

# The ghost of Beira <sup>WMail</sup> awaits the big boom <sup>8-14</sup> <sub>3</sub> <sub>91</sub>

Civil war has turned Beira into a ghost of its former self, seduced by the past, and haunted by the future.

By **ANDREW MELDRUM**

CRANES hoist crates of coffee onto one ship while containers of Canadian food aid are lifted off another freighter. Nearby workers strain under the beating sun to lay a sturdy platform over the new concrete piles supporting the rebuilt Beira port.

The massive construction work, carried out to the highest engineering standards, and the busy shipping activity make Beira port a hive of activity which contrasts sharply with the desultory, languid pace of life throughout the rest of the tropical, battered city.

Fifteen years of rebel war, years without the port's vital economic activity, months on end without electricity and water, have turned the once prosperous port and flamboyant seaside resort into a ghost of its former self, seduced by its own memories and haunted by the staggering amount of work needed to bring the city back to life.

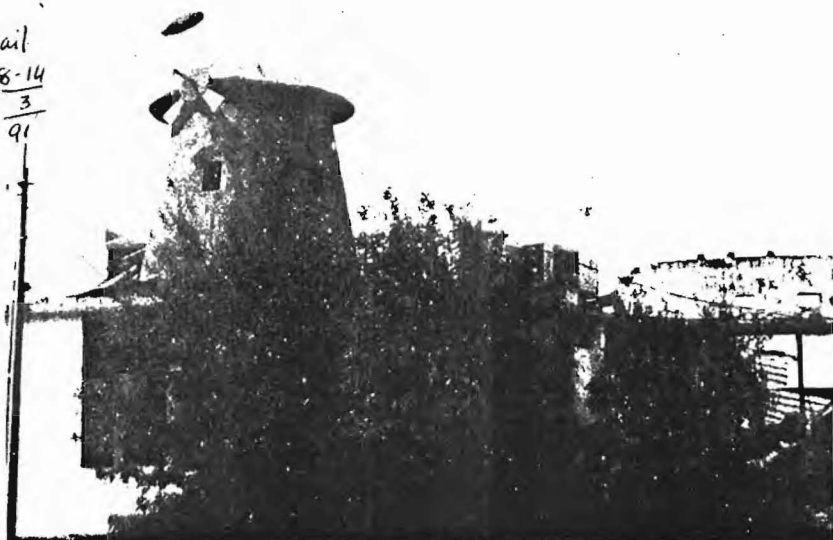
The striking sight of the red windmill of the Moulin Rouge nightclub is still the first thing seen by all those entering the port. The trademark windmill used to beckon sailors into the three-

storey club for food, wine, music and an introduction to Beira's legendary ladies of the night. Today the rusting windmill tilts unsteadily, the ballroom roof has collapsed and the plate glass windows are long gone. Yet, so indicative of Beira's struggle to keep going, in the cavern of the Moulin Rouge there is a brisk business in grilling piri-piri chicken for take-aways.

"I think Beira reached rock bottom in about 1984. There was nothing to eat, nothing in the market, the electricity was off, there was no water for five months. It was terrible," recalled Antonio Gaspar, shaking his head. "We couldn't get any soap so my wife used to wash our clothes with pawpaw leaves."

Gaspar (73) has lived in Beira since 1939 and can remember its peaks and troughs. "I've seen this city develop and I've experienced its deterioration. Now I want to see it come up again," said Gaspar, the commercial director of the large AMI freight firm.

Beira's story began in about 1899 when Portuguese colonialists leased



Relic of the past ... the once legendary Moulin Rouge nightclub in Beira, now an abandoned wreck

the territory to the British who developed the port as the best outlet to the sea for Rhodesia. In 1939 there were three wharves handling Rhodesia's mineral exports and all its imports. Mozambique was exporting maize, grown in the area now called the Beira Corridor.

"There were 400 British here then and the city was administered under British law and we used British currency," said Gaspar. "That was really the high

colonial period. All the British wore white linen suits and pith helmets to protect them from the heat. They built a trolley system and Africans would push a car carrying three or four people along the tracks."

Today even the hardest bitten ex-Rhodesians get a romantic, misty look when they talk about Beira.

"Leave here at 6am, be in Beira by noon," said one former rugby player.

"Then it was seaside cafes, *cervessas* and prawns piri-piri. There was always something going on."

"Those were the times. Beira was booming," recalled Gaspar. "On holidays the town would be full of Rhodesians, drinking beer. At the bullfights they would jump into the ring. In town they would drink beer and then dive into a central fountain. The police would chase them around and we all watched, it was a spectacle."

Gaspar said Beira's fevered high life continued right up to 1975 when Mozambique won its independence from Portugal. Then Beira's bubble burst. The Portuguese fled the country en masse and Samora Machel closed its border with Rhodesia to enforce international sanctions against the Smith regime. Beira's tourism dried up and so did much of its port traffic. The decline began.

By the 1980s the city's depression intensified as a result of Renamo's war. Cafes closed, shops were shuttered and the port traffic slowed down to a trickle of just a few hundred thousand tons. Sabotage knocked out power, water and bridges. Refugees from the rural areas flooded the city.

With the support of Zimbabwean troops, the transport route from Zimbabwe to the port is relatively secure. Zimbabwe is moving one-third of its traffic through Beira and in 1990 Beira's freight was up to 2.2-million tons. By 1992 the new quays will be completed and there are goals of 5-million tons of traffic per year.

The electricity supply is now secure and slowly Beira is stirring back to life. Sidewalk cafes and restaurants that were shuttered two years ago are now back in business.

"I think Beira's future is bright," said Gaspar from his office overlooking the port. "The only thing hampering progress is the war. The port is already operating well and could be really busy. Sofala, Manica and Zambezia are rich provinces and we could be the urban centre for all that. Even tourism could take off again, if only there were peace. We have to look forward to that. If there were peace, Beira could boom again."