



University of the Road (A Backpacker's Letters Home)

Prologue

It was 1976 – the height of apartheid in South Africa. Just to give you an idea of the restrictions on the freedom of the press, I had not even heard of Nelson Mandela.

At the time, I was at university studying for a degree in Sociable Science (ok, Social Science) majoring in Psychology and Sociology – or, to be more accurate, surfing and drinking!

Feeling pessimistic about the long-term future of South Africa, I felt I had to get out of the country before a bloodbath occurred. But I was facing a dilemma about just how to go about it. Should I:

- 1. Get started climbing the corporate ladder?** I could put my schooling to use, join the shirt-and-tie set, and launch my career in... well, something.
- 2. Go backpacking around the world?** Taking a gap year or two (or three) to roam around the globe was a longtime fantasy of mine.

After three minutes of serious thought, I decided it was just far too responsible to go into the workforce.

So backpacking around the world it was.

There was one small problem: I had absolutely *no money*.

At the time, the joke was that because of South African foreign exchange restrictions, South Africans could only take \$1,000 out of the country. When I mentioned to people what I had in mind, they would all ask how I was going to get the additional thousands of dollars out of the country to fund the trip. That was easy – I only had \$800 to my name!

I knew that to fund my adventure, I needed a plan. One that involved a paying job.

Plan 1: Contiki Bus Driver. This seemed like a pretty good idea: as a tour bus driver, I'd be able to cover 35 countries in 35 days and cram in plenty of socialising as well. All I needed was a bus driver's licence. So I got a bus driver's licence.

Plan 2: Sailor. Towards the end of my studies, I realised there was a Cape Town-to-Rio yacht race coming up. Held every four years, this might be a great and affordable way to start my around-the-world jaunt. Another "small problem," though: I had never sailed before. In fact, I had never even been out to sea a day in my life.

Not to worry, I thought. This was nothing a couple of weekends of dinghy sailing at the university yacht club on Durban Harbour would not solve (a mistaken notion, but I'll get to that later).

Emboldened by my two weekends of "sailing experience", I decided it was time to advertise my newfound skills in the different yacht clubs around Durban. The ad went something like this:

Experienced crew and deckhand seeking berth on Cape to Rio yacht race

I suspected there might be a hiccup, and of course everybody who interviewed me saw straight through me and realised I had no experience at all.

Not one to be easily deterred, I knew that I had to ramp up my skill set. So I attended a basic navigation course in the yacht club one Sunday afternoon. In essence, I learned how to read a map.

After that enlightening experience, I rewrote my ad to look like this:

Experienced crew, deckhand, and navigator seeking berth on Cape to Rio yacht race

Again, most people were able to figure out that I had no sailing experience whatsoever. However, one person did have the courage to take me on, on the basis that I didn't have to actually *navigate* anything. He just needed me aboard the vessel in the unfortunate event he fell overboard.

Victory! With the Cape-to-Rio yacht race, I had the first leg of my trip covered. And so, my adventure around the globe had begun.

What follows are excerpts from my letters home.



Sailor? Those were the days!



My ticket to Rio

Chapter 1 – A Sailor is Born

Letter 8 January 1976

Dear Mum and Dad,

I'm alive and well, but still recovering from some shocks.

Before the race started, we had to reposition the yacht from Durban down to Cape Town. Seasickness overtook me; it was like nothing I'd ever experienced. I did tell the rest of the crew that I had never been seasick (which was the God's honest truth, I just didn't tell them that I had never been to sea, either).

Once I got over the nonstop vomiting overboard, I was finally able to steer the yacht and haul in the odd sail or two. Since I had hitchhiked down the coast before and knew most of the landmarks along the way, navigation was fairly easy. But I didn't realise this route around the South African coast is also one of the busiest sea-lanes in the world, with super tankers and ships plying up and down the coast. Large tankers that cannot fit through the Suez Canal have to go via South Africa on their way from the Middle East to Europe and the U.S. So we spent most of the day and night dodging huge tankers.



BEWARE Tankers!!

I also learned that before it was named the “Cape of Good Hope”, the other name being considered was the “Cape of Storms”. We hit a major storm a few days into the trip – some of the waves came three-quarters up the mast (in our 42-foot yacht!). Naïve me thought it was great fun ‘surfing’ these monster waves. I had zero understanding of the dangers at all!



Let's go surfing. Maybe not such a great idea!

One night I was on duty steering the boat – it was dark and misty. I saw two vessels coming towards us – one in either direction. As the ships didn't seem to be moving at great speed, I believed we had enough time to get through the middle of them before tacking out to sea again. As the yacht got closer to the lights, fortunately there was a break in the clouds and I realised (just in time) that the lights were actually two houses on land. I had been trying to go between them! Luckily everybody was sleeping below and didn't know what was happening!

A bit further down the coast going around Cape Agulhas, there was yet another tanker coming towards us. Again, I was on duty and figured that as the ship was coming around the corner, we could take it on the inside. As we got closer one of my crewmates (who happened to be reading one of the updates for the navigation manual), discovered that this ship had run aground a few months ago. Again, just in time, we turned the yacht around and headed back out to sea.

Despite all this, we made it to Cape Town safely. You'll be proud to know that your son is now an experienced crewmember.

Dave

Letter 17 February 1976

I'm writing to you from Rio!

After preparing the yacht, we headed for the start line of the Cape Town-to-Rio yacht race on January 10 along with 132 other yachts.



Start of Cape Town to Rio Yacht Race

I wasn't too worried about the navigation, as my skipper had said in my interview that he could navigate and I was just a backup. I had also assumed we would just follow the other yachts. That was wrong – after the first night, we didn't see another yacht until we got to Rio.

The first five days we sailed up along the coast with vision of the land – so no navigation was needed. After leaving the sight of land, the skipper asked me to start navigating. He looked at me and I looked at him, and we realised that both of us had been bullshitting (sorry, Mum). He was not a skipper and I was not a navigator.

Fortunately I had bought a book in Cape Town called “The ABC of Navigation.” I studied like mad to try and differentiate what was the moon and what were stars. (I also kept in mind the tip Dad had given me, that if we saw any icebergs, we were most probably too far south.)

The big problem with learning to navigate on the fly was that I didn’t have any reference point to check if I was right or wrong. The only point of reference was the small island of Trinidad about 1,000 kms off the coast of Rio de Janeiro. I had calculated that we were due to go around (or was that aground) the island one night at 2am. Low and behold, at 2am that night, we rounded the island. Yeah! I could navigate!

We made it to Rio in 35 days. It seems most yachts took between 17 to 20 days to complete the course. Not sure if our boat was slow, or if we got lost. (I am sure there were no navigation errors!)

The bad news: I (and the rest of the crew) got kicked off the boat by the owner as soon as we got in to Rio. So much for sailing to the Caribbean with them.

The good news: We arrived just in time for the prize ceremony at the Rio Yacht Club. All the other crews had Brazilian beauties hanging off their arms. But of course, I ended up at a table full of older women. At first I was disappointed, but it turned out these women had beautiful daughters who were dying to meet ‘experienced sailors’ like me.

Life in Rio has certainly picked up since then.

Letter 28 February 1976

I've been in Rio for a few weeks now and things are going well. Spending a lot of time in the Rio Yacht Club below Sugarloaf Mountain, where I learnt my first Portuguese words – “uno Brahma Chopp por favor” (one beer, please).

Being a very naïve traveller, I didn't actually realise that the locals don't understand English, so for the first few weeks I had to eat pizza for breakfast, lunch and dinner as this was the only thing I could understand on the menu. I'll be happy to never see pizza again.

When we first got here we were spending loads of time on the verandah of the yacht club, but I was cruising through my budget a bit too rapidly. Luckily, I discovered the workman's dining room at the back of the club where prices were a quarter of the member's area for twice as much food, albeit with a few extra flies. No bother, as the flies don't eat much at all.

I love everything about Brazil – except the driving. The taxi drivers here could easily pass for Formula One drivers. The rule of the road in Brazil is that if you are a quarter of an inch in front of the car next to you, you have full right of way. No need for brakes – the hooter does everything.

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