

Boshoff didn't go

While waiting for a new passport in Lima, Peru, Nicholas Dall met some of the regulars at the South African embassy – all of them trapped in travel purgatory.



My wife and I took the last two seats in the poky foyer of the eighth-floor office in downtown Lima. Two guys, both scrawny, both tattooed, one a bit dirtier than the other, were sprawled across the only sofa in the room, grumbling to each other in Afrikaans. A middle-aged man with a surfer's mop and the beginnings of a boep searched frantically through a tog bag, while speaking on his cell-phone. It sounded like he was from Durban.

Then Boshoff arrived: a giant volcanic pimple waiting to erupt between his eyes, greasy black hair streaked across his face. He was 1,8m and dressed all in black. He squeezed onto the sofa, next to the two tattooed guys.

We were the first to be called – presumably because we had actually made an appointment and filled in the necessary forms.

The reason we were at the South African embassy in the first place was because we had been robbed. The previous day we had caught a bus from Ica, in the south of Peru, to Lima the capital. It was one of those slow buses that stops anywhere and everywhere to gather and deposit passengers, livestock and goods. I was dozing with my feet on our daypack and I felt the bag move, or at least I thought I did, but when I turned around to check, the guys behind us just sat there, hands in their pockets, headphones in their ears.

Hours later, at the police station in central Lima, an officer explained that the thieves would have used their toes to unzip the bag and remove our camera, passports and cash before getting off the bus.

Back at the embassy, the secretary – who seemed to be the only Peruvian in the room – told us that our paperwork was in order.

"You'll need passport photos," she said. "Colour. Three by four."

I asked where we could get them done.

"Oh," she laughed. "Boshoff can show you. He needs another set."

It turned out that Boshoff was from Cape Town, and he'd been in Peru for three months or so. When he arrived he'd gone straight to Cuzco, the launch pad to Machu Picchu, and he hadn't really left.

"Cuzco is so cheap," he giggled. "Everything costs 10 soles."

Boshoff hadn't done much in Cuzco. At least not in terms of sightseeing. He'd done plenty of cocaine, though, some magic mushrooms, a fair bit of San Pedro, even a dose of ayahuasca. He'd also managed to lose his passport somewhere, although he'd only realised this when it was time for him to return home.

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At the embassy in Lima, to save money, he had applied for a "travel document" as opposed to a temporary passport, which was valid for one journey and one journey only. The problem was that his return flight had included a seven-day layover in Buenos Aires. He was turned away at the airport so here he was again, starting the whole process once more. He couldn't tell us exactly how long he had been in Lima.

In the end it was us who found the photo shop, not Boshoff. We had our pictures done and I can still remember the light from the flash reverberating off Boshoff's Vesuvius. The shop assistant told us we could collect the pictures the following morning.

In the lift going back up to the embassy, I asked Boshoff when he was flying home.

"Tomorrow morning," he said.

"But what about the photos? You're only collecting them tomorrow."

"Oh," he giggled. "Good point."

Back in the embassy foyer, we had to wait our turn to see Mr Mudley, the man who had the final say over our passport application. I tried not to catch anyone's eye – preferring instead to focus on a poster of the Augrabies Falls at sunset. But my tactic didn't work. Soon Wayne – the Durbanite with the tog bag – was telling me his life story.

Wayne's mother was in prison in Lima and he was trying to get her out. About a year previously she'd gone on a post-divorce, once-in-a-lifetime, Machu Picchu adventure. She'd met a man in Cuzco; a well-educated, presentable Argentine who spoke excellent English. They had planned a trip to his native Buenos Aires and booked the tickets together. But a few days before their departure date, he was called home unexpectedly – a family emergency.

Should she still come? Of course she should. The tickets were booked and everything would be sorted out by the time she got there.

On the day of her flight he called her: would she mind popping into the pharmacy to pick up some shampoo he'd ordered?

Of course she would, no problem...

If gullibility were a crime, she should have got a life sentence.

Wayne had given up trying to get the "guilty" verdict overturned. Now – on his fourth trip to Lima – he was focusing his attention on persuading the Peruvian government to allow her to serve the rest of her sentence in SA. On this trip he'd also bought her a mattress, and was trying to arrange for a monthly stipend to be delivered to her in prison.

At Wayne's age, most of us help our parents choose between retirement villages. The natural order of events had been turned on its head. Poor Wayne. I didn't envy him.

"Mr Mudley will see you now," the secretary said. His office was an oasis of neat documents, stamps and signatures. The wallpaper had a Khoisan motif. We signed, he stamped, and we were on our way. Provided we delivered our photos to the embassy early the following morning, our passports would be ready for collection before close of business.

Exiting Mudley's office, we found that the foyer had emptied. Boshoff, we assumed, had gone in search of a while-you-wait photo shop, and Wayne was most likely meeting with his lawyers. Only the tattooed pair were still there.

"Are you waiting to see Mr Mudley?"

I asked.

"No man," whined the taller of the two, "We hungry."

"Hungry?"

"Ja bra, don't you have five soles for bread?"

It turned out that they had been released from prison a year previously, having served 10-year sentences for drug smuggling. They'd learnt Spanish in prison and had decided that they were better off in Lima than on the Cape Flats. They'd managed to get jobs as janitors. They got free lodging but very little pay, so they loitered at the embassy. They knew that if they stayed long enough, someone would usually feel sorry for them and fork out some cash.

The next morning we handed over our photos, and later that afternoon we picked up our temporary passports. Bridget, the officer who issued them, was suffering from a bad cough. "Agh," she spluttered, "This Lima air is not the same as in Venda. I don't cough like this when I go home."

While we were waiting for the lift, I overheard Mr Mudley speaking to Bridget. "Boshoff didn't go," he said. "He missed his flight."

"Eish," she sighed. "Again." ■

