TRAVEL AFRICA

Shaka, giant of the Zulus

King Goodwill, today's king of the Zulus, lives in the footsteps of King Shaka. **Stephen Scourfield** explains.

A local tribute to King Shaka, on the roadside near KwaDukuza (Stanger).

Blue flashing lights appear in the rearview mirror, then three police motorcyclists file past, signalling us to pull over. A black Range Rover and three shiny black Police 4WDs bowl past. King Goodwill — king of the Zulus — is heading back to his hotel after the successful A1 grand prix in Durban. He is a man who commands respect. He has huge clout.

He is also a man living in the footsteps of Zulu King Shaka, who stalks the pages of history.

Shaka is a monumental figure in the history of KwaZulu-Natal province in eastern South Africa. Before the 1700s, and King Shaka's military genius, argues Greg Garson, of Garsons Expeditions — a specialist in KwaZulu-Natal province today and in the past — the Zulus were "a small, insignificant tribe".

It was then that King Senzangakona had an illicit affair with a young woman, Nandi — such behaviour being outside the tribe's mores. Nandi, "the sweet one". Zulu, "heaven".

News eventually spread that Nandi was heavy with child, but the shamans countered by saying that her bowels were infected by the uShaka beetle, blowing her stomach out.

"That's what you have got," she was told.

But a child was born. Shaka.

"From day one, he and his mother, Nandi, had a terrible time from Zulus because of the circumstances," Mr Garson explains.

Nandi went back to live with her father's tribe and Shaka grew to be a man.

There is an image of Zulus as tall, statuesque, particularly athletic, light-absorbingly black. In fact, says Mr Garson, most are of normal height. Perhaps, partly people conjure up images of Masai.

But Shaka was all of these things — very tall, very strong, exceedingly athletic. He was an outstanding warrior and would prove himself to be a ruthless and unbeatable tactician. When Senzangakona died, Shaka marched on the Zulus to claim his birthright. His 5000 warriors faced 12,000 but Shaka won control of the tribe in a bloodbath.

"When he became king of the Zulus, he created a nation, "Mr Garson says.

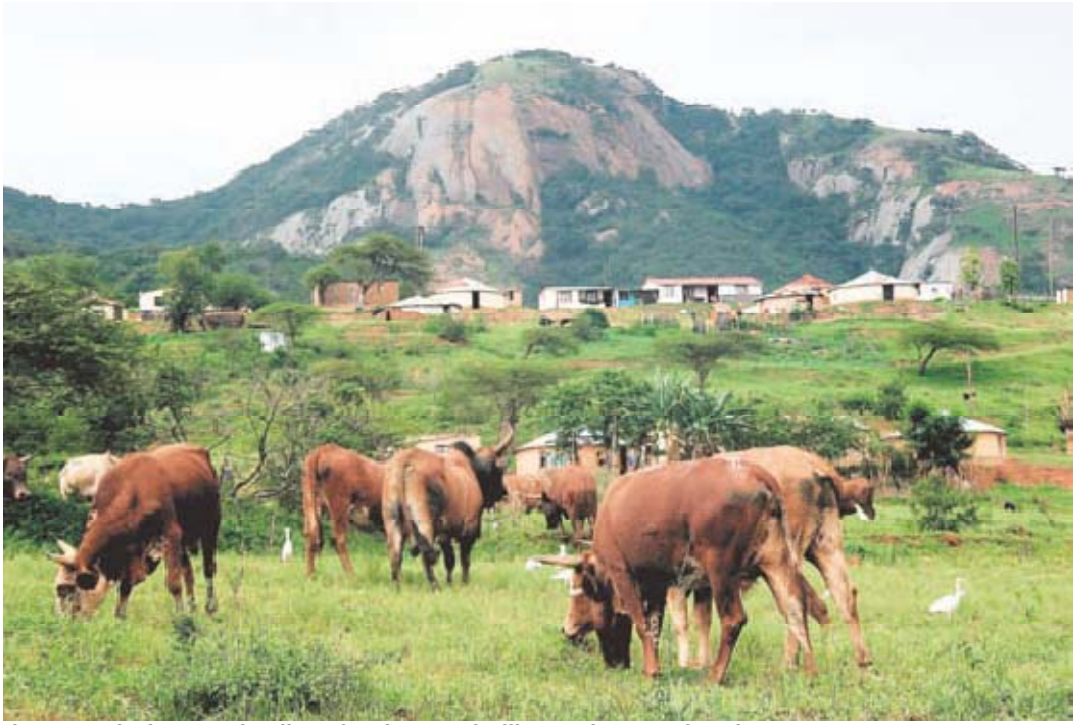
Shaka banned the use of throwing spears in battle (once you had thrown them, you were disarmed and the opposers threw them back) and said that from then, Zulus would fight in close combat. He invented a short, fighting spear, the iKlawa, named for the sound it made when withdrawn from an opponent's body. Pronounced with a guttural, sucking sound.

There were to be no more sandals — even over the thorny ground, his warriors' feet must be strong enough to cope and they must not show they felt pain. He wanted their speed and agility. And, crucially, no warrior was allowed to marry without his personal permission. That permission came easily only when they had "washed their spear in the blood of enemies".

'Once the Zulus arrived on the scene it changed things for ever.'

GREG GARSON, GARSONS EXPEDITIONS

King Shaka's burial place at King Shaka Visitor Centre, at KwaDukuza, under a simple rock



The evocatively named Valley of a Thousand Hills, north-west of Durban. **Pictures: Stephen Scourfield**

Shaka's Zulus were unleashed in eastern Africa and the shockwaves were felt thousands of kilometres away, as tribes were displaced. King Shaka's message to them was simple: "Join us or perish."

Often Shaka is portrayed as a cruel despot with no consideration for his own people. The story of his Mother's death in 1828, at least, bears this out.

King Shaka was so distraught at the death of the beloved Nandi that he ordered her handmaidens to be buried alive with her. He also ordered the slaughter of 7000 of his people. He wanted the Zulu nation to truly share the pain he was feeling.

He went to pieces and it was only a year later that his brother, Dingane, was involved in his assassination and took over the leadership of the Zulus.

It was under Dingane's kingship that the Dutch trekkers, displaced by the British, were confronted in 1838, with 571 wiped out in one night — impaled, with sticks up their rectums.

The scene was set for the battle of Blood River and the Anglo-Zulu wars, later made more famous by Michael Caine in the film, Zulu.

It was a different kind of telling to that by Zulus themselves, who relate their stories in the first person, mesmerising — and, some say, hypnotising — their listeners. The son of a Zulu general striding across the plains becomes that general in the telling. You become the teller, as a small boy, listening. The Zulus are serious storytellers.

Today, we cruise Durban's streets past the Shaka Liquor Store, Shaka Fashion, Shaka Tours and Shaka's Pub and Grill. The very word Shaka, as Mr Garson says, denotes strength and power.

And a shiny black motorcade barges by.

SAVOUR THE TIME

Endlessly, we pass people walking along roads a long way from anywhere. Two women strolling under the shade of an umbrella. A group of teenage boys, who wave and smile. A woman with a big, plastic water container on her head. A man in a leather jacket, striding smartly. A string of little kids with huge bundles of gleaned firewood on their heads, while ours are at home listening to their iPods.

Here in South Africa, you pass them, and drive on and on, looking for where they might be going, and realise that they are walking many kilometres to wherever it is.

Then you notice a youngster sitting in the grass on the side of the road, for no apparent reason. A man on a rock, spending his Sunday afternoon.

By Western world standards, these are poor people. They live in traditional round huts with thatched roofs and open fires without chimneys, the smoke permeating the thatch to kill insects trying to set up shop there.

Most are subsistence farmers. Small boys with thin, twitchy sticks herd the family's goats or cows, if they have any.

Yet watching them walking makes me think they are rich in one commodity that we, with our blessed Western lives, both lack and crave. A very precious commodity.

Time.

The need may be enforced by lack of transport (though mini-buses crammed full of people are constantly plying these remote roads, to be flagged down), but they seem to have time.

Time to stand and chat in the middle of the road. Time to walk to places. Time to be communal.

They need time, too, and I don't want to over-glorify their lives. Children and women are seen at communal water pumps, bringing up the day's litres, to carry home. Firewood has to be found and hauled.

But they live in the landscape and are part of it, and that is something we have lost too. A Zulu community in the Drakensberg has million-dollar views, in our parlance, in these times when a million dollars buys you a dog-box in a subdivided backyard.

They also have a connection with landscape and nature that I envy.

And that precious commodity. Time.

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD