



The moaner visa

Eugene Yiga's excitement at travelling somewhere new turns into the realisation that he might be better off staying home.

Three adventurous days exploring Namibia's coastline. Five tropical days in the paradise that is Mauritius. And let's not forget about half a dozen overnight or weekend stays at luxury properties across South Africa.

Yes, being a travel writer has given me the opportunity to go on some amazing trips in the last year. So it's no wonder that I was happy to say yes when I received an invitation to attend a media launch in another faraway land. But then came the complicated process of applying for a visa. How much of a mission was that? Let me count the ways.

First, I had to complete an online application on a website that looks like it was designed pre-Y2K. That meant taking selfies (which I had no idea were so difficult!) to act as my passport photograph, and including income and employment documentation to prove that I wasn't going to stick around and mooch off the generosity of the land.

Then, after providing details of my flights and hotel, and signing and dating all the forms, I had to pay the application fee.

But there was no option for an online credit

card payment, which meant I had to go out and make it happen in the real world.

So I went to the bank (for the first time in forever) to get a guaranteed cheque. "It will cost 20% of the amount," the woman at the counter said. "And it will take half an hour because we have to do it manually." I'd already been waiting that long just for my ticket number to be called. Stick around some more? No thanks.

Next stop was the post office (also for the first time in forever) but that wasn't easy either. The branch closest to me had closed down due to "unforeseen circumstances" but didn't include any details of nearby post offices to use instead. So I had to make an even greater trek to find another one.

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"Sorry, but we take only cash payments for postal orders," the guy at the counter said. So, after already giving them my proof of address and copy of my ID, I had to go hunting for an ATM.

After spending half a day getting everything sorted out, it was finally done.

The courier collected my application pack and all I had to do was wait.

And wait. And then wait some more.

After two weeks of no response (and having all my email queries ignored), I picked up the phone and called the High Commission. At first the number was engaged – you know,

because only one line is enough – but then I got through to one of those bureaucrats in a bad mood because I probably woke her up from a blissful nap.

I explained my situation and she told me to hold on, at which point she transferred me to someone else in a bad mood. Then I had to explain it all over again. "I can't help you now," she said. "Please call tomorrow." It was around 15h00 – you know, because being available for only a few hours a day is enough – and they were about to close. I asked her if she needed my reference number. "No," she snapped. Click. Did she just hang up? Oh yes, she did.

The next day I had to go through it all over again. According to the courier company, my application pack had been signed for 15 days ago. But the person in charge of receiving the deliveries had misplaced it! So she put me on hold while she ruffled through some papers to find it. Eventually she did. But the postal order payment I'd included had mysteriously disappeared. "You can pay it again," she said. So that it can go 'missing' again? No thanks.

This experience might sound extreme (or not, depending on your own tales of woe) but it happens all the time. Who knows how much damage it does to a country to have their 'brand' represented by people who just don't give a crap about their jobs? Much like companies employing staff who don't care – in which case we end up taking our business elsewhere. And if your first impression of a country screams "WE AIM TO MAKE YOUR VISIT AS PAINFUL AS POSSIBLE", then what's the point of going there at all?

The world is full of countries that welcome South African visitors with open arms. (Hint: go to South America!) Besides, if going on a trip requires your passport to have more of a holiday than you, then it might be better to take a different journey instead. **TBI**



Illustration by Colleen Brice