who sells his paintings to tourists on the station platform in the evenings. I took the train to Mombasa, talked to Kenya Railways and visited Tsavo, where over 140 railway workers were infamously eaten by lions. The resulting frenzy of big game hunting was Kenya’s first tourism bonanza.

Trip 2

Sudan

The next trip, in February 2010, was to Sudan and Egypt. The idea was to fly to Khartoum, spend a week there, then take the train north to Wadi Halfa, the ferry across Lake Nasser to Egypt and continue north to Cairo and Alexandria by train. After a rather nail-biting wait for Sudanese visas, my time in Khartoum was inspirational.

The Desert Railway south to Khartoum was built by Lord Kitchener – a man on a mission. An engineer by training, he used prisoners of war and redcoats as he powered south on his way to Omdurman (across the Nile from Khartoum and part of the modern city) to fight the Mahdi and revenge the death of General Gordon. The history of the city, the railway and the river are all bound up together with the Anglo-Sudanese wars. Churchill was present at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, riding with the 21st Lancers and wrote one of the definitive accounts of the history of the Desert Railway. I also travelled north to the main railhead town of Atbara, on the Nile, about 300km north of Khartoum – built entirely for and by the railways with a population at its height of over 20,000. At one point the town became such a hotbed of revolutionary socialism that textbooks have been written about it. It seems unlikely these days.
It was there that my plans went awry when I discovered that Sudan Railways had cancelled the passenger train to Wadi Halfa the month before I arrived. There was now no way to do my proposed route north to Egypt by train. I comforted myself (for the first of many times) that I was writing about the history of the railways, rearranged my whole itinerary and flew north to Cairo.

**Egypt**

In a hastily rearranged schedule, I took the day train the length of the Nile from Cairo to Aswan – actually something that turned into a real bonus as I watched the Nile Valley scenery unfold. It’s an incredibly long day. By African standards, the train is very efficient but the journey is nearly 900 km. It is only recently that tourists have been allowed to take the day train, for security reasons and it was definitely first class only, if you are foreign. The Egyptians take the safety of their tourists very seriously indeed. Trains in Africa are wonderfully cheap however – other things are not, but the day train was only $28 all the way. It was $60 to come back on the sleeper, which I did after a couple of days in Aswan, visiting amongst other things the extraordinary Aswan High Dam.

From Cairo, I went north through the delta to Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast. This 209km track is Africa’s oldest railway, laid out in 1851 by Robert Stephenson (of Stephenson’s Rocket fame) himself, hired as Chief Engineer by Khedive Abbas I. Egypt was seen a link in the ‘overland route’ to India. The European superpowers of the day all had a vested interest in ensuring that modern technology could transport them across from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean by the fastest possible means. Not only did Egypt get one of the world’s oldest railways south to Cairo, but
the Alexandria tram system, founded in 1862, was the second oldest in the world and is one of the oldest still functioning. The greatest engineering triumph of all was the French-driven Suez Canal which eventually opened up the sea route.

**Trip 3**

My third trip was a month-long trip down through the centre of Africa. I realized that while I could stretch my original requested grant allocation to 9 weeks, it wasn’t going to go any further and take me the whole way to South Africa. I therefore made the decision to take my time, use the remainder of the Winston Churchill grant allocation to do this leg of the journey properly and trust to my contacts within the travel industry to allow me to complete my research at a later date.

**Tanzania**

I flew out to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, where there are two very distinct sets of railway lines. The Central Line was built just before the First World War by the Germans. It heads inland towards Lake Tanganyika via Dodoma with a branch to Arusha, in parallel to the British Lunatic Line across the border in Kenya to the north. I had been unable to find any up to date information at all on the state of this line before getting to Tanzania.

On arrival, I discovered that massive floods had destroyed vast sections of it and the whole thing was slowly – very slowly – being repaired, but not due to reopen for at least another 9 months. As it was the weekend and all offices were closed, my proposed trip to Dodoma on a ramshackle overcrowded train with wooden slatted seats turned into a day on an Indian Ocean beach! You learn to rearrange life in Africa – it’s a hard life being a traveller at times.
The Tazara Line
The other line in Tanzania is the famed Tazara Line. Also known when it was first built as the Tanzam Railway or the Uhuru (Freedom) Line, this was built by the Chinese in the 1970s. At 1860km long, it took only 5 years to construct. Its purpose – to provide landlocked Zambia with an alternative outlet to the sea that avoided having to send their freight through the then political pariah states of Rhodesia and South Africa. These days, it is still very much a trading line, both for freight trains and even for the villagers and passengers who use it as a travelling market. It’s growing ever more rickety, but the two day journey through to Kapiri Mposhi on the Zambian Copper Belt was absolutely fascinating. By sheer chance, I ended up sharing a compartment with Racheal, a lovely Zambian woman who works for Tazara and became my unofficial guide to the workings of the line, both from a railway and social perspective.

Zambia
I tried, I really tried – but even the railway managers advised me not to use the trains on security grounds. Zambian Railways are now in terminal decline, with only two third-class only passenger trains a week in either direction from Lusaka – they don’t connect with the arrival of the Tazara. It would have meant waiting 2 days for a train that would then take nearly 24 hours to do 250 km. It simply couldn’t be justified. It’s a sad end to the once complex web of services that linked the economic powerhouse of the copperbelt into southern Africa, the northern limit of Cecil Rhodes’ grand dream of a rail network across Africa. The Zambians still dream of a revival, but I suspect that is all it is.
After journeys across Zambia by taxi and bus, I reached Livingstone on the banks of the Zambezi. Here I did find a touch of the old glamour, reinstated for tourists on the Royal Livingstone Express, a lavish heritage steam train on the Mulobezi line. Originally known as the Sawmills Line, this was a private railway built to extract timber from the Mulobezi forests, much of the timber going to build more railways! It was a very glamorous dinner excursion, with a four course haute cuisine meal, shared with a French chef and 90-something South African Avon ladies!

Zimbabwe
The Victoria Falls Bridge that links Zambia and Zimbabwe is one of the great symbols of the African railway system Cecil Rhodes’ Imperial Dream. Rhodes himself chose the site of the bridge so that passengers could feel the spray of the Falls as they crossed the Zambezi. Sadly he died before it was completed. Today only the occasional excursion train ventures onto it, but there are talks about opening up cross-border services again. It cannot come too soon.

Crossing the bridge into Zimbabwe was an extraordinary, emotional moment for me. I grew up in Zimbabwe and was entering Zimbabwe for the first time in 10 years. During that time, the country I loved had been to hell. I was going back in on a journalist’s visa, something that had only become possible in the last few months. I wasn’t at all sure what I would face.
I did three rail journeys during my time in Zimbabwe, from Victoria Falls to Bulawayo, Bulawayo to Harare and Harare to Mutare, my old hometown. I visited the Hwange, best known for its game park, but also home to the Wankie colliery, the coal bunker of southern Africa for generations.

Bulawayo, in the southwest of the country, is the headquarters of Zimbabwe National Railways and home to an excellent railway museum. Just outside the city, Cecil Rhodes is buried in spectacular surroundings in the Matobo National Park. I’d been there numerous times as a child but this was the first time I discovered that he had left aside money in his will for a small railway line to be built into the hills only to allow the people of Bulawayo to visit the grave and have picnics. The ego was enormous! The line, which was to be operated at weekends only, so it didn’t interfere with work, no longer exists, but the tiny station halt does.

My last train ride of the fellowship took me overnight from Harare down to Mutare on the Mozambique border, the town in which I grew up. It cost the princely sum of US$5 first class. I shared a compartment with two women, Lynette and Tsitsi, who were both going to Mozambique to trade. Lynette had a sackload of Zimbabwean goods she was taking across the border to sell. Tsitsi was going across to buy shoes to take back on the coach to Harare to sell in Mbare market. It was her last ditch effort to raise school fees – the school term started next day. This is how Zimbabwe survives, but it is surviving. It was an extraordinary journey, culminating in a visit back to my old school, now a teacher training college, where I was greeted with an effusive welcome ranked somewhere between royal visit and living history lesson.
The Outcome

My plan was (and is) to research and write a book that will combine serious history with travelogue, social anthropology with a journey. Alongside that, I planned to create a small website and blog and do a series of travel articles and possibly some radio reports.

Throughout my various journeys, I met railway enthusiasts, visited railway museums, talked to the curators and studied their exhibits. I explored stations and railway systems, interviewed the authorities who run the railways and recorded hours of material for possible radio programmes. I also came home with several thousand photographs. I have set up a small website, www.steel-safari.co.uk, and blogged during part of the journey, although I did not post blogs while in Sudan or Zimbabwe for political reasons. There is more information to go up on the website.

So far, I have written half a dozen magazine articles based on the various trips and there are more in the pipeline. I have done one broadcast for Radio 4 and one talk at the Travel Bookshop in London. Meantime, I have finished the book synopsis and have started writing. There is a lot of historical desk research to be done to back up my observations in the field and it will be some time before the final draft is complete, but already my biggest problem is fitting everything in. I have recently got a new contract to write a regular column on South Africa that will allow me to go out there and complete the journey. Meantime, I live in a slightly surreal world of people saying ‘a book about trains? But you’re a girl!’
Thanks to Winston

I first heard about the Churchill Fellowships many years ago when a couple of travel writing colleagues, Patricia Aithie and Christopher Portway, were awarded Fellowships. I kicked myself at the time for not applying, so when Pat posted a note about a new opportunity, I was determined not to let it pass me by again. It has to be one of the best decisions I have ever made.

Several things worried me going in to the application process. I am older – in my 50s. I am a professional travel writer. Surely there would be others who deserve it more? Did my project really fulfil the criteria and benefit Britain? I was asked if I could do the project without the grant. I could not. It is hugely to the credit of the selection panel that they genuinely do award across the most extraordinary range of people and projects.

I have wanted to write this book for 20 years. Getting this award broke a Catch-22 situation in which I had interest from publishers but had no money to do the necessary research. It has helped me professionally to climb out of my pigeon hole as a guidebook writer. At a time when travel writing as a profession is a state of real crisis thanks to the recession and the arrival of the internet, this trip has given me the chance to open up new doors and markets. Any scheme that gives a fat 50-something travel writer with an arthritic knee the chance to change direction and put the fun, the energy and the inspiration back into her working life is truly life-changing.

So thank you, Winston Churchill and all the team at the Memorial Trust, for one of the best years of my working life. It will take a little while longer for the final book to appear. I hope you enjoy it when it does.