



It's a tie-breaker

We all know everything is better overseas... But is it really? Richard Asher has a tough time deciding between Vereeniging and Barcelona.

Vereeniging. Yes, I'd heard of Vereeniging. Even as a head-in-the-sand Capetonian. I couldn't quite remember where, or why, but I knew I'd seen it in the headlines once. It was famous for something, but I wasn't sure what.

I'll figure it out later, I thought, as I sidled up to the window of my compartment on the Algoa train. My journey south from Joburg's Park Station had barely begun: I was one long sleep away from my student hovel in Grahamstown, but first I was going to spend 10 minutes in one of the three most important corners of the Vaal Triangle, which, I recalled, once produced a rugby team whose

results made Adrian Steed's Saturday evening news bulletin.

I'd always been morbidly fascinated by the urban bits of the Highveld. For a kid growing up in the Cape, Johannesburg and its surrounds were like another country. I was convinced that everything "up there" was a shade of brownish-yellow and that all Vaalies were as mean as Naas Botha and Clive Rice.

I'd just spent a week visiting a friend in Randfontein, a place that stood up rather well to the Highveld of my imagination. Something told me Vereeniging was going to fit the bill too.

So I got my camera out.

It didn't seem like a bad idea at the time. I leaned out of the window and pointed it in the direction of a man wearing a Nigeria soccer shirt – a geographical fashion twist that amused the photojournalist in me. And it seemed like a positively great idea when I flopped back down in my seat, feeling smug about my photography skills.

But it suddenly became a very bad idea when the door to my compartment burst open and the selfsame gentleman, along with two of his friends, lunged at me with sharpened blades.

I could only guess that the man in the Nigeria shirt had been unhappy about the

lighting or the angle of the photo, or perhaps suspected my composition was a little off. Maybe he was just upset I hadn't warned him to spruce up first. Whatever it was, he and his mates were very keen to relieve me of my camera. And my money and luggage bag.

Despite my pleas, the three train pirates even took my train ticket, which nearly caused me to be thrown off at Kroonstad that evening. I was lucky not to have lost any blood, but I was aware of the cruel irony of the situation: I had a photo of my attacker – perfect evidence, if he didn't happen to have my camera.

And then it hit me. I remembered what Vereeniging was famous for. Not the Treaty of Vereeniging (which was signed in Pretoria anyway), nor the town's hollow-sounding *Per pacem ad industriam* motto. It didn't have anything to do with peace, in fact, but rather some dreadful violence in the early 1990s – most notably in nearby Boipatong, where a massacre took place on 17 June 1992.

I should never have taken my camera out.

Barcelona. Wherever you go in the world, you'll find a shiny-eyed arts student or brain-washed backpacker ready to sing Barcelona's praises. Next time someone tells me how brilliant Barcelona is, I'm going to withdraw my life savings and buy a plane ticket for that ill-informed person. Then I'll arm him with a letter (in Catalan) addressed to the mayor of the city. The letter will state that the bearer is a talented nephew of Antoni Gaudí, sent to finish off all the works that the architectural genius couldn't be bothered to complete before he died. Especially that church. Then we'll see how much he enjoys Barcelona...

Have I got something personal against the city? Yes, I have. When you get mugged somewhere, you don't come away feeling warm and fuzzy. My theory is that Barcelona is just a modern Catalan corruption of "barbarian".

As far as I'm concerned, it's Europe's answer to Vereeniging.

I'd spent months wandering around Europe, and many other parts of Spain too. Never once did I feel threatened, except in Barcelona. In the same week that I was attacked, I'd awoken to screams outside my window in the "charming and rustic" Gothic Quarter as a hapless tourist was robbed in the street.

However, having had the dubious pleasure of being attacked in Barcelona and Vereeniging, I can tell you that Spanish muggers aren't very good. Here's why.

I was out for a stroll in Montjuïc Park,

"As I tried to pick myself off the dirt, I waited for Plan C. And that's when I realised how rubbish this guy was at his trade..."

one of Barcelona's top tourist attractions and usually quite a safe spot. But, me being me, I'd managed to enter via some dodgy, quiet corner near the docks. There wasn't a soul about, except two elderly joggers, a dishevelled Labrador and a weedy-looking teenager who asked me for the time. He should have realised I wasn't worth robbing when I told him I didn't have a watch, but he wasn't as alert to the presence or absence of valuables as the guys in Vereeniging were.

He would have made a great cricketer, though, because a few seconds later I felt an almighty thump on the back of my head – he'd picked up a rock, thrown it and hit me dead centre.

But his plan was flawed – the rock wasn't big enough to knock me out. So he opted for Plan B, which involved tripping me while I was slightly dazed.

As I tried to pick myself off the dirt, I waited for Plan C. And that's when I realised how rubbish this guy was at his trade. He danced around like a ninja from one of those early PC video games, yelling "*Dinero, dinero!*" He didn't even have a weapon! No gun, no knife... nothing. It was turning out to be a feeble mugging. He even allowed me to kick him in the shins and run away.

People always say that adrenaline is a useful thing, but it was only at the end of my 200m dash to safety that I fully understood this. Once I'd dusted myself off and assessed my torn clothing, I realised I was barely able to walk. I'd twisted my knee during the scuffle.

It was a blessing in disguise. Now I could spend the rest of my stay in Barcelona recuperating on the beach. No more half-finished churches for me, and no more uneasy strolls down Las Ramblas, that nest of thieves. I'm happy to report that nobody stole the towel from my deckchair, but only because I sat on it the whole time.

Occasionally a dangerous incident enlivens a trip; invariably it makes a good yarn when you get home. But I can't say I'd recommend it. If I've learnt one thing, it's to take a little more care when choosing a place to go wandering, and also what valuables I choose to display. The destination also has a lot to do with it.

So, Barcelona or Vereeniging?

It's a tough one. Vereeniging is cheaper to get to, but Barcelona has an edge in the art and history department.

Perhaps a musical tie-breaker will solve it? I'll leave you to pick your idol: Montserrat Caballé or the late Bles Bridges? ■

