

# HEY BABE, TAKE A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE.

## Tourists and Transkei's Wild Coast.

Fourteen years ago LM radio often used to play a song by New York Rock singer Lou Reed. The beat was slow, the style laid back. "Hey Babe, Take a Walk on the Wild Side". This was a song that mellowed the mind. For many it evoked images of the carefree wilderness that was the Wild Coast.

For years the Wild Coast has conjured up visions of natural beauty, fine fishing and unspoiled beaches. Here was a place that allowed for the gay abandon of nudity and the best dope in the sub-continent. For the less hedonistic there were the resorts that mesmerised with their melodic names; Umgazi, Sinangwana, Mkambali, Hluleka, Dwesa. For those who refused to be seduced by African poetry, Coffee Bay, Trennery's and the Haven offered refuge from the hassles of everyday life. The Wild Coast had something to offer everybody. Even bank robbers like Stander, who safely camped out in Transkei when the heat was on, could appreciate its merits.

The Wild Coast's special attraction lay in a combination of tempestuous seas, natural beauty and the striking absence of neon lights, ritzy nightspots and stifling humanity which normally sully tourist areas. The history of Transkei has played a major part in preserving the coast for tourists. In the 19th century, Xhosa resistance to the invasion of Cape and British soldiers succeeded in preventing extensive white settlement north of the Kei. Although distorted by contact with colonial administration, African forms of government remained. Neither the South African state nor white settlers had much reason to invest in the area. Thus it was that South Africa's system of racial capitalism was implanted by small-scale, unspectacular agents of social change. Only white traders, Native Affairs Department officials and migrant labourers ensured that Transkei felt the powerful tremors of change emanating from the epicentre of South African history, the Witwatersrand.

It was the failure of the region's infrastructure to match the changes experienced in rural relations that marked Transkei as part of the periphery. Big tar roads, telephones, Escom electricity, chlorinated water supply and the other advantages of full incorporation into the developing regional economy were granted in meagre

quantity only. For the most part Transkei was left to struggle along with pot-holed gravel roads, out-of-order party lines and kerosene lamps. The coast attracted a few hotels which bravely tried to keep up with the times. Elsewhere it was a case of relying on outdated technology, charm and cheap crayfish to get by. Ironically it was precisely the failure of the Wild Coast to develop and adopt the gimmicks of the modern tourist age that attracted travellers.

The Wild Coast was not impervious to external pressures. The social forces that initially had bypassed it returned to impress their change. The agent of change emerged from the African forms of government preserved for over a century by South Africa's white rulers. In 1948 the Nationalist Party set about bringing the system to full maturity with its Apartheid policy. In 1976 Chief K.D. Matanzima became the first homeland leader to accept independence. International recognition soon became his obsession. He conceived of numerous bizarre schemes to trap the world into recognising Transkei. All failed. Undeterred, he tried a different tack. He began boldly to assert his independence vis a vis South Africa. Amongst his early experiments to this end was the heroic severing of diplomatic ties. Another, more successful, venture was to get Sol Kerzner to erect an opulent hotel and casino at Mzamba, just south of Port Edward and just inside Transkei. Matanzima calculated that the project would bestow both prestige and wealth on his new regime.

Money was a subject never far from the heart of Transkei's battle-hardened leader. Nor was he one to give up a chance to increase his own considerable fortune. He already controlled the lion's share of Transkei's petrol sales and now sought to move into tourism itself. He obtained a share in the Coffee Bay hotel and before long a tar road snaked its way down to the coast. In April 1985 Matanzima gave evidence of the true extent of his personal ambition with a bill (the 'Idi Amin bill') which would have forced out all non-Transkeian businessmen and made available their businesses to Transkeian citizens (including K D himself, of course). The bill was withdrawn and South Africans continued to invest. The

interest shown in tourism naturally began to change the character of the coast. Other changes within the regional economy accelerated this process. The declining value of the Rand meant that more tourists stayed in South Africa and some of these began visiting the Wild Coast. Slowly the area was pulled into the mainstream of South African tourism and began losing its romantic remoteness.

The economic downturn affected not only the wealthy. Transkei's destitute rural population (itself the product of Transkei's peripheral position in the regional economy) now began to feel the effects of retrenchments and drought. Cholera took lives in Port St. Johns and Umtata in 1983. Along the hiking trails of the coast tourists began to report that the locals were being aggressive. Particularly in Pondoland, stonings and thefts became common. A prominent Natal canoist was stabbed when he attempted to apprehend a thief one night. Transkei responded to the crisis with its usual sensitivity. It dispatched its stripling army to Pondoland where poverty was manifesting itself in, among other ways, bloody faction fights. Details of Transkei Defence Force action are sketchy but nearly 100 Mpondo were killed. The region was made governable and nervous tourists were reassured that the area was safe. Strong-arm tactics, however, could not obscure the fact that things had deteriorated. The Port St. Johns hotels had to turn away visitors because the water supply had dried up. Increasing numbers of tourists complained about the disintegrating roads, the frequency with which alienated country folk stoned passing cars and the alarmingly high levels of drunkenness amongst the police and army members manning the roadblocks that sprang up throughout the country.

The task of developing tourism in a newly independent country proved difficult. Untoward happenings bedevilled attempts to convince prospective holidaymakers to visit the Wild Coast. In contrast to the glossy pamphlet put out by the Transkei Development Corporation extolling Transkei's beauty, the dominant images were of innocent white motorcyclists arrested and kept without food in the Bizana prison, of a world champion disco queen shot dead in Mzamba's parking lot and of a black hole of Calcutta lock-up at the hotel used for incarcerating guests for conduct unbecoming. Nor could Transkei claim

to have avoided the political trouble that rippled through South Africa in 1984. The University of Transkei proved an unwilling witness to the Bantustan policy and academics were deported and students detained in the troubles that followed. Two spectacular guerilla attacks in Umtata indicated that the ANC was not neglecting its homeland operations. In 1985 and 1986 the fuel depot and the Umtata police stations were attacked, denting not only the fuel supply but the morale of the security forces. At the Mzamba complex a bomb exploded in April 1986 killing two and sending shock waves through the tourist industry as a whole.

Perhaps the worst blow to tourism resulted from petty nationalist rivalry between Ciskei and Transkei. (It should be noted that this Lilliputian feud stemmed from the same forces that gave Transkei political identity in a white-dominated South Africa. Segregation and Apartheid policies kept Transkei black and, incidentally, preserved the coastline for tourists. But Apartheid also exaggerated petty nationalisms and gave the homelands the military wherewithal to pursue nationalist ambitions.) The most recent manifestation of the feud began in September 1986 with the brazen rescue of Charles Sebe, one-time strongman of Ciskei's security forces, from a Ciskei gaol. Tit for tat detentions followed, a war of words escalated and South Africa stepped in to ease the situation. It arranged a detainee swap at the Kei Border post just after Christmas, 1986. Having failed to rescue a member of Lennox Sebe's family held in Transkei, the Ciskei retaliated by initiating a plan to deport all Transkeians resident in Ciskei in January 1987. In turn Transkei responded with an abortive attack on the Sebe residence in February. The impact that this is likely to have on tourism is difficult to assess. On the one hand, the AA has already warned motorists to avoid Transkei. On the other, Sol Kerzner has recently announced plans for a R30 million resort for Umtata.

Despite these misfortunes the Wild Coast continues to lure tourists. But now they have to contend with another dimension of wild. The sea is still wild, the vegetation likewise. The area manages to appear wild in its remoteness. But now the costs of being on the periphery are being counted in thefts, stonings and assaults. For tourists, Wild has taken on a whole new meaning. □