

THEN  
AND NOW



The spectacular Sani Pass is the entry point from South Africa to Lesotho

# A road well travelled

In the 1920s you'd have been one of 18 965 motorists in SA. Today you're one of 8.6 million drivers who traverse the roads that cover some 747 000 km of the country. Kerry Dimmer looks at road infrastructure past and present

**D**riving from Johannesburg to Durban today takes roughly five hours. Back when the AA was established in 1930 it could take almost three times that, with an overnight stop in Van Reenen if the weather was really grim. Vehicles weren't reliable, there were no mobile gadgets and cars were often seen stranded with no emergency roadside assistance available other than the goodwill of police and other drivers. The hospitality of South Africans willing to assist was legendary and it was safe enough then to sleep next to your car.

'Things moved at a much slower pace when the AA, pretty much a gentlemen's motoring club, was formed,' says the AA's Gary Ronald. 'By 1950 there were 565 000 registered vehicles on our roads and nine years later this had grown to a million.'

One million became two million in 1971 and double that by 1985. Since then we have experienced exponential growth to reach the current figure of 8.6 million motorised vehicles. But are we still applauding?

'Yes and no,' says Gary. 'With this many cars on our roads we are seeing an increase in driver aggression and serious congestion on city routes. On the other hand, road infrastructure and development has provided us with world-class upgrades. Certainly hosting the Fifa World Cup has motivated a flurry of road development, at much inconvenience yes, but these improvements will serve us for some time to come. Conversely, we have pretty much used up the reserves we have for city road development so we will continue to experience traffic congestion at peak times long after the World Cup.'

'What we at the AA are more concerned with, now that the ball is really rolling, is whether the momentum will continue in terms of maintenance and further development,' says Gary.

The AA plays a major advocacy role in terms of protecting the interests of motorists, consumer bodies and transporters, and so the government tends to take the AA's opinion fairly seriously. 'We are the voice of reason,' he adds. 'The government does listen to us in so far as we are able to provide facts on road conditions and needs but, contrary to popular belief, we cannot effect change. What we are able to do, and do effectively, is be a conduit for

information, such as when it was announced that toll roads were to be introduced. Despite objecting vociferously, the AA was told that, well, we are getting tolled anyway.'

The introduction of toll roads in the 1990s made motoring more expensive and many motorists resented the payments, believing that maintenance of major routes should be undertaken by the government. 'The fact is,' says Gary wryly, 'the toll operators do take road maintenance seriously and, generally speaking, these roads are far better maintained than many of the national routes.'

However, alarm bells are starting to ring. For one, South Africa is running out of road space. Compounding this is the disintegration of our roads due to an increase in road freight transportation that, sadly, is the consequence of having an inefficient rail operator. Another untenable situation is dangerous potholes on suburban routes that are not being addressed. Some provincial transport departments are crying poverty in response to their ineffective delivery of repairs.

Ian Venter, owner of Tar-A-Way, says that in the 1930s tar surfacing was an art, largely undertaken in South Africa by master builders from Italy and France. 'Some of the roads they built are still pothole free – these guys were the "Daddies" of the roads. Today the aggregate we use to mix with bitumen for road creation is sourced from quarries. Back in the '30s, '40s and '50s it was sourced in-situ, often from the farms that bordered the roads to be developed. They were very clever people. Remember too that trucks back then could not carry such heavy loads and there were no roads that catered to that type of load-bearing anyway.'

'Pothole repair is completely inefficient,' says Ian irritably. 'There are only a handful of road inspectors left in this country. In the good old days road inspectors were prolific and could repair on discovery. When a pothole is repaired correctly and the mix tested to the highest standards, there is no reason for our roads not to last 20 years, as they should.'



## DID YOU KNOW?

The cost of petrol in 1930 was nine cents a gallon, compared to roughly R8.04 per litre today, depending on where in SA you are.



## THEN AND NOW



Above: The Nelson Mandela Bridge crosses the Johannesburg Station shunting yards, linking the business districts of Braamfontein and Newtown  
Below: Civil engineers survey road infrastructure in Pietermaritzburg

With regard to our road quality, Sanral's network manager and demand analyst, Louw Kannemeyer, says South Africa has been one of the more advanced nations in terms of road design and construction.

'We are able to build roads up to 30% cheaper than the rest of the world. But we acknowledge that we have an old road

*South Africa has been one of the more advanced nations in terms of road design and construction. "We are able to build roads up to 30% cheaper than the rest of the world"*

network with more than 78% of the national and provincial routes older than the 20-year design life. To address this problem will require a minimum estimated investment of R50 billion per year for the next five years, but we have only R19 billion to fix 64 350 km of paved and 136 640 km of gravel roads. With such

a deficit, it is obvious that the condition of the South African road network will not be improving as a whole in the near future,' says Louw.

Looking ahead, Gary says that more land needs to be expropriated for roads. 'This is the main priority. We cannot wait another 10 years, and public transport alternatives will not necessarily reduce or contain the number of vehicles. Business can help by encouraging home-based office work, which will alleviate extreme deterioration of road surfaces.'

Decades ago we lived in an industry-motivated environment; today we sway towards knowledge. The milestones and pathways we have crossed since 1930 are so phenomenal in terms of technological advancements that perhaps by 2090 we won't have a need for highways or cars.

In the meantime, I hope our roads do last at least 20 years, thereafter I want to pilot my own sky transit vehicle. 🚀



### PLAN OF ACTION

Freeway Management System (FMS) and Intelligent Transport System (ITS) are two of the latest road development strategies that Sanral is implementing. These systems will benefit road users by helping reduce congestion and assist with incident management systems. They will provide a faster response time to incidents and aid quicker clearance of impediments to traffic flow.

- **Cape Town:** FMS will be rolled out on the N1, N7, N2, M5 and R300. This system includes a centralised Transport Management Centre (TMC), closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras, viable message signs (VMS), loops and other traffic detection equipment and traffic information devices.
- **KwaZulu-Natal:** 100 km of ITS infrastructure is being deployed on the N2 and N3 inclusive of 109 CCTV cameras and 18 VMS. FMS will be operational by the end of April.
- **Gauteng:** ITS has been expanded to the R21, covering 43 km of the route. Twenty-five CCTV cameras will be added with wireless communications – six of those solar powered. The current FMS includes the N1, N3, N12 and N17.