

TONY CARNIE looks at life in the capital of the world's poorest country

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Maputo clawing itself out of the gutter



Rubbish bin raiding in the centre of Maputo

IF ANYONE WANTS to know where old ships and old aeroplanes go to die, Maputo must rank as a worthy contender.

A veritable graveyard of rusty shipwrecks clogs the harbour of Mozambique's capital city — providing an early indication of the devastation that has happened there since independence 17 years ago.

And visitors arriving by air won't have to look hard to spot the abandoned rail trucks, or the scrap heap of aircraft and helicopters which lie discarded next to the runway at Mavalane airport.

Apart from ageing skyscrapers built by the former Portuguese rulers and a handful of new buildings, the city looks very much like a giant, dusty squatter camp.

Thousands on thousands of refugees have fled the inland war zones to erect shanty settlements on the outskirts of the capital — swelling the army of unemployed street urchins who besiege foreign visitors and plead for a few bank notes.

There's little point in begging for coins here; repeated devaluation of the Mozambican metical has rendered them worthless.

Even the bank notes aren't worth an awful lot, so the currency for hotel accommodation is the US dollar or the South African rand.

And very few visitors bother exchanging their foreign currency at legal outlets, preferring to deal with black marketeers who swop money in full view of anyone who cares to watch.

Brought to its knees by a decade and a half of war and bungled financial policies, the World Bank recently described Mozambique as the poorest, hungriest, most indebted and most aid-dependent country in the world.

But in spite of these ravages, the poor man of Africa is slowly crawling out of the gutter — mainly due to the strict financial medicine imposed by foreign donor governments, and a decided shift away from hardline socialism.

And Maputo, albeit run-down and neglected, is steadily attracting businessmen and a trickle of tourists.

It wasn't so long ago that the streets were virtually deserted because of fuel shortages.

Petrol can now be obtained readily at filling stations, or in handy-sized five litre wine bottles which are sold by informal sector merchants on the side of the road.

You can buy imported beers and cigarettes, hire a car at the airport or get copies South African newspapers. Some hotels even have a regular supply of hot water.

Luxury doesn't come cheap though.

A can of Lion lager at the five-star Polana Hotel will set you back \$2.50 or R7.50, and packet of 20 cigarettes costs R6.60.

A night in an air-conditioned double room at the Polana costs a minimum of R330, with a full English breakfast an extra R37.50. You can also telephone Durban for three minutes from your room for another R63.

There are a number of nightspots to choose from, including the upmarket Club Sheikh and

the more youthful Club Mini Golf — both open to the early hours.

A number of restaurants and pavement cafes have also re-opened in several parts of the city, offering good quality seafood at reasonable prices.

But Maputo remains a city of contrasts.

Goats graze on the grass near State House, and children raid rubbish bins in the main street.

Just up the road from the Cardoso Hotel there's a massive shebeen complex called Dumboanengue — trust your legs — so named because the merchants there often had to make a run for it during frequent police raids.

Businessmen Antonio Gomes said the complex was legalised recently, but it used to be one of the few places where second-hand car parts were obtainable — mostly of the mid-night variety.

"You could drive up to Dumbanengue, place your order, and collect another car engine in less than three hours."

Jose Mendez, a Portuguese hotelier who has returned to Maputo, says he was shocked to see how the city had changed when he arrived 12 months ago.

"But there has been a definite improvement in recent months. The shops are fully stocked now — although most people don't have the money to buy anything."

Corruption is also discussed openly in the media, he says.

"I get the feeling that the authorities are really making an effort to put a stop to it."