



The UKZN Griot. Of Visas and Travels

BY: [👤](#)

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Once upon a time anyone could go anywhere. The conditions were tough and survival was not guaranteed. The original First (San) people did not need visas to populate the world. The traces of their DNA are everywhere. Their migrations were largely peaceful. In contrast, the Romans, Attila the Hun and the Vikings, the Spanish, the French, and the English murdered and plundered across the known world, destroying civilisations and spreading disease. Everyone colonised everyone else. Colonisation and conquest was the norm. Africa was not the exception.

All this recently came to mind when I was applying for a visa to visit Fortress Europe. In 2012 I was on a lecture tour in Norway, speaking at six universities, and being accommodated by four. One night in my two-week itinerary was unaccounted for hotel-wise. The Embassy refused to issue a visa until all my hotel bookings for every night were confirmed, paid for and proof provided. This was in addition to my paid-for air tickets, three months of bank account statements, my shareholding portfolio, travel and medical insurance and letters of invitation, not to mention my letter of employment at UKZN, and my scout's honour assurance that I would return to South Africa.

Not wanting to slave each and every hour of my travels to a predetermined schedule, I responded that I would buy an overnight ticket at the station next to the Oslo hotel I was staying at to take me to my next destination. Not possible unless I could show the ticket! So I decided to take a day train and stay an extra night in Oslo with my host, a media professor who via NORAD had invested over a million kroner in CCMS collaborations over a 10-year period. I asked him to write me a formal letter on a departmental letterhead addressed to the Embassy confirming that I would be staying with him this one night.

The Embassy immediately sent me a five page form that my host was instructed to fill in personally. Amongst the conditions listed for my host were that: a) he was personally responsible for repatriating me back to South Africa in the event that I overstayed, got sick or died; and ii) he needed to personally take the form to his local friendly police commissioner to get official clearance for me to stay with him for one night. Now, remember, this is Norway, not apartheid South Africa, Nazi Germany or North Korea.

My friend blew a fuse as I knew he would. He was in Rotterdam and was not going to return to Oslo to get a form signed. He called the Embassy and inquired about these conditions – Schengen requirements he was told.

When I arrived in Oslo, all my hosts there were talking about the visa requirements. They were largely disbelieving. This was EU officialese to which Norway had reluctantly succumbed, they assumed. Norway would not behave like this otherwise. My host even published newspaper comment on the nice, friendly police state that Norway had become since 9/11.

On arrival, one of my Norwegian hosts gave me a cartoon book called: *How to Understand and Use a Norwegian: A users manual and troubleshooters guide*. It's a wonderfully self-deprecating take on a people who were still travelling on skis and gave off the faint odour of fish until the discovery of oil made them rich just a few decades ago. The Norwegian, according to this book, is a really quirky character, a loner, someone who rarely spoke because, apart from family, there was no-one to talk to in the vast snowy plains, glaciers and mountains.

On my inaugural arrival in Oslo in 1992, other than the passport officer, the first Norwegian I encountered was a short man with a backpack wearing traditional Norwegian dress, as if for a solitary and bracing mountain walk. He appeared to be waiting for someone. He struck up a friendly conversation with me and then showed me into a room while flashing his ID at me. He wanted me to unpack my backpack. I imagined – like in Nigeria – that this must be a scam and I told him to buzz off. But he really was an undercover cop and he really did want to see into my backpack. He was also really quite pleased that he did not find any contraband. Unlike African governments, Norway's government has used its new found riches wisely, honestly and sensibly. No corruption in this state, the cop did not ask 'what can I do for him?' and wished me good travels. Norway is egalitarian, no-one has a sense of entitlement, and the king is above reproach.

Unless on a US or EU passport, one's carefree back packing days are gone. The traveller's every hour is managed by embassies, electronic surveillance (both commercial and state) and police clearances. Even our friends are included in this surveillance of their visitors.

* Keyan G Tomaselli travels a lot, he pays for his travels by singing for his hotel rooms, and spending huge amounts of time and money on visa applications. Sometimes he just refuses invitations like when recently told that because he was to be in Finland for an hour more than in Germany on the same trip, he would need to go to Pretoria to get his fingerprints taken by the Finns – notwithstanding his good behaviour during his three previous visits to that country. Backpacking in Lesotho, anyone?

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.