

Durban - Watering holes of my youth

By David Baird

For those of you who have known me for a while, the following may explain why it took me so long to finish a pretty straight forward degree...

Durban was my home from 1967 till 1993. By 1976 I had reached my later teens and could not wait to explore the pubs, clubs and dens of debauchery in Durban. I was a little ahead of my time, though. At the tender age of fifteen, (1974), during a visit to South Africa by an older cousin, my brother and he hatched a plan to introduce me to the (dubious) pleasures of alcohol. Consequently, I found myself sitting in the (men's) bar of the Astra Hotel in Russell Street, trying vainly to keep up with two seasoned drinkers. I am sure that I don't need to describe the fallout from the experiment. That may have been my first real experience of Durban pubs, but unsurprisingly it wasn't to be my last.

Friday nights were all systems go.

The Beachfront in Durban was locally known as "the Golden Mile", and you seldom had to walk much more than sixty or seventy metres between pubs. They were all different, and they all had their own characters. For the sake of convenience, let's start with the one that was actually quite a walk away from the rest. This pub was a favourite of visiting sailors, thirsty locals and girls of the night. Of course, I am referring to Smuggler's Inn at the Alexandra Hotel. It had a reputation of being a bit of a dive, but it opened late and served great bar food as late as 3am. There was trouble occasionally, and usually sparked off because of the aforementioned girls of the night. However, once you were known it was a pretty good little "local" pub for a cold Castle or two. Latterly it was owned by Spyder Murch of Gary and Spyder fame. Sadly, after years of sterling service to the thirsty patrons, it was finally demolished a few years ago. RIP, Smuggies.

The White House Hotel featured as a watering hole only briefly for me. It was on the South Beach side of the Marine Parade but not long after I started frequenting the beach front, it became a residential hotel, not open to the public as a bar. Just behind the White House was the Four Seasons Hotel. The Four Seasons was extremely popular with visitors during the avalanche season (when the Rocks came down from the Transvaal escarpment for their annual bath). Although I did occasionally drink in the Four Seasons, I always had to behave myself, largely because the hotel PR was the mother of a former classmate and friend called Bryan Brett. His mother, Toni, was a lovely lady. The Four Seasons was probably better known for its Pink Panther Restaurant, but it did have a lounge where weekend dances would happen. Many a holiday romance started on that dance floor, but it really was more of a "visitor's venue" than a "locals venue".

And so the Malibu Hotel. The hotel was built by LTA Construction (Let's Try Again) in the

early 70's, and as my sister worked there as a bookkeeper, I had an inside track on the hotel. By the time we started frequenting the Malibu, there were several venues - the Port o' Call Disco, Father's Moustache (where the Blarney Brothers got their start) and the Diamond Circle. The Diamond Circle was a lounge type environment, similar to that described at the Four Seasons. It was a good singles venue because it tended not to be as loud as some of the other venues. The Father's Moustache was a raucous, down and dirty singalong place. Always loud, always fun. Port's o' Call was a disco. Enough said?

Next up was Claridges Hotel. The Cookie Look Ladies Bar was "sophisticated". It was where the "moffies" hung out - guys who preferred women to rugby. Across the landing was the Cat's Whiskers Disco, and the Kit Kat Bar. Later on, the hotel opened another popular, loud, wet T shirt, yard of ale competition type raucous nightspot called the London Town Pub. Many a good night...

Crossing the road, you would have encountered the Beach Hotel. The Beach had a pub downstairs called The Cockney Pride and The Red Garter. There was always live music, and in the early 80's that was provided by a taciturn little Scot by the name of Brian Gallagher. Brian had a steady flow of jokes and a great repertoire of 60's and 70's songs. Upstairs, the Beach Hotel verandah served a reasonable curry and was a pretty good Sunday vantage point for checking out the "cherries" promenading along the Marine Parade.

Backtracking, slightly, it would be remiss of me not to mention the Bullring from 5-7pm and from 8-12pm became the El Castillian(dancing) , Pool Deck and San Antone Rose at the Lonsdale Hotel. Derek Gordon and Joe Parker were the resident act at the pool deck for many years. I think I saw Joe Parker for almost 20 years, and in all that time he never once came up with a new joke. Still, he was funny.

Back on the Beachfront, the next hotel of note was the Balmoral (or Bad Morals, as it was known colloquially). One thing in the favour of the Balmoral was their curry, served on the verandah. A Sunday hangover cure par excellence. The ladies bar was the domain of a gay Indian barman called Blondie. His sexuality was "duidelik" to say the least. He wore a blonde wig (hence, Blondie) and was the distribution point for all the gossip that went on regarding the service workers on the Beachfront. He was a really fun guy and enjoyed camping it up.

The next hotel along was the Edward Hotel. Five star luxury and five star prices. However there was Dorians Disco (the first Disco in Durban). It closed not long after I came of age so I only visited there once. Later on though, I did frequent Peter Chen's Chinese restaurant (Peter cooked a meal for us when he was 98 years old). I also liked to drink in the Ladies Bar in the Edward. It was expensive, and consequently quiet, and therefore a good place to chat up the ladies...

Without getting into the politics of the situation, Magoo's Nightclub was also a popular

attraction on the Beachfront, until it was bombed in June 1985. It was claimed that Magoos was a popular hang out for the Security Services, but in all the times I visited Magoos, I doubt that many of the patrons were even old enough to be involved as members of the Bureau of State Security. However, onward and upward...

Next along the road would be the Elangeni Hotel. Another of Sol Kerzner's Southern Sun hotel empire. There were several bars in the Elangeni, and all of them busy during the weekend (which seemed to start on Tuesday and run till Sunday night). Derby's Corner was my preferred hangout, but my gay friends were happier at Davy Jones Locker, on the back side of the hotel (no pun intended). I am pretty sure that if one of my gay friends hadn't told me about DJ's I would never have known of it. There was another bar in the Elangeni, off to the left side of the hotel, past the reception area. The name escapes me but it was a Friday night post work, pre (serious) drinking venue. Arrival after 5pm on a Friday would often mean not even getting in the door, it was so popular.

There was another hotel (I think another Kersner venture) with a glass lift which went to the top floor to Raffles night club.

The sportsman Bar at the Edenroc was also a fun venue, until it became an old age home. It was popular with the Natal Rugby and Cricket teams, and I got the feeling that many of them drank there because there was an unspoken rule that people would not pester them for autographs etc. As this was pre Natal's first ever rugby Currie Cup, hero worship is not exactly how I would have described the relationship between the players and the fans!

The last stop along the beachfront was the Blue Waters Hotel (or Natal Command Annexe). The best bar in the Blue Waters was around the back of the hotel. It was a men's bar and saw its share of arguments settled physically. However, they made a great bunny chow and the beer was cheap.

The hotels I have described on the beachfront frequently constituted a Friday or Saturday (or, in some cases, Friday AND Saturday) night pub crawl for my friends and myself. Thinking back, it was scary just how much SAB product we could sling over our throats in one sitting.

But Durbs wasn't just about the Beachfront. Going into town from the beachfront, you would first come across the Killarney Hotel, with its Travolta's disco. Travolta's opened and closed more often than a 50c hooker on a Friday night and had many many names and incarnations. It had a glass dance floor and did all that disco stuff, in Spades. It was also the venue for the first lunch time strip shows in Durban,(advertising "Steak, egg and strips") with dancers gyrating in thongs and their decency kept intact by stick on nipple caps. Sheesh, we were naïve. They also had The Pool Deck at the back where Gary and Spyder entertained as well. If you were brave enough, and disdainful enough of the bizarre Apartheid laws, you could also go out to Stamfordhill Road and go to the Cosmo

nightclub. This was a predominantly "coloured" venue, but they were quite happy to take my money in return for alcohol. Play on, no foul, in my book.

Coming back to the top end of West Street there was the West End Hotel and the New Rand Hotel. One of them had a huge horseshoe shaped bar and a string of blonde barmaids with ample charms. The other seldom bothered cleaning Friday night's blood off the floor till Sunday afternoon. Rough and ready, but the clientele were a great bunch.

Opposite the new Metro cinema complex was the Tudor House Hotel. If we were going to watch a movie, we would often pop in for a beer. Nothing to write home about, but it was in there that I drank my one and only bottle of Stallion 54 lager. Eugh. Coming out of there and down Aliwal Street and into Smith Street, you would find the Red Ensign Pub at the Mayfair. I would drop in there quite often on a Saturday morning to talk football with the patrons as most of them were Poms. Squadron and Coke was the drink of choice and if you weren't quick enough to tell Ali, the barman, what you wanted to drink, Squaddies was what you got by default. I remember once asking him for a Squadron and Lemonade. He looked me squarely in the eye and said - "we don't do cocktails, an' all".

Just along the road from the Mayfair was the Royal Hotel. The Ulundi Bar, the Lounge and several other bars were also popular with movie goers at the weekend. The Ulundi Bar was another Friday night post work venue for mainly city centre workers. The place used to get packed solid, but it was a great buzz.

Through town, and at the Berea side of Smith Street you would find Broad Street, in which was the Plaza Hotel. The Plaza catered for people who lived in town centre flats, and it's most redeeming feature was it's powerful air conditioning during hot Durban summers. Around the corner, on the Esplanade (or whatever it is called now) was the Riviera Hotel. There was a good jazz club on the first floor and a ladies bar but it never really drew big crowds. Along from the Plaza was the Esplanade Hotel (now the Royal Natal Yacht Club). We were housed in the Esplanade Hotel when we first arrived in Durban and I remember listening to the Flames play in the Alfresco Bar whilst watching the skateboard sized cockroaches removing everything edible that wasn't nailed down.

Around the corner was Russell Street. I have already mentioned my session in the men's bar, but there was also the Keg n Tankard where Gary and Spyder held court for many years. I also used to go to the Keg to watch videos of English and Scottish football videos which arrived weekly on the mailships.

Further up the road was the Tudor Rose Hotel. Again this had a dead quiet little ladies bar, but it was a pleasant place to drink, and it had the advantage of a really good Chinese Restaurant called the Tong Lok. It was on the corner of St George's Street. Further along St George's Street towards Albert Park was the Belgica Hotel, the scene of

my first introduction to Amstel Lager. If ever there was a Ladies beer, Amstel was it. Eugh, again. Going along St George's Street in the opposite direction (back towards town) was the St George's Hotel. Suave and sophisticated did not describe the St George's. Rough as heather described it perfectly. However, when I worked at Grindrod's and played football for the company team, we would often meet in the "Indian" bar at the St George's for a drink, largely because we had a lot of Indian players and I could drink in "their" bar without issue while they could not have drunk in the "white" bar. South Africa was bizarre, at times.

Leaving town and heading up Berea Road, you would come to the Savoy Hotel. There was a live music venue with girls in skimpy white bikinis go-go dancing in cages hanging from the ceiling whose name escapes me but I remember going to see a metal band there called Tank. I thought they were great but the noise was such that there was no point in trying to "chat up" the opposite sex.

Next up Berea Road would have been the Osborne Hotel. It was popular with my Glenwood friends because it was within walking distance for most of us. It was in the gents toilet of that very hotel that a drunk gay guy misread my intentions of being in the gents. I was there to put the toilet to it's intended use, he was there... Suffice it to say that he had to be physically dissuaded from his intentions.

Further up Berea Road was the Berea Hotel. There were two men's bars (actually it was one bar with a dividing wall, for some obscure reason), and in the top bar, there was a little Irish barman called Jackie. Jackie had been a jockey (you couldn't make this up) and was a good source for racing tips. There was also a large ladies bar and a huge verandah, all of which I frequented because it was, in effect, my local.

Along Musgrave Road were several other hotels and bars which my friends and I frequented. The Los Angeles Hotel was popular with its several bars. The Sportsman's Bar, Swingles, The Ladies Bar, Beer Garden and the upstairs bar, whose name I could never remember, Robert E Lee that had 2 blind guys playing the music, one on Piano and the other on guitar (very good with Elton John songs) largely because I never left there sober. There was an Indian waiter who would get progressively more drunk as the evening wore on but never made a mistake on service, even when the order for the table was confirmed by the drunken wave of a hand. There were Sunday night outdoor movies and braais in the beer garden which were incredibly popular with the patrons. Of course, it was also a bit of a flashpoint because it was also frequented by both DHS and Glenwood Old Boys.

Further along was the Caister. The Caister was fairly genteel, and we would mainly drink on the verandah with a wonderful view of the city, especially at night when the lights were twinkling. However, there was the Caister Bar which was a fantastic Saturday afternoon jazz venue.

Further still along the road you would encounter the Ocean View Hotel. If we were ever in the mood to play darts in a bar, for some obscure reason we would always end up at the Ovies. It also very briefly had a popular ladies bar with a band that played guitars, bongos and violins.

If you kept going along the Ridge and down to Stamfordhill Road you could find yourself at the Kingsmead Club. It was a members only club but I played snooker there every day with my Dad for a year while he was waiting to have a heart bypass done in 1978. It had a lounge, restaurant and gent's bar, and the food was superb. Further out Stamfordhill Road was the Imperial Hotel. It was mainly residential but had an active gent's bar, which reminded me of a saloon that you might see in a gold rush movie.

Heading out towards Umbilo was the Willowvale Hotel which had a ladies bar and verandah and served a fine curry. Further out was the Outspan Hotel which (as the locals would droningly tell you) had the longest bar on Earth, or Mars or some such. It was always full of railway workers. There was also the Congella Hotel which was a great Sunday lunch venue. It was kept going mainly by the workers from the shipping companies etc along Maydon Wharf, who used to go there at lunchtimes.

Further still and you would come across the Clairmont Hotel. This was the only hotel in Durban where everything went dead quiet when I walked in the door - kind of like a scene from Deliverance. The Montclair and Yellowwood Park locals did kind of jealously guard their turf. At the bottom end of Jacobs Ladder was the Rossburgh Hotel. The Rossies was a real drinkers pub, but the food was better than good. You just had to wipe your feet on the way out.

The Bluff was a bit of a mystery to me, as I spent very little time there. I do remember going to a hotel which had a bar called the Dolphin Bar, if I recall correctly, but you will have to forgive me if I can't remember the name.

Those are my recollections of Durban watering holes. I am glad that I have written it all down now because as time goes by the little grey cells are becoming less and less effective. I am sure that there are lots of places that I have missed out and I may have transposed some locations as well, but I have done my best. If anyone would like to chip in and add information, I would be happy to see it. I have not mentioned Pinetown, or Westville or Escombe and maybe even more, largely because I set out to do this exercise on Durban hotels and bars, so if anyone can be bothered, it would be nice to see some recollections of the Westville Hotel, The Imperial Hotel in Pinetown, The Rob Roy, The Escombe Club etc, etc.

In the writing and reading of this little memoir, I came to realise that our hit rate with the ladies was pretty abysmal,... Of course when your tactic is to wander into a pub, club or disco where some of the most beautiful women in the world were also hanging out, we proceeded to get legless and fall about like skittles in an earthquake. Ah, the folly of

youth, but Hell, it was fun!!!!

Thanks for reading this. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed remembering it.

Safe my mate.

Main entertainment, beach and music