



AMAZING ZAMBIA

THE LANDLOCKED AFRICAN NATION IS ALSO LOCKED AGAINST LGBT RIGHTS, BUT ONE CURVETTE AND HER GIRLFRIEND VISITED. BY ALLISON STEINBERG

It sounds like a recipe for dyke disaster: staying at a Catholic convent with my lesbian lover in a country where homosexuality is punishable by long-term imprisonment. It also sounds like the opening to a bad Margaret Cho sketch. But while the entire experience felt surreal, it exposed a harsh reality—this is the way much of the world lives.

I recently traveled with my girlfriend and my Jewish mother to visit Catholic nuns in Kitwe, Zambia—specifically, one nun my mom had befriended some 12 years ago, when she came to the United States in search of a better education. Zambia, just north of Botswana and south of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is a landlocked country in sub-Saharan Africa. It just recently held its first fair election, after decades of corrupt rule left the people impoverished and the infrastructure in ruins.

From the moment we landed on the single dirt runway at tiny Ndola airport, I was petrified of breathing the wrong way—would someone take note of the gay way I looked at my girlfriend and realize we weren't just friends? Would our short haircuts and wide strides give us away? What if, out of habit, I accidentally put my hand on her thigh or offered her a bite of my dinner?

I soon realized that no one noticed anything. In fact, I

came to feel safer in Zambia than I have felt in other parts of the world where gay people, though hardly tolerated, are more visible. In societies where homophobia is so thickly entrenched in the law, and religion is so strictly enforced, there is no discourse around being gay and therefore no radar by which to detect it. No one thought I was gay because in Zambia there's no such thing, or so it seemed.

Ironic to the Western eye, affection between men is visible in Zambia. There were men holding hands and walking with their arms around each other, but, as is the case in many countries, this is a sign of friendship, and gay men would never dare showcase their affection in public.

The gay community in Zambia is silent at best. Attempts to create a more visible community in the late 1990s were quickly stamped out by the government; this led to a decade of silence. The creation of an official gay group in Zambia is still in the works, and only in the past three years have some brave LGBT people come together in conjunction with the CDC to help collect ethnographic research to foster support for HIV/AIDS awareness and education. There is the first such study in the country, although the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is around 16 percent. The research group calls itself the Friends of Rainka, after a

LEZ-FRIENDLIEST DESTINATIONS

1 THE NETHERLANDS



2 ENGLAND

3 SPAIN

CANADA

4



Victoria Falls (from left), school children, local nuns, elephants in the Zambezi River

local DJ and known lesbian who worked to further human rights before dying of an unknown illness. The suppression of gay identity in Zambia only compounds the severity of the HIV/AIDS epidemic since emerging HIV programs will ignore LGBT people because they are not recognized as a part of society.

Zambia was officially declared a Christian nation in 1991 by then president Frederick Chiluba. This caused myriad problems, most notably a lack of access to birth control and disease prevention: Zambia has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS of any country in the world (the reported 16 percent are the people who are aware that they have the disease, but owing to poverty, poor healthcare and the cultural suppression of women many more people are likely to be living with HIV/AIDS and not know it). A single handwritten sign at the side of a road—"Stop HIV/AIDS. Use a condom."—was the only visible attempt I saw to provide HIV-prevention education.

Women are married off at 15 or 16, are having babies shortly thereafter and have little access to education or decent healthcare. Zambia is just starting to have the conversation about equal rights for women; gay rights is light-years away.

Of course, my girlfriend and I kept our affection curbed for safety's sake, something that as out-and-proud New Yorkers tugged heavily at our ethical heartstrings. After seeing the horrid conditions of the hospitals, schools and homes in Zambia, we both agreed that compromising our identity for a few days was better than dying in prison at the hands of a nation that has a very weak relationship with its U.S. and British embassies.

To perpetuate our hetero myth, after we pushed our twin cots together at night in the convent, we begrudgingly separated them again during waking hours. We stole kisses in dark hallways and held hands in the backseat of the pickup when the nuns weren't looking. It was all very high school, even a little exciting; the fear of being caught was terrifyingly consequential. There were moments when I wondered if the nuns had some idea that we were lovers, particularly the one who had been educated in the United States and had 12 years of New York City under her belt. I could have sworn I saw a smirk in the rearview of the pickup at one point.

Interestingly, it is the nuns who are turning gender on its head in Zambia. The religious order we stayed with—and many others—run private schools there (public school is not free after the sixth grade) and have a shared goal of empowering women to break free of the cycles of female degradation that are still alive there. The nuns, by dint of their being nuns, are not marrying young and having babies; they are not contracting HIV or living within the parameters of what's considered "women's work." The sisters are educated, and they teach at the schools. They hire men to cook and clean, tend to the land, even launder their habits for them. Many of the nuns we met were young, and we wondered whether they came to the order out of religious conviction or as a survival tactic. How many of them were lesbians and had chosen celibacy over forced marriage?

"Thank you for having the courage to visit Zambia," one of the sisters who had lived in the States wrote to us upon our return home. Though it hadn't been said, she knew just how different life is in Zambia and how shocking the trip must have been for us. I'm not sure whether I'd be willing to travel to another homophobic country with my partner, but I do know that Zambia was more educational than any LGBT-friendly destination could have been, and what's more eye-opening than that? ■

5

AUSTRALIA/
NEW ZEALAND

6

FRANCE



SWEDEN

7

8

GERMANY

