

Secret to the Greatness of Zimbabwe

- By 2 Wheels 2 Capes, "Moto piedzīvojumu klubs ""apPasaule""", Latvija

Our biking expedition has arrived in Zimbabwe. On the early sunny morning we get up and pack up our little tent camp. We want to leave as early as possible to visit the historical site called Great Zimbabwe before the day gets as hot as a furnace with its +30C or more.

It is one of the oldest buildings and definitely the biggest historical structure in Africa to the south of the equator. This fortified town north of Zimbabwe was built in the 11th-13th century and flourished until the 14th century. It was the centre of a developed civilization. The kingdom controlled large areas and developed gold mining, and merchants travelled there as far as from Asia. However, the wealth did not ensure long-term prosperity and grandeur. The growth stopped due to overpopulation, disease and internal conflicts, and the kingdom ceased to exist. The first Europeans who arrived here in the 15th century discovered nothing else but the abandoned town.

We ride on up to the parking lot at this historic site and realize that we'll be among the first visitors. We leave the bikes behind and start walking towards the mountain citadel, scaring away a bunch of monkeys along the way. It seems they are the ones who represent the local population here now. The main fortifications are built on a rocky hill about 100 metres vertically above the rest of the valley. We climb up the narrow stone path which runs between the ten-metre high rock blocks, looking like a natural gate.

When we stop to take yet another picture of the lovely view of the valley, we are greeted by another early visitor. So the three of us continue climbing all together and engage in conversation. The name of our new acquaintance is Douglas. He is from Danga village some 50 km away. No, this is not his first visit to Great Zimbabwe. He comes here from time to time to look for peace and contemplation. It turns out Douglas is writing his doctoral thesis on development issues, but he fell in love with this place due to both its landscape and historical context.

We ask him to share his thoughts on why exactly this place encourages contemplation and how it is actually related to Douglas' occupation, which is finance and community development. Douglas says that he has always been astounded by the fact of how people in the 11th century, without modern technology and materials, were able to create such an impressive structure on top the inaccessible cliff. He believes it happened thanks to the ability to organize people in a rational way and a very clear vision of what was going to be achieved and why. To some

extent it can be compared with the concepts which would be perceived in the modern development policy as good management or leadership, as well as knowledge and innovation.

Douglas is working to build new Great Zimbabwe, but at a level of individual villages and communities. Douglas believes that knowledge management is one of the biggest challenges in the development of local communities. People lack the knowledge to take full advantage of opportunities offered, for example, by the land on which they live. This leads to situations where the locals live in poverty, deriving their tiny income from domestic grain cultivation, or go to the cities in search of happiness, hoping for a quick profit. Many don't even know that their gardens stand on huge gold ores and other mineral deposits and that they can live in prosperity by staying in their village and applying wise management skills.

Even if someone has the knowledge, it is not actually customary to accumulate the knowledge through records and hand it down from generation to generation. In these strictly traditional societies, knowledge is handed down orally, which also means that it can be easily lost.

Availability of resources is another very important topic for Douglas as a financial expert. The opportunity to make savings and invest them, in his view, is crucial for local residents. Here he once again draws a parallel with Great Zimbabwe. The King's residence was on top the fortified rock, but his first wife (polygamy was accepted in that society, but the first wife was always the most important one and was selected with great care) and also the mother of the successor to the throne lived down in the valley, in a palace surrounded by a solid stone wall. The palace was a kind of granary used to store crops, valuables and knowledge. It resembled a local bank, from which resources could be invested in agriculture, as well as in education of the young generation.

In the present-day Zimbabwe, people from the local villages do not actually have such resources available. Large corporate financial institutions are operating in urban areas and do not provide services to the rural population. Consequently, there is no access to loans, which could be used to buy basic equipment, such as devices for mineral extraction, or to develop modern agriculture. So one of the main tasks that Douglas has set to himself is to create a number of local savings/credit companies, operating at the village level and providing the people with the opportunity to deposit the money earned, as well as to take a loan for investment.

Douglas bids farewell to us and sends greetings to the people of Latvia and Latvian schoolchildren in particular. He continues his walk and knowledge quest. Now and then we still see a glimpse of his light shirt

somewhere between the impressive stone walls. We have to move on, as there are 400 km in front of us.

Going out through the gate of the historical site, we meet a bunch of local youth. They jump out of a black BMW and hurry off to our bikes to take pictures. We, in turn, take interest in their traditional colourful shirts with bright embroidery and small portraits of President Mugabe right in the middle of the chest. We ask them about the meaning of their garments, and it appears that the shirts were made in honour of a special event – the inaugural ceremony of the new leader of this Zimbabwean region. She comes from the same political party as the veteran President Mugabe, so the young people put on these shirts to pay homage to “our great leader”. The photo shoot is over and the colourful bunch heads for the famous ruins. What are they going to learn there and would they understand what Douglas has said? We can only guess.

About the expedition

Two motorcyclists - Andžs Ūbelis and Mārtiņš Sils – are on the expedition from the Cape of Good Hope (Capetown, South Africa) to the farthest Northern Cape in Europe and then back to Riga. The overall length of the expedition is 25 thousand km. During the trip both motorcyclists will implement the tasks given by Latvian pupils at the contest "Discover Africa for me" („Atklāj man Āfriku”). The contest was one of the main EYD activities in order to raise interest and awareness of Latvian youth on global development. Overall 100 applications from 13 Latvian schools were sent in.

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