

Section 2

Elation meets
terror when
cultures collideUrban landscape is the scene of South Africa's uniquely vibrant mosaic, writes **Mark Gevisser**

YOUR pants is falling down!" yelled a fishwife at me at the Kalk Bay harbour last week, seemingly miffed because I had selected the wares of her competitor. "We are seeing too much of you, and it's not a pretty sight!" The entire market howled with laughter, and I retreated with mock-injured pride to buy a cappuccino at the larney Harbour House above while my fish was being gutted.

It was one of my first weekends back, living permanently in South Africa again after nearly six years in France, making a new home not far from the harbour. As I sat on the terrace at a crisp white tablecloth, spending more on a coffee than the fishwife probably has to spare on a meal for her whole family, I thought about the verticality of South African life, with the saltiness of the harbour and its struggling fishermen just below. Kalk Bay's fishing community has been outrageously dispossessed by new government regulations, which favour the big fishing fleets.

If I looked down, further, below the level of the wooden boats in the dock, I could see a mass of people squeezed into a tiny, filthy beach below the railway viaduct. The old Coloured beach of Kalk Bay — like all of the coastline around my new home — still attracts the Cape working classes on summer weekends and public holidays. Why, I asked myself, as I frequently have, do brown families still crowd in to this pen, laden with their watermelons and pots of bredie and biryani, when they are now free to go anywhere?

This time, though, the fishwife's taunt ringing in my ears, I turned my question on its head. No matter how many bourgeois-bohemians of my ilk bought fancy piles overlooking the sea in Kalk Bay, we would always have to share it: with the fishmongers and their families who lived in the flats above the harbour and with the working people for whom the railway line is a cheap escape route from the sandswept bleakness of the townships of the Cape Flats.

"Don't you worry about the rest of them," my fishmonger said to me when I went back to collect my fish from her. "I will look after you. Thank you for your loyalty!" I walked back home along the railway line, dodging inebriated young roosters with bright red comb-overs chucking their beer cans into the driveways of the good burghers of Kalk Bay while their molls wished me a "Merry Christmas, sir!"

I thought about how powerful urbanism is, in the way it forces us to rub up against others so very different from ourselves, and how most South Africans are denied this experience because of the atomised way our environments have been developed; because of the walls and the boundaries and those capsules of steel and glass that shuttle us from one gated enclave to another.

I am struck by the way we look one another in the eye and communicate with humour

Fear rules our lives too much; it keeps us too much apart. This is despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that we are forced to deal with one another, across race and class lines, every day. Because of the intense wealth disparities in this country, we encounter people dramatically different to ourselves all the time, even if many of us relate to these people as service providers, or even serfs, rather than fellow citizens.

Our interactions are by no means always pleasant, or enriching: a white swim coach beats up a black mother and calls her a whore; township gangsters invade a suburban redoubt and run riot. Still, after having been away for a while, I am struck by the way we look one another in the eye and communicate across class and race with a kind humour and even

ease — an old baas might call it sassiness — that I have come to think of as typically South African.

Perhaps it's easy for me to say that I like it, because I can retreat to my deck above it all, and look out over the waves at the whales when the people and the problems get too much for me.

I spent some weeks last year researching a story that required me to be in the townships of the Cape Flats and, getting to know them for the first time, I was shocked by how more desolate they are than those of Gauteng. I was struck, too, by the route between my new home and the Flats, along Baden-Powell Drive, through dunes studded with arum lilies, gulls wheeling above me and False Bay's waves almost crashing against my windows. The shuttle between privilege and need seems so much starker here, but so do the possibilities of the kind of urban encounter I crave, perhaps because of the public space that is available, with no equivalent in Johannesburg: the promenade, the beach, the Company Gardens.

I walked through those gardens at dusk, a few days after buying my fish, to go to an opening at the South African National Gallery of a retrospective by the incandescent Penny Siopis.

This is one of the most exciting exhibitions South Africa has seen for years, and Siopis swirls much of the turmoil of the past decades into her vibrant oils, her dense collages, her deceptively anarchic installations, and her hallucinogenic films.

There were hundreds of people at the opening, but very few of them were not white. I was reminded, with a wince, by how monochrome the launch of my own last book was, at the Wits Art Museum in Braamfontein in April last year, despite the fact that I had chosen the venue precisely because of its glass walls, and the way it opened the university up to streets of my native city. The divisions might appear starker in Cape Town, perhaps because of how small the black middle class remains



WAVES OF CHANGE: Nobody knows what our society will look like in 10 years' time, let alone 50. That is one of the reasons South Africa is such an exhilarating but sometimes terrifying country to live in
Picture: ALON SKUY



PAVEMENT PRIVILEGE: Cafés are frequented by the middle classes, who seldom connect with those they see as service providers
Picture: RUVAN BOSHOFF



DIFFERENT WORLD: Little Michael Gwanya lives in a shack settlement in Khayelitsha vastly different from other areas of the city
Picture: SHELLEY CHRISTIANS

here, but we all still live in an atomised country, 20 years after the advent of democracy.

Moving back here after nearly six years, I set against this reality the bracing engagement of South African life: the sense so many people have that things can be better. "Is today going to be good or bad for my country?" we ask ourselves. And the color-

lary: "What am I going to do about it?"

These are not questions that have worried me much in recent years. I was too far away from home to be bothered by the daily churn which obsesses us as South Africans, and I was too detached from France to worry much about what was going on there either. Besides, whatever

was going on did not seem to threaten the fundamentals of French life: there might be an economic crisis or a far-right revival, but Paris will look pretty much the same, in 10 or 50 years' time, as it does today, and as it did 50 years ago.

How different it is back here, where we really don't know what our society is going to look

like in 50 years' time, let alone 10. There is a whirr to South African life, because of this, that is both exhilarating and enervating — and sometimes terrifying. Right now, at the beginning of a new year, and with a new beginning, too, in a new home at the coast, I find myself drawn to the energy of it all rather than the terror. I find

myself making plans, big and small, to find ways of whirring rather than churning. But I know, too, that sometimes I just need to sit and look at the sea.

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An invitation to put to sea under sail

A three-masted square-rigger is waiting for those looking for a life on the ocean wave, writes **Paul Ash**

AHOY: Cape Town student Andrew Bestbier goes aloft into the rigging of The Picton Castle, a Canadian sail training ship

IF you have ever wanted to quit the grind of daily life and run away to sea on a square-rigger, your ship has come in.

On Friday, the Canadian sail-training ship Picton Castle eased into a berth at The Waterfront for a two-week refit before setting sail across the Atlantic on the final leg of its current circumnavigation.

The Picton Castle, a 55m-long, three-masted barque from Lunenburg in Nova Scotia, has been at sea for the past two years, letting the trade winds carry her across the world's oceans.

Aboard are a small professional crew and a team of volunteer deck hands from around the world who have signed on to

learn the ropes on various legs of the voyage.

Cape Town brothers Nicholas and Andrew Bestbier are two of the hundreds of volunteers who could not resist the call.

First up was Nicholas, who signed on for a year right after matric.

There was no sailing history in the family, said Andrew. "It was just a romantic idea when we saw it docked at the Waterfront."

While Nick was off on the high seas, Andrew got stuck into a chemical engineering degree at the University of Cape Town.

After two years of academia he wanted a break and signed on for a three-month voyage from Grenada in the Caribbean to Fiji.



UNDER FULL SAIL: The Picton Castle

"We went through the Panama Canal and to the Galapagos, then did a massive leg to the Pitcairn Islands — about 25 days at sea."

The work is hands-on from

the start. The crew is divided into four-hour watches, with Andrew assigned to a watch that meant being on duty from midnight and from midday, every day. "It was a bit brutal at first," he said.

At 4am, his watch would wake the next watch keeper and turn in until breakfast time.

There is always plenty of work to do on a sailing ship. Decks have to be washed twice a day. The morning watch cleans the ship. Masts and decks have to be sanded, and rust scraped off the steelwork. When the wind changes and sails need to be raised or lowered, all hands pitch in, many going aloft into the rigging, others hauling on the ropes below.

"This is not a cruise liner,"

Andrew said. "You don't come on here and relax and drink champagne. You earn your way across the ocean."

When the wind is up and the ship is flying along under all its canvas, the crew joins that mariner elite who have been to sea under sail.

"The boat is rocking and for a few days you're stumbling round," said Andrew. "But it's exhilarating. You realise how powerful the sea is, the wind is howling and everyone is running around setting sails. It's very exciting."

The downtime must be some of the best in the world. There is no internet link at sea and the crew rely on simpler pastimes. Andrew read books, entertained the ship's cat, George, or

watched the sea hiss past in all its moods.

"You never get tired of watching the sea," he said. "It was quite liberating. It was a slow-down from life."

The Picton Castle has a handful of berths open for the voyage from Cape Town to St Helena, the West Indies and home to Lunenburg.

Prospective trainees have to be at least 18 years old and, because the ship is quite a physical environment, some degree of physical fitness is required. As well as helping sail the ship, trainees are taught seamanship and navigation. There will also be time to explore exotic tropical ports and islands.

● For more information, visit picton-castle.com



END OF SEASON

NOW ON

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