

NEWSLETTER FROM CATHY BUCKLE IN ZIMBABWE



Flying ants or four-star hotels

21 November 2025



Dear Family and Friends

A kind of madness overtakes us in Zimbabwe when the rains come. There's a frantic dash to the roadsides, along the railway lines, in the wetlands, around the cemeteries and on any piece of unused ground, the land is being cleared, dug up and planted with maize. The view from the window is of people bent over everywhere dropping maize pips in the wet ground. The rhythm is hypnotic to watch: a hand dips into a little bag, one seed is grasped between finger and thumb, a quick flick and it drops into the hole, a swipe of the foot covers it with soil and the planter moves on. Dip, flick, swipe, seed after seed, row after row, people have an urgency to grow food. Zimbabwe is a very unpredictable place when it comes to food security; one day they tell us there's a bumper harvest and the next day we are importing it, and so you grow whatever you can, wherever you can.

We've had over four inches (100 ml) of rain in my home town in the last 10 days alone and it has brought with it an explosion of creatures emerging from underground: millipedes and rhino beetles, sausage flies and Christmas beetles and of course a myriad flying ants which shed their golden wings and then run for cover before they get eaten. Flying ants are called Ishwa in Zimbabwe and they are much in demand, snapped up by birds, eaten by small mammals and collected by people everywhere. Under outside lights, in rain puddles, crowded under gutters and in wet and soggy places, people with empty plastic bottles and bags are busy collecting flying ants in handfuls. 'Ishwa', such an evocative whisper of a word for the little winged ants which are fried or roasted with a little salt. This is Zimbabwe in mid-November and this year it's not just mealie madness or the flying ant frenzy on our minds, it's the bizarre things going on in government.

In recent weeks Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube told parliament that the average Zimbabwean spends US\$9 a day which he described as evidence of growing prosperity. The Minister said that by the end of December 2025 “Zimbabwe will be a fully-fledged middle-income economy.” Spending US\$9 a day is a huge stretch of the imagination that’s been met with eyebrows right up. Do people in a middle-income economy really do their shopping under a tree or on the side of the road, bargaining for a one dollar second hand shirt? The Borgen Project, which draws data from UNICEF, the World Food Programme and the World Bank, says that as of April 2025 60% of Zimbabweans lived on US\$3.65 a day, an amount they describe as ‘extreme poverty.’ An amount far more realistic than the amount quoted by the Minister of Finance.

Next the Finance Minister said that he was not going to remove the 2% tax on electronic transfers, despite pressure for him to do so; he said that removing the tax would create a ‘substantial revenue shortfall.’ Since 2018 when Minister Ncube became the Finance Minister, we’ve suffered with this punitive tax which he said would only be in place in the short term but is still there 7 years later. A 2% tax is automatically added onto every bill we pay, every bag of groceries we buy, every item of clothing, every medical consumable we need and every payment we send. In a country where local currency bank notes are in extremely short supply, we have no choice but to pay using electronic transfers and so we pay tax upon tax upon tax.

Finally came this unbelievable announcement from the Finance Minister. Speaking to MPs in Parliament he said: “I’m going to announce today that we have bought you a hotel. Its Monomatapa Hotel.” The 182 bed four-star Monomatapa Hotel in central Harare has been bought by the government, paid for by the Pension Fund, a Fund meant to support retired teachers, nurses and civil servants. The purchase of the hotel was not debated in, or approved by, parliament.

Political commentator Reason Wafawarova said: “Not one parliamentarian asked why Parliament, whose job is to authorize such expenditure, had not debated or approved the purchase before the deal was done. Instead they clapped hands like clients at a raffle draw, because in today’s Zimbabwe Parliament doesn’t oversee government; it auditions for it.” Minister Ncube said the purchase had been made to cut costs on accommodation for MPs when they are in Harare. This is despite the fact that MP’s “have received stands [of land] in Harare, salary hikes, doubled constituency funds and are now being offered hotel suites. MPs are no longer representatives of the people, they are shareholders in privilege,” Mr Wafawarova said.

So, while the rich get richer and the poor get poorer in Zimbabwe, pensioners who have had pension payments deducted from their salaries for decades have just found out that their retirement money has bought a hotel for MPs. We can’t help but wonder if the retired nurse or teacher or government worker will ever benefit from the four-star hotel their pension money has bought or if they will still be out there planting mealies on the roadsides and collecting flying ants for supper.

There is no charge for this Letter From Zimbabwe but if you would like to donate please visit my website. Until next time, thanks for reading this Letter From Zimbabwe now in its 25th year, and my books about life in Zimbabwe, a country in waiting.

Ndini shamwari yenyu (I am your friend)

Love Cathy

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