

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

Memoirs of a Bus Anorak: 1940 to 2009, by the Revd. Terry Challis

Chapter 13: Being a Passenger and a Customer in the Netherlands and Kenya.

Early in September 1972, June and I set off for Kenya. We were to travel there on flights of KLM as the Church Missionary Society sometimes used the services of 'Raptim'. This was a travel firm based in the Netherlands that arranged travel for missionaries of various Christian denominations. The plan was that we would travel to Amsterdam on a Saturday, stay at the Hospice San Lucetio and travel on to Nairobi on the Monday.

It was the first time that I had flown but not June's first flight. June's parents saw us off at Heathrow on Saturday morning. The airliner was a DC 9 of KLM. Having arrived at Schiphol Airport, we caught a KLM Leyland 'Worldmaster' bus to the city centre and then made our way to the Hospice San Lucetio. The Hospice was a well run Roman Catholic guest house where we were made most welcome. Being our first visit to Amsterdam we had a look around on the rest of Saturday and I found the trams to be very interesting: as I still do! However we could not travel on them because we did not know how to pay.

This problem was resolved on the Sunday. We attended the Anglican Church and over coffee after the service one of the congregation who, I think, worked for the transport authority explained how to buy a ticket and validate it on the tram. Armed with this knowledge, we enjoyed our first rides on Amsterdam trams. However, they were not our first rides on trams. I should have explained: June's home was at Blackpool! One of the things that puzzled me was the way that passengers changed from tram to tram without validating a ticket. I later discovered that the tickets were valid for 45 minutes from the time of validation. This was my first experience of 'off-bus or tram' ticketing and I have come to think that it is the best solution for one-person operated town services.

On the Monday we made our way back to Schiphol Airport for our flight to Nairobi. This was made on a KLM DC 8. The only noteworthy incident of the flight was that when we touched down at Kampala, across the airport, we could see East African Asians, refugees from President Amin's regime, boarding a UK bound Bristol Britannia.

We arrived safely in Nairobi and a missionary colleague collected us and took us to the Church of the Province of Kenya Guest House. We were to spend three months there learning the language of the Luo people of Nyanza province where we would be living and working.

Living in Nairobi was a good experience in many ways: not least bus-wise. The local services were run by Kenya Bus Services mainly with green and white Leyland Comets with local bodies. However in 1972 the newest buses were Guy 'Victories' with Gardner 6LX engines. There were also a few Guy Arab 1Vs with Park Royal bodies and 'tin-fronts'. They were rather battered and only appeared at peak times. I only had cause to travel on them a few times but was interested to discover that the conductors used Setright Speed machines. The buses were usually very crowded.

The most interesting bus experience was a visit to Murang'a (Fort Hall in colonial days) at the invitation of a missionary friend from our time in Birmingham. We travelled on a Saturday afternoon from Nairobi and the two hour journey which covered about fifty miles was made in a coach of the East African Road Services: also known as OTC (Overland Transport Company). I believe that it was part of the same group as Kenya Bus Services.

OTC was Overseas Touring Company and EARS kept the name on unofficially as it was so well-known. [Arriva please note in Maidstone, Midland Red, area, etc]. Both EARS and KBS and KBS [Mombasa] were in United Transport Overseas, UTO. as was UT Malawi and were earlier CARS, N Rhodesia, DMT, Dar, Uganda T Co, etc, but these had all been nationalised by 1974. Incidentally EARS still had a sub ULWT, United Land & Water Tpt, based in Kisumu, until 1976.

This was a Leyland 'Comet' with locally built body. The journey out of Nairobi was uneventful and on time. After a pleasant weekend we travelled back on the Sunday afternoon. About half-way, we stopped in the middle of the 'bush' for no apparent reason. We were the only Europeans in the coach. All the Africans alighted. The women went into the bush on one side of the coach and the men went into the bush on the other side. It was then that we realised that this was the 'comfort' stop!

After a month or so we were issued with our missionary society car: a pink Renault 4 or 'Roho', as they were known by many people. This was a small (850cc engine) car with good ground clearance. It was not a four-wheel drive but it was economical and reliable. In the three years that we had it, it only got stuck in the mud twice. However being relatively light some local children could push it out of the mud easily for a small sum of money!

We made our first visit to Kisumu and Nyanza Province, where we were due to live and work and work, after about six weeks into our language course. We were the only two people learning the Luo language and it was thought that it would be good for us to get some first-hand experience of 'Luoland' (Nyanza). In December 1972 we made the move to Kisumu, the main Kenyan town on Lake Victoria, which is a little over 200 miles from Nairobi. There I took up my position of Bishop's Chaplain and Administrative Secretary of the Diocese of Maseno South.

Bishop Evan Agola was a kindly man in his mid-sixties who was due to retire in 1973. He also had a Renault4, a white one, but on most of our travels together we used my car and I acted as chauffeur. This was useful as in this way I learnt the geography of the Diocese and with the Bishop's advice, got used to driving on unmade roads and tracks. When we came to patches of mud, he would bang his stick on the floor of the car and shout: 'Keep going! Keep going!' it generally worked!

My only use of public transport was for visits to Nairobi for Church meetings and so on. When we arrived in Kisumu there were two main ways of travelling by public transport to Nairobi. The quickest way was by 'Peugeot' taxi... These were Peugeot 404 estate cars which carried six passengers and completed the journey in a remarkable 4 hours. The main road to Nairobi was tarmacked but nevertheless this is quite an achievement. The taxis left at 8am. in the morning and returned at about 2pm. The main company was Rift Valley Peugeots (RVP) who had the contract to carry the mail for the Kenyan Post Office. However there were a number of companies to choose from. In those days the fare was twenty Kenyan shillings (just over £1 sterling): it was good value and surprisingly safe and reliable.

When the Peugeot 504 was introduced, the number of passengers was increased to seven: three passengers were made to sit on the 'dicky' seat at the rear of the car. This was a very uncomfortable place to sit! In 1975 some firms introduced 'matatu' type vehicles. These were the vehicles that had been used for years as local

minibuses. Some were Nissan or Toyota van type minibuses but, at that time, most 'matatus' were converted Peugeot 404 pick-up trucks with a simple roof and longitudinal seating for (nominally) about twelve passengers: plus two in the cab with the driver. However they were generally overcrowded and there were some bad accidents which sometimes involved the 'matatu' trying to race a train over a railway crossing. No doubt the passengers in the cab paid a premium for the extra comfort and the dubious privilege of being first through the windscreen in the case of an accident. 'Matatus' had a bad reputation for over-crowding and accidents. However, on one of my last journeys from Nairobi to Kisumu, late in 1975, I travelled on a Peugeot 404 'matatu' which had seats for, I think, nine or ten laterally across the vehicle. At first, sitting relatively high up was a bit disconcerting but the 404 rode remarkably well and I soon got used to it. We made good time and got to Kisumu safely.

There were many local buses that operated from Kisumu Bus Station but I never had needed to use them. However, one Saturday, June had cause to use one on her way back from a Sunday School Conference. Her journey of about twenty-five miles was made safely and in good time and she told me that she was to feel very welcome on the bus by the crew and passengers. There were usually a driver and at least two conductors. There were many local or country buses to Nairobi but I was advised not to use them by my African colleagues as you could never be sure when they would arrive in Nairobi. Apparently it was not unusual for them to stop off in a market for a couple of hours: probably waiting for more passengers.

East African Road Services ran some buses to Kisumu but they were very slow and Kisumu did not seem to be an important destination for them. The Kisumu service was, I believe, part of the Nairobi to Kampala (Uganda) service. Occasionally, someone in the office reported that the overnight bus from Kampala to Kisumu was late. The usual explanation was that it had reached Maseno, about 20 miles from Kisumu, and discovered boulders across the road. The procedure, apparently, was to reverse to a safe place and wait until day-light. The danger of being ambushed by robbers would have evaporated by then!

The Kamba people of Kenya, whose homeland lies about half-way between Nairobi and Mombasa and is centred on Machakos, seem to specialise in running bus services all over Kenya. In 1973, Akamba Bus Services began an express bus service from Kisumu to Nairobi with one journey in each direction each day. The service to Nairobi left Kisumu at (I think) 8am. and arrived at 1pm. The return journey left Nairobi at 3pm. and arrived in Kisumu at about 8pm. The service proved to be safe and reliable and, quite often, ran early. There was usually a comfort stop at Nakuru but on occasions this was left out. It was best not to drink too much before the journey! The vehicles used were Leyland/Albion Comets with local bodies fitted with high-backed seats. They were well turned out and reasonably comfortable. The fare was, I think, 15 Kenyan Shillings.

There was also, of course, the most traditional way of travelling to Nairobi: by train! The service from Kisumu took over twelve hours. It left at 6 (or 6.30) pm and arrived at Nairobi at 8am. the next morning. It was not, therefore, a fast way to travel but it was the most comfortable. I only travelled by train 'to' Nairobi as the journey was usually for a morning meeting. I then came home by taxi or Akamba bus. I was told not to travel third class as that would be too dangerous: the third class coaches were patrolled by policemen with rifles. On my first journey, I travelled second class which meant sharing a compartment and sleeping with five other people. When the Bishop and the other 'powers that be' in the Church discovered that I had travelled second class, I was told in no uncertain terms that I should travel 'first class' and not feel guilty about it.

In first class I shared a compartment with one other passenger and had a proper bunk to sleep in. I also had dinner in the dining-car as the train, hauled by a diesel engine, made its way slowly up the escarpment on its way to Fort Ternan and Nakuru. I well remember having soup, followed by roast Molo lamb, followed by Queen of Puddings served steaming hot from a dish. Some of the colonial traditions were still maintained! However, a full menu of African food was also available. Having had a good night's sleep, it was time for a full English breakfast served efficiently as the train rumbled through the Nairobi suburbs into Nairobi Station. It was not an expensive way to travel but it was a stylish way to travel: in first class at least!

The trains were usually hauled by a diesel electric locomotive that had worked its way into Kisumu from Nakuru during the afternoon. However, one evening I arrived at Kisumu Station to see smoke at the front of the train. Intrigued, I went to investigate and discovered that the motive power was 'two' tender locomotives. I believe that they were 4-6-0s. At that time all steam locos in Kenya, and there were many, were oil-fired. Apparently, there had been a problem up the line and the diesel engine had not been able to get to Kisumu. The two steam locos hauled us up the escarpment to Fort Ternan where the diesel took over. It was a memorable occasion.

Our first child, Debbie was born in Kisumu in September 1975 and in December of that year we returned home to England. My job was being taken over by an African and there was no longer any obvious role for me in the Church in Kenya. We therefore left Kenya after three busy, interesting and worthwhile years. However the journey home was not without incident.

We left Nairobi at midnight on a flight of British Caledonian Airways worked by a Boeing 707. When we reached the UK, Gatwick Airport was covered in freezing fog so we were diverted to Luton. This was a little more than a nuisance, as we were due to fly on to Manchester from Gatwick and we had a three months old baby with us!

We travelled from Luton to London Victoria by coach: it was a Caetano bodied Bedford. We were then given vouchers to travel to Manchester by train. Having discovered that the 'Tube' was no way to travel with a baby in a cot in the pre-Christmas rush, we got a taxi to Euston. We then travelled to Manchester where June's parents, who had been alerted to the change of plans, met us at Piccadilly Station.

We then spent three months travelling the country recounting our exploits to friends at various churches. Then, in March 1976, I was licensed as the Priest-in-Charge of Christ Church, Sparkbrook in Birmingham and Assistant Community Relations Chaplain in the Diocese of Birmingham. We were back in the West Midlands: more about that in the next chapter.