

## Word from the kopje

2 March 2007



It's not just sunshine in South Africa... Kerry Underwood remembers some of the wild times

It's 'word from the kopje' rather than 'word on the street' this month, as it is that time of year again when I escape the English winter by delivering CPD hours in South Africa to other solicitors from England and Wales who come out for that purpose.

So by way of light relief, let's look at some of the more memorable incidents from the four years that we have been lecturing in Africa.

### Meeting a baboon

One highlight was the confrontation between Tony Learmonth of Coyne Learmonth of Liverpool and an alpha male baboon of Cape Point, Western Cape, Republic of South Africa. We were travelling around the Cape of Good Hope (onshore!) in a people-carrier and everyone except Tony got out to look at some baboons. Someone left the passenger window open. A huge alpha male baboon, seeing two rows of empty seats assumed an empty car and swiftly jumped in, threw a handbag on to the road and then came face-to-face with Tony, who was sitting in the back row.

If I could have told which was which, I might have tried to rescue one of them, instead of just taking a photo. It was an ugly confrontation. The baboon backed off, jumped out and returned to the handbag it had tossed on to the ground. Discarding credit cards, lipstick etc, it came upon a tin of Vaseline. It deftly unscrewed the top and, sitting in the middle of the road, gently and with evident relief applied the Vaseline to its presumably dry nether regions. I still wonder whether the story would have ended so happily for Tony if it had discovered the Vaseline *before* seeing Tony.

This did not stop him (Tony, not the baboon) from diving with sharks in Cape Town the next morning. I dislike those US jokes about lawyers being safe from shark attacks because of professional courtesy, but even Tony was not game enough to test out the theory – he insisted on using the cage provided for non-lawyers.

Managing a firm of solicitors has famously been compared to herding cats. One year we took everyone to Fugitive's Drift for exploration of Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana, the sites of the two most famous battles of the 1879 Anglo-Zulu war, as per Michael Caine. I was tour leading and Andy Wakeford, chef, driver, database maintainer etc, was driving us back to Durban for the flight to Cape

Town. We both knew that we were very tight for time and chivvied everyone up, but they were unchivviable. I became a little flustered, pointing out that the flight was at 6 o'clock, it was now 4 o'clock and we were 119 miles from the airport. Six intelligent solicitors relaxed, pointed to the tickets saying '1800 hours', all absolutely convinced that this meant 8 o'clock, which is why no one was hurrying.

We screeched to a halt at Durban Airport where the forewarned waiting staff unhooked the luggage trailer and got everything, including all of us, on to the plane in five minutes' flat. The air hostess poured me a large drink and I was apparently already snoring contentedly when we took off two minutes later.

Two of this year's party, before joining us, were at Fugitive's Drift when David Rattray, the historian who owned it, was murdered.

From our own firm of solicitors, four solicitors and three trainee solicitors have made the trip over the years. It is not easy being a trainee at Underwoods, and nor is it meant to be, but there are consolations, like walking across the Zambezi River and seeing Victoria Falls from directly above, and like close encounters with elephants and hippos in Chobe National Park in Botswana. You do not get that at Freshoveries and you will not get it at Tessbury's either.

## **Robben Island**

And we teach and we learn. A visit to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela and others were imprisoned, is compulsory – literally – if you do not agree to it, you do not come on our trips. That visit is humbling and salutary. It is a reminder to every solicitor and trainee as to what being a lawyer is all about.

That is as opposed to what some lawyers think that being a lawyer is about. I will get a number of letters in response to this column telling me of various regulations that I have broken (I am serious – never underestimate the heavyweight anorak quality of some of our colleagues). So, yes, we are a properly bonded tour operator, yes we are CPD-accredited. No, I was not supposed to take my trainee (and her 9-year-old daughter) across the Zambezi on foot – breach of the Zambian Park regulations I am afraid – and lots of Law Society guidance notes as well I expect. Sharks, baboons, solicitors, trainees and daughters: well, they all survived, albeit traumatised, the animals by the lawyers and the lawyers by the lectures.

It doesn't have to all be doom and gloom. Legal Services Act? Carter? The End of Western Civilisation as we know it?

Who cares? Next year in Cape Town....

Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika.

God Bless Africa.

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Postscript:

Kerry Underwood is senior partner in Underwoods