



Life in gay Lusaka

Photos: Brett Davidson

In this sprawling African city and in Kitwe, the gay scene is tolerated despite being outlawed.



For a gay man living in Cape Town, a trip to Lusaka is a bit like travelling back in time, says **BRETT DAVIDSON**, and on a recent trip he gained fascinating insight into the local social scene where the right to be who you are has not yet been won.

Cape Town boasts of being the gay mecca of Africa. While prejudice and even violence against gays and lesbians have by no means disappeared, if you live in the city bowl or the suburbs, there's no reason not to be open about who you are. It's easy to forget the days before the new Constitution, when one still had to be careful – and the twenty-somethings who dance the night away in the gay village just have no concept of the battles that were fought for their right to party.

Lusaka is different. Homosexuality is still illegal in Zambia, and it's possible to be prosecuted and jailed for sodomy. So while it would be a bit too extreme to say that it's underground or hidden, it does take a bit of luck or effort to find. You have to have your eyes open, know the right people, or be in the right place at the right time. I'd been to Lusaka several times before, but never really had the time to explore its social life. On my latest trip, though, I had the good fortune to meet a couple who agreed to give me some insights into 'gay Lusaka'.

Joshua (35) and his partner Greg (28)* have been together for eight years, having met back in 2000, through mutual friends. Judging from what they say, they are at the hub of a vibrant and lively gay community in Lusaka. Their stories and experiences make it clear how ridiculous it is to claim, as some still do, that homosexuality is 'un-African'.

Both Joshua and Greg realised at a fairly young age that they were different from other boys, and beginning in their teens, each slowly began to find others who were similar to them. Around 1998, Joshua saw an advertisement in a newspaper, for a new organisation called Lesbians, Gays and Transgenders, or Legatra. He contacted them, and became a member. It was through a friend he made at Legatra that he met Greg. 'It was love at first sight,' Joshua says.

Initially Legatra had about 15 members, but it didn't last long. Joshua believes this was because they tried to be too vocal and visible, in the hopes of gaining funding. The social and political climate wasn't right, and eventually the chairperson ended up fleeing to South Africa to escape the police.

Since then, it seems, gays and lesbians in Lusaka have carved out a space for themselves by being unobtrusive. Joshua says, 'being gay in Lusaka is not difficult if you don't cross people's paths. In my community they all know I am gay but I make my space. Certain places, I stay away from.'

He and Greg have their regular haunts, all straight bars, restaurants or clubs, where they are tolerated. Some of the places they name are very popular and well known generally in Lusaka: Club Zone in Matero, and Times at the Arcades shopping centre. Northmead, close to the city centre, is home to several popular bars and clubs that they frequent: Alpha, Fahrenheit 24, and The Lounge. Aside from that, they gather at parties and at friends' homes.

Joshua tells the story of a recent evening in their local hangout in their neighbourhood, where a patron suddenly started screaming about there being the two homosexuals in the bar, making a fuss



Rather than 'gay' bars and clubs as such, there are places where the still quite close-knit community tend to gather.



that they should leave. They refused. Because of the ruckus, the owner of the bar came out. She rebuked the complaining man, and threw him out instead.

Joshua and Greg relish the telling of this story, and then reveal they used to own their own bar, called Boomshake. They had worked for several months in the Maldives, and when they returned they invested some money in a minibus taxi, and the rest in starting a bar. It wasn't intended as a gay bar, but it became that to all intents and purposes, as all their friends and their friends' friends would

turn up. The bar gave them a completely new perspective on the gay scene. 'It really opened our eyes,' says Greg, as he tells story after story of apparently 'straight' men who would come and confess their real feelings.

According to Joshua there are many different types of gay men in Lusaka: those who are in good jobs and so don't want to show, there are 'township queens', and those who are 'in-between', who play things cool.

The Zambian government continues to deny that homosexuals exist in their



Increasing congestion and load shedding are the major gripes in Lusaka.

country, and it's still risky being gay. Both Greg and Joshua tell stories of entrapment by police – the most recent incident having happened to a friend of theirs just two weeks before. They also say there's a myth that gay men have money, and tell of situations where their friends have slept with men who then claim to be straight and threaten them with exposure unless they pay up.

Greg and Joshua have lived and worked outside Zambia – in the Maldives, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and South Africa. They say they were never bothered anywhere, even in the Islamic countries, but did enjoy living in South Africa, where they could freely go to gay bars in Braamfontein and Hillbrow.

Still, being gay in Lusaka is easier than in other places in Zambia, with Kitwe on the Copperbelt in second place. It's the most populous city, and is increasingly diverse. The gay community is expanding too. 'It used to be that everybody knew everybody else,' says Joshua, 'but this is changing.' More generally, they say Lusaka is a pleasant enough place to live. Crime is not too bad, though like any city

it has its safer and more dangerous areas. The biggest irritations at present seem to be the traffic – which isn't bad during the day, but infuriatingly congested during the morning and evening rush hours – and the electricity. Everybody grumbles about the load shedding, which happens for several hours each day.

The Internet has become an important part of gay life – people identify one another and meet through the aid of sites such as Gaydar and Gay Friendly Finder. But even this is no guarantee of anonymity and safety, as Internet cafes are used since computers are unaffordable for most people. Sometimes they get thrown out, but generally it's fine, says Greg, although it can get expensive.

'Being gay in Lusaka is not difficult if you don't cross people's paths. In my community they all know I am gay but I make my space. Certain places, I stay away from.'

Ten years ago, Joshua was an activist for gay and lesbian rights in Zambia. Since the major organisation lobbying for change has collapsed, nothing has happened. Now, he and Greg are trying to start a new organisation, or loose coalition for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-sexual and intersexed community. They plan to call the fledgling organisation Rainka, a combination of Rainbow, and 'kankra', a word they use among themselves, which Greg says is based on the Bemba word for fruits.

Their aims are modest. They don't want to fight for equal rights for gays and lesbians, as they believe this is still too risky and a confrontational approach could take them 10 years back. Rather, they simply want to get a campaign going for gay-friendly health facilities – so that they will no longer be turned away at clinics, when doctors or nurses discover they have a same-sex partner. Joshua says they're looking to the examples of gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana, and plan to fight the battles they think they can win, for now.

** Not their real names.*

SUBSCRIBE

SUBSCRIBE – from just R100 a year – AND BE THE FIRST TO KNOW

Keep up with what's happening in the sector with South Africa's premier local government magazine. Get your own copy of **DELIVERY** every quarter, full of information about the people, places and projects that are transforming our country.

SUBSCRIBE NOW FOR A YEAR (R100), 24 MONTHS (R200) OR 36 MONTHS (R300), including VAT and postage.

How to subscribe

- Send a copy of this form, with a cheque or postal order PAYABLE TO STRING COMMUNICATIONS, to Delivery Magazine, 10th Floor, Church Square House, 5 Spin Street, Cape Town 8001.
- Fax this form to (021) 461-4953 with a copy of a deposit slip. The bank details are String Communications, Standard Bank Thibault Square, branch code 020909, account number 070831335. A copy of the subscription form can also be found on our website – www.sadelivery.co.za

WIN A BOOK OF YOUR CHOICE

If you are one of our new subscribers, or are renewing your subscription, you could win a R250 voucher from Exclusive Books to buy a book of your choice.



Do you know what's going on?

delivery

THE MAGAZINE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

FIRST NAME/S

SURNAME

ORGANISATION

DELIVERY ADDRESS

Code

WORK TELEPHONE

FAX

CELL PHONE

EMAIL ADDRESS

PAYMENT DETAILS: CHEQUE DIRECT DEPOSIT

1 YEAR 2 YEARS 3 YEARS

Annual rates:

South Africa: R100 and R80 for councillors
Neighbouring states: R150
Overseas: R250 (surface mail)
Rates include VAT and postage.



ARE YOU A WINNER?

In our last issue we offered a new or renewing subscriber a chance to win a R250 gift voucher from Exclusive Books.



★ The winner is Mr Happy Moodley from Durban. ★

Visit the **DELIVERY** website at www.sadelivery.co.za and sign up for our email newsletter. Get breaking news, informed comment and links to useful documents on your desktop.

Plus, on the website, you'll have access to a wide range of useful resources and content from **DELIVERY** Magazine.

www.sadelivery.co.za

sharing knowledge and information in the public sector