



Santa's little helpers

For most of us, the festive season means lazing on the beach, gorging on gammon, and trying to score on New Years. But for some poor souls, it's the busiest time of their working year.

Nick Dall sought them out, and he discovered that the last thing they want is your sympathy.



THE 31ST OF December 2005 may have been the most miserable day of my entire life. Not only was my throat swollen to the point where I couldn't open my mouth or swallow my own saliva (spittoon, please!), but I was working from 7pm to 7am – on New Year's Eve.

I'd found myself a job doing the night shift at a youth hostel in Mendoza in Argentina, and we'd drawn straws to see who would have to work when. I got the shortest one ... by a long way. While an assortment of Irishmen, Ozzies, Kiwis and Argies played beer pong and frolicked in the pool, I found myself folding towels and tumble drying sheets which weren't even my own.

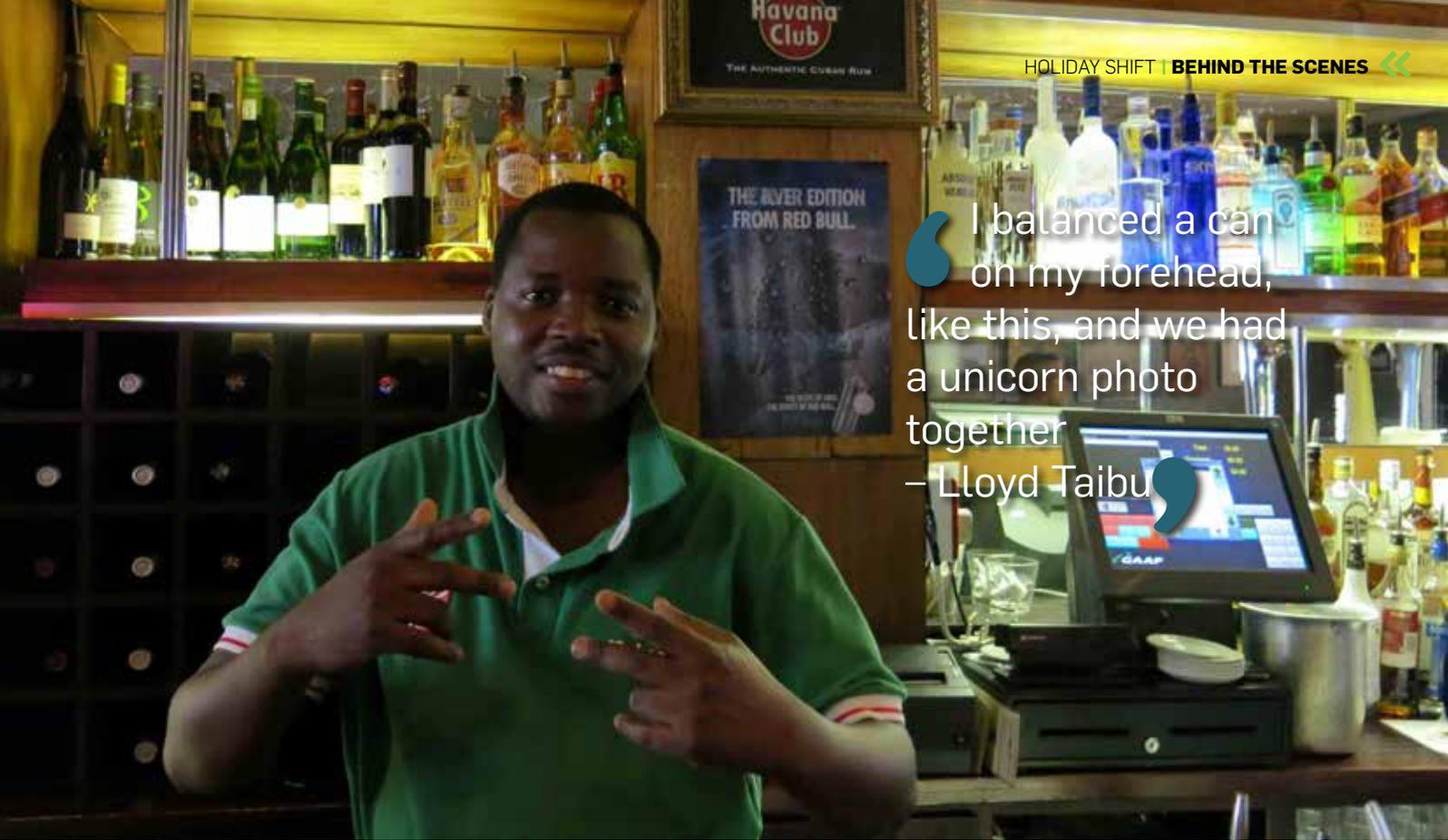
As the gaggle of gringos stumbled into the taxis, which would ferry them to Mendoza's finest (or filthiest) night spots, I SMSed for a pizza (I had no voice), which I eventually ended up sharing with the delivery guy on a vinyl couch covered in congealed Fernet and coke.

I may not be cut out for working while everyone else is *jolling*, and you probably aren't either. But I found plenty of barmen, video store dudes, and taxi drivers in Cape Town for whom it's a way of life. And they weren't complaining either...

Love what you do

Devon Daniels – who manages the floor at upmarket sneaker store, Shelflife – has certainly put in the hard yards over the years. 'I've been in retail for 12 years, and that means working insane hours over the festive season. When I worked in a mall for a big chain, it was hectic. We had to work on all the public holidays, and we didn't get much thanks in return,' he says.

But, Devon explains, working at Shelflife is very different: 'If you're passionate about what you sell, and you like the people you work with, everything is a lot easier.' →



I balanced a can on my forehead, like this, and we had a unicorn photo together – Lloyd Taibu

Devon is single and he doesn't have kids, so he sees the guys at the store as 'kind of like family'.

'As long as the boss appreciates that we're all working our butts off to make him money, it's all good,' Devon says. 'Often in the lead-up to Christmas he'll take us all out for dinner, or he'll just crack open some beers at closing time. And because we get all the public holidays off, I still have enough time to see my *real* family,' he winks, 'more than enough.'

Over the years, Devon has developed a formula that helps him deal with the silly season: he takes leave both before and after the Christmas rush. This doesn't only give him a chance to recharge his batteries, it's much more relaxing too.

'I'd much rather be on holiday in Cape Town in February. There's no wind, and it's much easier to get tables at restaurants

and a *lekker* spot for your towel on Clifton,' he says.

Timothy King, the guy at my local video store, also enjoys being able to avoid the crowds. 'Outside, things get a bit crazy over Christmas, but in here, not much happens,' he explains. 'My family visits me from America every year, and although they sometimes get annoyed that I'm at work, I quite enjoy the time to myself ... I only work from Thursdays to Sundays anyway.'

Silver lining

Lloyd Taibu, from Zimbabwe, has been a barman at Neighbourhood in Long Street for five years. 'Working over the festive season has two sides – advantages and disadvantages,' he looks up from stocking the fridge, 'we get more people from all over the world, which means I make more money. But, of course I miss my family. In

my culture, everyone is supposed to get together at Christmas and I can't do that anymore. But at least my wife and kids are here.'

For Lloyd, the best part about working in December and January is that all of his customers are in a good mood. 'Sometimes people come to a bar because they're stressed or depressed, and serving them is no fun.

But for those two months, everyone is happy, especially the ones who have birthdays at this time,' he explains.

Lloyd tells me about a guy from Turkey, who came dressed as a unicorn, and taught all of the barmen to sing Turkish football chants. 'I balanced a can on my forehead, like this, and we had a unicorn photo together. He shared it with me on Facebook, but now I've forgotten his name,' Lloyd says. →



“The weird thing is that all the biggest hazards we see are South Africans. The foreign guests have a good time, but the guys who visit from upcountry take it to the next level.”

And who can blame him? Lloyd can often put in 14- to 15-hour shifts over the festive season, but the one day he always gets off is New Year's Eve: the damage caused by revellers doesn't make opening the bar worthwhile!

Someone with a similar story is fellow Zimbabwean, Santa Kayz, a taxi driver. With a name like that, I guess he was destined to work at Christmas time, but Santa says it's all about choices. 'I'm an independent contractor, so no one is forcing me to work. But at that time of the year, Cape Town is full of tourists and they all want to get to places,' he explains.

Santa is getting to places too: he's using his income to fund a diploma in tourism and hospitality, and has dreams of opening his own tour company one day. Whatever the future holds, he'll still be working over Christmas...

Both Lloyd and Santa use the money they save over Christmas to fund annual trips back to Zimbabwe. 'As a Christian, Easter is more important than Christmas,

so that is when I see my family,' Santa shouts, as he gets into his car to avoid a fine from a lurking traffic officer.

Anywhere but home!

Carlvin Gomba, who's a receptionist at Blue Mountain Backpackers, has good reason to avoid his family over Christmas. 'They're Jehovah's Witnesses and I'm an atheist, so Christmas Day is a bit of a buzz kill. I'm happy to see them every other day of the year, but on Christmas, I'd much rather be at work – it's literally a thousand times more festive,' he explains.

When I interviewed him, Carlvin was with his best friend Amber Ernstzen. Amber doesn't actually work at the hostel, but she enjoys the vibe so much that she spends most of her free time there (she's a waitress at the Cape Town International Convention Centre). Amber and Carlvin have a good laugh telling me about all the crazy things they've seen, the most interesting being a guy who got back very drunk one night, and proceeded to walk

on the balcony banister – both forwards and backwards. 'If he'd been sober, I would have given him a 50 per cent chance of falling into the traffic below,' says Carlvin. 'But in his state, it was a miracle he lived ... and I don't believe in miracles.'

'The weird thing,' Amber chimes in, 'is that all the biggest hazards we see are South Africans. The foreign guests have a good time, but the guys who visit from upcountry take it to the next level.' Interesting.

Lessons learned?

During my 'research' I met loads of really nice guys and girls who weren't just resigned to working over the festive season, they actually relished it. I heard some funny stories and some inspiring ones, and – I never thought I'd say it – I came away from it all feeling slightly jealous. If I'm honest, it was the thought of Devon chilling on Clifton 4th on a random Tuesday in February that really did it. Lucky bugger. ■