

May, 2000

Cheryll and I just returned from two and a half weeks in South Africa and Swaziland. The vacation fun started in the doctor's office before we even left. We got shots for TB, Typhoid, Tetanus and Cholera and we were each prescribed some really fun pills to prevent malaria. The pills have some nasty side effects (basically a mild hangover that lasts for days), but over a million people die from malaria in Africa each year, so they're better than the alternative. You have to take the malaria pills for four weeks after returning, so it's like the vacation that just won't end.

We flew Northwest to New York Kennedy and then South African Airlines for 14 hours non-stop to Johannesburg, arriving mid-afternoon on Saturday, April 15. Tourists are advised not to stay in the city center, so we stayed at a Holiday Inn in Sandton, a suburb north of town. On Sunday we took a tour of the city. There were some interesting museums which detail how the city was founded quite literally on a gold mine as well as some of the more recent history surrounding the end of Apartheid in 1994. In the afternoon we toured Soweto; the black township southwest of Johannesburg. "Soweto" is a contraction of Southwest Township. The government is pouring a lot of money into improving the standard of housing and most, but by no means all, of it looked decent.

On Monday we joined our group of 22 people for our twelve-day bus tour around the country. Most of the tourists are British, and we were the only Americans in our group. South Africa is a beautiful place. We expected the scenery to look like the African stereotype: grassland with the occasional short tree. While some of it did meet our expectations, we also saw beautiful mountains, incredible canyons, sandy beaches, rugged coastlines, forests of pines like the Pacific Northwest, and deserts just like Arizona. We went game spotting in several reserves and national parks and saw herds of elephants, rhinos, giraffes, buffalo, lions, zebra, impala, warthogs, wildebeest and countless species of birds and reptiles. There were monkeys and some baboons who felt it inappropriate for us to have a picnic lunch without sharing it with them.

Our tour spent two days in Kruger National Park where we could see hippos in the river that ran in front of our hotel. We stopped at a reenactment of a Zulu village where tourists are treated to dancers wearing little more than loin cloths and given a demonstration of various crafts including spear manufacturing and how to turn a cow's horn into a water bong and use it to smoke marijuana. We spent two nights in Durban and watched jet-ski races at the beach. We flew to Port Elizabeth and spent three days on the "Garden Route" which is reminiscent of the California coast. We stopped at an ostrich farm in the Little Karoo Desert and finished the tour in Cape Town where we enjoyed happy hour while watching the sunset from Table Mountain: very romantic. We also toured the Cape Peninsula and saw many seals and penguins.

South Africa is a fascinating study in race relations. The population is 77% black, 11% white, 9% "colored" or mixed race, and 3% Indian. Democracy replaced apartheid in 1994 and blacks now control most of the key political positions, but whites still hold most of the wealth. The fact that the relationship is peaceful is truly a testament to the leadership of Nelson Mandela, but Cheryl and I both sensed tension between the groups. The blacks we met were polite, but not generally warm or welcoming. White people still seem to have most of the management positions and it was common for the black people to be doing work under the close supervision of the whites. Even the museum had hundred year old pictures of black workers drilling holes in the gold mines while whites looked closely over their shoulders. The government has passed affirmative action laws requiring all companies to have a plan for mirroring the demographics of the country: 80% black and 50% female. This has made young whites largely unemployable. I played golf in Durban with two white recent university graduates. They said that in their class of fourteen, twelve had left the country to find work in Britain or Australia, and the thirteenth was leaving next month. They loved the beautiful country and its climate, but felt there were no other options for employment. Great Britain is offering passports to South Africans who can prove British ancestry. Time will tell what the effect of this brain drain will be.

We also had a chance to visit the small kingdom of Swaziland and enjoyed it thoroughly. Swaziland is a small country with less of a colonial past. They don't know apartheid. Cheryl and I found it fascinating that, unlike South Africa, the people (99% black) were very warm and welcoming toward white tourists. They waved to the bus from the fields as we drove by, and smiled and chatted with us in the market. The tension between white and black which was almost everywhere in South Africa seemed non-existent in Swaziland.

One of the highlights was on our last day in Cape Town when we took the ferry to the former prison on Robben Island. We toured the prison where Nelson Mandela spent 18 years. Our guide had formerly occupied a cell located four doors down the hallway from Mandela. It was fascinating to meet a living part of real history. He held a twenty-minute question and answer session with our group of about thirty visitors. He and many of the prisoners obtained college degrees through correspondence courses while in prison. He was articulate and well-spoken. He said that when he was fourteen he got involved in the "military arm of the African National Congress". The ANC is currently the ruling political party. He had "training" in Cuba, Angola and Zimbabwe. He was tried as a terrorist at the age of nineteen, convicted and served most of his twenty-year sentence. He insisted that he was not a terrorist, but rather a freedom fighter and a political prisoner. I don't know what really happened before he was convicted, but inside the prison Nelson Mandela was the acknowledged leader, and his emphasis on peace, forgiveness, education and reconciliation has no doubt had a profound impact on the future of the country.

Throughout our visit, there were news stories of farm occupations by groups of “war veterans” and the killing of white farmers in neighboring Zimbabwe, but the recent history of the transformation from apartheid to democracy has been much more peaceful in South Africa. It will be interesting to follow what happens there in the coming months and years. I wish much luck for the South Africans, black and white.

We enjoyed the trip thoroughly and learned a great deal. I'll close with the top ten lessons from this fascinating trip:

10. Spending too much time staring at the bushes as you drive by looking for wildlife can cause your eyes to go buggy, and don't be fooled; white rhinos are actually black.
9. Barbecue duties have been standardized internationally. The standards apply equally in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, north and south. The women do all of the shopping, preparation, side dishes and cleanup. The men stand around, cook the meat, and get all of the credit.
8. The last person writing the history gets to decide who was a terrorist and who was a freedom fighter and a political prisoner.
7. Don't expect to enjoy a quiet, relaxing picnic when there are hungry baboons nearby.
6. It is normal for thatched-roof huts to smell like urine after a good rain.
5. If someone approaches you while waiting to use an ATM machine at a crowded mall and suggests that you use a more secluded one, don't go.
4. Six years after the end of apartheid, most black South African workers are still being closely supervised by white managers.
3. If you are in economy class on a seventeen-hour red-eye flight and are assigned a center seat next to someone who weighs 300 pounds, resign yourself early to the fact that you will get little sleep.
2. If you and your caddy are searching for a ball in the long grass, hope that he finds it first. This seems to greatly improve the odds of having a good lie with a reasonable next shot.
1. Nelson Mandela was a great leader. He managed the transition from apartheid to democracy in an exemplary manner, and he truly deserves the Nobel Peace Prize he was awarded.

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