

September 16, 2003

Kruger Game Park South Africa

Meet Jumbo. He's one of two guides on our sunset Bush Walk in Kruger National Park – South Africa. A strapping 6'5" white Namibian, he looks like Central Casting's choice for the role of Great White Hunter. Our other guide is an attractive 23-year old brunette named Syska. They both carry rifles.

Pretoria - Our First Afrikaners

I tried not to carry any preconceived notions as we landed at Johannesburg airport on September 16. But it was a surprise. It's so modern and clean. The Jo'Burg Airport is like O'Hare without the walking. Everything is so convenient. The walk from baggage claim to the car rental office to the car is a short one.

The problem was starting the car. Car theft is a big problem here. In order to start the car you have to insert this plastic piece into a slot. When the light stops blinking you can start the car with the key.

In South Africa you drive on the left. Therefore everything in the car is reversed. The steering wheel is on the right. The gearshift is on the left. The turn signal is located on the right of the steering wheel. I don't know how many times that I turned on the windshield wipers to signal a turn.

First stop was the home of Gene Peuse, Anzie's counterpart in Southern Africa. Gene has worked in this position for three years. Born in Iowa, he has worked for many years in Africa. His warm, attractive wife, Gatti, is Tanzanian. They have two sons.

Gene guided us over to the Seiler Bed & Breakfast Lodge. Anne and I ate a buffet dinner at a common table together with Mrs. Seiler, son Karl and five other Afrikaners. We discovered that Afrikaners are great meat eaters, and justifiably so. The lamb was terrific. I began to compare conditions in Senegal to those in South Africa. What they call lamb in Senegal tastes like it must have died of natural causes, like Alzheimers. This lamb was tender. For dessert we had a heavenly trifle. I had two helpings.

Afrikaner men for the most part look large and well fed. Rugby is their national sport. You've probably heard of their national team, the Springboks. Interestingly enough, Black Africans prefer Football/Soccer. Afrikaners are a loud, brash bunch with no pretensions. They are friendly to strangers, but you have to make the first move.

The dinner conversation was lively. One openly gay man had just moved from Capetown. He had many good travel tips for our upcoming visit there.

The conversation turned to the recent anniversary of 9/11. I didn't realize how many South Africans lost their lives in the Twin towers disaster. Everyone spoke of how they had been affected by the event. A professor from a university in Port Elizabeth on the southeast coast asked us respectfully what we would say to the charge that Americans are arrogant. Anne spoke up immediately, "Of course we're arrogant, but naively so. We as a people just can't seem to understand why other people don't like us. Never mind that we maintained a military presence in Saudi Arabia way longer than our host nationals ever dreamed."

"Others call us imperialists. But we're not like other aggressor nations. They conquer a country and never leave. We subdue a country. Then we fix it up, put all the chairs back in order, and then we leave the country to govern itself. Call it 'Imperialism Lite'. We want to be liked!"

Woke up the next morning having slept under a blanket for the first time in months. It was cool. It's early Spring on this side of the equator. Johannesburg lies about on a latitude with Santiago, Chile. Spring flowers are just beginning to bloom.

Had breakfast with the Seiler family: eggs any style, bacon, sausage and smoked fish poached in cream. Delicious!

- Lodging and breakfast for the two of us: \$46.00
- Dinner: \$16.00

Off to Kruger

Took off for Kruger National Park, a four-hour drive. The roads are phenomenal. No potholes here. Speed limit is 80 mph. The countryside resembles Northern California – Hayward out to Sacramento. Rolling hills covered with what Californians describe as "golden" grasses. Leaves are an olive green. The winter was unusually dry. The rainy season really wasn't. It rained for 1 ½ days during our trip, and made quite a difference.

The gas stations are run some familiar names – Shell, Total. They are modern and immaculate. Their convenient stores feature "biltong", South African jerky made from a variety of meats including ostrich.

We stopped in Nelspruit, about three hours outside of Pretoria, to buy groceries. The SPAR supermarket would put most U.S. markets to shame. Anzie just stood there open-mouthed in awe of all the fresh produce, fruit and cheeses. South Africans barbeque a lot. They call it "braai". Such a selection of meats and poultry en brochette we've never seen. We bought lamb chops and three pairs of chicken brochettes spiced different ways.

We went next door to the liquor store. We bought a selection of white and red wines at \$1.25 – 1.70 a bottle. They were all excellent!

It took us another hour to arrive at the Crocodile Bridge Gate to Kruger. The park is enormous - the size of Israel. We entered at the southern end. Within two miles of the entrance we spotted a sleeping rhino. Actually "Sharp-Eyed Anzie" spotted it. I thought it was a rock.

Our 30-mile trip took almost three hours as we "road-hunted" for game. We spotted lots of impala – deer with racing stripes. They are beautiful animals. The males sport antlers that twist as they grow. Impala are so numerous that we didn't even slow down to watch them after a while.

Then there were bush pigs – wild boar - and a herd of huge water buffalo. As the herd crossed the road, one stopped in front of us and eyed us belligerently. I put the car in reverse gear, just in case. Thankfully he followed his buddies.

Lower Sabie Camp

We arrived at our first camp, Lower Sabie, aptly named as it is situated on the banks of the Sabie River. The main lodge overlooks a series of river pools wherein many hippos and crocodiles reside. Both were huge! The crocs went 9-12 feet in length.

Our bungalow was located on the riverbank. With gin and tonics in hand we watched the hippos and crocs cavort. Actually, they didn't cavort much. They mostly maintained position. Those hippos are a noisy bunch! Their grunts and roars kept us awake ... for about 15 minutes. It became our standing joke. Whenever one of us passed gas, we exclaimed: "Hippo!"

We met Pindy the next morning at 5:30. Pindy was our guide for a Morning Drive. You've probably seen pictures of the safari truck – tall with canvas sides, open at the top, bench seats. That was our mode of transportation. Pindy began her introduction by belaboring the need for us all to start our three-hour trip with empty bladders. It was our last chance. Since it was dangerous to pee "au nature", a "Drive" is a gamble. You're never sure just what you're going to see. We came upon a family of baboons, several giraffes, wart hogs, a few vervet monkeys. We even saw a violet-breasted roller, a beautiful bird dressed in seven different colors. But what we wanted to see were "The Big Five": lions, rhinos, elephants, leopards and buffalo.

Into our third hour we could tell that even Pindy was a bit frustrated. We were traveling down a dirt road with nary an animal in sight when up ahead we spied something lying alongside the road. Pindy shouted out "Yes!" and pounded the steering wheel. Cheetah! These were two of only 200 in the Park, the first cheetah she had seen in three months. We were able to come up alongside them

before they stood up, posed together very photogenically, and then strolled off. Gorgeous, sleek animals with their telltale black teardrop mark descending from the corner of the eye. (For photos see directions below) They can attain a speed of 60 mph for about 300 yards. Then they tire quickly.

We were happy with the results of our "Drive".

At 5 PM we met Pindy again for a night Drive. There were only four of us on the morning Drive. Now we had two full trucks, about 24 people. After a beautiful sunset Pindy turned on the lights - headlights plus two side spots. She asked for two volunteers to operate the handheld spotlights. Of course I volunteered. For the next 2 1/2 hours I was occupied with scanning the port side of the truck for fauna.

Their eyes gave them away. We could see the reflected color from a long way off. A bunch of green lights dancing in the distance signified a herd of impala. Red eyes were hippo and rhino. Yellow eyes were hyena, lions and other cats.

Hyenas are despicable animals. Even their carriage bespeaks mean underhandedness. They walk with both head and rear end down like some smartass teenage slacker with an attitude. Maybe I get this stereotype from watching too many Disney movies, but they are scavengers after all. They eat anything, even bones. They eat so much bone that their scat is easily recognizable. It's white. More on the subject of scat later.

The next morning we left Lower Sabie and began our meander north to our next camp - Olifants. Half an hour out we came upon a little mountain that looked to be worth a detour. It was. At the top of the mountain we arrived at a spot that overlooked a small lake. It resembled the Garden of Eden. How do I know? It was just the conglomeration of species all in seemingly peaceful cohabitation: several elephants, kudu, impala, storks and other large birds.

We took a dirt road that led us past two rhinos. Their hide really does remind one of armor plates. Saw herds of Burchell zebras. They have a grey "shadow" stripe between the black ones on their hindquarters. Zebras seem to couple up and hang close to one another.

At the Orpendam we saw the biggest crocodile. Had to be 20 feet long. It's hide resembled a series of unmortared bricks. It looked like Captain Hook's nemesis.

We didn't get close enough, but if we did, I bet we could hear a clock ticking.

Stopped for lunch at Satara Camp. We brought our own, so we sat at a table overlooking a grassy park. We were accompanied by a variety of birds who shared our repast of dinner rolls -- crested grey lourie, blue-green cape glossy

starling, red billed helmetshrike - black with orange eye. Simply amazing to have these exotic birds to lunch.

We continued our meander stopping at waterholes along the way. At one point we stopped to look a huge bull elephant in the eye, only 12 feet away alongside the road. Here we were without cage bars separating us -- he, nonchalantly wreaking havoc on an acacia tree, while we snapped photos.

The secret, so we are told, is to stay in the car. The animals are used to the cars. They see car. They smell car. You're only in danger if you step out of the car.

We had noticed many acacia trees that were either broken or uprooted. A full-grown acacia stands about ten feet tall. The branches are covered with thorns. Some areas resembled the aftermath of a hurricane, the landscape strewn with dead trees. Elephants are the vandals. They tear out the trees to eat the roots. Our guides informed us that the elephant count is currently too high, as evidenced by the census and the amount of devastation. As a result the population is being "culled". Elephants are transported to less populated areas of the park. Pindy, our bladder-fixated guide, recommends that they take the vandal elephants to Zimbabwe, whose border adjoins Kruger. "Let Mugabe deal with them." Pindy doesn't think much of Mugabe, Zimbabwe's dictator president.

We were just a few miles from the Mozambique border. Apparently Kruger has no fences along the borders with Mozambique and Zimbabwe. So the animals are allowed to roam freely across the borders, sans passports. Unfortunately, the elephants seem to like it better in Kruger than across the borders -- fewer poachers? So, overpopulation is a problem.

I'm reminded of a Gary Larsen "Far Side" cartoon. Two elephants talking in the Serengeti. One says to the other: " Sure life here is OK, but I'm really looking forward to retirement at the San Diego Zoo."

We took one long detour over rough, unpaved road without any terrific sightings until we spied a large female elephant about 25 yards away. We stopped, and she stopped. Then we noticed a baby elephant walking in front of her on a path that intersected our road. We could surmise that, if we stopped our car right at the intersection, we could get a great shot of the elephant coming right at us. The big question was: how fast would they come? I suddenly had a vision of an angry mama elephant removing our car from her path. Avis wouldn't appreciate the result. I moved out of the way. In less than a minute both elephants crossed the road just behind our car.

In one more minute we were confronted by another Garden of Eden scene. It was cocktail time at the old water hole: giraffes, zebras, impala and elephants all

commingling after a rough day. I'm sure one of them sighed, "It's a jungle out there."

It made us think longingly of a gin & tonic at Olifants, our next camp.

Chuck & Anne

19th

Olifants Camp

Our Frommers Guide to South Africa states that Olifants camp is so popular that it is "worth rearranging your trip" in order to reserve a bungalow. As we turned into the entrance road a giraffe stood at the corner to greet us. We took this as a good omen. We ascended the winding road until we reached the camp, which is situated on a bluff 300 ft. above a river bed. Our round, thatched roof bungalow #9 was located on a point of the bluff above a bend in the river. Our view extended over a mile in either direction. Our front veranda included a fully equipped kitchen. We watched all sorts of birds and animals come down to the river for a drink. A kitchen with a view. Amazing. We had our cocktails watching a glorious sunset, barbequed chicken brochettes, drank a nice bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon, and went to bed.

Up and at 'em early next morning for a 5:15 Drive. With our guide, Stephen, we spotted our first lions, a pride of seven. We then came upon three hyenas sauntering down the road with swollen bellies after a successful night out. We followed them to their den, a culvert under the road.

Stephen showed us a hippo track. After sunset hippos leave the water, which protects their sensitive skin from the sun, and they travel inland to graze. They always follow the same path with a shuffling gait. Consequently the hippo track looks like someone rolled a beer barrel over the earth. Very distinctive.

I wouldn't want to be in their way during their evening stroll. Hippos aren't known for their friendly disposition. Of all the four-legged beasties we had the pleasure to spot, hippos are responsible for more human deaths than any other.

We also came upon five elephants, including one baby that was suckling at its mother's breast. Beautiful!

Our First Kill:

We stood on a bridge - the only road spot where you're allowed to alight from your vehicle and walk around unguided - gazing at the pride of lions from a distance of 200 yards. A stranger announced that a lion and two cubs were dining on fresh kill only 50 ft. off the road about 12 miles south. So, after

breakfast we drove down to take a look. We couldn't miss it. A veritable traffic jam of ten cars marked the spot. We could see the kill, a large wildebeest, lying under an acacia tree. No lions, however. We waited about 15 minutes, and left for Skukuza - another camp - where we bought camera batteries.

An hour later we returned to the traffic jam at the lion kill. This time a lioness was lying under a tree 50 yards behind the kill, guarding against potential interlopers. It's hot out. The lioness is panting. We suspect that the lions dragged the kill into the shade of a tree to prevent it from becoming "biltong" within 24 hours. Judging from the size of the kill, it would keep several predators from starving for a few days.

On our way back to Olifants two guys in a commercial truck waved us down excitedly. "Lion up ahead at next water hole!" We turned off the main road at the next water hole sign. Sure enough, a lioness was sunning herself on the levee overlooking the water hole. Her gaze seemed very intense. All we could see were two elephants spraying their backs with muddy water and a couple of marabou storks on the opposite bank. Then the lioness began to move down the levee toward the water. She moved in a low crouch. It was then that we spied the bush pigs, four of them, drinking with their backs to the approaching danger. The lioness's approach took the better part of ten minutes. Suddenly, the pigs bolted, their tails straight up. Immediately, the lioness charged. The pigs had too much of a head start on her. After 50 yards the lioness gave up the chase. Her saunter suggested: "Aww, I was just playing with them. I could've caught them if I really wanted to. Besides, it's too darn hot." She walked out to the tip of a peninsula and lay down to resume her stakeout.

Stalking Scat with Jumbo

We returned to Olifants in time for our Bush Walk at 4 PM. It was 96 degrees and Anzie was having second thoughts, but a guest who had done the trip that morning convinced her to go. We're the only two participants; so it's just us and two guides, Jumbo and Syska. Jumbo looks like he's spent 21 years in the bush, and he has. His craggy, suntanned face complete with a few scars and pockmarks is matched with a body that makes him look like he'd be just as comfortable on a Rugby pitch as he would be wrestling a crocodile. Born in Namibia, which is located in the Western Cape, Jumbo has worked as a big game hunting guide. He has guided at Olifants for eight years.

Syska, on the other hand, is sweet and soft-spoken. However she was all business once we were on the ground, keeping a sharp watch with rifle at the ready as Jumbo gave us the rules: "Stay in single file. Walk quietly. No talking. Watch my hand signals".

As we started off following the riverbank, I noted several different species of scat, a.k.a crap or shit, and asked about them. Turns out to be a favorite subject. Jumbo identified the varieties.

- Hippo: Looks like grass clippings after a month in the composter.
- Impala: A pile of black berries. Males poop in the same spot to mark their turf.
- Kudu: A trail of black berries. They poop on the run.
- Giraffe: A trail of black berries, with a difference. Giraffe berries are excreted in a string, like a necklace, which separates when it hits the ground. There is a small indentation at one end of a giraffe berry, which distinguishes it from a kudu berry.

Isn't this interesting???!!!

- Buffalo: Large black biscuits.
- Hyena: White, from all the bones they eat.
- Elephant: Huge! Hard to miss.
- Fu bird: Green, powdery. When mixed with water, turns to sulfuric acid. If it comes into contact with your skin, do not wash it off. Gave rise to the old saying: "If the Fu shits, wear it."

Gotcha!

Had enough?

Back to our Bush Walk. During this dry season the river is a series of pools. We peeked over the edge of one pool and surprised a sleeping hippo. We literally scared the crap out of him. He awoke with a roar and charged off to the other side of the pool, about 25 ft. away from us, and proceeded to excrete a huge quantity, twirling his tail to slice his poop into small bits as it exited. (Back to the scat again, huh?) He continued to roar and express his displeasure at being awakened. Thankfully a four-foot high bank separated us from his pool, or else our encounter might have become too close.

We came upon another pool containing 12-15 hippos. Jumbo explained that, during an especially dry season when water sources dry up, Hippos will attack and kill each other over water rights. Sure enough several small fights broke out as we watched. We also learned that hippos don't swim. They either float or they walk on the river bottom. They must possess a neat system of ballast tanks.

Mopani Worms

Jumbo called our attention to the *Mopani* trees. We had noticed these trees only in the Olifants area and parts north, none further south. They resemble small apple trees with small leaves that exhibited fall colors. Around October of each

year the mopani worms eat the leaves during a two-week period after which the worms have grown to the size of your index finger. The worms are harvested and eaten, either raw or cooked. Cooked they taste crispy and peppery, a delicacy, according to Jumbo.

We also saw several Fishing Eagles, which look exactly like the American Bald Eagle.

We arrived back at our truck just after sunset, back at our bungalow in time for a gin & tonic on the veranda in time to watch the animals in the twilight on the river below.

We dined out for the first time at the Olifants Dining Room. The restaurant overlooks the river, which is spotlighted at night. Dinner was buffet-style. A wonderful assortment of salads, main courses (including Impala. Anzie: "We're eating Bambi!") and desserts. Cost: \$13 each.

We brought our own wine.

The next morning we bid a fond "Adieu" to Olifants and began our journey back to Pretoria.

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A la prochaine,