My Trip to South Africa (and Swaziland)

I first became aware of the term 'apartheid' after watching an episode of Saturday Night Live. It was December 13, 1975, and I was only fifteen years old. SNL was in its infancy back then, quite controversial, appealing to my teenage angst by skewering contemporary politics and culture. I loved it (and still do). On that particular night the guest host was comedian Richard Pryor. The skits were hilarious. But what I remembered most was the song 'Johannesburg' performed live by Gil Scott-Heron, the episode's musical guest. The song was a protest piece in support of the struggles against apartheid, something I knew nothing about. As Gil Scott-Heron belted out his question – *"What's the word? Tell me, brother, have you heard, from Johannesburg?"* – over and over again, his voice rising in an angry crescendo, I became enthralled. Suddenly, I, too, wanted to know what was going on in Johannesburg. In those pre-Internet days, though, one needed to go to the library to get information. And what I discovered was disturbing, indeed.

Apartheid was the name given to an institutionalized system of racial segregation and discrimination created by the former ruling white National Party of South Africa, starting – 'officially', anyway – in 1948 for the purpose of maintaining their grip on power. Blacks and Coloreds (multiracial ethnic groups) were forced to live in separate neighborhoods with virtually no political or legal recourses. By the mid-seventies, the social and economic disparity between the South African races became so shockingly clear the National Party government became a pariah in the eyes of the free world.

In June of 1976, just six months after I saw the SNL episode, college students in the large black township of Soweto (on the southern edges of Johannesburg) took to the streets to protest newly declared apartheid policies in the school system. The brutal backlash by government forces resulted in what is now referred to as the Soweto Uprising, a series of riots and massive protests against the National Party government. Now *everyone* knew what was going on in Johannesburg as the nightly television news brought the continuing uprising and the vicious government crackdown and reprisals

into our homes. International sanctions were levied against the South African government; nation after nation boycotted the country's goods, isolating the apartheid government both economically and diplomatically. The Soweto Uprising sparked further protests and demonstrations across the country for years to come, many were later organized by the ANC (the African National Congress), culminating in truly free elections in 1994 that brought an end to the National Party's rule, ushering in a new democratic republic. Nelson Mandela, the jailed former anti-apartheid revolutionary, was elected the first black head of state. The 'change' had finally come, and while there was fear of reprisals against the former ruling class – and the type of 'white exodus' that had occurred in Mozambique and Rhodesia years earlier, crippling their economies – the transition to a South African Black-majority rule seemed relatively peaceful.

After the fall of apartheid, news concerning South Africa seemed to taper off in the American press. I guess fighting for the *soul* of a nation is more interesting than actually building one. And, I must admit, over the ensuing years I also began to lose interest in South Africa, assuming all was well now that justice had supposedly prevailed. In fact, it wasn't until the country hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2010 that I even considered visiting South Africa. And then a year ago my best friend mentioned to me that he and his family were thinking of taking a trip over there and asked me if I wanted to tag along. This piqued my interest. Around this time, by coincidence, I received an email from Travelzoo advertising a basically all-inclusive 11-day trip to South Africa via Gate 1 Travel (one of my favorite tour companies) for only $2400; this included the dreaded single supplement fee. I concluded that Fate was now tempting me to go. I booked the tour. As for my friend and his family, they were unable to join me because of the limited departure dates for this reduced-price tour, which only left in March. So I ended up going by myself.

The land portion of the trip amounted to only 11 days, but I experienced what I believe was a 'representative sampling' of South African culture during my visit. The tour included two separate game drives and took me through sections of five of the country's nine provinces. I also spent one night in Swaziland, an independent land-locked kingdom within South Africa's borders. For some additional thrills I booked a shark cage diving excursion to see Great White sharks off the southern coast. *I was thoroughly stoked*.

As usual, I registered my trip with the State Department's S.T.E.P. program (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program), which notifies the government of my travel plans abroad in case of an emergency. When you register, you will also receive – via email – security alerts prior to your trip. The only thing in the alerts that concerned me was the reference to the higher crime rates in the bigger cities, but nothing too drastic. In these cases I always caution my readers to use common sense. Your tour guide will always provide good advise on what to do and areas to avoid. *Just take heed*. I also purchased another travel guidebook on South Africa to augment the one my friend gave me for Christmas, and routinely checked the weather reports and news coming out of South Africa over the Internet. As far as I could tell, everything looked fine for my trip.

On March 9, 2017, I boarded a Lufthansa jet at Miami International Airport and began my South African adventure…

Days One, Two and Three

At the time I booked my tour, Lufthansa Airlines was having an advertised sale on their international flights, so I decided to purchase my airfare separately through them. This brought down the cost of the tour package by another $150 and added an extra day in Cape Town. The first leg of my flight to South Africa left Miami International Airport at 6:55pm, arriving in Munich at 10:00am the following morning. I always sit in an aisles seat due to my claustrophobia. No one sat in the middle seat next to me so I had plenty of room to stretch out. It was a very comfortable flight. The only downside was the nine-hour layover in Germany. I made the most of it by catching some shut-eye in one of the terminal lounges in Munich. My connecting flight to Cape Town left shortly after 7:00pm on Day Two. I had paid in advance to select my own aisles seat for this leg of the journey, but when I boarded the plane an elderly gentleman who was traveling with his young grandson asked me if I wouldn't mind trading places with him so they could sit together. At first I was reluctant, but the man assured me he also had an aisles seat, only further back in the plane. What could I do? It

was his grandson! I agreed with a sigh. Whatever negative feelings I had about changing seats dissipated quickly; my new sitting companion turned out to be a *very* attractive young British woman. I was able to engage her from time-to-time in friendly airplane banter. (*God Bless grand kids*!).

I did have one embarrassing moment when I first sat down, though. I noticed the man sitting across the aisles from me removing his shoes to get more comfortable. *A good idea*, I thought, as this was an 11-hour flight. I kicked off my black sneakers and relaxed. I'm a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service, which means I am constantly on my feet. I purchase special shoe inserts on a regular basis from my podiatrist to ward off foot and back problems. Prior to this trip, an epic Miami downpour had drenched my shoes (and inserts) while I was delivering mail. I normally keep two sets of inserts for just this type of situation; if one gets wet, I'll let them dry out and use the other pair. But as I was preparing to leave my apartment for the airport the previous day, I must have inadvertently placed the wrong inserts inside my sneakers. Apparently, these were still damp from the rain and had picked up a rather funky odor I hadn't realized…*until now*. No sooner were my shoes off, I began smelling something unpleasant. I glanced at the young British woman to my right, her pretty face contorted now into a tortured grimace, her head swiveling from side to side seeking out the source of this malodorous affront. I started to search out the offending item, too, when suddenly I peered down, made eye contact with my red inserts and came to a horrifying realization: *Holy Blue Cheese, the smell is coming from my shoes*! Mortified that this woman would put two-and-two together, I *nonchalantly* shoved my feet back into my sneakers and then casually retreated to the bathroom to lace them up. Later, when I reached Cape Town, I stopped at a grocery store and purchased a can of air-freshener and hosed my inserts down nightly until the odor was gone.

We touched down in Cape Town around 7:00am on what was now the third day of my trip. I had left Miami on a Friday evening and it was now Sunday morning. The east coast of South Africa is six hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST) and having logged just over 20 hours of air travel I was thoroughly jet-lagged. But I could not rest. Despite having left home on Friday, this was officially the 'first day' of my tour and was considered a free day while tour members flew in from different parts of the world throughout the afternoon and evening. I chose this early morning arrival so that I could take full advantage of the extra time in Cape Town.

After breezing through immigration (an absolute delight, no registration card was required, just my passport), I collected my luggage and proceeded to the exit area of the terminal building where a Gate 1 Travel representative was waiting for me holding up a sign. His name tag said Marvelous. There were two other tour members with him, Jing and Joy, a pair of middle-aged computer techies traveling together from the San Francisco area. These two fun-loving ladies and I would become tour buddies, taking many of our meals together. Marvelous led us to an awaiting taxi van and then said his goodbyes. The taxi took off in the direction of the city's waterfront area.

Cape Town International Airport is roughly 20 kilometers from the city center. As we drove to our hotel, the driver, a white South African of English descent, pointed out interesting landmarks like Table Mountain looming to our left and the hospital where the first heart transplant was performed back in 1967. Traffic was relatively light as we entered the city and I asked the driver if this was normal. He told us we had arrived on the day of the annual Cape Town Cycle Tour, a 109-kilometer bicycle race that attracts tens of thousands of cyclists from around the globe. Many of the city's residents choose to stay off the roadways during the event. As it turned out, though, the cape's notoriously windy weather put a stop to the race, which had to be cancelled shortly after it began because of gale force winds (several cyclists supposedly went airborne from the powerful gusts of air). But the streets were still filled with thousands of bicycle enthusiasts who apparently had nothing better to do than ride around all day now that the race had been cancelled. We reached our hotel, the Protea Hotel Victoria Junction, in less than 30 minutes.

Since I was arriving so early in the morning, and check-in wasn't until 3:00pm, I had booked an additional day's lodging so that my room would be available as soon as I reached the hotel. Joy and Jing lucked out; their room was actually ready and they were able to check-in without waiting. Our tour director, Roger Harding, had left us a note welcoming us to South Africa and detailing the time and location for the group's orientation meeting the following morning. The rest of today was free to explore Cape Town on our own. I went up to my room and took a long hot shower…unaware Cape Town was undergoing a severe drought. I made a cup of instant coffee, then spent about 20 minutes squaring away my luggage before grabbing my backpack, bottled water and guidebook and heading for the street. In the lobby, I stopped and asked the concierge for a tourist map of the area and directions on how to reach the V&A Waterfront.

I had marked a few sites in my guidebook that I wanted to visit during my free day in Cape Town. The first was the nearby V&A Waterfront; two navy yard basins originally built in the latter part of the 19th century and named after Queen Victoria and her second son, Alfred. Today, in addition to being a working harbor, the V&A Waterfront has morphed into a beautiful and bustling commercial complex, with over 450 retail outlets and restaurants, various museums, cinemas and other tourist attractions, including an enormous Ferris wheel. Situated within the Table Bay Harbor, along the Atlantic shoreline, this is South Africa's oldest working harbor, sprawling out over 123 hectares with a growing residential zone of upscale apartment buildings and offices. One can easily spend an entire day here walking the piers, browsing the shops and visiting the museums. My first stop within the waterfront area was to see the Two Oceans Aquarium next to the marina. Luckily, my hotel was located only a 15-20 minute walking distance from the waterfront. I headed north along Ebenezer Road and followed the curving Dock Road until I reached the Two Oceans Aquarium. To my right, as I made my way towards the waterfront, was a series of modern apartment buildings, and on the street a continuous stream of international cyclists whizzed by me, undeterred by the incredibly windy conditions.

Just off the southern coast of South Africa, the warm waters of the Indian Ocean collide with the frigid waters of the Atlantic. In 1995, the Two Oceans Aquarium opened its doors with the purpose of showcasing the unique and incredible diversity of the marine life found in these two bodies of water. I purchased a day-long pass for 150 rand ($11.50 US). Currently, there are seven exhibition halls or centers within the aquarium. I originally thought an hour and a half would be sufficient enough time to wander through all of them, but fascinating displays of sea creatures and the informative 'feeding shows' made me stay an hour longer.

I made my way through the galleries housing the individual displays of coral, fish and crustaceans. I learned that the reason the Indian Ocean is warm is due to the Agulhas Current, one of the world's most powerful currents that runs southward along the east coast of Africa bringing with it the warm waters of the tropical regions. The fish here tend to be very colorful, such as the damsels, butterflyfish, surgeons and angelfish. Even the frightening moray eels were beautiful. The colors of the marine life serve a purpose, to either attract or deter other fish. The Atlantic Ocean Gallery has

an incredible selection of translucent jellies in cylindrical displays lit up in cool vibrant colors. Also on display are octopuses, rare Knysna seahorses, snake-like hagfish and even a creepy giant spider crab. Along the west coast of Africa the cold Benguela Current slowly flows northward, cooling the waters of the Atlantic. During the summer months, strong southeasterly winds blow across the surface of the Atlantic Ocean, resulting in an upwelling of icy cold waters from the ocean's depths, bringing with it nutrients that fertilize the microscopic plant life forms known as phytoplankton and the underwater forests of kelp and other seaweeds that flourish here. This, in turn, provides sustenance to the entire eco-system, making the west coast of Africa one of the richest fishing grounds on the planet. This abundance also supports large colonies of fur seals, African penguins and other seabirds. Another very interesting section was the venomous and poisonous fish displays (the difference between the two types is that venomous fish inject venom, while poisonous fish are toxic to eat).

One of my favorite stops was the I&J Ocean Exhibit, the newest addition to the aquarium. Basically, this is a humongous fish tank with a height of six meters, holding 1.6 million liters of seawater. The water is maintained at a constant 20 to 24 degree Celsius and is filled with unique marine life such as a huge sea turtle, stingrays, striped bonito and a giant guitarfish. The main viewing window is a 9 meter-wide panel (4 meters tall) that offers an amazing view of the entire thing. You can also pay to go scuba diving inside the tank. One of the coolest aspects is a ten meter-long tunnel that runs underneath the exhibit, giving you the illusion that you are 'under the sea', as the song goes. I was able to witness the feeding of the stingrays and the giant sea turtle; an aquarium employee in scuba gear went down and hand-fed fish (or squid) to the creatures.

The I&J Ocean Exhibit also includes a fascinating display of large kelp, resembling an underwater forest. From here, I went to see the feeding exhibition of the African penguins to learn a little more about them. To be honest, I had no idea penguins even inhabited South Africa! Other exhibits, like the Touch Pools, allowed visitors to interact with the marine life, touching various types of coral, baby stingrays and plant life. And there were sobering exhibits focusing on the environmental challenges facing our oceans, including the mounting plastic debris that is dumped annually in our waters, endangering the world's marine life. This exhibit teaches us how to be environmentally friendly by avoiding plastics and taking other steps to ensure the safety of our precious oceans. I had a great time here, and whole-

heartedly recommend the aquarium to anyone visiting Cape Town. This was a fun and educational diversion that kept me completely entertained for several hours.

I left the Two Oceans Aquarium shortly before 12:30pm. In front of the building is the small office of the City Sightseeing Bus Company, otherwise known as the Red City Tour Bus. This company provides double-decker tour buses that cover most of the areas in Cape Town a tourist would want to visit. It is a hop-on hop-off service, which costs the equivalent of around $14 (US) for a day-long pass with convenient stops and schedules throughout the city. My goal was to purchase a day pass and visit some of the nearby museums along the Alfred Basin quay within the V&A Waterfront, and then head out to the Bo-Kaap section of the city. Unfortunately, I was not aware of the Cape Town Cycle Tour and the impact this would have on my plans. When I arrived at the counter to purchase my ticket, the female representative informed me that the Red City Tour Bus service was cancelled for the day due to the bicycle race (a double whammy seeing as how the race had also been cancelled!). I was somewhat stymied. I asked the rep how much a taxi cab would cost to the Bo-Kaap area from the waterfront and she suggested I walk, showing me on my tourist map which route to take. *Hmmmmmm*. It never dawned on me that I might be able to cover the area on foot; after all, tourist maps handed out in hotel lobbies are not as detailed (or accurate) as official street maps and often contain deceptively simple outlines and diagrams. I thanked the woman, determined to do the rest of my sightseeing via the pavement. *Boy, was I in for a lot of walking*!

I headed north along the marina, making my way around the Robinson Dry Dock, and came upon Noble Square, a small park containing the life-size sculptures of South Africa's four Nobel Peace Prize laureates: former President Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Nkosi Albert Luthuli of the African National Congress, and F.W. de Klerk, the last president of the apartheid government. Next to the square was a large warehouse structure called the V&A Food Market, housing a collection of eateries, cafés and food kiosks. I went inside and ordered a delicious lamb ciabatta sandwich from one of the vendors and ate it outside at a picnic table adjacent to Noble Square. After my quick lunch, I continued along the North Quay until I reached the pedestrian Swing Bridge connecting the two sections of the waterfront, crossing the Alfred Basin into the Clock Tower Center. This red Victorian Gothic clock tower, a beloved landmark of the dock area, was originally built in 1882 and completely renovated in 1997.

The first floor of the structure contains a tide-gauge mechanism used to measure the level of the tide, while the second story is a decorative mirror room from where the Port Captain was able to monitor all harbor activities. The clock itself is still functioning. On the eastern end of the quay is the launching pier for excursions to the small oval-shaped land mass known as Robben Island, its famous prison was where Nelson Mandela spent 18 of the 27 years he was incarcerated. The prison is both a South African National Site and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Visiting Robben Island is one of the recommended things to do while in Cape Town. Unfortunately, I did not have sufficient time to take the tour, which one must usually reserve in advance (space on the boats are limited and sell out quickly).

On the western end of the quay, a short walking distance from the Clock Tower, is the Chavonnes Battery Museum, my next stop. But before I can describe my visit to the museum I need to take a brief moment to discuss the VOC, or the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, better known in history books as the Dutch East India Company.

The VOC started out as a charter company in 1602 when the Dutch government granted it a 21-year monopoly on their East Asia spice trade, and quickly grew to become one of the most powerful companies on the planet, recognized as probably the first truly transnational conglomerate. In fact, the VOC was the first publicly-traded company in the world, issuing bonds and shares of stock that would eventually pay, on average, an astonishing 18% a year in dividends for nearly 200 years before it was finally dissolved and taken over by the Dutch government in 1799. During its successful economic run, the VOC had the power to form quasi-governments, wage war, negotiate treaties, strike their own coin and establish Dutch colonies wherever their business interests took them. Their commercial fleet grew to almost 4,800 ships, which they used to transfer more than a million European workers (and millions of tons of trade) back and forth throughout their territories in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, eclipsing all of their European rivals.

To protect their colonies and trading businesses, the VOC established bastion forts in major areas. In Cape Town, they built the Castle of Good Hope – the original fort was built along the shoreline but later moved inland to where it stands today in the city center – creating a harbor that served as a replenishment station for Dutch ships making their way around the treacherous coastline of South Africa's western cape peninsula, known

ironically as the Cape of Good Hope. To augment the cape's defenses, numerous coastal batteries were constructed along the peninsula, providing cannon fire at the first sign of an enemy's approach. One of those was the Chavonnes Battery, named after the colony's governor, and built between 1715 and 1724. The battery was demolished in 1860 and covered over during the construction of what is now the V&A Waterfront in Table Bay, but in 1999 the site was excavated and the remains of the cannon battery are now on display inside this interesting museum.

The bottom portion of the building is actually the foundation of the battery, sections of its stone walls are still intact, and you can walk around it getting a good feel of what the site was like back then. Also on display are some of the cannons, cannon balls, and an assortment of guns and other armor from that era, and several scale replicas of the battery to give you a better idea of where everything was located. The top portion of the museum is completely different, a modern art gallery that wraps around the walls but at the same time gives you a view of the ruins down below, a remarkable contrast that is the museum's strongest appeal.

Different art venues are displayed on a regular basis. When I was there I saw a photography exhibit entitled *1%: Privilege in a Time of Global Inequality*, a collection of incredible works by 33 internationally renowned photographers selected by curator Myles Little, showcasing the conspicuous consumption of the very rich. The purpose of the exhibit was to show how a small section of the population lives while all around them is suffering and/or inequality. Granted, it's easy to criticize the super rich for their lavish lifestyles, but, *hey*, who knows what kind of outlandish bullshit most of us would wrap ourselves in if we had that sort of crazy money? Some of the photography focused on ostentatiously designed opera houses or churches, which one can argue is also part of a peoples' heritage or culture. Other photos showed beautiful mansions being tended to by servants…a nod to class struggle, I'm guessing. To me, the most convincing pictures were those of *true* indifference. For example, people jet skiing on a European beach while frightened Syrian refugees are trying to make landfall in dangerous makeshift rafts. Either way, the photos made you wonder about the economic and social disparities in our world.

I spent about an hour at the Chavonnes Battery Museum before taking my leave. I was on my way now to visit a section of the city known as the Bo-Kaap district. I continued walking south, parallel to the East Quay, stopping

briefly to take a picture at the 7 Wonders Photo Frame, a giant empty frame that faces the magnificent Table Mountain on the southern edge of the city. Tourists can climb up to the frame and take postcard-like photos of themselves with the mountain as a background. I left the waterfront and came to a street circle that led me back to Dock Road. A short distance later I found Ebenezer Road and headed south, walking past my hotel, and just on the corner I turned left onto Somerset Road and followed the sidewalks for several blocks until I hit Buitengracht Street, a major thoroughfare one can take heading southwest towards the entrance lift to Table Mountain. Buitengracht Street also cuts through the Bo-Kaap district.

During my walk, the neighborhoods I passed were very nice, consisting of small shops, restaurants, business offices and hotels. But I also noticed quite a few homeless people. A few came up to me asking for money. The further I walked towards Buitengracht Street the more homeless I ran into, mostly men hanging out on street corners, but I also saw women holding infants and begging. Along Buitengracht Street, which is just a few blocks west of the City Center, I witnessed what looked like small clusters of tents or makeshift lean-tos set up in public areas with more homeless people. As I entered the Bo-Kaap area it dawned on me that I was the only tourist walking around taking pictures at that time of day. It was Sunday afternoon, most businesses were closed, the streets deserted. Suddenly, the travel alerts issued by the State Department came to mind, cautioning about the higher crime rates in South Africa's major cities. I became acutely aware that I was the only white person in the area. Forgive me if that sounded racist, but that was the exact thought running through my mind; this journal is only as relevant as my honesty. As I continued to walk, vagrants kept approaching me and even the groups of friendly young men I passed started to make me nervous. Somehow, I just didn't feel like I belonged here…*at least not by myself*. In my own defense, though, I mustered on, keeping a tight lid on the baseless anxieties swirling around in my head, and aside from a few bothersome beggars I wandered the streets of the Bo-Kaap without incident.

The word **Bo-Kaap** means 'upper Cape Town' and refers to a neighborhood that lies on the western slopes of Signal Hill. During the 18th century, this section of Cape Town was home to a large population of slaves brought to the area by the Dutch from Indonesia, Suriname, Malaysia and other countries (the Bo-Kaap is also called the Malay Quarter). Till this day, many of the homes here are still inhabited by the descendents of those former slaves; although, recent gentrification spurred on by the city's

economic expansion and the end of the segregationist policies of apartheid has seen wealthier residents moving into the Bo-Kaap and slowly dissolving the historic 'Cape Malay' cultural make-up of the neighborhood.

The attraction of the Bo-Kaap – besides being in the coveted City Bowl (or central area) of Cape Town – lies in its quaint cobbled-stone streets and unique architecture. The low-roofed houses, many of them historic monuments in their own right, sit adjacent to one another, and while some may look narrow, they can actually extend far back and are quite spacious inside. But the remarkable appearance of these dwellings lies in their vibrant colors, a kaleidoscope of blues, reds, lime greens, pinks and oranges that dot the hilly cobbled streets here, forcing one to take notice *immediately*. The Bo-Kaap is easily the most photographed district in Cape Town. I walked street after hilly street taking pictures of the colorful homes. I wanted to visit the small Bo-Kaap Iziko Museum on Wale Street, housed in the oldest dwelling in the neighborhood (built between 1763 and 1768). The museum showcases the traditional Muslim culture of the area. Unfortunately, it is closed on Sundays.

Slaves first introduced Islam to Cape Town. One notable individual was Tuan Guru, an exiled Islamic leader from Indonesia who, incredibly enough, was able to accurately copy the Quran from memory. He later helped establish the Auwal Mosque in 1798, the oldest mosque in the city, effectively making the Bo-Kaap the heart of the Muslim community in Cape Town. Tuan Guru is buried in the Tana Baru cemetery on Longmarket Street and is regarded as a Muslim saint; his tomb is visited by the faithful on mini-pilgrimages. I was able to photograph the Auwal Mosque and the Nural Islam Mosque (founded in 1844) before leaving the Bo-Kaap. Both were closed when I arrived, but I was struck by the simplicity of the structures; their facades seem to blend in with the surrounding buildings.

I returned to the Protea Hotel Victoria Junction around 4:30pm, after stopping first for a pastry and coffee at a local bakery on Somerset Road. In the lobby I ran into Jing and Joy (who I will refer to – with utmost affection and respect – as the J J's from now on). I related to them the things I had done that day and they told me they actually crashed when they got to their room earlier that morning, exhausted from the long flights. They were just now getting ready to 'hit the streets'. I recommended the V&A Waterfront and suggested we might hook up later for dinner. As it turned out, though, I had underestimated my own fatigue and when I lied down for a quick nap I

slept until almost midnight. When I awoke, I spent about an hour writing the day's events into my journal, intermittingly watching the BBC news broadcast on TV, before crawling back into bed.

Day Four

I awoke at 4:15am, unable to sleep any further. I showered, shaved, made some instant coffee and wrote in my journal. At 6:30am I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. The hotel was full, many people were at the buffet table, but since I hadn't met anyone from my tour group yet (besides the J J's) I sat by myself. At 7:45am I grabbed my camera, backpack and water bottle and proceeded to the lobby where our tour director, Roger Harding, had instructed us to meet. We were a fairly large group – 39 members in all – and after we had fully congregated Roger led us to a second floor conference room for our orientation meeting. Normally, I do not prefer tours with more than 30 people, as they can become disorganized quickly, bogging down as you wait for everyone to catch up. Not to mention the chaotic situation that usually unfolds over the daily bus seating arrangements. In this particular case, though, I had to make an exception. I booked this trip on Travelzoo at a great discount, so I knew in advance the tour would probably be sold out. To be perfectly honest, my main concern was being able to secure my own bus seat. I am over 6 feet tall and require a lot of legroom, which precludes having anyone sitting next to me. I lucked out on this trip. Roger kept to a very strict seating rotation system (he actually placed name tags on the seats so there would be no ambiguities) and because I was the only person traveling solo in our group, I had a seat to myself the whole time. *God Bless You, Roger*!

This is the point in my journal where I list the names and places of origin of my fellow tour companions. Unfortunately, the size of the group made it difficult for me to get to know *everyone* by the time the trip ended. So, to be fair, I will dispense with this 'formality' and will only mention certain individuals as they pertain to my narrative. I hope the group understands.

Roger Harding introduced himself and welcomed us to his country. A native white South African of English descent, he appeared to be in his mid-

fifties judging from his thin frame, glasses and graying hair. Although he did not talk much about himself at the orientation meeting, he did offer some personal information throughout the tour. I discovered he used to work for a national utilities company prior to the end of the apartheid regime, and decided to leave after management changes placed his future there in doubt. He said a friend recommended the tour guide business to him and he realized quickly he had a knack for this type of work, and has been doing it ever since. I liked him. He was a bit formal, but very knowledgeable and helpful, and had a dry sense of humor that I really enjoyed. And, best of all, he kept the pace of the tour going along at a nice clip, not an easy thing to do with a group this size.

During our orientation meeting we went around the room introducing ourselves. Roger then discussed our trip itinerary and what we could expect throughout the tour. He mentioned the optional excursions for Day Six (a free day) in case anyone was interested and had not purchased one already. Approximately one-third of the group was also continuing on to Victoria Falls at the end of the tour, which is located on the Zambezi River near the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe. Getting to Victoria Falls required an additional series of flights, and from what Roger was telling the group, the original airline that Gate 1 Travel had used was now fully booked and new arrangements had to be made. According to Roger there were a limited amount of flights into the area near Victoria Falls and the new travel itinerary included a stop in Zimbabwe that was going to cost each passenger an additional $125 in visa entry fees, which had to be paid in US dollars. This announcement was met with a chorus of grumbling and muffled expletives. When I first booked the tour I debated taking the extensions into Victoria Falls and Botswana, but this would have raised the price of the trip by more than half, putting it out of my budget range and negating the ‘great deal’ I had gotten from Travelzoo in the first place. Besides, I planned on returning to Africa in the future and reasoned I would have other opportunities to visit these sites at some later date.

Roger spoke about the seat-rotation on the bus, telling us he would be implementing a strict regimen using nametags to insure the daily seat assignments were equitable and without confusion. He told us to check the post board situated in the lobby each night for any changes in the itinerary. And then he talked briefly about the crime situation in South Africa. As it turned out, the J J’s became the victims of a crime the previous evening as they returned to the hotel. A young black man had snatched Jing’s

smartphone and took off running. These two gutsy gals actually gave chase. The thief panicked – seeing a bus full of tourists pulling up to the curb and these two shouting American women over his shoulder – dropping the phone on the sidewalk and sprinting off. Although Jing was able to retrieve her phone, the incident made them both feel a little uncomfortable and got everyone in the group talking about safety. Roger tried to allay our fears by telling us to be cautious when approached by homeless men, not to give them money, and to be careful when going out at night. This was an isolated incident; we encountered no further crime-related issues throughout the trip.

By 8:30am we piled into our large bus to begin a daylong tour of the Cape Peninsula, a 52 kilometer-long strip of land that juts out into the Atlantic Ocean at the most south-westerly point of the African continent. On the northern end is Table Mountain and on its southern end are Cape Point, a promontory on the southeastern corner, and the Cape of Good Hope, a rocky headland formation that forms the tip of the peninsula. On the eastern side of the Cape Peninsula is a body of water called False Bay. For the past 5 million years, rising and falling sea levels due to the Ice Age and global warming cycles have sometimes separated the peninsula from the continent, making it an island. The current peninsula was created about 1.5 million years ago by the emergence of a low-lying sandy area just to the southeast of Table Mountain known as the Cape Flats, which reconnected the strip to the mainland.

We began our journey by traveling south along M6, a coastal freeway that runs down the western side of the cape. We started near Mouille Point, the peninsula's northern-most tip at Table Bay and passed the Cape Town Stadium (built for the 2010 FIFA World Cup). During the ride south the cold, choppy Atlantic Ocean was always on our right-hand side. It was incredibly windy that day. In fact, the Cape Peninsula is known for its notoriously unpredictable weather. A standard joke in these parts is that Cape Town has four seasons: *sometimes in the same day*! I was visiting in early autumn, when the weather is supposed to be less chaotic. In the spring and summer, anticyclones spinning off from the Antarctic Ocean produce south-easter winds (known as the Cape Doctor) that blow through the area via False Bay. These powerful winds wrap themselves around the eastern flank of Table Mountain and Devil's Peak before descending on Cape Town where they often get trapped between the mountain and the sea, creating a gutsy whirlwind that can play havoc for days. The only upside seems to be the clearing of the city's smog (and ideal conditions for windsurfing!). As

for why it was *this* windy in March when I was there I'm not certain, but I'll guess climate change, or El Nino, or *something* was making those Antarctic winds blow northward with a vengeance. For this reason, I recommend you bring a windbreaker if visiting Cape Town, regardless of the time of year.

As we drove along the Cape Peninsula's western coast out of the city, we passed some very nice, upscale coastal communities like Bantry Bay and Clifton. The tide was out and clumps of kelp dotted the shoreline. On some of the larger rocks a herd of seals were sunning themselves. We also spotted a school of dolphins. Overlooking Clifton is a mountain called Lion's Head, which has an elevation of 669 meters above sea level, its distinct peak providing a dramatic backdrop to Cape Town. Beyond this point we passed the sandy beaches of trendy Camps Bay and were now traveling with the western face of Table Mountain on our left-hand side. Further south we came upon the sandy beaches of another popular suburb called Bakoven, which is Dutch for 'baking oven' and named after the shape of an offshore rock (not the heat of the sun, as I originally thought). A bit further south we passed the rocky secluded beach of Oudekraal. During the 1700's, the ravines here provided refuge for runaway slaves, particularly Muslims, who were able to teach thier faith and keep Islam going in the Cape.

Up and down the entire coastline of the Cape Peninsula you will also come across areas where shipwrecks occurred. There have been numerous over the centuries. The strong currents provided by the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, coupled with the fierce winds blowing northward from Antarctica, have conspired throughout history to doom many a sea voyage in these parts. In fact, a ship traveling south along the western side of the African continent from the Equator is actually pulled eastward by the collision of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean currents. So much so that it wasn't until 1488 that a European sailor (the Portuguese explorer, Bartolomeu Dias) was actually able to round the Cape of Good Hope. To be sure, no one *really* knows how many ships lie at the bottom of the waters surrounding the Cape Peninsula, since even ancient documents speak of its treacherous passageway. In his own records, a frustrated Bartolomeu Dias referred to the tip of the peninsula as the Cape of Storms. Shortly thereafter, though, Pope John II of Portugal – who wanted to encourage trade with India via this sea route – changed this ominous title to the Cape of Good Hope. *I don't think he fooled anyone*.

Approximately twenty kilometers south of Cape Town we reached the harbor town of Hout Bay, located within the Hout Bay valley. Early Dutch

settlers used the trees from the Constantia Mountain forests nearby to help build their colony in Table Bay (Cape Town), establishing a thriving community in the process. Over the centuries, Hout Bay and its neighborhoods grew up around the fishing and harbor activities associated with the bay. This particular area consists of affluent and middle class white neighborhoods. Following the end of apartheid, roughly 18 hectares of land in the Hout Bay area was re-categorized as an 'informal settlement' for the poor. A sprawling shantytown has emerged along the hillsides here called *Imizamo Yethu* (which means 'our efforts' in the Xhosa language). At present, more than 30,000 poor, mostly migrant workers live in this settlement (a source of real tension for the townsfolk, I'm assuming), their shanties closely packed together and lacking important infrastructure. On the day I arrived in Cape Town, a massive fire broke out in Imizamo Yethu that took several days to contain, killing three people and destroying over 3,000 shanties. When we drove through the valley of Hout Bay we saw the devastation; fire fighters were still in the process of trying to put out the blaze (which spread quickly due to the windy conditions) and evacuate survivors.

On the south end of Hout Bay we reached a mountain called Chapman's Peak and took a scenic road known as Chapman's Peak Drive that hugs the near-vertical face of the mountain all the way to the suburb of Noordhoek. The views along this curving rode were spectacular. The western flank of Chapman's Peak falls dramatically for hundreds of meters into the choppy waters of the Atlantic Ocean all along the roadway, providing our group with many awe-gasping moments as we rounded each bend. We stopped for fifteen minutes at one of the official viewpoints to photograph the beautiful inlet of Hout Bay before continuing further south. Beyond Noordhoek we passed numerous secluded beaches, and when we reached the small town of Kommetjie we came upon an 8 kilometer-long white sandy stretch known as the Long Beach. Wind conditions here tend to be strong, making this wide beach perfect for wind surfing and bodyboarding. You can also ride horses along the beach. The water, though, can be quite chilly year round. On a hilltop overlooking Long Beach we saw a spotter who constantly monitors the water for sharks. If he spots any he will immediately post a warning flag to inform the beachgoers below.

We turned east at Kommetjie and drove across the center of the peninsula – through several sleepy little towns like Sunnydale, Sun Valley and Fish Hoek – to the eastern side of the cape where the warmer waters of the False

Bay collide against the rocky shoreline. At the suburb of Glencairn we turned west again and then followed the road south, passing the Glencairn Wetlands, a 20-hectare reserve that protects the indigenous Cape wetlands of the lower Else River. Beyond here we found ourselves on route M65, driving through the heart of Table Mountain National Park. Administered by the South African National Parks service (SANSPark), this is one of the most visited nature reserves in the country, running along the range of mountains that make up the entire peninsula, all the way from Signal Hill (in the north) to the Cape Point (in the south). The park was *formally* created in 1998 to protect the natural environment of the Table Mountain chain, particularly the rare *fynbos* vegetation that grows here, making this area one of only six recognized floral kingdoms in the world. Known as the Cape Floristic Region, the smallest of the floral kingdoms, there is an extraordinary diversity of plant species (*thousands*, actually) of which sixty-nine percent are endemic to the peninsula. Much of this diversity is associated with the shrub-like fynbos vegetation, which covers eighty percent of the park.

Table Mountain National Park is not one contiguous area. The protected mountainous regions are surrounded by developed urban communities so the park is divided into three sections. In the north is the Table Mountain section, which runs from Signal Hill down to the Hout Bay area. In the middle is the Silvermine-Tokai section, and in the south is the Cape Point section. Each area of the park offers the visitor something different, from spectacular mountain views to indigenous flora and fauna. We were now traveling south through the Cape Point section, heading towards the famous lighthouse on the peninsula's southernmost tip. The landscape was hilly and mostly barren except for the seemingly endless fields of fynbos vegetation that converts the south cape into a thick carpet of shrubland. We passed a troop of baboons making their way along the barbed wire fence lining the roadway. One of the males was wearing some sort of tracking device around his neck. Roger told us this indicated the baboon was being monitored by the park service because it was somewhat mischievous and potentially dangerous to people. Further down the road we came across an ostrich farm. Roger said he preferred ostrich meat to steak, and suggested we try some before leaving South Africa.

We encountered a mini-traffic jam upon approaching the Cape of Good Hope, which is accessible only through a toll section (mostly tourists in private cars or buses). We cruised along the western coastline for a short

distance, passing the actual Cape of Good Hope, a rocky headland that juts into the Atlantic Ocean. Roger pointed out the area where the Portuguese ocean liner SS Lusitania sank in 1911 after hitting the infamous Bellows Rock just off the shoreline in thick fog. While most of the passengers survived, the incident prompted local officials to build a new, higher-elevated lighthouse on Cape Point.

Our driver parked the bus in the lot near the viewpoint overlooking the Cape of Good Hope. I paid to take the funicular train up to the lighthouse area (you could also hike or climb stairs to the top, but time was limited and the wind made it quite the task). I took some photos of the Cape of Good Hope and then climbed a series of steps to the lighthouse itself. *Whew, was it windy up there*! I had to hold on to my hat the whole time. The lighthouse lookout deck allows for a 360-degree vantage point. You could see the Atlantic Ocean to the west and south, False Bay to the east and the cape peninsula to the north. After taking some more pictures of the scenery I went down to the tiny museum adjacent to the funicular train station and spent about fifteen minutes looking at old photographs and charts on the wall explaining the history of the southern cape, particularly the reason why the wind and water currents can be so dangerous. A list was posted detailing the known boating disasters throughout the centuries. As we left the Cape of Good Hope we spotted a large antelope nearly camouflaged by the surrounding fynbos vegetation. Most of the southern cape is devoid of human development. Roger told us the windy conditions and the susceptibility of fynbos to catch fire made living here less attractive to the early settlers.

We left the Cape Point section of Table Mountain National Park and drove northward along the *eastern* coastline of the peninsula, traveling on freeway M4. To our right now were the warmer waters of False Bay. The shoreline and beaches here seemed strewn with boulders, small rocks and pebbles, not what I would consider ideal conditions for a dip. But we did see a few ballsy wind-surfers out in the choppy waters braving the incredibly strong winds. False Bay is famous for whale watching and has its fair share of great white sharks. Unfortunately, they don't have spotters on this side of the peninsula so if you go swimming here you do so at your own peril. We stopped for a delicious sea bass lunch at the Seaforth Restaurant in the small beach community of Seaforth, near the historic Simon's Town. After lunch, we walked a short distance to Boulders Beach, the powerful winds blowing the white sand into our faces, to observe the penguin colony there.

Boulders Beach is made up of inlets covered with large boulders (hence the name) and is part of the Table Mountain National Park. It is a protected sanctuary for a colony of South African penguins. In 1982, a pair of breeding penguins arrived and 35 years later more than 3,000 of them now call this strip of beach home. The proliferation of these birds is due to the fact that commercial trawling was banned in the False Bay in recent years, which increased the supply of anchovy and pilchards, a large part of the penguins' diet. What is unique about Boulders Beach is that it lies within close proximity of a residential area; it is one of the few sites where visitors can actually observe the South African penguin up close, wandering freely in a protected natural environment. *And they were everywhere*! On the beach, on the boulders, in the grass…an army of adorable little tuxedos waddling about or simply lying on the ground, side by side. They must be used to the tourists because they didn't flinch when we approached. Some even got closer and would stand tall as if posing for the cameras.

We continued our drive northward along the eastern coastline of the peninsula, passing through Simon's Town. Named after Simon van der Stel, the first governor of the Cape Colony, this historic coastal town has served as a naval base for more than two centuries, first as the home of the Royal Navy and now the South African Navy. Roger was stationed here as a young man…*he fondly remembers the R & R*! Some of the Dutch structures here date back a long time. In addition to the large naval yard, we saw a sizeable marina and some commercial vessels in the bay.

Several kilometers further north, at Glencairn Beach, we turned northwest and began heading inland, eventually driving along the *Ou Kaapse Weg* road (M64) through the mountainous valleys of the Silvermine-Tokai section of Table Mountain National Park. Not too long ago a portion of the Silvermine-Tokai Park was devastated by forest fires and only recently re-opened. During the late 1600s, settlers thought silver could be found in the mountains around these parts. Numerous shafts were dug but no silver was ever located. The name stuck, though. In 1898, a reservoir was built on the Silvermine River to supply water for the people of Cape Town, the area is now a popular hiking destination. If you want to see fynbos vegetation then take a walk through this valley, there are more than 900 species just around the dam alone. We continued northward through the center of the peninsula (I was no longer sure what freeway we were on), passing the Constantia Mountain range in the process, and arrived at the

Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden – on the eastern side of Table Mountain – shortly before 3:30pm.

Kirstenbosch is the most famous of the nine national botanical gardens in South Africa. It was founded in 1913 for the purpose of preserving the country's unique flora, focusing on cultivating indigenous plant species. Its large conservatory exhibits plants from the different regions of the country, including fynbos (from the cape), karoo (from the semi-desert regions) and savanna (from the mixed woodland and grassland regions). The outdoor gardens focus mostly on indigenous species within the cape, including a stunning collection of proteas, the national flower of South Africa. The backdrop to this beautiful botanical garden is the massive wall of Table Mountain and the slopes of Devil's Peak, both can be accessed via hiking trails that go up through the mountain chain. We spent an hour and a half here, walking several of the gardens, admiring the different species of trees like the African mahogany and the yellowwood (the national tree of South Africa), and flowers like purplish Ericas and an assortment of multi-colored flowering reeds known as Restios. It is impossible to see the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in one afternoon. The estate has over 583 hectares, of which 36 are cultivated in the botanical gardens and the rest is mostly a protected natural forest that rises up into the mountains, home to a wide variety of indigenous animals. In one open field there was a stage where concerts and special events are held; near the entrance was the beginning of a forest canopy trail. If you visit Cape Town, make sure to set aside some time to visit this spectacular botanical garden.

We made it back to our hotel by 5:30pm. In my room I had just enough time to wash up, change my shirt, write some notes in my journal and make a cup of coffee before heading back down to the lobby at 6:30pm for an included dinner. Roger led us to an establishment called the Beluga Restaurant a block from the hotel. It was a great meal; most of us lingered around afterwards getting to know each other better. I returned to my room by 9:45pm, thoroughly exhausted after a full day of sightseeing. I fell asleep almost immediately.

Day Five

I awoke shortly after 5:00am feeling fully rested. Hopefully, this jet lag was behind me. I showered and shaved, drank my usual ‘gallon’ of coffee, watched the international edition of the BBC News on TV and wrote more details about the previous day’s outing in my journal. By 6:30am I was downstairs for breakfast. No one from my group was there yet so I ate alone. Roger had asked us to gather in the lobby a bit earlier than usual, at 7:45am. We were going to the top of Table Mountain and the park service anticipated larger than normal crowds. The cable lift that transports visitors to the mountaintop had been suspended the previous two days due to the gale force winds, and with the Cape Town Cycle Tour cancellation and thousands of cyclists and tourists in the city, it was going to be hectic and crowded at this very popular site, voted one of the *New Seven Wonders of Nature* in 2011. Roger wanted to get us there early to avoid the long lines. And thank goodness he did, when we left Table Mountain several hours later the queue for the cable lift was several blocks long!

Our bus driver headed southeast along Somerset Road, turning right on Buitengracht Street and following that through several nice neighborhoods: Bo-Kaap, Tamboerskloof and Gardens. As we reached the southwestern section of the city the road began to climb and we could see the distinct peak of Lion’s Head Mountain to our right over the trees. A bit further and we arrived at the Lower Cableway Station for Table Mountain. It was 8:35am and already there was a line of people waiting outside. We got off the bus and Roger led us across the street to the station entrance where we waited nearly 45 minutes to board one of the large circular cable cars to the top of the mountain. The cableway system was upgraded in 1997; newer, faster and much larger cable cars were added that can ‘whisk’ 65 visitors up (or down) Table Mountain in just over ten minutes. An added feature is a mechanism that slowly rotates the cars 360 degrees as you ride, rendering an unusual panoramic view of the city *and* the mountain wall. For the more physically active tourist, you can also hike to the top along the Platteklip Gorge that splits the cliffs of the main plateau. But beyond the mountain slope it seemed like one arduous climb.

Table Mountain is a prominent landmark of Cape Town, looming over the city and containing a large array of animal and plant species endemic to

the area. The flat-top shape makes it a geological wonder; a level plateau running 3 kilometers from end to end, hemmed in by dramatic cliffs and two other mountains: the Devil's Peak to the east and the Lion's Head to the west. At its highest point it is nearly 1,100 kilometers above sea level. When we reached the top we saw a sign admonishing visitors to heed the 'wind hooter', a warning sound indicating that strong winds were approaching, requiring everyone to quickly seek shelter inside the station building. I wondered how many people had been blown off the mountaintop that such a dire warning sign was necessary? Roger gathered everyone near the restaurant/curio shop area and gave us a very brief orientation on the various viewpoints, suggesting some sections of interest. We then had roughly an hour and a half to explore on our own. The group split up, heading off in different directions.

If the plateau of this spectacular mountain is supposed to resemble a tabletop, then the tablecloth is a cloud cover known as an orographic lift, which forms when an air mass is forced to climb to a higher elevation over rising terrain, cooling rapidly, the humidity causing clouds (and precipitation) to form. On this particular day the cloud cover was not so bad, probably because the winds had died down. The morning sun shined brightly on the valley below. And what incredible views! Various lookout points have been constructed along the cliff edges, giving one an amazing vantage point to see the entire city of Cape Town, Table Bay, the Atlantic Ocean beyond and the mountain chain trailing off to the south of the peninsula. On the southwestern side you get a nice view of the coastline and the steep mountain wall.

I started out walking along a path on the eastern edge of the mountaintop. In addition to the lookout points, tourists can climb the larger rocks along the edges to get a different view of the valley. Group members would run into each other as we hiked the trails and ask to take each other's photograph with the beautiful scenery in the background. In the more secluded areas I took a lot of selfies! The rocky mountaintop terrain was not exactly as flat as I had envisioned. Most of the upper layer consisted of an extremely hard rock called quartzitic sandstone, which is highly resistant to erosion and forms deep, gray-colored crags. Within the crevice and cracks grow an array of endemic fynbos species, the shrubby plants enveloping the bottom portion of the jagged rocky surface.

Table Mountain also has a unique collection of animals. Mongooses, porcupines, other small mammals, snakes, turtles, and lizards roam this area. There is also a rare species of amphibian called the Table Mountain ghost frog (green with black stripes) that is only found here. A long time ago, lions and leopards also climbed the rocky cliffs in search of prey but have since been hunted into extinction on the cape. In the 1990's baboons began abandoning the mountaintops for the pine plantations below, where the vegetation apparently provides for a better diet than the fynbos alone. Nocturnal and secretive carnivores like the caracal and African wildcat can sometimes be spotted; although, they too seemed to have abandoned the mountaintop for better pickings elsewhere. The most common – and adorable – mammal on Table Mountain used to be the rock hyrax (called *dassies* in South Africa), which resemble larger, heavier guinea pigs. I actually saw two of them, one resting on a rock and the other near the restaurant area where they often come up to tourists looking for a free handout. Surprisingly, these creatures are related to elephants and manatees. Between 2000 and 2004, the park service observed a noticeable decline in the population of rock hyrax. Nobody is sure why, but the dwindling numbers coincided with a decline in the population of Verreaux's eagles (African black eagles) who preyed on them. Which makes it even more perplexing. I'm not sure if they've bounced back. This mountainous region contains numerous raptor species in addition to the Verreaux's eagle, like the African harrier-hawk, jackal buzzard, booted eagle, rock kestrel and the peregrine falcon.

After hiking along portions of both sides of the plateau, and taking a gazillion photos, I rendezvoused with my group near the rest area around 11:00am. The cable car ride down the mountain seemed faster, or maybe it appeared that way because of the downward angle. Back on the bus, we spent the next hour doing a touring drive of the City Bowl area of Cape Town, the main part of the city, encompassing some very upscale neighborhoods, the central business district, the government and judicial buildings and the Table Bay harbor. Many of the districts around the City Bowl form affluent neighborhoods populated by professionals and other upwardly mobile urban dwellers; you'll find numerous chic restaurants, hotels, and boutique shops surrounded by older, beautifully maintained homes and newer loft apartment buildings.

Cape Town is the capital of the Western Cape province and has the second-largest urban population after Johannesburg. Under the constitution,

South Africa has three governing capitals. The *administrative* capital is in Pretoria, the *judicial* capital is in Bloemfontein, and the *legislative* capital (the Parliament) is in Cape Town. These three cities are spread out throughout the country, an unusual arrangement that would be akin to us having the White House in Washington, DC, our Congress in Oklahoma and our Supreme Court in California. *Why such a division*? This actually dates back to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, when there were only four provinces and the settlers couldn't agree on which province to house the seat of government. So they created three capital cities. Talk about mistrust! After apartheid ended there was hope that the three governing bodies would be centralized in one location, but the new constitution of 1997 kept this 'separation of powers' intact, mainly because the people of the Cape protested the concentration of power in one area (especially since it wasn't going to be Cape Town). How the government gets anything done is beyond me, with all that back and forth.

We began our tour in the Bo-Kaap district, driving by the colorful rows of homes while Roger gave us the historical background on the Muslim Quarter. I had seen most of this the previous day during my walk. We turned right onto Strand Street and followed that into the City Center area, the streets of this section lined with businesses and professional buildings in an eclectic mix of new and old architectural designs. In fact, throughout the entire City Bowl a person can discover the architectural influences that have shaped this city for the past 300 years. In addition to the classic Cape Dutch and Victorian homes (which are wonderfully preserved), a visitor will discover structures designed by some of the best French and German architects from the 18th century, who gathered in the Cape to help shape this fledgling city. They designed some of its grandest structures, like the Lutheran Church and the public buildings that are still in use today.

We reached the north side of the Grand Parade, the city's main square, which serves now as an open market and parking area, and then turned right on Buitenkant Street passing directly in front of the bastion fort known as the Castle of Good Hope. This stone-walled, pentagonal 17th century castle is the oldest surviving building in South Africa; it is one of the best examples of VOC (or Dutch East India Company) architecture in the world. The Castle of Good Hope not only represents the colonial history of Cape Town, it still serves as the headquarters for the Western Cape military command. Admission includes a guided tour of the fortress and the military museum. We rounded the Grand Parade by turning right onto Darling Street,

passing the famous Cape Town City Hall built in 1905 in an Edwardian architectural design with honey-colored oolitic limestone from Bath, England. Only hours after being released from prison in 1990, Nelson Mandela made his first public speech from the balcony of this historic structure, which is no longer used as an administrative building and functions as a central venue for creative and cultural events.

We turned left onto Adderly Street, the city's original main street, passing some traditional financial landmark buildings like Standard Bank nestled among newer structures. On Wale Street we drove by St. George's Cathedral, the seat of the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town. The construction of this cathedral began in 1901 to replace the previous church that once stood there. St. George's Cathedral became a potent symbol of the anti-apartheid movement early on. Desmond Tutu, the first black archbishop of South Africa, led many protest marches and rallies from the front steps of this revered religious building. On Queen Victoria Street we made a left and headed southwest through the government sector, passing the Western Cape Provincial Parliament, the Western Cape Government building, the Cape Town High Court and the High Court Civil Annex offices. To our right was the Company's Gardens, the city's main park. Originally created as a vegetable patch by the early Dutch settlers during the 1650s, the Company's Gardens has grown over the years to become a popular central park and botanical garden in the heart of the city. In addition to the usual monuments and statues of historical figures, the park offers a collection of botanical specimens from South Africa and around the world. The oldest cultivated pear tree in the country (from the original settlers) can be found on these grounds. The Company's Gardens also has a well-stocked fishpond. Locals like to walk the trails or just relax on a park bench and take in the natural setting.

We rounded Orange Street and headed back towards the City Center via St. Johns Street, driving by the Cape Town Holocaust Center and South African Jewish Museum, the South African National Gallery building and the Roman Catholic Metropolitan Archdiocese, to name just a few of the sites. During our drive we passed many museums. One could easily spend several days walking and exploring the City Bowl area, which is why it is essential to plan for some extra time in Cape Town. We slowly made our way back onto Adderly Street heading northeast now towards the harbor, along the way we passed the bustling Greenmarket Square and the flower market. Near the Cape Town International Convention Center we turned left

and followed the harbor to the V&A Waterfront where our city tour ended with a visit to the famous Cape Town Diamond Museum a short walking distance from the waterfront's Clock Tower.

The Cape Town Diamond Museum is a non-profit organization created by famed jeweler Yair Shimansky as a gift to the city of Cape Town. Shimansky owns a collection of high-end shops throughout South Africa called the Shimansky Collection, producing some of the world's most exquisite jewelry. The stated purpose of the museum is to promote a better understanding and appreciation for diamonds. Although the museum is not large, it offers the visitor a unique look into how diamonds are formed in the earth, the methods used to mine them and the fascinating history of the South African diamond business. Along a series of walls are photographs and information (which read like a text book). You can walk through it, reading along the way, or, as in our case, a *very* attractive, professionally dressed guide will escort you through the halls, giving you a brief overview of the history of the South African diamond.

Before we began the tour, our guide asked us if we knew why the engagement ring is always worn on the left ring finger? She told us that in 1477, Archduke Maximilian – the first guy to propose to a woman with a diamond ring – believed that the vein of the left hand ring finger went directly to the heart. Or, at least, that was what he told his wife-to-be, Mary of Burgandy, when he presented her with the ring, inadvertently sealing the fate of men everywhere who now had to produce a diamond engagement ring before popping the question. *Thanks*, Max! This was just one of the many interesting anecdotes you will hear during the museum tour.

One section called the *Diamond through the Ages* provided a visual timeline, showcasing how the diamond, from its crystallized carbon formation more than 3 billion years ago, was first discovered in India around 2500 BC and how these precious gemstones spread throughout the world. The first discovery of a diamond in South Africa was by a 15-year old named Erasmus Stephanus Jacobs, who unearthed the stone on his dad's farm along the south bank of the Orange River near Hopetown in 1867. This 21.25-carat diamond has since been cut down to a brilliant stone half its original size known as the Eureka Diamond and is on display in a museum in Kimberley, the largest city in the Northern Cape Province. The discovery of the Eureka Diamond led to a diamond rush in Kimberley during the 1870s. This was when the mining giants, including De Beers, made their

mark and grew their empires. It is interesting to note the profound impact South Africa has had on the diamond business. Since the discovery of the first diamond in 1867, South Africa has become the largest producer of these precious gemstones in the world, providing approximately 65% of the current global market.

Another section of the museum devotes itself to the actual mining process, both in the past and present. On display are the tools and gear once worn by miners of yesteryear. Another section provides tantalizing replicas of some of the world's greatest diamonds, including the Hope Diamond, the most expensive gemstone on the planet, valued at over 200 million U.S. dollars! The tour of the museum lasted about forty-five minutes. When it was over we were led into a Shimansky jewelry shop. *Hmmmm, suspiciously convenient, if you ask me*. The display cases contained enough bling to render most women speechless. Behind glass window compartments we could see jewelers setting and polishing gemstones. Among the beautiful jewelry on display was a *Brilliant 10 Diamond*, a round 71-facet cut stone created and patented by Shimanksy himself. His unique cut produces no light leakage; all of the light that enters through the table and the crown of the diamond is reflected back. This special design supposedly creates the most brilliant diamonds in the world. We were given about half an hour to browse. They offered wonderful refreshments and freshly ground espresso. I'm not sure, though, how many of my fellow tour members – *if any* – actually made purchases here. The stuff was pricier than a celebrity's divorce, and most of us had booked this trip on Travelzoo to save money. Hardly the kind of combination that inspires spur-of the-moment diamond shopping. But the Cape Town Diamond Museum was fun and very informative.

We left the museum and followed Roger across the pedestrian swing bridge in front of the Clock Tower, stopping just in front of the Victoria Wharf Shopping Center on the other side of the V&A Waterfront. The rest of the day was free for us to explore Cape Town on our own. Roger recommended a few places to visit in the waterfront for those who wanted to stay in the area, telling them to follow the Dock Road back to the hotel when they were through. The rest of us boarded the bus, which was waiting on the other side of Dock Road, and returned to the hotel. I, and a few others in the group, had signed up for an afternoon excursion to visit the Langa Township, a black district located on the outskirts of the city. I was curious to see where and how black South Africans lived. Since arriving in Cape

Town – a beautiful coastal city – most of what I saw was limited to the affluent residential and urban areas populated predominately by white people. Besides the Bo-Kaap district, and the depressing hillside shantytown of *Imizano Yethu*, I hadn't seen any real black neighborhoods.

Well, that was about to change…

In my hotel room I washed up quickly and wolfed down some trail mix I always stash in my luggage as a back-up food supply. The excursion to Langa Township left at 1:30pm and I didn't have time to eat lunch. Fourteen other tour members had signed up for this afternoon 'jaunt'. We boarded our bus and met our local guide Shai (pronounced *Shy*), a tall, broad-shouldered South African of the Xhosa tribe who is from the Langa Township. His English was very good but spoken with the accent of the Xhosa people, the second-largest South African tribal group after the Zulus. He smiled, welcomed us to his country, and then launched into a list of unusual 'rules' we were to follow during our brief tour; like, for example, no tipping, no eating or sampling of food, no falling behind, giving donations *only* when he said it was okay to do so, and one of the strangest requests I've ever heard on a guided tour…*don't pick up any children*. According to Shai, the children of the township are very friendly, running up to tourists and giving them hugs. I'm assuming delighted tourists, caught up in the emotion of the moment, have swept these kids up into their arms. Shai told us not to do this. His reasoning (I kid you not) was that the diet of the Xhosa people, and Langa is a Xhosa township, consists of a lot of meat and starch, so the children tend to be heavy or stocky. He didn't want any of us injuring ourselves by lifting these children into the air. Honestly, I didn't know what to make of this. I started to envision a sci-fi movie where 300-pound toddlers ran amok, crushing tourists by the busloads. With that kind of introduction, I can't say many of us were endeared to Shai, who struck us as a bit of an African dictator. But when the tour proceeded, we grew *very* fond of him, and I personally respected his candor about all we were about to witness. And let me tell you, the next couple of hours proved to be quite an emotional experience for us.

Our first stop on this excursion was to the District Six Museum located just a few blocks from the Castle of Good Hope, in an area *called* District Six (or *Zonnebloem*), the site of a former multi-ethnic and multi-racial neighborhood in the heart of the city. On the drive over, Shai told us that South Africa is divided into townships, which traditionally have been

segregated among the various ethnic or racial groups that make up the country's population. The District Six Museum is dedicated to the lives and memories of the people who once lived in this community. In order to understand the growth of the non-white townships surrounding Cape Town, including Langa, we had to know the history of District Six. And it was a shocking lesson; a glimpse into a cruel and unjust practice that once prevailed in the country. When we entered the museum, Shai led us to a series of black and white blown-up photographs of the former District Six neighborhood, rows of streets lined with homes and small apartments with a mix of Blacks and Coloreds living side-by-side. It resembled a typical working class neighborhood from the 1960s found in any large urban area. In addition to the Xhosa people (the largest tribal group in Cape Town), there were Asians, Arabs and Jews living together peacefully in this community. Today, District Six is not much more than a barren field. *So what happened*?

Here's a brief history lesson:

The descendents of the Dutch settlers (known as *Afrikaners* or *Boers*) and the British colonists, the two European groups to battle it out for control of what would later become South Africa, fought several wars between themselves – in addition to battling the Zulus and the Xhosa – for supremacy. During the late 19th century, after the discovery of gold and diamonds made the territories even more valuable, Afrikaners fought two major wars with the British that would eventually lay the foundation for a new country. The First Boer War (1880-1881) saw the Afrikaners, who were greatly outnumbered, utilizing successful guerilla tactics against the British, who returned for another round of fighting – the Second Boer War (1899-1902) – with even greater numbers and were eventually successful despite suffering heavy losses. With the British now in control of the territories, the focus among *all* white South Africans shifted towards independence. Several years of negotiations led to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 after the British Parliament granted nominal independence to the colonists. In 1931, the Union of South Africa became a fully sovereign nation.

Prior to the formation of this Union of South Africa in 1910, white South Africans (both British and Afrikaners) had already been enforcing an informal policy of segregation to keep the races apart, setting up living areas similar to our own Native American reservations for indigenous groups. Pass

Laws were instituted, requiring everyone to carry around an internal passport for the purpose of limiting travel throughout the country by non-whites. After 1910, the new government began in earnest to severely limit the lands that could be acquired by blacks (guaranteeing that whites would control most of the country). After true independence was declared in 1931, there was no holding back the white minority government. By the time the National Party came to power in 1948, it became clear to them that the only way to hold onto power in a 'democratic' country – where the vast majority of the population was non-white – was to deny this majority the right to *real* citizenship. The legal, political and civil rights afforded to people of color were continuously curtailed under the apartheid laws passed by the National Party. South Africa was officially divided into three basic races: whites, blacks and coloreds (mixed). By law, each race had determined rights and privileges. The whites, of course, had the best of everything. The other two races fell victim to the injustices of this discriminatory system.

District Six was a dire example of the lengths the National Party was willing to go to segregate the races. Under a law called the Group Areas Act passed in 1950, the national government had the power to designate areas into specific racial zones. In February of 1966, P.W. Botha, the then Minister of Community Development, proclaimed District Six – which was located close to the city center – a "white group area". Over the next 15 years, more than 60,000 residents of this once harmonious neighborhood were forcibly removed from their homes and made to live in new or established black or colored townships in the bleak, sandy areas of the Cape Flats just to the southeast of the city. Mr. Botha, a racist's *racist*, would later serve as Prime Minister (1978 – 1984) and then would become the first executive State President (1984 – 1989) of South Africa. Under his administrations, apartheid was brutally enforced; thousands were detained without trail and others tortured and killed. It's interesting to note that ole P.W. never apologized for apartheid. He claimed in an interview conducted on his 90th birthday that he was merely following the policies established under the former British colonial administration. Till his death, this bigot continued to decry 'majority rule' and believed in separating the races.

The District Six museum reminded me in some way of my visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. Although much smaller in size, the museum was designed to allow the visitor to 'feel' the impact of this horrible act upon the innocent people who once lived in District Six. The main floor is covered with a map of the former

neighborhood, with hand-scrawled notes of previous inhabitants indicating were their houses had been. Photographs of these victims line the walls; men, women and children from all walks of life whose only fault, according to the government, was the color of their skin and their separate ethnicity or religion. There is a re-created apartment bedroom where the life of a young black girl is told through her memories and framed photographs. In fact, you'll read hundreds of testimonials by the former residents of District Six, attesting to how relatively peaceful their lives had been…that is, until the police, soldiers and bulldozers arrived, and then their stories become one of despair, anger and heartbreak. It was a deeply moving experience. The visit to the museum was meant to prepare us for what we would see later that afternoon.

We boarded our bus and drove east out of the City Bowl area, passing the empty fields of District Six just in front of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Today, the land remains barren but the government has vowed to honor former resident's claims and rebuild the neighborhood. Progress, though, moves at a snail's pace. We arrived in the Langa Township around 3:00pm. Langa is the oldest black township in Cape Town; it was formed under the 1923 Urban Areas Act (prior to apartheid) that created land space for Black Africans, with the intent of keeping them corralled and easily controlled. Langa was the site of many protests against the injustices of apartheid. In 1960, a massive rally against the much hated pass laws was met by aggressive police force and several protesters were killed. We drove by the 2010 monument erected by the government to honor those who lost their lives on that day.

Traveling on Settlers Way (freeway N2) along the township's southern border, we could see rows of newly built community housing projects. Since the nineties, the national government has been continuously erecting these apartment complexes for the displaced people of the former apartheid regime. Lately, the constructions have slowed due to funding issues – some might even argue corruption issues – which has led to some discontent in certain black communities. Our first stop in Langa was at the Guga S'thebe Arts and Cultural Center on Washington Street. This brightly colored building, decorated in sections by polychromatic ceramic murals, is by far one of the most interesting structures in the entire township, and not to be missed if visiting Langa. Although the building might be new, the center has actually been around almost as long as the township itself, opening its doors back in 1926. It has become the focal point for community development

within the township, emphasizing cultural improvement and economic empowerment.

A staggering 60% of the entire adult population of Langa is currently unemployed. Many families in the township support themselves through an informal economy, either opening a small home-based business or service known as a Spaza shop, or selling products on the street. The Guga S'thebe center provides accounting and secretarial services, and other facilities that enable locals to start their own businesses. In addition, the center is equally focused on improving the lives of the township via art and culture, providing metal and ceramic workshops, classes in dance, choir training, music, poetry, arts and crafts. Performances are conducted in an outdoor amphitheater and a newly created indoor theater made largely out of recycled materials. The center also has an Internet café and a venue for selling the works of local artists. We spent about an hour here, visiting several workshops (mosaics, painting and ceramics).

I was surprised to discover that volunteers from Rutgers University, my alma mater, had recently helped build the new indoor theater. Inside the ceramic workshop were numerous mugs with the Rutgers logo, made by the students of the center and presented to the Rutgers volunteers in appreciation for their work. I was able to purchase one of the leftover mugs for $5. It is proudly displayed on my kitchen shelf. Our group also participated in a music class, learning how to play the bongos and sing a traditional Xhosa song.

From the cultural center we drove through a middle-class neighborhood, with neat, brick-faced single-family homes owned mostly by professionals or those with good jobs in Cape Town. And then suddenly, without warning, we had entered the poorest section of Langa, where, according to our guide, the unemployment rate for men ran nearly 100%. The look of this neighborhood definitely coincided with that grim reality. We passed rows of shanties; tiny, wood boarded dwellings with corrugated steel sheets for roofs. Many of the businesses here were wooden shacks selling limited grocery items, or hair salons that were situated inside cutout metal shipping containers. In one particularly run-down section we stopped to visit a group of women referred to as the Sheep Head Women of Langa. I'm not going to lie to you, the area was more than just a little frightening, and there were people in our tour group who didn't feel 'comfortable' getting off the bus, but Shai insisted, telling us not to be afraid.

The Sheep Head Women are a group of displaced ladies who lost their spouses and now sell cooked sheep heads to earn a living. Several Xhosa women were standing behind wooden stalls and smoking grills. On the tables in front of them were sheep heads in various stages of preparation. The women were heavy-set, dressed in aprons and grimy skirts, their heads wrapped in bandanas and their faces smeared with some kind of yellow grease to protect their skin from the sooty smoke. It was hard to guess how old they were; this kind of poverty does not age a person well. Shai picked up one of the 'unprocessed' sheep heads and held it up for us to get a better view…although, in all honesty, I don't think a severed sheep's head has a *good* side. It looked gruesome from all angles. Shai explained how these women venture to the public food markets in Cape Town very early each morning to buy these sheep heads by the sack. After being boiled and the hair removed, the heads are smoked for several hours. Shai then held up one of the smoked sheep heads so we could see what *that* looked like. The smoking process causes the muscles to become taut, and the mouth develops a grimace that makes for one incredibly disturbing image, like staring at the face of a smiling demon. After the smoking process is completed, the heads are further cooked and then split down the middle and sold for 70 rands a piece. I have no idea how much 'meat' one could scrape off a single sheep head (it didn't look like much), but according to Shai, one head could feed an entire family (adding, of course, some starches and veggies). *Wow*.

From there we continued through a neighborhood of older two-story housing projects. Almost every apartment, it seemed, had a satellite dish, but Shai told us the average resident could ill afford the monthly service fees and the dishes were mostly disconnected. Landscaping between the rows of housing projects was non-existent; we saw very little grass or greenery in this area, just gray sandy plots between the sidewalks and the paved streets. On almost every corner were small groups of young men, some possibly gang members according to Shai. The streets were filled with playing children, who often ran alongside the bus waving cheerily at us. Shai spoke about social security and social grants (like welfare) that help keep this community afloat. Needless to say, crime – and in particular, drug addiction – tend to be a big problem in the township. On a positive note, he did mention the literacy rate was very high. Since the end of apartheid, the national government has made it a priority that *all* children have access to a good education. When we first reached Langa, school was letting out and we saw school kids in uniforms everywhere.

We stopped in the heart of the projects to visit a former migrant hostel being used as a temporary housing unit. These buildings were initially constructed fifty or more years ago for black male migrant workers, and were set up like army barracks. Two workers were assigned for each cot; the one who worked the nightshift slept during the day, and the one who worked the dayshift would sleep during the night. The bathroom and shower facilities were communal. Under apartheid, it was actually illegal for a black single, unemployed male, 18 or older, to live at home, so waves of young migrant workers were forced to find work and live away from their communities under these hostel conditions.

Today, many of the now run-down migrant hostels are being torn down for new housing units, but some, like the one we visited, were still being used as temporary housing for very poor families waiting for an apartment opening in the projects. Some families spend years waiting. I cannot begin to describe the deplorable conditions of these buildings. With the exception of the urban blight I saw in certain parts of India, I had never before experienced this kind of heart-wrenching poverty up close and so personal. Clotheslines and hanging laundry, the ground strewn with garbage, divided the courtyard shared by the surrounding structures. Like the housing projects, these migrant hostels were two-story, and each floor had a three-bedroom apartment providing shelter for three separate families, one per bedroom. If that doesn't sound *too* bad then you have to consider this fact: Black South Africans live in extended families numbering 15-20 people. Yes, multiply those numbers by three and you soon realize that as many as 45 to 60 people might be sharing *one* apartment. What makes this scenario even worse is the actual living conditions of these dwellings. Each apartment has a main living quarter that is also used as a kitchen, with the bedrooms set on opposite ends. There is only one bathroom with no toilets. The unit we visited had no electricity and no running water. The paint on the walls was peeling and there was black mold everywhere. One of the families sharing this apartment permitted us to enter their bedroom. It was cramped with three twin beds positioned along different sides of the room. Adults slept on the beds while the children slept on the floor, or in the living room area. Hooks or makeshift shelving along the wall contained what meager belongings they had. The windows had no glass, just wrought iron bars. A large wooden bench table in the center of the apartment seemed to be the only real piece of furniture. How this many people can live under these conditions is beyond me. It was a stifling, depressing experience. When we

were leaving, most of us stuffed money into a donation bowl on the bench table.

Our tour of Langa Township ended on this somber note; we drove back through the nicer neighborhoods and returned to the City Bowl. As our bus neared our hotel along Somerset Road, I couldn't help but think about the contrast between Cape Town's beautiful streets and districts and the township we just visited. It made me wonder just how much has really changed for the Black majority in South Africa since apartheid ended 25 years ago? When I shared this experience with family and friends back home, they were shocked that I would have taken such an excursion. *But how could I not*? World travel isn't just about seeing amazing ruins, awe-inspiring landscapes and wonderful cities. It is also about experiencing the culture and the history of the places you visit, both the good *and* the bad, in order to gain a better perspective. How else can we positively change the world if we refuse to see the parts that frighten or disturb us? South Africa is a beautiful country, and is continually changing for the better. But, like all countries, there are places and social conditions that still need improvement. I really appreciated this opportunity; Shai did a great job in revealing to us some of the starker realities still confronting the people of his homeland.

We arrived back at the hotel by 5:30pm. I joined the J J's for dinner. We returned to the Beluga Restaurant down the street because both Jing and I wanted to try the Ostrich steak. Roger advised us to order it medium-rare since the meat has a tendency to be tough if over cooked. It was delicious, resembling prime rib, served with fried potato balls and a side of sautéed squash and beets. During dinner, we discussed the things we had seen during our Langa Township excursion. I cannot speak for the others, but I certainly had a much better appreciation for all the people who served us during our tour now that I had had a sobering glimpse of how the 'other side' lived. I returned to my room shortly after 7:00pm and made a cup of coffee, wrote in my journal and watched the BBC nightly news broadcast. I was in bed by 8:30pm because I had a very early morning wake-up call for my much anticipated shark cage diving excursion.

Day Six

My smartphone alarm clock went off at 3:45 am. I groggily stepped into the shower and afterwards made several cups of coffee to stay awake, writing in my journal to keep busy. Shortly before 5:30am I went downstairs to the lobby to join the other six members of my tour group who had signed up for the shark cage diving excursion: Bud, Nancy, Tom, Maxine, Terry and Edelenn. A few minutes later a van from Marine Dynamics pulled up to the hotel and we piled in for a two and a half hour drive to the Overberg region of the Western Cape Province, approximately 160 kilometers to the east of Cape Town, situated along the southern coastline. Hima, our driver, resembled a smaller version of me, sporting a shaved bald head and a graying goatee. I sat in the front seat next to him so I could take photographs of the scenery, but it was still dark (and raining) when we left Cape Town. Hima mentioned that the region sorely needed the rain. The Cape was undergoing a severe drought, its main reservoir down to only 20 percent capacity, which meant only about another 105-days of fresh water. I made a mental note to take only two-minute showers from then on. In our van were three or four other tourists Hima had picked up from another hotel.

We followed freeway N2 out of the city heading east. It was about another hour before sunrise. I dozed on and off during this time. When the sun finally did come up we were approaching the town of Somerset West located in the wine-producing area known as the Helderberg. In the background was the imposing Helderberg Mountain, part of the Hottentots-Holland mountain range. We drove by vineyard after vineyard. Beyond this were mostly flatlands and mountains as we traversed Sir Lowry's Pass into the Elgin Valley. During our drive we also passed fields lined with olive trees and an apple farm operated by the Kromco Company, one of the largest packers and distributors of apples and pears in the country.

When we reached the small wine-producing town of Botrivier, Hima made a right onto R43, a two-lane local road that took us through several sleepy little communities approaching the Atlantic coastline in the Overberg region. Places like Fisherhaven, Hawston and Vermont. The Kleinrivier Mountains were to our left in the distance. By 7:10am we were driving through Hermanus, probably the largest seaside town in the area, overlooking Walker Bay. Hermanus has a fairly large shopping and industrial center, and we actually encountered a little bit of morning traffic at

that hour. The town is famous for its beaches and whale watching. During the Southern Hemisphere winter months (from June to October), visitors standing on the cliffs around Hermanus can spot *Southern right whales*, a species of baleen whales, who come into the bay to calve and mate. Although slightly smaller than other *right whales*, these beautiful, often molten-colored creatures are still enormous, with lengths ranging from fifty to sixty feet and weighing as much as 80 tons.

Roughly thirty minutes after leaving Hermanus we ended up on the other side of Walker Bay, passing the coastal village of De Kelders where you can visit the excavated Klipgat Cave, one of the most significant historical sites in the Western Cape. The cave contains the earliest evidence of the sheep-herding Khoi people, one of the first inhabitants of southwestern Africa. The descendents of the Khoi are the ones who originally settled the coastal area referred to as Walker Bay. When the first Dutch arrived, nomadic farmers known as 'trekboers', they copied the Khoi herding technique of grazing a field to exhaustion before moving on to greener pastures. At the time, the region produced the lands capable for such a lifestyle, but eventually the Dutch settled down and developed farming communities here. Just down the road from De Kelders is the fishing town of Gansbaai. Established in the 1880s as a tiny fishing colony, the waters off the Gansbaai harbor are considered the 'great white shark capital of the world'. Each year, film crews from the National Geographic Society and various scientific research teams converge on this part of South Africa to study these famous predators. This area is also good for watching and studying Southern right whales. And while the main economy of Gansbaai still centers around its fishing and canning industry, since around the mid-1990's it has become a very popular tourism destination due to the shark cage diving expeditions that are organized from here and the surrounding harbor communities. In fact, recent studies have shown that after Kruger National Park, one of the biggest tourist attractions in South Africa is the great white shark.

We drove through Gansbaai and went a bit further south along the jutting peninsula that borders the western side of Walker Bay. Much of the vegetation here consisted of the unique fynbos vegetation of the area. On the southernmost tip is Danger Point, a treacherous promontory lined with reefs and underwater rocks that have caused dozens of shipwrecks throughout the centuries. One of the most notable was the sinking of the British troopship HMS Birkenhead in 1852. The vessel was carrying troops and their families to the Eastern Cape when it hit a rock and sank. This shipwreck is famous

because it was the first time the ‘women and children first’ protocol was applied.

Our final stop was in the tiny port of Kleinbaai on the eastern side of the peninsula. It was just after 8:00am. We entered a two-story facility owned by Marine Dynamics, which serves as a combination staging area, gift shop and restaurant. Marine Dynamics is one of about a dozen companies given permission by the government to conduct shark cage diving off the coast of South Africa. It is recognized as probably the best in this field. In addition to shark cage diving excursions, the company also conducts whale-watching trips and has marine biologists and volunteers who work to conserve and protect the ecosystem of the bay. When we arrived, we went upstairs to a hall to have breakfast; a light fare of cheese, fruit, yogurt, bread and muffins. This was for a reason. You didn’t want to go out into the seas around here on a full stomach. The waters just south of Kleinbaai are where the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans meet. The collision of the warmer Indian Ocean current against the cold Atlantic waters can create some incredibly choppy conditions. I took a Dramamine tablet with breakfast, hoping to ward off seasickness later on.

At 8:30am our boat director (an attractive young woman whose name escapes me) addressed the group of 34 passengers inside the hall who were going on the shark cage diving excursion. She said great white sharks are a migratory species that frequent the bay area regularly. She also told us the water would be very cold, to brace ourselves, and then went over some basic safety protocols with us. We were shown a short video with further instructions and safety guidelines. Afterwards, we were each given a duffel bag with our wet suit gear. When you book this excursion they ask for your height and weight to make sure the wet suit fits. Three months prior to my tour of South Africa I enlisted the aid of Nutrisystem to shed 25 pounds. I had ballooned to 255 after my last trip (to Colombia) six months earlier and was afraid I would not be able to squeeze into my wet suit. Besides, I didn’t want to appear like Spam-in a-can floating inside that cage. I was able to ‘slim’ down to 230 pounds. And, boy, was I grateful I did. Trying to put those wet suits on was quite the hilarious YouTube moment. A group of fun loving, beer-bellied Germans in my group needed serious assistance getting into their gear; it was like stuffing meat into a sausage casing. But once we succeeded in zipping up our suits, the effect was like wearing a full-body Spanx. *I hadn’t looked this thin in years*!

We placed our clothes in the duffel bags for safekeeping and then put on our life vests. Completely suited up, our group marched about a block to the pier where our boat, the *Slashfin*, was moored. The vessel was a modern aluminum two-deck boat custom designed for viewing and cage diving. Supposedly, the Slashfin – named after a popular local great white shark with a big slash on its fin – is the first of its kind in the industry. It can accommodate 40 passengers (plus the crew), and is specifically aimed at providing superior speed, safety and comfort. Below are toilets, a canvassed dressing room and a food table with drawers conveniently stocked with snacks and drinks. Big, clean white towels are provided every time you climb out of the shark cage, cold and dripping wet. I must say, it all looked wonderful…but then we headed out to sea in those choppy waters, eight-foot swells rocking the boat up and down, and then suddenly all the creature comforts on earth didn't seem to matter. Luckily, I had taken my Dramamine, but for those who hadn't, and were prone to seasickness, well, let's just say the crew had to clean up some of the earlier breakfast fare.

I sat on the top deck next to Bud. When I first saw Bud in the hotel dining room on my second day in South Africa, I mistook him for a much younger man. Bud is 75-years old and an inspiration to anyone who fears the effects of aging. The man works out on a regular basis and looked in better shape than most guys in their twenties. Combine his physique with his fun, adventuresome demeanor and he was like the cool grandpa everybody wanted. I loved talking to him. He had great stories and was always in an upbeat mood. Him and his wife (who did not join us on the shark cage diving excursion) were continuing on to Victoria Falls at the end of our tour and he had signed up to go bungee jumping off some tall bridge. Bungee jumping at seventy-five? *The balls on this guy*! He was my hero.

The *Slashfin* set off from the dock at Kleinbaai around 9:00am. It took approximately 30 minutes from the inlet to reach a shallow section of the bay where the great whites like to come and go. The temperature of the water here was 10 degrees Celsius (or 50 degrees Fahrenheit). Depending on the time of year, the view from inside the shark cage was usually limited to just one or two feet. Silt from the bottom of the bay made the waters murky, so it was essential to draw the sharks as close to the cage as possible for a better view. The boat had a sturdy stainless steel cage, professionally engineered for this purpose, made out of 25mm squared tubing and covered by a security mesh. It was 4.5 meters long and 2.5 meters deep, capable of holding up to eight divers at a time. The steel bars provided plenty of feet

and hand support for holding onto – or climbing in or out of – the cage, with two lidded covers for easy access along the top.

People who watch Shark Week on cable TV probably think the cage is submerged below the boat, but that is not the case. The steel cage is actually assembled and then securely fastened to the side of the boat. And while it is primarily under the ocean (only about a foot and a half or so is above water), it will not sink or float away. You climb into it and suspend yourself in the cage by holding onto the bars, your head above water, and when the sharks appear you simply push yourself down for a (hopefully) better view. I'm not going to lie to you; I was a bit anxious prior to the excursion, not being a diver *or* a swimmer. Just before my trip to South Africa, a video had gone viral over the Internet about a shark breaking into a diving cage off the coast of Mexico, the diver had to drop to the bottom of the cage for safety while the shark thrashed madly above him before finally exiting. That YouTube video was the image reel spinning through my mind now. Again, my worries were for naught. In the fifteen years since Marine Dynamics has been conducting shark cage excursions, never once has the cage been breached. In fact, the sharks are more interested in the bait or decoys used to bring them closer than the actual gawking tourists. I lost my fear immediately.

The one *real* concern everybody had was whether or not we would get to see great white sharks, at all. The previous month, for the first time ever, there was a 23-day period when no sharks were spotted in the bay. Apparently, a pod of Orcas (better known as killer whales) had entered the area frightening off the great whites. Orcas, hunting together, often target the big sharks. Most of these boat trips last about three hours, but there is no guarantee on any given day that you'll get to see *any* sharks. Marine Dynamics has a policy of refunding half the price of the excursion if no sharks whatsoever are spotted; so when we did see our first shark, a disappointingly small tiger shark, this led to a running joke that the fish was probably attached to the bottom of the boat!

The weather was nice. It was drizzling at first when we headed out into the water, but the skies cleared up and it turned out to be a beautiful day. When we reached a certain point, the engine was turned off and several crewmembers began assembling and attaching the steel cage to the side of the boat while another tossed a commercially manufactured chum into the water to attract the sharks. The stuff left a trail of oily fishy residue that was, according to our boat director, environmentally friendly. We waited for

another fifteen minutes. The only thing to come around was a flock of seagulls looking for a free meal. All around us were smaller cage diving boats, rocking mightily against the waves. I pitied the poor souls on those tinier vessels. Our skipper eventually moved us further away from them to give us more room.

We continued to wait. And then the first great white shark appeared. It wasn't big, probably six or seven feet long, but it made us all stand up and run to the side of the boat for a better view. One crewmember had tossed a thick line into the water; on the end of the rope was what looked like a bunch of fish heads and tails strung together. Another crewmember tossed out a decoy of a baby seal. Working in tandem, they maneuvered the bait and decoy trying to bring the shark closer to the boat. The great white centered in on the bait and when it lunged, its razor sharp teeth trying to tear a portion of the fish bait from the end of the line, we gasped in excitement and started to take photos. No sooner than one shark would leave, another shark would appear and take a stab at the bait, including a massive female that measured more than thirteen feet. Meanwhile, the first eight divers from our group climbed into the steel cage. The crewmembers kept luring the sharks closer to the cage and instructing the divers to submerge by yelling, "down!" whenever a great white was about to pass in front of them. Because the divers' heads were just above water, and unable to see the approaching shark, it was necessary for the crew to let them know when to go under. There were no snorkels, only goggles. You held your breath and pushed yourself under the water. It wasn't always easy because of the buoyancy of the life vests. Before entering the cage a crewmember strapped a weight around your chest and shoulders to help you stay under, but you still had to struggle to keep your head below water, all the while looking out for the sharks.

Bud and I were watching the proceedings from the top deck, taking pictures galore, until it was our turn to get into the cage. We climbed down to the main deck, had the weights strapped to us and waited. I handed my eyeglasses to the boat director for safekeeping; the goggles did not fit over the frames. Luckily, Terry had two pairs of prescription goggles with him and he lent me one. Our eyesight was very similar so the goggles worked beautifully for me. Everyone was allowed at least twenty minutes inside the cage. When it was finally our turn, Bud and I slowly climbed in using the bars as a ladder. Tom, Maxine and Terry (who went in for the second time) joined us.

I have no idea how long it takes for a man's testicles to shrink once they've been exposed to the cold… but I'm fairly certain my 'boys' qualified for an honorable mention in the Guinness Book of World Records. The ocean felt mind-numbingly frigid. Earlier, when the boat director told us the water temperature would be around 10 degrees Celsius, I quickly did the Fahrenheit conversion in my mind, thinking: "*50 degrees*? *That's not so cold*." I stand corrected. Whatever fear I had of the sharks was now replaced by the fear of experiencing my first case of hypothermia. I floated inside the cage, my head barely above the waterline, shivering uncontrollably. When the crewmembers yelled "Down!" and I put my head under for the first time, the cold only intensified. I was able to keep my head under for only a few seconds before popping back up. Visibility was so murky I couldn't see anything. I don't think any of the other divers saw much of anything, either. It wasn't until my fourth attempt that I caught sight of a shark. All I remember was a section of its grinning mouth and one soulless black eye as it swam by me. *Yikes*!

Our group was the last one inside the cage. We spent a little more than twenty minutes in the water, but it felt much longer, believe me. By the time I climbed out of that steel contraption my body had acclimated to the cold and I was no longer shivering. Crewmembers handed out fluffy white towels and cups of hot chocolate or tea to us as we came out of the water. I went below deck and helped myself to some snacks, as well. The crew busied themselves dismantling the cage and getting us back to shore. When we returned to the Marine Dynamics building, our most difficult task awaited us: *removing our wet suits!* I grabbed my duffel bag with my clothes inside and proceeded into a bathroom stall for a little privacy. What a mistake. The wet suit was now clinging to my body with all the tenacity of Saran Wrap. When I got the thing below my shoulders I became stuck in that position, my arms jammed at my sides. No matter what I did I couldn't free myself. I was now locked inside a bathroom stall trapped inside a rubber suit like in some vintage S&M porn movie! From the grunting and heaving emanating from the other side of the stall door, I gathered my dive mates weren't having a better time of it, either. Fearing I was going to have a full-blown panic attack, I called out for help. But when it came, my stall door was locked. I had to turn to my side and maneuver the latch with my hindered hand. I finally got the door opened. An Australian fellow – who couldn't resist laughing when he saw me – pulled the wet suit down, freeing me. Not one of my *manlier* moments, I grant you.

Dried off and fully dressed, we were treated to bowls of hot soup and bread before piling back into our van for the long drive back to Cape Town. The shark cage diving experience is one I will never forget, and I whole-heartedly recommend it. We got to see seven great whites (and one curious tiger shark) during our outing. We hit the road shortly after 1:00pm. I would love to describe the scenery to you but I slept for nearly an hour and a half. When I woke, Hima was pulling into a rest stop so we could use the bathrooms and grab some coffee and/or snacks. About twenty minutes further we were traveling along Sir Lowry's Pass, an often heavily traveled four-lane road that crosses the lush, farming lands of the Elgin Valley and over the rugged Hottentots-Holland mountain range in the heart of the Western Cape Province. This winding mountain road is responsible for a large number of vehicular accidents annually. We stopped briefly at a lookout point on Sir Lowry's Pass so we could take in the phenomenal view. On one side were the waters of the False Bay and on the other the mountain chain extending to the north. A huge cross had been erected just near the cliffs. I read that this area is the starting point for the Boland Hiking Trail that runs through the Hottentots-Holland Nature Reserve. Surprisingly, many hikers have died walking this trail, which can take three days to complete, mostly from hypothermia during the winter months.

We made it back to the hotel by 4:00pm. I thanked and tipped Hima for his service and returned to my room, taking a quick shower and changing my clothes. I made coffee and wrote the day's events in my journal. At 6:30pm I returned to the lobby where I joined a dozen of my fellow tour members on a home-hosted meal excursion to a suburb of Cape Town called Plumstead. We traveled along the eastern side of Table Mountain heading south. It took us about half an hour before arriving at the home of a middle-class family of (I think) Indian descent. Vivian (a school teacher) and her husband Wayne (a manager for a local Woolworths store) and their two grown sons, Joshua and Mikhail, greeted us warmly and led us into the family dining room for a spectacular home-cooked meal. A long table had been prepared for us. We began our dinner with a fresh salad of chicken, lettuce, mango and beans. I had two servings. Near the dining room table was a smaller table set up like a mini-buffet. We helped ourselves to chutney chicken (Mandela's favorite), roasted lamb and *bobotie* (a traditional South African dish consisting of minced meat, various spices, nuts, dried fruit and topped with a layer of baked milk and eggs). There was yellow rice, creamed corn, roasted potatoes, cooked veggies, bread and butter. *What a feast*!

During dinner Vivian and Wayne spoke to us about the Cape Town school system, the economy and various immigration issues. And while they were often critical of the current political leadership they were also quite frank about the positive impact the change to a 'majority-rule' government has had on people of color like themselves. It was a very informative dinner conversation.

I was back in my hotel room shortly after 9:30pm. I set aside my clothes for the following day and repacked my luggage before going to bed. I slept soundly.

Day Seven

It was another early morning wake-up for me. My alarm clock went off at 4:30am. I immediately made some instant coffee and then proceeded, groggy-eyed, into the bathroom to shave and shower. By 6:00am I placed my luggage in front of my door for the bellhop and went downstairs for breakfast. At 7:00am we were on the bus for the drive to the airport. When we arrived at the terminal building we tipped and said our 'goodbyes' to Arthur (our driver) and went inside. Our uneventful, two-hour flight to Durban left at 9:10am. Waiting for us inside the parking area of the King Shaka International Airport in Durban was another big, comfortable tour bus. A fellow named Peter was our new driver. Roger, in true fastidious fashion, boarded the coach first to attach nametags to our seats. *I loved this guy*!

We were now on the opposite side of the country. Durban is the busiest port city in South Africa, and an important manufacturing hub, situated on the eastern coastline facing the Indian Ocean. It has a humid subtropical climate and is famous for its beachfront known as the Golden Mile. The city is the largest in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, and has the third highest urban population in the country behind Johannesburg and Cape Town. We did not stop in Durban, though. Our afternoon was spent driving north for more than two and a half hours through the province of KwaZulu-Natal to

the town of Mtubatuba where our next hotel – the Protea Hotel Umfolozi River – was located. We began our drive shortly after 12:00 pm.

The province of KwaZulu-Natal was formed in 1994 when the Zulu Bantustan (one of about ten black homelands previously created under apartheid) merged with the Natal Province, making it roughly the size of Portugal. Its capital city is Pietermaritzburg. The province shares a long shoreline beside the Indian Ocean, and is bordered by three countries, Mozambique and Swaziland in the north, and Lesotho to the west. The history of KwaZulu-Natal is quite a bloody one. During the first half of the 1800s, the northern part of the province was controlled by the Zulu Kingdom, which had been united under the rule of the great King Shaka (1787 – 1828). The southern portion was briefly controlled by the Dutch farmer settlers (the Boers) who created the short-lived Natalia Republic in 1838. The British annexed the territory in 1843 and established the British Colony of Natal. Throughout that turbulent century many famous battles occurred between the Zulus, the Boers and the British. In fact, according to Roger, one of the key tourism draws of the area (at least for British and Dutch visitors) focuses on these historical battleground sites, like the fields of Isandlwana where the British suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the ferocious Zulu warriors armed mostly with spears, and several of the sites where the Anglo-Boer Wars were fought.

As we drove through KwaZulu-Natal we were able to experience some of the unique geological diversity of this province. Along its coastal region are the lowlands that are narrow in the south but widen the further north you go, covered by subtropical thickets and deep ravines and forest areas. In the center of the province are the Natal Midlands, a plateau consisting of rolling hills that rise to the west. Perhaps the most dramatic physical feature in the region are the western Drakensberg Mountains that form a solid basalt wall – 3,000 meters tall – along the Lesotho border, with parallel ranges of granite heading southward from Swaziland.

We left Durban driving north on freeway N2 through the subtropical low-lying region of the eastern coastal plains. The Midland Mountains were to our left. We passed many sugarcane fields, an important agricultural crop in this area (known as the sugar coast). The sugar industry here produces 80 million tons annually, employing 80,000 local workers and as many as 400,000 (often illegal) immigrant workers. During the late 1800s, the British couldn’t get Zulus to work their sugarcane fields so they brought thousands

of workers from India to do the task, inadvertently creating what would become one of the largest Indian communities (in the city of Durban) outside of India. Later we also saw pine tree plantations, another important industry in these parts. Dotting the road at times were umbrella acacia trees.

During our drive we must have passed about half a dozen toll plazas. The first one was about 36 kilometers north of Durban near the town of Tongaat, known for its sugar mills. A few kilometers later we passed the beach resort community of Ballito, a popular area for dolphin watching. Beyond the uMvoti Toll Plaza we came upon KwaDukuza, a town that was originally founded by King Shaka in 1820 and served as a key city within his kingdom. The word KwaDukuza means 'place of the lost person' in the Zulu language and referred to the labyrinth of huts that sprang up in the area after it was settled. The town was burnt to the ground and abandoned in 1828 following the assassination of King Shaka in a coup led by two of his half-brothers. Later, in 1873, Europeans settlers built a town here called Stanger, naming it after the surveyor-general of the Colony of Natal. In 2006, the name was reverted back to KwaDukuza to honor the local Zulus (who simply call it *Dukuza*). Most White South Africans, though, continue to refer to the town as Stanger. You'll see a lot of this throughout the country. Much of the name-changing of towns and parks that has gone on in South Africa is very recent, only since the end of the apartheid government. But white South Africans continue to use the names they were accustomed to, perhaps as a form of mild resistance. The road maps sometimes list both the European and African names of these towns side-by-side. In his descriptions, Roger often used the original European names given these areas, which led to some confusion when I tried to find the places on my map.

Approximately 96 kilometers north of Durban we passed the industrial town of Mandini, with the Tugela River running through it. Nearby is the site of the famous Battle of Tugela (the 'Battle of Blood River'), which occurred in 1838 between the Boer settlers and the Zulu forces of King Dingane, who succeeded the throne after Shaka was assassinated. Dingane – in a moment worthy of the Red Wedding massacre scene from *Game of Thrones* – had invited the local Boer chieftain into his royal residence and during the feast had him and his men (who had surrendered their muskets at the door) slaughtered. As Dingane continued to attack Boer settlements, reinforcements arrived from Cape Town and several key battles took place that, miraculously enough, ended in favor of the Dutch settlers. With only 470 men, the Boers somehow held off and defeated a Zulu force numbering

into the tens of thousands. This victory eventually led to the overthrow of Dingane by a rival Zulu prince who later negotiated a treaty with the Boers, establishing a border between Zululand and the Boer's short-lived Republic of Natalia.

Just south of the Mtunzini Toll plaza we passed the recently opened titanium dioxide Fairbreeze Mine owned by the giant mining corporation Tronox. This operation is slated to last 20-25 years and employ more than 1,000 local workers. Further north we saw eucalyptus tree plantations. At times I thought I was looking at natural forests only to discover the rows of pine or eucalyptus trees that grow in this region are planted and harvested by lumber companies; entire hillsides and valleys, it seemed. We drove passed eMpangani, a small community situated on a hilly countryside that overlooks the major harbor town of Richards Bay 16 kilometers to the east. Richards Bay sits within a 30-square kilometer lagoon of the Mhlatuze River, just off the Indian Ocean coastline, making it one of the country's largest harbors. The town is home to the Richards Bay Coal Terminal, supposedly the biggest coal export facility in the world. In addition, the nearby sandy dunes are mined for iron ore, titanium oxide and zircon. There are two aluminum smelters here, as well, and a large fertilizer plant. It is one of South Africa's fastest growing cities, a bustling industrial center that has also managed to maintain and protect its ecological diversity. Ironically, with all of its major companies, the city still has a large percentage of poor, unemployed residents. Richards Bay is also a large tourism draw. The city is seen as a gateway to Zululand. From here, many foreign tourists venture out into the area's large game parks. According to Roger, tours of the famous Anglo-Zulu battlefields are staged from Richards Bay and are very popular with British visitors.

As we approached the town of Mtubatuba we drove by many communities with circular-shaped homes. The traditional Zulu hut resembles a large beehive, constructed out of sticks bound together with a single, low opening. Today, many Zulus still prefer to live in round dwellings, but they are built out of concrete, not sticks, and have modern amenities. Another thing we saw in the Zulu communities were goti cows from India. Roger told us that for traditional Zulus, wealth is often measured by the amount of cattle one owned. Goti cows became popular in South Africa because they have less susceptibility to disease. We arrived at the Protea Hotel Umfolozi River, located about 40 kilometers north of Richards Bay, around 2:30pm. The Protea Hotel chain is owned by Marriott and is considered the largest

such chain on the African continent, with hotels in more than half a dozen African countries. This particular one was located on a hillside within the Greater Hluhluwe/Umfolozi Game Reserve area. A beautiful property offering bungalow-style rooms with splendid garden views.

We had about 30 minutes at the hotel to square away our luggage and use the bathroom before re-boarding the bus for the drive to the St. Lucia Estuary some 20 kilometers to the east. As we drove through the town of Mtubatuba I saw signs warning people to be on the lookout for hippopotamuses. Apparently, hippos, which like to roam at night, sometimes find their way into the local communities (even though many have electrified fences surrounding the wild life areas). Roger told us it is not unusual to see an occasional hippo meandering down a street or lounging inside a pool in the early morning hours. He said the best defense against a charging hippo is to climb the nearest tree as quickly as possible since hippos can easily outrun most humans (over short distances) and are ferocious animals, killing hundreds of Africans yearly. In less than an hour we would be surrounded by them. *Gulp*.

On the 30-minute drive to St. Lucia, Roger went over the following day's itinerary. Tomorrow we would be visiting our first game reserve and he went over some of the procedures with us. He also explained the origin of the term the 'Big Five': the elephant, rhinoceros, lion, leopard and Cape buffalo. This phrase was coined by big game hunters to describe the five most difficult African game animals to hunt on foot. Later on, safari tour operators began using the slogan for marketing purposes and the 'Big Five' became part of the continent's lexicon. Currently, there are about 13 or so African countries that have all five of these animals within their borders. South Africa is one of those, and it was our fervent hope we would be able to see all five on our game drives during the next several days.

We arrived at the dock of the St. Lucia Estuary shortly before 4:00pm for an hour-and-a-half riverboat ride down the waterway. The estuary is a natural habitat for both hippos and crocodiles. As we waited to board our two-level passenger boat, I took photographs of the unusual statues near the dock area, including a wicker image of a giant croc with a stone human head in its mouth. Not a comforting visual, I must admit. When we boarded, I immediately climbed to the top of the boat where rows of plastic chairs were lined up across the deck, sitting next to the railing on the left hand side hoping for an unencumbered view to take pictures from. The sun was

beating down on us. As we slowly cruised the widening estuary, the boat's tour guide gave us the skinny on the area. The St. Lucia Estuary runs a length of approximately 85 kilometers from south to north and is about 22 kilometers wide at its widest point, making it one of South Africa's largest estuaries. On its southern end the waterway connects with the Indian Ocean, while all the main rivers – the Hluhluwe, Mzinene, Nyalazi and Mkhuze Rivers – flow into the system from the northern end. In 1999, UNESCO proclaimed this wetland area a World Heritage Site, the first one in the country. The area is home to more than 800 hippos and an estimated 1200 Nile crocodiles, not to mention an abundance of birdlife. In the surrounding scenic landscape you can find elephants, black rhinoceroses, buffalo and a variety of antelope.

It wasn't long before a pair of eyes popped out of the water and began staring at us. Hippos are very aggressive, and have been known to chase after boats. But if you don't get too close they mostly just stand back and watch cautiously. About fifteen minutes into our game boat drive we began to see more hippos, and then an entire herd lounging along the banks of the estuary, their massive bodies covered in mud as they snoozed the lazy afternoon away. There were now hippos in the water *everywhere*. Some would yawn or bellow, opening their mouths to an almost astonishing 180 degrees, revealing large and deadly lower canines and incisors that can grow more than a foot long and are used exclusively for combat. The only land mammals bigger than hippos are elephants and rhinos. These mostly herbivorous animals have easily recognizable barrel-shaped torsos that can reach up to 3,300 pounds in heft, yet they can be quite nimble on their short, stubby legs, reaching top speeds of 30 kilometers an hour over short distances. If a hippo is close by and charging, your only chance of escape is to climb high because they will most certainly outrun you. Hippos, as adorable as they look, are considered one of the top most dangerous animals on the planet. Interestingly, despite looking like brown over-sized pigs, they are actually related to cetaceans (dolphins, porpoises and whales) from which they evolved some 55 million years ago.

There are five subspecies of hippos, the South African version is known for its large flat skull. Not an understatement, either. The adult hippos we saw had *HUGE* heads. Hippopotamuses spend most of their lives in the water – mating, birthing, fighting, lounging, etc – and only venture inland at dusk to graze on short grasses. At times they can travel inland up to 10 kilometers, but always return to the water, usually a fresh water source like a

river or estuary. Adult hippos can keep their heads below water for upward of five minutes before resurfacing for air. These animals also make quite an environmental impact. Their massive weight and eating habits, over time, can clear areas along their pathways, sometimes diverting swamps and channels. And their pooping, which is as big as everything else about them, produces allochthonous deposits of organic matter along the river beds. It is not sure what ecological impact this has but it is believed that hippo dung provides nutrients for fish and invertebrates.

Most of the vegetation growing along the banks of the estuary consists of tall grasses and trees capable of flourishing in this unique environment. During the rainy season the rivers flow strongly out to sea, producing a low salinity level within this wetland system. But during extended months of drought, the rivers stop flowing and the estuarine lake level falls below sea level. When this occurs, the inflowing seawater introduces a high level of saline to parts of the estuary, making it up to three times saltier than the ocean. As the salinity changes, so does the ecological nature of the estuary; for example, when the saline level is low, this favors the kind of submerged plants that attract ducks, and when the saline levels are high, the concentration of estuarine fish who spawn at sea is increased – together with the phytoplankton and zooplankton – providing an abundant food source for lesser flamingos. During our game boat ride, we saw several different species of birds, including a colorful kingfisher and a regal-looking African eagle. Unfortunately, we only saw one Nile crocodile; it was swimming across the estuary as we were returning to the dock. Perhaps the absence of these large predators was because the area was full of hippos, a natural enemy. Hippos can snap a large croc in half with their powerful jaws.

Dusk was fast approaching when we docked at 6:00pm. By the time we reached our hotel thirty minutes later it was nightfall. That evening we enjoyed an included buffet dinner inside the hotel restaurant. Roger bought everyone a round of drinks. I sat with the J J's and we had a nice conversation ranging from middle-age relationships to travel. Since we were leaving very early in the morning to visit the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve, I decided to set out the clothes I would be wearing and repack my suitcase before going to bed.

I dreamt I was being chased by a herd of Happy, Happy Hippos…

Day Eight

I awoke at 4:00am feeling – believe it or not – fully rested. Back home I am accustomed to waking up at this hour during a typical workweek. I immediately prepared my caffeine fix, jumped in the shower and got dressed. By 5:15am my luggage was in the hallway ready to be picked up. Breakfast would be served later that morning inside the game park. At 6:00am sharp we were on the bus and hitting the road. I was very excited; this would be my first game ride (Lion Country Safari in West Palm Beach, Florida doesn't count). We drove through the town of Mtubatuba, and even at this early hour we saw children and teenagers on their way to school. Street vendors sold *pap*, a traditional porridge made from ground maize, out of black cooking pots. The dish tastes like a blander and lumpier form of grits. It is a staple of the Bantu peoples' diet (served with just about every meal) and can be flavored in any number of ways by adding vegetables, spices or sugar, or simply lathering it with whatever gravy accompanies the main course. Sold on the streets, *pap* provides a filling, on-the-go breakfast for both students and workers alike.

During our drive to the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve, Roger spoke about healthcare in South Africa. Currently, health insurance and private medical facilities are available only to those fortunate enough to afford them. The vast majority of the population must use either public clinics in the rural areas or public hospitals in the major cities. Recently, the government passed a law that will roll out a national health insurance plan for the entire country. The problem with its implementation, according to Roger, is deciding how this plan will be financed. *Welcome to the club, buddy*!

We drove north on freeway N2 for about an hour before reaching the entrance into the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve. Along the way we passed small Zulu communities with their row of round houses. Securing the roadside from the reserve grounds was a double electrified fence. Park rangers walk between the fences to stay safe. Once inside the game reserve

we wasted little time splitting up into four different safari vehicles, which is the best way of seeing the wildlife up close and personal without becoming a life-size snack in the process. These sturdy open-air utility vehicles are standard transportation mode for South Africa's game parks. Built for this specific purpose, the vehicles often resemble over-sized, elongated jeeps with three rows of passenger benches, each row slightly higher than the last for better viewing. One of the biggest concerns a visitor to the game reserve might have is: *How the heck do I stay safe inside an open-air vehicle? What's to stop a lion from looking up from his daily kill, seeing a big serving cart full of humans and deciding it's time to vary the menu*? Okay, maybe most tourists don't think that, but it was definitely on *my* mind. Our park ranger/driver was a middle-aged Zulu named Peter. He was, in his own physical way, very reassuring; a tall, strapping fellow with a deep calming voice. But I also noticed he didn't carry a gun, so my anxiety didn't abate one bit. Unless, of course, lions prefer to eat brawny flesh as opposed to globs of fat. Then I guess Peter would have to take one for the team!

Actually, as Peter went over the safety protocol with us he *did* mention the reason why the animals do not attack the safari vehicles. Although wary of humans, the park wildlife has become accustomed to seeing the safari jeeps driving by on a daily basis and do not view them as a threat. For the most part, anyway. We were cautioned about not getting out of the vehicle, *obviously*, but also about not standing up and making loud or sudden movements, as this could upset or frighten the animals who will usually run away (or, in very rare instances, attack). The park rangers all hail from the area and are often advised (via radio contact) by bush guides who understand the terrain and the animals very well. They know which animals they can approach for a closer view and which ones to keep a reasonably safe distance from. By the way, all of this adds to the excitement of the game drive safari. One never knows what to expect whenever you visit any of the reserves, each visit *will* be different.

The Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park is the oldest nature reserve on the entire continent. It was originally a royal hunting area for the Zulu kingdom, and was established as a park in 1895 primarily to protect the white rhinoceros from extinction. Today, more than a 1,000 white rhinos inhabit the park so the effort proved noble. The reserve covers over 960 square kilometers of hilly topography in the center of what is considered Zululand. Many of the park rangers and employees are locals from the nearby villages or towns, people who grew up with an intimate knowledge of the bush. The Hluhluwe-

Imfolozi Game Reserve is the only state-run park in the KwaZulu-Natal province that contains the Big Five animals. Whether you actually get to see them all is a matter of pure chance.

We set out in a caravan formation along a paved road that meanders around certain sections of the Hluhluwe area of the park. The rangers were in constant communication with one another via walkie-talkies, informing each other once they spotted animal activity. At times, though, our ranger would cut down a dirt trail in search of wildlife on his own. When animals were spotted, a mini traffic jam would ensue as safari vehicles converged on the site. Peter told us to be vigilant and to call out whenever we spotted anything in the bush. As we entered the park grounds we witnessed the arrest of several poachers who had killed a rhino for his horns. Peter said some poachers use tranquilizer guns to immobilize the animal, but if they do not have access to such devices they often just shoot and kill them. A growing problem all over Africa.

The first group of animals we saw was a herd of Cape buffalo and a few zebras grazing near a wallowing spot. One of the buffalos was sitting in the mud pit trying to cool off. As we drove by, two of the larger bulls began banging their horns together in what could have been either play or some kind of dispute. The Cape buffalo is a large African bovine, but since it is not closely related to cattle (or the other, slightly larger bovines worldwide) its ancestry is not exactly clear. Unlike its Asian counterpart (the water buffalo), the African Cape buffalo has never been domesticated due to its unpredictable temperament. They can lunge at any moment and are considered quite dangerous to humans (killing as many as 200 a year). Roger told us about an incident a few months earlier when a Cape buffalo charged the safari vehicle he was in. He recounted how the driver had to step on the gas, just narrowly avoided being rammed. Among hunters, the Cape buffalo is a prized trophy. Adult bulls have very characteristic horns that are fused along the top of their heads, forming one continuous curving shield. To me, it looked like a hairstyle parted in the middle.

The next animal we spotted was purely by coincidence. One of my fellow tour members, sitting on the left-hand side of the safari vehicle, thought she saw something in the bush and called out to Peter who immediately pulled up alongside the tall grass to have a look. At first, we couldn’t see anything but grasslands. Suddenly, an orange shape became visible. I zoomed my camera lens in and it turned out to be a lion crouching within the thicket, its

orange mane framing his face. I thought he was tracking the herd of buffalo or zebra we'd just seen further down the road, but Peter, as if reading my mind, said this was not the case. And we soon discovered why. Actually, it was the telltale smell of a dead animal that gave it away. A few dozen meters from the lion was the bloated dead carcass of a rhino lying on its side. (*Perhaps the one the poachers had killed*?) Peter told us the lion was probably feeding off the dead rhino…and as if on cue, a lioness popped her head out from behind the carcass, her mouth covered in blood. According to Peter, this large dead animal would provide several days' worth of 'free meals' to the park's predators before being completely devoured.

We made a 30-minute breakfast stop inside one of the park's hut-roofed picnic table rest areas. A mini-buffet had been set up providing scrambled eggs, pork sausages, bread, muffins, fruit and yogurt, with plenty of fresh juice and coffee. We helped ourselves and took advantage of the restroom facilities before continuing the game drive. I have looked at maps of the park after returning home, but it would be difficult for me to say with any certainty which path we took that day through the bush, suffice it to say we covered a lot of ground. We drove south towards the Imfolozi section of the park and came upon a very exciting scene, a group of white rhinos making their way through the bush. The term 'white rhinoceros' is a bit of a misnomer since the actual skin color of these animals varies from yellowish brown to slate gray. There are two subspecies of white rhinos: the *northern white rhinoceros,* which is nearly extinct, and the ones we were looking at now, the *southern white rhinoceros,* the most abundant rhino species on the planet (numbering over 20,000 as of 2013). These are enormous creatures, reaching lengths of 11 to 15 feet long with shoulder heights around 6 feet tall. The males can weigh up to 5,000 pounds (2400 kg). They have two distinct horns, a long one on the tip of their large head and a shorter, stumpy one right behind it. The horns are made of keratin, the same substance found in hair and nail, but in some Asian cultures the horns are believed to contain therapeutic properties and are ground up and consumed for medicinal purposes. By weight, the price of rhino horns on the black market equals that of gold, which is why poachers target these animals. In some countries, the horns are routinely cut off to prevent the rhinos from being hunted (the horns grow back). But in the wild that is not always a practical thing since the horns are used for self-defense.

Further along we spotted two zebras on a hilltop, and then a lone Cape buffalo wallowing in a mud pit. Peter said he was probably old and had been

outcast from his group. We saw plenty of skittish impala, jumping about and taking off whenever we approached too close. Another herd of Cape buffalo and more zebra. A giraffe eating tree leaves in the distance. As we headed back towards the gate entrance we came face-to-face with four warthogs making their way down the dirt road, looking like a gang of toughies. We spent a total of three and a half hours inside the park, finishing at 10:30am, and although we had arrived very early in the morning (a good time to spot the wildlife) we did not see as many animals as we would have preferred. But this was not the fault of the park rangers. They did their best to locate the reserve's animals. Unfortunately, the wildlife sometimes doesn't cooperate. Nonetheless, it was an exciting game drive, preparing us for our day-long visit to Kruger National Park in two days time.

Shortly after 10:30am we were back on the road again, heading towards the border with Swaziland. We passed large pineapple plantations during the drive, and on our right were the mountains separating South Africa and Swaziland from the country of Mozambique. By noon we had reached the South African border town of Pongola, situated in a fertile valley along N2, and crossed into the Kingdom of Swaziland. The border crossing took 40 minutes due to the limited staff on the Swaziland side. Roger told us that in the past there had been no border crossing here and travel was relatively free flowing, but a dispute between the South African government and the Swazi king over territorial rights led to this retaliatory inconvenient procedure. We spent the rest of the afternoon driving to the very center of this independent nation.

The Kingdom of Swaziland (officially, the *Kingdom of Eswatini*) is a tiny, land-locked country bordered by Mozambique to the northeast and everywhere else by South Africa. This sovereign state is only 121 miles long (200 km) from north to south, and 81 miles wide (130 km) from east to west. It has a population of just over 1.1 million people, primarily ethnic Swazis whose language is Swati (although English is also spoken). The history of the region dates back to the early Stone Age. Artifacts have been found indicating the presence of early humans from 200,000 years ago. Khoisan hunter-gatherers, who hail from probably the largest ethnic group known to modern human demographic history, settled in the valleys of Swaziland thousands of years ago, leaving behind Prehistoric rock art paintings throughout the country.

Today's Swazis are descended from Nguni-speaking clans who migrated from North East Africa to South East Africa around the 15th century, settling first in the territories that make up Mozambique before finally moving into what is now Swaziland. They were originally called the *Ngwane* people but later became known as *Swazis* under the reign of King Mswati II (1820 – 1868), a brilliant warrior king who greatly expanded the territories of his kingdom by continuously raiding other tribes. His death in 1868 ended Swazi expansion in the region. The present-day boundaries of Swaziland were drawn up in 1881 under the Partition of Africa by European powers during the period known as the New Imperialism (1881 – 1914), when 90 percent of Africa was carved up into European colonies and territories. Following the Second Anglo-Boer War, Swaziland became a British protectorate and remained so until its independence in 1968.

The country is ruled under an absolute monarchy system. The current king (or *Ngwenyama*) is Mswati III, who has been on the throne since 1986. As the supreme head of state, Mswati III appoints the prime ministers and a number of representatives to the parliament's two chambers: the Senate and the House of Assembly. The remaining parliament members are elected to office every five years (under the current constitution). The king's power is granted under constitutional provisions and by Swazi law and tribal customs. He is regarded not only as the symbol of unity (he is advised by a council of elders from the various tribes) but also as a symbol of the eternity of the Swazi nation. By tradition, the king rules alongside his mother, referred to as the *Ndlovukati* (or the She-Elephant). This was done to 'counter-balance' the power of the king who is technically the administrative head of state while the Ndlovukati serves as both the spiritual and national head of state. But over the years the role of the Ndlovukati has been more or less relegated to a symbolic one, with most of the power concentrated in the hands of the king. There have been attempts to reign in the authority of the monarch. Student and labor protests during the 1990's led to constitutional reforms, paving the way for more representation via elections established by the new constitution of 2005. It remains to be seen if this is enough or if more challenges to the monarchy will take place.

Perhaps the biggest threat to the king's power base is the country's own poverty rate. The economy is diversified enough – agriculture, forestry, mining and manufacturing – but the majority of the people do not benefit greatly from these industries. And that's because 75% of the population is employed as subsistence farmers on what is called *Swazi Nation Land*.

Technically, the king owns all the lands in Swaziland. He doles out settlement territories (Swazi Nation Land) to be administered by the tribal chieftains for his subjects to live on. The people who live on Swazi Nation Land cannot own their properties, and are basically subsistence farmers, eking out what they need to survive in what amounts to a modern-day feudal system. Productivity on these parceled SNL farms is understandably low which hurts the overall economy. In fact, it's a strange sort of paradox, an economic system where on one hand you have the big, industrialized agricultural and manufacturing sectors doing reasonably well, while the majority of the people work on these low-producing farms that insure they will remain poor in perpetuity. The high unemployment and underemployment rates have forced many young men to leave the country in search of meaningful work. This in itself has had a devastating effect on the country, as returning migrant workers have helped spread AIDS/HIV virus throughout the general population. Today, Swaziland has the highest HIV infection rate in the world; a staggering 26% of the adult population has the virus. Couple that with a growing tuberculosis problem, and the average life expectancy in Swaziland is just under 51 years of age. *Incredible*.

Swaziland is divided into four administrative regions: Hhohho, Lubombo, Manzini and Shiselweni. Along the eastern side bordering Mozambique is the Lubombo mountain ridge (600 meters above sea level) broken up by three river canyons, this is the cattle ranching area of the country. The western border of Swaziland lies on the edge of a great escarpment (1200 meters high). Running between these mountains are numerous river systems that make this small country one of the most fertile regions in Africa. In the center of the country is the *middleveld*, where the majority of the population lives, a wide-open rural landscape of grasslands or low scrub situated halfway between the eastern and western mountains. And then there is the *lowveld*; at only 250 meters above sea level this is the lowest-lying region of the country. This combination of mountain ranges, river canyons, forests and the *veld* landscapes makes Swaziland a beautiful country to visit, with a varied and unique wildlife population – 11 globally endangered species and over 100 endemic mammal species alone – inhabiting a series of protected nature reserves, wildlife game parks and frontier conservation zones. During our brief stay we were able to witness this geographical diversity firsthand as we drove up through the low-lying areas northward into the middleveld, and then continued to the mountainous region on the western side before re-entering South Africa the following afternoon.

After crossing the border into Swaziland, we passed many small agricultural communities. In addition to the large sugarcane fields, the country's top exporter, we saw some of the small rural farms that consume a large portion of the country's workforce. Most of the homes were no better than shacks built at the edges of these tiny plots of land. These subsistence farmers, many of them taking refuge from the afternoon sun underneath whatever shade was available, looked just as ragged as their homes. We were driving through the Lubombo region; the Lubombo mountain range was to our right, separating Swaziland from Mozambique. We came upon the Nisela Game Reserve located at the foot of this mountain chain, in the lowveld area, home to over 250 species of birds, including some rare ones like the Black Chested Snake Eagle, the Amathys Sunbird and the African Qauil Finch. A bit further north we reached the agricultural town of Big Bend next to the Lusutfu River, with its large sugarcane plantations. We passed USA Distillers, a big, modern distillery, providing beverage, food and pharmaceutical grade alcohol for both African and European markets. Roger told us they make a brand of spirits (similar to vodka) that is very popular throughout southern Africa.

Beyond Big Bend we began turning in a northwesterly direction along MR8 road (the freeway we were traveling on), passing through Phuzumoya, a small town with a train station located near the confluence of the Lusutfu and Umtimphofu rivers. Just to the north of Phuzumoya is the Mkhaya Game Reserve, a protected area within the lowveld wilderness that was originally established in 1979 to save the Nguni cattle from extinction. This conservationist park has since grown to include other endangered species like the black and white rhinos, elephants, Cape buffalo and three separate subspecies of antelopes (roan, sable and the tsessebe). The reserve is a mostly semi-arid savanna covered by thorny acacia and knobthorn trees in the south (known as a thornveld), and by areas of dry, sandy soil in the north (known as a sandveld). About ten kilometers further up the road we passed another sugarcane producing town called Siphofaneni.

We continued to travel northwest for another 45 kilometers (I believe we were now on MR3 road) before reaching the major city of Manzini, situated in the Upper Middleveld. Manzini is the largest urban center in the country, and the capital city of the region by the same name. It is often referred to as 'the Hub' of Swaziland, a chaotic commercial and industrial area whose small town center is dominated by shopping malls and office buildings lining its two main streets. There is also a colorful market square selling

handicrafts ranging from Swaziland goods to Mozambican textiles. By the time we reached Manzini, school had let out and the sidewalks and streets were full of happy uniformed children heading home. We saw large crowds of shoppers near the malls. This was the first place in Swaziland where we actually experienced traffic.

We drove west beyond the city, through the scenic Malkerns Valley, stopping to visit a handicrafts marketplace called the Swazi Candles Centre, a popular tourist spot for souvenirs. Candle-making here is raised to a real art form, incorporating an ancient technique called 'millifiore'. The wax is colored, made into sheets, sliced and patterned, and then extruded through a pressing machine. The final product is layered with a hard veneer outer finish that hardly melts when the candle is lit, retaining its artistic shape. In addition to the candle-making shop, there was a small outdoor handicrafts market selling local textiles, paintings, jewelry and wooden sculptures. I purchased most of my souvenirs here.

After spending more than an hour at the Swazi Candles Centre we hopped back on the bus and continued westward towards Mbabane, the country's capital, in the highveld region of Hhohho. We drove through the 30-kilometer long Ezulwini Valley corridor, including the historical city of Lobamba, which serves as the spiritual and legislative capital of the country. Lobamba contains the seat of Parliament and is the residence of the Queen Mother, Ntfombi Tfwala (the *Ndlovukati* of Swaziland). While driving through the city, we passed several notable places: the Houses of Parliament and the National Museum of Swaziland, the Queen Mother's residence (within the Ludzidzini Royal Village), the Somhlolo National Stadium with its multi-colored sitting sections, and the King Sobhuza II Memorial Park. Sobhuza II was the current king's father whose reign of 82 years is the longest such record for any monarch in human history. He reportedly had 70 wives, fathered some 210 children, and, at the time of his death in 1982, had over 1,000 grandchildren. *Whoa*.

Roughly 10 kilometers from Lobamba is the Lozitha Palace, the royal residence of King Mswati III. Each year, the king visits the Ludzidzini Royal Village in Lobamba during the annual *Reed* (or *Umhlanga*) *Dance* and the *Incwala* ceremonies, the two most important annual ceremonial events in Swaziland. The *Reed Dance* is organized by the Queen Mother and brings together tens of thousands of unmarried and childless Swazi girls and women who dance – bare-chested in traditional attire and beadwork –

holding the knives they used to cut reeds the night before to mend the fence around the royal village. This is a woman's ritual dance designed to encourage girls to abstain from sex until marriage (the knives represent their virginity). Supposedly, this ceremony has taken on a more important role during the current HIV crisis gripping the nation. I think Roger told us that the king might even select a wife from these events. Or several, as the case may be (King Mswati III has 13 wives as of this writing). The other annual ritual, the *Incwala* ceremony, is the main ritual of Kingship in Swaziland; it is a national event that takes place during the summer solstice and lasts for about a month, with a culminating series of spiritual and symbolic rituals controlled by national priests known as *Bemanti*. The purpose of this ceremony is to show support for the king and his authority as the ruler of the Swazi people.

As we left Lobamba, Roger pointed out a large granite precipice jutting out from the nearby Nyonyane Mountain. Officially known as the Nyonyane Peak, it has a much more sinister nickname: *Executioner's Rock*. Supposedly, ancient bushman would force criminals to walk off this ledge at spear point as punishment for their crimes. At over 1,100 meters high the fall would undoubtedly kill you…but on the bright side, your sentence lasted only a few seconds.

Just before 5:00pm we began our ascent up the Mdzimba Mountains, where the capital Mbabane is situated. We were traveling on a winding mountain rode that should not have taken us too long to reach the top, but an accident caused us to sit in traffic for nearly an hour. A beer truck collided with a Mercedes-Benz passenger car and overturned, unloading almost its entire cargo all over the roadway. Not only did this bring traffic to a halt, while ambulances and police vehicles attended to the accident victims, but a huge, impromptu block party broke out on the rode as thirsty Swazis helped themselves to can after can (and bottle after bottle) of free lager. We finally reached the Mountain Inn around 6:00pm. *And what a beautiful hotel*! Located approximately 3 kilometers from the Mbabane city center, the hotel is sprawled out in sections over a wooded hilltop overlooking the Ezulwini Valley. My room had a big picture window facing the valley and as I put my luggage away I was treated to a spectacular sunset.

That evening I once again sat with the J J's for dinner inside the hotel restaurant. I ordered the schnitzel. Delicious. We were later joined at our table by Terry who shared some interesting traveling stories with us. Terry

and his wife, Edelenn, a young couple from Australia, were quite the adventuresome duo. Sky-diving, flying mini-helicopters, deep sea diving, etc. He told us they had wanted to go paragliding in Cape Town but couldn't because of the dangerous wind conditions. *Ahhh, to be young and reckless*! Me? I'm solidly middle-aged and *cautiously* timid. To prove my point, I was back in my room and sleeping soundly by 9:15 pm.

Day Nine

As usual, I was awake shortly after 4:00am. I made several cups of instant coffee and spent over an hour writing down the previous day's events in my journal. I had a minor (and embarrassing) accident during my shower that morning. The spray nozzle inside the bath was relatively low-centered. I adjusted the hot and cold flow of the water and then turned the handle to activate the showerhead, not realizing the spray nozzle was aimed directly at my balls. When the first powerful burst of water came shooting out I nearly doubled over from the pain. It took me a few minutes to recover. I don't think my 'boys' ever want to set foot in Africa again! At 7:00am I was shaved, dressed (and fully healed), heading for the breakfast buffet, my luggage already in the hallway.

By 8:15am our bus hit the road, driving through sections of Mbabane along the mountainous MR3 roadway. We were traveling across the northwestern Hhohho region of the country, through the Ngwenya Valley. It was my turn to sit in the front seat and the panoramic mountain valley views as seen from the coach's wide, clear windshield were quite spectacular. The Hhohho region is at a much higher elevation than the rest of the country, offering the best scenery in Swaziland. Later, as we continued driving further north and out of the country we traversed valleys of lush hills and mountain chains seemingly undulating off towards the horizon. In between these hills and dramatic ravines we saw large plantations, beautiful woodlands, sloping grasslands, rivers and streams.

From Mbabane it took us about thirty minutes to reach the small town of Ngwenya, lying near the border with South Africa's Mpumalanga province. Nearby were the historic Ngwenya Iron Ore Mines, one of the world's oldest known mines (and from what I read a very interesting field trip if visiting this region). During the Middle Stone Age the inhabitants of this valley mined hematite ore deposits to extract red ochre, and during later times the mines provided iron ore for both smelting and export. We stopped for an hour at a place called the Ngwenya Glass Village.

The Ngwenya Glass Village opened more than twenty years ago and quickly became a very popular tourist attraction in northwestern Swaziland. Using nothing but 100% recycled glass (collected by the country's poor who turn it in for money) this factory churns out exquisite artwork and tableware using traditional glass-blowing techniques. In addition to the large showrooms where visitors can browse and buy the finished products, the factory has a second-story catwalk which takes you above the factory floor so you can see how the glass pieces are made. Workers were continuously extracting liquid glass from huge furnaces and bringing it to skilled artisans who would shape the substance on special lathes (or the end of hallowed poles) into tableware. Other artisans were blowing glass into ornate designs. Running alongside the factory was a string of *Imvelo Estwatini* shops, selling homemade handicrafts like ceramic disc/beaded jewelry, bags made out of lutindzi grass (a sedge that grows in between rock cracks), post cards, paintings and sculptures. All of the profits generated are used to sustain Youth Care and Social Welfare programs. I purchased some post cards and earrings for my nieces made by local Swazi women using only waste paper – very clever – and a glass elephant souvenir for my best friend back home.

Shortly after 10:00am we were back on the bus. I assumed we were going to cross the border into South Africa near Ngwenya, but our driver headed north along a new route (MR1) for another hour and a half through the beautiful Hhohho region. We passed the Malolotja Nature Reserve on our left, covering 18,000 hectares (44,000 acres) of mountain wilderness. Although you can find various antelope, zebra, wildebeest and hundreds of bird species throughout the reserve, this park is more famous for its landscape. Remarkably unspoiled, it is a true and rugged wilderness area, containing the Ngwenya Mountain range, high-altitude grasslands, afrotropical forests and lower-lying bushveld. Streams and rivers lace through the reserve, including the Malolotja River, which rises in the east and meanders through gorges, tumbling down to form spectacular waterfalls.

Beyond the reserve we passed the Maguga Dam on the Komati River. The dam was completed in 2001 and serves primarily as an irrigation system, benefiting mostly the sugarcane and forestry industries of the country's large neighbor, South Africa. I read it was the biggest public works project ever undertaken by the government (South Africa footed the lion's share of the construction costs). A hydroelectric power station was added about ten years ago.

Twelve kilometers further north we drove through the historic town of Piggs Peak, named after a French prospector, William Pigg, who discovered a gold reef here in 1884, ushering in a mini-gold rush. His 'peak' is the nearby summit of Mt. Emlembe, the highest mountain in Swaziland. Believe it or not, Pigg's son went on to marry a woman whose surname was Hogg. Gold mining continued until the 1950's and then dried up; the main industry around Piggs Peak now is forestry. The town itself seems to exist around a main street, with stores set up along its roadway. Further north we passed another small, basically non-descript town called Ngonini, and approximately 17 kilometers later we reached the Matsamo border crossing. On the other side of the border was the South African town of Jeppes Reef, but before we re-entered South Africa we stopped to have lunch within the Matsamo Cultural Village situated right on the Swaziland side of the border crossing. Matsamo is named after the first Swazi chief to reside permanently in the area. Chief Matsamo was a prominent Shongwe clan leader who sided with King Mswati II during the mid-1800s, helping to defend the northern territory of the kingdom against intruders. For his allegiance, the king bestowed Swazi royalty status on Matsamo and put him in charge of the northern region. Matsamo later absorbed the local Sotho clans into his own. Today, more than 150 years later, the region is still under Matsamo Tribal Authority.

The Matsamo Cultural Village and Center opened in 2001, and is run by more than a 100 local clans people who adhere to their traditional way of life, making this not only an important cultural learning center for indigenous knowledge but also a thriving tourism attraction, as well. Sitting around tables on an outdoor patio covered by a thatched-roof, we helped ourselves to a traditional Swazi cuisine buffet, all the while attended to by women dressed in local tribal attire. I had my fill of the typical maize grits, sweet potato mash, chicken and beef stew dishes, rice, veggies and fruit. After lunch, we met Sheila, a young, unmarried Swazi woman whose father was the local chieftain. She led our group to an authentic tribal village set up

just a short walking distance from the cultural center. The village was enclosed by a fence made of tall sticks or reeds tied together, forming a perimeter around the beehive huts situated inside, and, in certain areas, separating the female huts like a yard fence.

Sheila explained the Swazi tribal culture to us, taking us inside a very large beehive hut belonging to her grandmother, who serves as a strong maternal figure for the entire clan. A Swazi hut has only one opening, a small, low to the ground passageway that required me to bend so far down I was nearly on all fours. This is by design. The hut openings are deliberately low so that if an intruder entered, his head would be immediately chopped off or bludgeoned. The shape of each hut *did* resemble large beehives. They are built around poles or existing tree trunks in a round frame with thatch walls bound by plaited ropes. Inside is a large (and dark) open living space. While we stood in a circle, Sheila explained the dominant role that men play in her culture. Apparently, it's good to be a Swazi man. They can have multiple wives and seem to be the center of the universe as far as their women are concerned. The male head of the household has the main sleeping mat to himself, and summons his wife (or a particular wife if he has more than one) by tapping his stick cane in a certain fashion. The woman then crawls to her husband from her sleeping area, has sex with him and then *returns* to her side of the hut leaving the husband alone to sleep in peace. *Whoaaaaaaaaa*! The men in our group were whooping it up, some were asking about the possibility of dual citizenship, while their wives snorted and shook their heads with derision.

Sheila told us that more than 60 people lived in this small village. We saw a couple of locals walking by, and one young man sleeping on a mat in front of a hut, but other than that the place seemed deserted, making me wonder if this wasn't just for show. Supposedly, the locals are out tending to their fields, cattle or making handicrafts. Before moving on, many of us posed with Sheila in front of her grandmother's hut. When it was my turn to take a photograph with her, I was in for a shock. Sheila put her arm around the small of my back and smiled sweetly for the camera. When the picture was taken, I could have sworn she 'goosed' me. But, um, to be perfectly honest…I couldn't have been more flattered, *it made me feel like a true Swazi man*! ☺

We left the enclosed village and walked down a dirt pathway towards what looked like a central square. Sitting on wooden benches beneath the

shade of several trees, we watched a group of young Swazi men and women – wearing original skirts and wraps – perform traditional tribal dances and songs for us. The harmonizing vocals of the women were simply beautiful, and the men performed a stick stomping number that included thrilling jumping and kicking maneuvers. I was delightfully enthralled by it all. Before we left, the audience (which included other tourist groups) was invited to join the Swazi youngsters in one of the final song and dance numbers. Locals sold DVD's of the performance for a few dollars. (Yeah, I bought one).

It was around 2:30pm when we finally left Swaziland. We drove through Jeppes Reef, a small rural town within the Mpumalanga Province just over the border into South Africa, and continued heading north on road R570. To our right was the Driekoppies, an irrigation dam built on the Lomati River; to our left in the distance was the mighty Drakensberg Escarpment, the eastern portion of the larger geological formation known as the Great Escarpment, a massive cliff formation that runs through southern Africa, separating two relatively level plateaus of differing elevations. During our short drive along R570 I remember passing another small town called Buffelspruit and the Kaalrug farmstead before reaching Malelane, a farming community off highway N4 that produces sugarcane, subtropical fruit and winter vegetables. We turned west on N4 at Malelane, leaving the sugarcane fields behind us, traveling now along the southern edges of Kruger National Park.

We passed the Nkomazi toll plaza and came upon another small farming community called Kaapmuiden, which is situated on the confluence of the Kaap and Crocodile rivers. A large abandoned silo serves as the town's landmark. We traveled further west for a few more kilometers before reaching Mbombela (formerly known as Nelspruit), the capital of the Mpumalanga province. There is quite a bit of history attached to this small city. It once served as an important 19th century trading gateway for the short-lived Boer republic known as the South African Republic (or the Transvaal Republic) into Mozambique, bypassing the British-dominated ports. Later, when the British united the country after the Second Boer War, the city became famous as being the gateway into Kruger National Park, benefiting greatly from the large tourism draw. The city has since grown tremendously, becoming the trading center for the fruit growing area of Mpumalanga, and still maintains a strong business and trade exchange with Mozambique. At Mbombela, we turned right on R538 and began heading

north again along the southwestern edges of Kruger National Park. We passed White River, a small holiday and farming community just north of the Mpumalanga capital, and continued on through picturesque valleys until we finally arrived at our hotel in the town of Hazyview shortly after 5:00pm.

The Protea Hotel Hazyview was another wonderful retreat, situated on a hillside overlooking a vast banana plantation in the Sand River Valley below. The hotel is only 20 minutes away from the Numbi Gate entrance into Kruger National Park, a perfect staging area to visit the reserve. Sprawled out over a 10-acre garden estate, the tall trees ringing the back of the property are filled with abundant birdlife and an occasional troop of small monkeys. We checked in and I spent the next hour and a half in my room relaxing, making a cup of coffee and writing in my journal. I also separated the clothes I'd be wearing for our scheduled early morning safari game drive through Kruger National Park. At 6:30pm I joined the J J's for an included buffet dinner inside the hotel restaurant. The place was packed with different tour groups. Roger joined us at our table and told us the story of how he became a tour guide. In 1994, following the change in the national government, Roger felt he was no longer going to advance in his telecommunications post, so when a friend suggested he become a tour guide he tried it out and decided to switch careers. He said he loved doing this line of work, traveling and meeting new people, and has been conducting tours with Gate 1 Travel for the past eight years.

After dinner I returned to my room and decided to call it a night. We needed to leave really early the following morning to have a good chance of seeing the animals in the park, so I set my smartphone alarm clock, climbed into bed and quickly fell asleep.

DAY TEN

I awoke at 2:30am, an hour earlier than my alarm clock was supposed to go off, but I was too excited to go back to bed. I made several cups of coffee and wrote in my journal some more, intermittingly watching the BBC International News channel on TV. I showered, dressed and at 5:00am went to the lobby where our group was treated to coffee and rusks, a hard, dry

buttermilk biscuit that is a popular breakfast treat for South Africans. It was not bad, I had two of them, but I needed to dip the rusks in my coffee before I could eat them. Frankly, if these rock hard biscuits are a morning staple, I'm surprised there aren't a lot of chip-toothed South Africans walking around!

At 5:15am we boarded the bus and left for Kruger National Park. It was still dark out. We drove through Hazyview, a small farming town known for its banana plantations; although, in the dark it was difficult to make out any particular landmarks. We arrived at the Numbi Gate (one of several entrances into the reserve) just as the sun was rising. Roger advised us to use the restroom facilities before boarding our safari vehicles, telling us there would be no bathroom breaks until we reached the first rest camp around 8:15am. I rushed my middle-aged prostate to the nearest urinal.

Once again, our group divided itself into four safari vehicles, which looked exactly like the open vehicles we had used at the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve. Our ranger/driver was Andrew, a member of the local Tsonga tribe, a stout, bald-headed man with a serious demeanor about him. Don't get me wrong, he was very friendly and accommodating but not the type to crack a smile on his own, we had to coax it out of him. No sooner than the sun began basking the area in daylight, Andrew threw the vehicle into gear and off we went. Roger had warned us the day before it might get a little windy on the game drive. I did not heed his advice, thinking about how hot it had been during the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi visit, so I elected to wear a T-shirt with a safari vest over it. As our vehicle made its way through the park's roads, the wind was very strong at that hour of the morning and I was feeling quite chilly. To make matters worse, it began drizzling. Andrew stopped the vehicle and handed out plastic rain ponchos. Luckily, the drizzling abated, and the day – while mostly overcast – turned out to be beautiful. But until it warmed up, nobody took off the ponchos, which made excellent windbreakers!

In Africa, there are hundreds of ethnic groups who speak Bantu languages. One of these groups, the Tsonga people, emigrated from central Africa to the southeastern area of the continent roughly 1,000 years ago, settling in the territories that now includes Kruger National Park. In 1898, the South African Republic (or Transvaal Republic) established by the Boers proclaimed a 'government wildlife park' within their region to protect the animals from being over hunted. This small reserve would later grow under

British control to become one of the largest game reserves in all of Africa. In 1926, the reserve was renamed Kruger National Park in honor of Paul Kruger, the president of the former Transvaal Republic who made the initial proclamation. As for the Tsonga people? They were eventually forced to relocate for the sake of conservationism. As tourism flourished, so did the park's expansion. By the 1960's, the last of the Tsonga people had been forcibly removed from the reserve. Today, many of them work in the hospitality industry surrounding the park.

Kruger National Park is huge, spread out over two South African provinces, Mpumalanga and Limpopo. It borders the countries of Mozambique in the east and Zimbabwe in the north. The park covers an area of over 19,000 square kilometers (more than 7,500 square miles), extending 360 kilometers (roughly 220 miles) from north to south with an average width of 65 kilometers (41 miles). Its entire land space is almost equal in size to the state of Massachusetts. Through separate treaties with its neighbors, the reserve is now part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, a 35,000 square kilometer peace park that links Kruger National Park with the Limpopo National Park in Mozambique and the Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe. The idea was to take down the fence barriers between the countries' borders in order to allow migratory species to move freely within these wilderness areas. As of this writing I am not sure if all the political hurdles had been cleared yet over various oversight and management issues, and if this peace park is truly functional, but I did read that border fences were being torn down, which is a good thing for the animals. I think the idea is to eventually link as much of Africa's nature reserves as possible for a better conservation effort. That would be truly wonderful, as more resources and focused management of these lands could help save the native fauna and flora from human encroachment.

Six rivers run through Kruger National Park; two of them – the Limpopo and Crocodile Rivers – form natural boundaries along the northern and southern edges. To the east of the park the Lebombo Mountains separate it from Mozambique. The elevation of the area runs from 200 meters (660 feet) to 840 meters (2,760 feet). The highest point is a hill called Khandzalive. The climate is subtropical, with a rainy season that lasts from September thru May. In the summer months it is very hot and humid. The vegetation is incredibly diverse due to the park's vastness. In fact, the area has 16 macro ecozones that contain over 330 different species of trees. Some of these species are endemic and protected. The northern half of the park,

just north of the Olifants River, is mostly *mopane veld*; an open rural landscape filled with mopane trees and their colorful butterfly-shaped leaves. To the south of the Olifants River, the ecozones are *thornveld*; a semi-arid savanna dominated by grasslands with thorny bushes and acacia trees.

Kruger National Park is definitely one of the premier game-watching destinations on the planet. If you want to see the Big Five, you've got a good chance to do so here. The park has an estimated 17,000 elephants, 1,500 lions, 1,000 leopards, 48,000 Cape buffalo and several thousand rhinos (although poaching has decimated the rhino population in recent years, forcing the government to consider removing hundreds of these endangered animals out of the country to preserve their numbers). In total, more than a 140 different mammal species occur in the park; so on any given day the average visitor will experience a fair share of wildlife, including, on lucky occasions, the spotting of a cheetah or a pack of African wild dogs, two of the rarest species within the reserve. And if bird watching is your forte, hold onto your binoculars because the park offers more than 500 species. It is truly an exciting place to visit.

We began our game drive from the Numbi Gate (one of about a dozen entrances situated around the entire park) located on the southwestern side of the reserve, but once we embarked I had no idea which road or in which direction we were traveling. The only thing I was certain was that we were definitely in the southern region of the park. To the uninitiated, the African bush begins to look the same after a while, and our driver Andrew would often cut down side roads and dirt pathways in search of wildlife. As in the other game reserves, Andrew was in constant contact with his fellow rangers via walkie-talkie, or, at times, would sidle up to another safari vehicle and the two drivers would exchange information about where the animals were. This hide-and-seek went on for the entire day.

The first animal we came across was a lone male impala nibbling on tall grass beside the road. Impalas are a medium-sized antelope species that can be found all over eastern and southern Africa. They are particularly skittish, a defense mechanism against predators, with lightening fast leap and dash maneuvers. They are often seen in separate herds of males and females. Andrew told us impalas are quite common in the park and not to be too excited when we saw them (which we did with some frequency); I guess it was his way of saying: *I'm not going to be stopping every time we run*

across impala. But whenever we did see impala, it was amazing to watch them jumping and zipping by with such alacrity. Just a bit further down the road we saw a herd of zebras grazing in a small field. These beautiful members of the African *equid* family are better known for their black and white stripes, which are as unique as fingerprints. Unlike their close relatives – the horse and donkey – zebras have not been domesticated on a large scale. There are various subspecies throughout Africa. The ones in Kruger National Park are plains zebras, better known as Burchell's zebras. In my research I read this is the only species that can be legally farmed for human consumption.

About twenty minutes later we came upon a very rare sighting in Kruger National Park. A pack of African wild dogs were grouped along a section of the road. They seemed interested in something hidden in the bush, but were very cautious about approaching it. Andrew said he though that perhaps a larger predator was eating a recent kill somewhere in the tall grass and the dogs were waiting for a chance at a free meal. The African wild dog can weigh from 45-60 pounds and tends to be tall and lean (as compared to other wild canine species) with outsized ears. The fur is predominately black with splotches of orange or yellow. These particular wild dogs (there are a few different species) are endemic to the eastern side of Africa. They live in permanent packs with social bonds that are stronger than those seen among lions and hyenas. The average pack size within Kruger National Park contains 5-6 adults, but this one seemed much larger. They hunt as a group, usually targeting young antelope by chasing them to exhaustion. The African wild dog is listed as an endangered species throughout the continent due to disease and human encroachment on their original range. It is estimated that there are fewer than 1,800 adult wild dogs left worldwide. Kruger National Park currently has about 200. Andrew slowly came to a stop just meters away from the animals, which didn't seem concerned by the vehicles or the tourists, sauntering around us like we were a natural part of the landscape. *It was so exciting*.

We continued along different roads, spotting more impalas and some striped kudu (another antelope species). Just before our breakfast break we encountered an adult giraffe eating tree leaves next to the road. A small bird kept fluttering around and landing on it. According to Andrew, birds like to eat the ticks that crawl onto these tall creatures. We arrived at the Skukuza rest camp, situated close to the central region of the park, around 8:15am for a 45-minute break. Roger handed out a bagged breakfast provided by the

hotel staff (consisting of a sandwich, fruit, chocolate bar, peanuts, crackers and juice). Before we embarked on the second leg of the game drive I used the bathroom facilities again.

Just as we left the rest camp area we were treated to a pair of male and female giraffes crossing the road in front of us. A bit further down we came across another sighting of African wild dogs (a different pack than the one we had seen earlier; Andrew said it was *very* rare to see two packs in one visit). The dogs were lined up on one side of the road in some kind of Mexican standoff with a male lion (a natural foe) partially obscured in the bush on the other side. We waited for about twenty minutes but nothing happened and so we continued in search of other wildlife. We spent three hours driving through the bush looking for animals, but, frustratingly, we didn't run across many, just more antelope and an occasional lone elephant. A fellow ranger radioed Andrew about a possible sighting along a dirt side road and we hurried down this bumpy pathway for about fifteen minutes but only saw a slow-moving leopard turtle for our effort, plus two interesting birds, a lilac-breasted rola perched prettily on a tree branch and a rare, endangered southern ground hornbill scavenging in a field for reptiles, small mammals and insects. As we rounded back to the Skukuza rest camp for lunch, we had another exciting moment when a large, big-tusked elephant wandered across us on the road, temporarily stopping traffic on both sides.

At the Skukuza rest camp we were given an hour break for lunch. I joined the J J's (um, Joy and Jing in case you've forgotten their names by now) inside the camp's official food and gift shop where I purchased a pre-packaged ham and cheese sandwich and a small bag of potato chips. There was a restaurant located nearby but it was so busy we would have spent a good portion of our time waiting to be served. I also purchased a bag of South African beef jerky called *biltong*. Roger had passed around some barbecue *biltong* on the bus (his favorite flavor) a few days back and I loved the taste. The practice of drying and curing meat dates back to ancient times. Indigenous peoples of Africa would preserve meat by slicing it into thin strips, curing it with salt and then hanging it up to dry. European settlers later added vinegar and saltpeter (potassium nitrate) to inhibit the growth of botulism and deadly toxins, and introduced pepper, cloves and coriander (the latter has been shown to kill deadly bacteria strains) to the recipe to give the meat additional flavor. *Biltong* is very popular in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia. You can buy it in grocery stores, gas stations, specialty shops and on street corners. Although beef is quite common, *biltong* can be made

from any number of game animals (kudu, springbok, wildebeest), from chicken, ostrich and even shark meat (biltong made of fish is called *bokkoms*). After trying it, I always kept a bag of the stuff in my backpack in case I got hungry on the road. It was filling and satisfying.

We were back in our safari vehicles for the third leg of the game drive by 1:40pm. I'm not sure what direction Andrew followed (whether or not we were still in the southwestern area of the park) but wherever he took us, it surely made up for the somewhat disappointing *second* leg of the drive. I imagine there are several 'hot spots' where large herds of animals tend to congregate. The rangers probably visit these places towards the end of the game drive to finish on a high note. We spent the last two hours continuously coming upon herds of the more common park animals. We saw zebra and wildebeest grazing side-by-side. A convenient partnership since the zebra has keen eyesight and the wildebeest has a great sense of smell. Combined, they can spot or smell predators before they get too close, forming an early warning system for the rest of the herd. We also saw a large group of Cape buffalo, giraffes feeding between the trees, and on numerous occasions any number of antelopes (specifically impalas) dashing gracefully about.

Perhaps the most interesting animals we encountered on the last leg of the drive were the elephants. They seemed to be everywhere. We'd spot one or two refreshing themselves in a wallowing pit, covered with mud, and then see an entire herd stomping through the bush. On more than one occasion they crossed the road in front of us, just a few meters from the vehicle. We even stopped to photograph a lone adult male puffing out his ears in such regal fashion (ear flapping helps to control their body temperature). It is interesting to note that elephants are considered a *keystone species* in the African savannas; this means they make an important ecological impact on their environment. Elephants destroy trees and allow for different grass species to flourish, providing nourishment for other animals. Without them, the savannas would turn into woodland. The conservation effort within Kruger National Park to save the elephants from poachers who seek their ivory tusks has led to a substantial increase in the elephant population since the 1990s. In 2012, there were nearly 17,000 of these large animals within the park. The problem? The reserve can only sustain about 8,000. At one point, culling (reducing the population by selective slaughter) was used on the reserve; this was eventually replaced by the more humane introduction of contraception methods, but this didn't prove feasible, either (I mean, how're

you gonna get a condom on an elephant? *Hahahahaha*!). I have no idea what the current plan is to control the elephant population. Perhaps to save the ecological integrity of the savanna they might resort to culling again.

We finished our daylong safari game drive around 3:30 pm, having spent more than nine hours inside the park. It was truly an amazing and unique experience to see these animals in their natural habitat. And while a broader sighting of fauna would have been welcomed, I felt content with what we had seen. The only Big Five animal we did not spot during either one of our two game drives on this tour was the elusive leopard. (I actually got to see a leopard in Johannesburg on the last day of the trip, but I'll explain why later). Most of the areas we visited within Kruger National Park were in the historic Sabi Game Reserve section, the original reserve set up by the Boers before the park was expanded. Before leaving, we tipped Andrew for his service and had him take our picture like typical tourists while we sat in the safari vehicle. We exited Kruger National Park via the Phabeni Gate, a few kilometers north of where we had entered, and drove back to our hotel. Before returning to my room I spent about 30 minutes walking around and taking photographs of the beautiful hotel grounds. I stopped when I reached an electrified perimeter fence on one edge of the property overlooking the banana plantations in the Sand River valley below. I wondered if this was designed to keep stray animals at bay…or to prevent human intruders?

I went back to my room by 4:30pm and decided to take a sort nap before dinner. Luckily, Joy called my room at 6:45pm. I had overslept. I washed up quickly and headed to the hotel restaurant for an included dinner buffet featuring *braai*, a traditional South African barbecue. In addition to the usual South African cuisine, chefs were on hand to cook skewered meats on requests, first dipping the meat in a variety of sauces before grilling it. Very tasty! The J J's had saved me a spot at their table, which included Roger, Terry, Edelenn, Ross and Carolyn. Everyone at the table kept going back for more of that delicious *braai*. I guess watching predators in the wild will turn anyone into a carnivore!

I returned to my room by 8:30pm, stuffed to the max. I tried to watch a Tina Fey movie on TV, but before long I lapsed into a deep slumber.

Day Eleven

I awoke at 4:00am and performed my morning ritual: coffee, journal writing, more coffee, news watching, shave and a shower. I left my luggage outside my door at 6:30am and headed for breakfast. We left the hotel an hour later and spent the entire day traveling to Johannesburg, our final destination of the tour, mostly through the Mpumalanga province. We made some interesting stops along the way. On our drive out of Hazyview I noticed for the first time the coral and royal Poinciana trees lining the roadways here, which produce beautiful red flowers. Just outside the town is a private, 600-hectare elephant sanctuary that serves as a 'half-way house' for orphaned or displaced elephants. It is a popular site for tourists who enjoy the more intimate setting, getting to interact and ride the elephants and learn more about them. From Hazyview, we headed westward towards the looming Drakensberg Escarpment on freeway R535.

Leaving the banana plantations behind us, we began driving through valleys of man-made forests of eucalyptus and pine trees managed by the large timber companies. Roger told us that since the end of apartheid, blacks and coloreds have filed land claims in the cities for properties they were forced to vacate. But in the rural areas, like this valley we were traversing, the timber industry has made agreements with the local ethnic tribes to settle *their* land claims by hiring workers exclusively from the tribes and promoting them to management level. I have no idea how big the tree plantations were, but they seemed to go on forever, hill after hill, and valley after valley. The eucalyptus fields are burned after harvesting; the trees simply grow back. Pine fields, on the other hand, must be re-seeded once the trees have been cut down. From the bus, it all looked so well-maintained; neat rows of trees as far as the eye could see.

We reached the small hilltop town of Graskop and turned north onto R532, traveling now on what is called the *panorama route* that takes one through the tall cliffs of the Drakensberg Escarpment and down into the lowveld. Graskop was originally a gold mining camp set up during the 1880s. Today, it serves as a holiday retreat for South Africans who enjoy the canyon landscape and nearby hiking trails. It has a quaint mainstreet lined

with small craft shops, lodges and restaurants. Just to the north of the town we stopped at a popular cliff side vantage point called *God's Window*, which offers a stunning view over the Drakensberg Escarpment into the eastern lowveld valley, a 700 meter (2300 foot) drop. Thankfully, there was little cloud cover that morning, affording us a clear view of not only the expanse of Kruger National Park, but also the Lebombo Mountains of Mozambique in the distance. We took endless panoramic photos from a viewing platform built along the very edges of the cliff. *Spectacular*!

As we continued beyond Graskop, we entered the Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve, which forms the northern part of the Drakensberg Escarpment. This mostly red sandstone canyon is one of the largest in the world, and perhaps the greenest due to its lush subtropical vegetation. The canyon stretches for about 25 kilometers (16 miles) and has a peak of nearly 2, 200 meters (almost 6400 feet). It is situated below the confluence of the Blyde and Treur Rivers. There is an irony associated with the naming of these two rivers. Pioneering pastoral Boers known as Voortrekkers immigrated eastward across southern Africa. In 1844, a famous Voortrekker expedition had set out to reach Delagoa Bay in Mozambique and was presumed dead, the river near their departing encampment was named the *Treur River* by their surviving relatives, which means 'mourning' in Afrikaans. But this expedition, headed by Hendrik Potgieter, actually returned safely from their journey, and the joyous celebration that followed made them name the river they had used for their return the *Blyde River*, which means 'happy' in Afrikaans. So you have the 'happy' and 'mournful' rivers running into each other. Much of the canyon area is bordered by this 260-kilometer nature reserve. We continued on R532 northward but eventually ended up snaking our way back south, down the Drakensberg Escarpment. Within the nature reserve we stopped to visit an unusual geological formation called Bourke's Luck Potholes not far from where the Blyde River begins.

(Incidentally, the area is now 'officially' referred to as the Motlatse River Canyon. The word 'Motlatse' comes from a Northern Sotho dialect that predates the name 'Blyde'. Among white South Africans, though, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who doesn't refer to this place as Blyde River Canyon. Make of that what you will, folks!).

The area known as Bourke's Luck Potholes is named after a gold prospector who once staked a claim here but failed to find any gold. He would have been better off just charging visitors a fee (like they do today) to see the landscape, because – *pardon the pun* – he would have stumbled onto a real goldmine! Mpumalanga Province has so many interesting natural wonders you almost begin to take them for granted. The Drakensberg Escarpment, the Blyde River Canyon, the phenomenal mountain views of the lowveld, the lowveld itself, and some pretty awesome geological formations of which Bourke's Luck Potholes are among the most unique. These bizarre holes have been carved out of the red sandstone rock by years of whirlpools created by the dumping of the Treur River into the Blyde River. These powerful eddies cause waterborne sand and rock to grind huge, cylindrical potholes through the bedrock of the Blyde River, extending all the way down through the canyon walls. It is not just the holes, either, but the colorful rock sculptures that are formed by the water erosion, a dazzling mix of white, yellow, brown and reddish colors caused by the mineral composition present in the water. The site has several pedestrian bridges connecting the narrow canyon walls. You can walk back and forth over them to get a better view or angle of the rock formation. Beyond the potholes is the source of the water that cascades over the rocks, forming the eddies and waterfalls that dump into the river below. We spent over an hour here, walking the trails and taking every conceivable picture we could think of.

We left Bourke's Luck Potholes and continued down towards the valley on the western side of the Drakensberg cliffs. We had temporarily entered the province of Limpopo, traveling south along R36 through a green valley marked by citrus fields. The path we were now traveling was the same wagon trail used by the Voortrekkers on their march eastward to establish contact with the port of Delagoa Bay (now known as Maputo Bay) in Mozambique, which was free of British control. We passed many Dutch towns that served as forts or early settlements, like Burgersfort in the Spekboom River Valley just to the west of us. We did a short drive through the quaint little village of Ohrigstad to see some of the older Dutch style homes and churches. This town is the oldest one along the *panorama route*, established by Voortrekker leader Hendrik Potgieter in 1845. Three years later, a malaria outbreak caused the town to be abandoned and it wasn't resettled until the 1900s when the disease was finally brought under control.

The settlers who abandoned Ohrigstad moved 47 kilometers further south and founded the town of Lydenburg in 1849. We drove through farmlands

along R36 before reaching Lydenburg, now called Mashishing (but don't tell the locals that; these Dutch descendents still refer to the place as Lydenburg). The town is situated along a tributary at the foothills of the Long Tom Pass, surrounded by the Steenkampsberg and Mauchsberg Mountains, and is famous for its fly-fishing. There are some spectacular waterfalls nearby, as well. Lydenburg is also a hub for the local farming and mining industries. Alluvial gold fields were discovered near here in 1873, ushering in a gold rush. The British briefly took control of the area during the First Boer War in 1880. In addition to its role in the country's Boer history, Lydenburg is also an important part of ancient African history. During the 1950s a young boy stumbled upon pottery pieces while playing on his father's farm. These pieces were later excavated and put together at the University of Cape Town, forming seven terra cotta heads dating back to 500AD, the earliest forms of African sculptures ever found in South Africa. They are referred to as the Lydenburg Heads. Roger had Peter drive the bus through the town so we could see the Old Dutch Reform Church and other structures from the 1800s. As we left Lydenburg and continued south, we passed by the Gustav Klingbiel Nature Reserve just east of the town, its scenic trails offer fascinating bird-watching opportunities as more than 320 species inhabit the park.

Beyond Lydenburg we began heading southwest along R540, and while we were still traveling along the escarpment we were moving further away from the Drakensberg Mountains, entering what Roger called 'cattle country'. We passed numerous ranches and fields filled with grazing cows. Railroad tracks were to our right. According to Roger, this region is very popular with South Africans who enjoy hunting and fishing in the area or hiking the various mountain trails on vacation. Trout farms are prevalent in this part of Mpumalanga province, offering lodging and trout fishing services.

By 1:00pm we reached the town of Dullstroom where we stopped for lunch. This small, unassuming town attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. Situated at a high altitude (in the mist belt), Dullstroom's cool, clean climate makes it the perfect weekend retreat for South Africans wishing to escape the noise and pollution of Johannesburg or the heat of the lowveld in summer. The original town that was settled here by Dutch immigrants was actually destroyed during the first Anglo-Boer skirmishes. In 1892, Paul Kruger proclaimed a new town on the site. It was a quiet, insignificant place until the introduction of trout in 1916 turned the town

into the ‘trout fishing capital’ of South Africa. Because of its unique high-altitude climate, the plant life around here is very rich. You’ll find many rare and endemic species of orchids, and during the spring and summer months the grasslands are converted into a rainbow of flowers. From what I could tell, Dullstroom seemed organized around a main street called Naledi Drive that was lined with craft shops, galleries, lodges and a huge selection of restaurants.

When we arrived the town was packed with tourists. The following day was a holiday in South Africa – Human Rights Day – and many city dwellers had taken the long weekend off (and apparently ended up in this place!). We had about an hour and a half to eat lunch and explore the town. Roger suggested a few restaurants in the area. I joined the J J’s and we took our lunch inside a quaint establishment called the Old Transvaal Restaurant on Naledi Drive. Adjacent to the restaurant was a homemade candy and toy store. Since this was cattle country I opted to try a beef burger. It was good, despite being a little undercooked. We spent about 45 minutes after lunch browsing the art galleries and shops across the street. For such a small town, the area had quite an art culture. I read there is even a music winter festival held here in July that attracts people from all over the country.

We left Dullstroom at 2:30pm, continuing south along R540 until we reached the town of Belfast (also called eMakhazeni), another historic town. During the Anglo-Boer conflict, several battles took place in and around Belfast. The British built a concentration camp here to house Boer women and children. According to Roger, this was another great place for trout fishing. But we also saw farms growing maize and potatoes, and more cattle and sheep. The nearby mountains are a source of timber. This was also mining country; coal and black granite are mined around the town. We turned right onto freeway N4 at Belfast and began heading west towards Gauteng province. We encountered heavier traffic now, as tractor-trailers and mining trucks became more common.

About 70 kilometers west we passed Middelburg, a somewhat large farming and industrial center in the region, which originated as a Voortrekker settlement back in 1864. Following WWII, hundreds of expatriates from the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe moved to this town to work in its manufacturing sector. The local economy for many years focused on the stainless steel industry, which requires a coal and transport network to sustain it, but agriculture in the area has grown

considerably over the years. Just 30 kilometers further west we passed Witbank (now called Emalahleni), a coal-mining town situated in a portion of South Africa's elevated inland plateau known as the highveld. This is a rapidly growing city, employing many people in its steel mill, multiple power stations and 22 collieries. Outside most towns in this area, particularly along the freeways, we saw many 'fake mountains' created from the mining of coal. Power stations were built next to these mines for expediency.

Roger told us an interesting story as we passed Witbank. He asked us if we knew what Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Winston Churchill had in common? The answer: *They had all been imprisoned in South Africa*. Churchill was a war correspondent covering the Second Anglo-Boer War in 1899 for the London Morning Post when the armored train he was traveling on was attacked by a Boer patrol and he was taken captive along with the British soldiers. The 25-year old Churchill was detained in a prison in Pretoria but managed to escape two months later, stowing away on a coal train that stopped near Witbank. A local Englishman who managed a coal business in the town kept the future prime minister well fed and hidden until he could be smuggled out to Mozambique. Churchill was, as you can imagine, forever grateful to this Englishman and for his 'brief stay' in Witbank.

Beyond Witbank we switched freeways, heading southwest now on N12 all the way to Johannesburg. We made one final rest stop before entering Gauteng, the smallest of South Africa's nine provinces and the administrative seat of the country. Gauteng is located in the highveld region. Its name means 'place of gold'…*and they ain't kidding*! As we drove into the greater Johannesburg area, shortly after crossing the border into Gauteng, we passed abandoned gold mine shafts and huge mounds of fake mountains (or mine dumps) made from gold tailings, which are the residue of earth left over after ore is extracted from a mine. During the next 24 hours, as we toured the city, we would see quite a few of these fake mountains, many have now been landscaped with grass and trees and have whole neighborhoods built around them. We actually drove over one called the Crown Mines. Our local tour guide the following day told us gold is no longer mined in Johannesburg due to geological factors. Johannesburg sits on a maze of mine shafts so prevalent there is a genuine fear that a large earthquake might sink the city. From what I read there are more than 200 of these mine dumps around Johannesburg, amounting to 6 billion tons of waste, some of it very toxic. The tailings that make up the mine dumps

contain uranium, lead, arsenic and other heavy metals that are brought to the surface during the excavation process. Johannesburg has strong, year-round winds that tend to blow the loose tailings over the nearby communities, many of which are in the poorer sections of the city, causing a myriad of health issues. Half of Johannesburg's current population lives in the old miners' townships or in newer settlements constructed around these mine dumps. *Yikes*! These are usually the most economically disadvantaged residents of the city, like migrant workers, and are predominantly black. Incidentally, the white communities tend to be in the wealthier, nicely planned northern suburbs sheltered by natural windbreaks and trees. *I'm just saying…*

Gauteng province is very small, amounting to under 2% of South Africa's total land space (by comparison, Kruger National Park is bigger). But what it lacks in size it makes up for in population. Currently, there are more than 13 million people living in Gauteng, the most of any province. The reason for so many people? Because tiny Gauteng is a highly urbanized parcel of land. Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city, and Pretoria, the nation's administrative capital, are just 65 kilometers apart from one another. In between these two cities and in the southern parts of the province are major industrial towns, making Gauteng a political and economic powerhouse despite its size.

Afrikaners from Cape Town first started settling north of the Vaal River – a large tributary that runs across the provinces of Mpumalanga and Free State – and into Gauteng around the 1830s. This area became known as the Transvaal region. Luckily for the Boers, vicious fighting initiated by the Ndebele tribes had depopulated the area and they were able to settle here without much resistance. The Boers eventually defeated the great Ndebele chieftain, Mzilikazi, and had free reign over the Transvaal area for many decades. But it wasn't until gold was discovered in what would soon become Johannesburg in the 1880s that the province really took off. The ensuing gold rush (the region became the world's single largest producer of gold in just a few short years) spurred an urban and industrial growth in Johannesburg that left the older Pretoria in the dust, and the province continued to grow in political and economic importance.

As we drove into the city from the outskirts, Roger pointed out the new electronic toll plaza scanners erected over the highways. The idea was to eliminate the need for toll plazas that bottleneck traffic during rush hour.

The only problem is that nobody pays the tolls, according to Roger, amounting to billions in uncollected rands. The government has even instituted discounts and rate cuts, but the public still refuses to pay. Hmmmmm, I wonder if that would work in Florida?

Our first introduction into Johannesburg was a collection of decrepit-looking shanties used by mostly foreign migrant workers on the city's outskirts. We drove by the International Airport and continued into the city along a roadway that intersected an industrial area of Johannesburg. Soon we came upon nicer outlying suburbs. Traffic was a little heavy the closer we got to the city center. We reached the Hotel Protea Fire and Ice around 6:00pm. This was another beautiful establishment, a chic, modernly decorated hotel situated in the very upscale Melrose Arch section of the Sandton precinct, one of the most affluent districts in Johannesburg. The Sandton precinct is home to a thriving new financial center that has poured a lot of money into its infrastructure and created a sort of 'white enclave' within Johannesburg, filled with white folks who have fled the urban decay of the downtown area. You can stroll the streets around here for blocks. Nothing but malls, fancy shops and eateries, professional businesses and upscale apartment buildings.

My hotel room was beautifully decorated in an artsy motif. I almost hated to disturb it. I unpacked, made some instant coffee and washed up, putting on a new shirt. At 7:00pm I went to the lobby and met the J J's, Ross, Carolyn, Terry and Edelenn for dinner. We walked two blocks down from the hotel to a plaza containing several outdoor restaurants and decided to eat at a seafood place called Oceans Basket. Tom and Maxine later joined us. I ordered a delicious prawn and fish combo with rice and veggies that cost only 145 rand, or approximately $11 US. Terry and Edelenn split a seafood platter that contained enough seafood and fixings to feed an entire family! We had a great time and returned to the hotel around 9:30pm. I spent a few minutes exploring different areas of this uniquely designed hotel with Terry and Edelenn; in one upstairs lounge we took pictures of each other sitting in the bizarre high back armchairs and loveseats, some with ottomans so long they appeared to have been made for giants. By 10:00pm I was back in my room and getting ready for bed.

Day Twelve

I awoke at my usual 4:30am and quickly made coffee. Using three separate maps (including one I purchased during one of our rest stops) I sat down with a yellow marker and outlined the path we had taken from Hazyview to Johannesburg the day before. The notes I keep in my travel journal and jot down on my maps prove invaluable to me later on when I begin the more serious task of writing the *actual* journal I post on my website. I prefer doing this work very early in the morning while the events are still fresh in my mind. Afterwards I shaved and showered. Today was the last 'official' day of the tour; at least for those of us who were not continuing on to Victoria Falls. Our scheduled itinerary included a half-day tour of the Soweto Township and then a visit to the Apartheid Museum in the afternoon. At 7:30am I went downstairs for breakfast in the hotel's cool restaurant with its avant-garde tables and chairs. By 8:30am we were on the bus and ready to roll.

A local guide named Andani joined us on the bus for the Soweto portion of the tour. During the drive, Andani, a native of Soweto, gave us a brief history lesson on the city of Johannesburg and the creation of his beloved township:

Johannesburg is the largest city in South Africa. It has a population of over 4.5 million people, but if you include the outlying suburbs and townships, the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Area probably contains twice that number. It is situated in the highveld, within the Witwatersand range of hills, a 52-kilometer long escarpment that faces northward. These cliffs are made of hard, erosion-resistant quartzite sedimentary rocks. North-flowing rivers cascade over them creating the numerous waterfalls that give this area its name (*witwatersand* means 'ridge of white waters'). But it isn't what goes over the cliffs that make this region important…it's what's buried beneath the Witwatersand plateau, in the conglomerate of strata that makes up the earth here. *Gold*. And plenty of it. As legend goes, an Australian fellow by the name of (I kid you not) George Harrison discovered gold on his farm in what would soon become Johannesburg. In less time than it takes

to shout, "*Dar's gold in dem dar hills*!" the city was created. Incidentally, gold had already been found in the Witwatersrand a couple of years earlier, so the rush was already on. But after Mr. Harrison's discovery, hundreds of thousands of prospectors (of all races, religions and ethnicity) flocked to this new city to seek their fortune. Just how much gold is buried in these hills, you ask? The amount is unparalleled in human history. More than 50,000 tons of this precious metal has already been mined here since the first discovery, accounting for nearly 50% of all the gold ever mined on earth. *Whoa*.

The naming of the city *Johannesburg* seems shrouded in mystery. Andani told us it probably originated from one of three different men named Johannes, all of whom were involved in the city's early history: Christiaan Johannes Joubert (a former parliament member and chief of mining), Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger (better known as Paul Kruger, who was president of the Transvaal Republic) and Johannes Meyer, the area's first government official. *Take your pick*! Whatever its namesake origin, the city soon grew by leaps and bounds, becoming a rough and tumble place; a real frontier town dominated by white miners from all over the world. These miners hired African tribesmen to perform unskilled mining work, but soon an entire economy, both legal and illegal, flourished around the gold rush. European prostitutes, gangsters, beer brewers, tradesmen, impoverished Afrikaners, adventuring prospectors and unemployed Zulus all ended up in Johannesburg. As the value of the land known as Witwatersrand (and other outlying Transvaal areas where gold was also discovered) continued to grow, control of this territory became paramount to the powers that be.

In many ways, the gold rush led to the formation of South Africa. Prior to the 20th century, the country's lands were divided into four distinct territorial entities: the British colonies of Cape Town and Natal, and two separate Boer republics, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republic. All four territories were actually intertwined economically, and peoples went back and forth between them or had relatives and friends in different territories. Cape Town was the most dominant at this point, especially after they took control of the diamond fields around Kimberly. The other three territories were mostly resigned to pastoral farming. But the discovery of such large gold deposits threatened to change all that. Some independent-thinking British colonists tried to instigate an uprising (known as the Jameson Raid) within the Transvaal Republic at the beginning of 1896, which failed miserably. The tensions and mistrust created by the botched raid was one of

the reasons behind the Second Anglo-Boer War that would eventually unite the territories and create the country of South Africa.

After the Union of South Africa was officially formed, uniting the four territories under one government, this newly formed country had tremendous resources at its disposal, but it was still the British who controlled the prices worldwide. In order to keep the costs of mining down, ensuring good profits, the mining companies began bringing in Blacks, Coloreds and Asians to replace the 'overpaid' white mine workers. These migrant workers lived in deplorable shantytowns around the mining sites. According to Andani, an outbreak of bubonic plague in the early 1900s in one of these shantytowns caused widespread panic among the white population, and it was decided to segregate the migrant workers into settlements south of the city. Eventually, over the years, these settlements grew and by the 1960s would became a sprawling agglomeration of townships known as *Soweto*, which stands for South Western Townships. Andani told us Soweto is made up of 40 separate sections of predominately non-white communities.

From our hotel we got on the De Villiers Graaf Motorway (M1) heading south. We drove out of the Sandton area, cutting across Parktown, the first suburb just north of the inner city and one of the oldest, filled with stately Victorian and Edwardian homes, and a few structures designed by famed British architect, Sir Herbert Baker, who was a driving force in South African architecture and built his own mansion here in 1902. We reached Braamfontein, a central suburb just north of the city center. From the motorway we passed many tall business towers on our left, the headquarters of some of South Africa's largest corporations, including the glass-fronted De Beers building (the top is designed in the shape of a diamond). We also passed the Nelson Mandela Bridge, which connects Braamfontein with the inner city precinct of Newton. In the distance we saw the Carlton Center, a 50-story skyscraper that has been the tallest office building in Africa since 1973, situated in the district known as the City Business Center. We also passed the Johannesburg Central Police Station, a once notorious headquarters for the former apartheid government's national police, where, according to Andani, black detainees were often tortured and killed, tossed off the rooftop.

In 2006, Johannesburg was decentralized into seven regions. The idea being that each region (or zone) within the city had specific needs and would be better served if they managed their own essential services. But, like any

major city, not all sections are equal. In fact, since the end of apartheid, the once thriving City Business District (CBD) in Region F has been largely neglected, with many businesses and well-to-do residents relocating to northern suburbs (like Sandton in Region E). As a result, buildings in neighborhoods around the CBD have been abandoned or converted into impromptu housing projects by squatters, creating a very high incidence of crime, helping to keep businesses and investors away. We passed over another motorway (M2) near the Marshalltown area of Region F that runs east-west across Johannesburg, providing a border dividing the southernmost suburbs from the rest of the city.

We began turning southwest now along M1. We drove through one of the largest gold mine dump sites in the world, a place called Crown Mines; an entire business community built over an abandoned mining operation. Nearby was Gold Reef City; a very popular amusement park with an adjacent casino constructed on the site of a closed gold mine. The Apartheid Museum we visited later that afternoon was located on the Gold Reef City property. Shortly beyond the amusement park we passed the Evans Park Mosque, one of two large mosques we saw that day. Islam is not a prominent religion in Johannesburg (or, for that matter, throughout the rest of South Africa) but I read that the community is growing, spurred on by new converts amidst the ongoing AIDS epidemic. Islam's appeal in those hardest-hit areas seems to be the sanctity of marriage and a more conservative view of promiscuity and sexual mores.

When we reached toll road N12 (known as the Western Bypass), we took it heading west and drove straight into the heart of Region D, made up of the townships known collectively as Soweto. The region is situated in the southwestern part of Johannesburg; its western periphery marks the furthermost boundaries of the city. To the north lies Johannesburg's mining belt, and to the south is Region G, the southernmost boundary of the city (often referred to as the Deep South), which includes Lenasia, an apartheid-created Indian community and a scattering of newer, informal settlements constructed mainly for migrant workers.

Soweto currently has over 1.3 million combined residents; it is the largest populated section of Johannesburg, and pretty much acts as a 'city within a city'. In fact, it wasn't until apartheid ended that Soweto became part of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, so the area is accustomed to being independent. Many of the streets here are lined with "matchbox"

houses built to provide cheap accommodations for black workers during apartheid. Nearly 98% of the townships are still black. Today, residents take pride in their matchbox dwellings, extending and embellishing them, adding gardens and planting trees. In some of the newer townships, like the Diepkloof Extension, wealthy Sowetans have constructed homes similar to those in the upscale northern suburbs. But unlike the rich white neighborhoods to the north, in Soweto you often have wealthy neighborhoods side-by-side to poorer ones. There are also quite a number of informal settlements in Region D that amount to nothing more than shantytowns. Those were always sad to see, but for the most part, the townships are built around good infrastructure and have a viable local economy. We saw large strip malls and very busy commercial districts, especially along Chris Hani Road (M68), the main thoroughfare that dissects the townships.

We left N12 and turned onto Chris Hani Road, stopping at the entrance of the townships to take pictures in front of the street sign welcoming everybody to Soweto. On the median dividing the roadway were giant multi-colored *vuvuzelas*, the plastic musical horns made popular during the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Andani had our driver go down several of the side streets so we could experience the various neighborhoods. We passed four and two bedroom homes that constituted the upper and middle class neighborhoods, and we also passed some tin-roofed shanties of the informal settlements. We also saw many of the same apartheid-era migrant hostels I had seen in the Langa Township in Cape Town. Some were abandoned, but many had been improved and now provided decent housing for couples and families.

We returned to the Chris Hani Road and drove west through Soweto. In the Diepkloof Township, just as we entered Soweto, we passed the Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, the largest hospital in South Africa with over 10,000 employees, providing free medical treatment for the elderly and the unemployed. Next to the hospital was a large housing complex for nursing students. According to Andani, this is one of the best hospitals in the country. Further west we passed a taxi stand, with a small queue of popular white taxi vans *crammed* to capacity. The taxi van is an integral part of everyday life in the townships. They seem to inspire a love-hate relationship, though, within the community; on one hand they provide an invaluable service as a means of transportation, on the other hand they are usually over-filled (15 to 20 passengers) and often flaunt traffic laws, speeding and getting into serious accidents. There is a public bus

transportation system in Johannesburg called the Rea Vaya Metro that goes through Soweto, but the people here still seem to rely on these taxi vans to get around.

Shortly after Nicholas Street, near the small Orlando dam, we saw one of Soweto's most iconic landmarks: the twin cooling towers of the de-commissioned Orlando coal-burning power station. The power station was shut down in 1998 after 56 years in service and the two 33-story cooling towers were later transformed into an entertainment and business center. Visitors can climb to the top of the towers and participate in a number of extreme sports activities like bungee jumping, abseiling, zip lining and pendulum swinging. The cool thing about the towers is that each is completely decorated in colorful murals; one depicts the culture of the townships, while the other is more of an advertising billboard for a leading bank. They both loom over the area and can be seen from far away. On the opposite side of Chris Hani Road from the dam is the University of Johannesburg, Soweto Campus. We saw street food vendors here selling pap grits and cow heads…*a rather unusual breakfast fare*. Further west we passed the Maponya Mall, a large shopping complex in what looked like a thriving business district. To help out the local economy, businesses in Soweto (and this includes national chains) usually hire exclusively from the townships. But even still, the unemployment rate, according to Andani, hovers around 25% or higher. So unemployed males will offer themselves for labor on street corners. One example was near a large Midas garage shop. Several unemployed mechanics were milling about, offering to work on your vehicle in the street in exchange for pay. Andani said you take your chances, the work is never guaranteed.

Our first stop inside Soweto was a visit to the Regina Mundi Roman Catholic Church in the old township of Rockville. We turned right from Chris Hani Road onto Kumalo Street where the church is situated in front of Thokoza Park, one of the oldest public parks in Soweto. The church was built in 1964 and is supposedly the largest Catholic Church in South Africa, but looking at it from the front, the A-shaped design seemed quite ordinary and uninspiring. Inside, though, the vast interior can accommodate as many as 5,000 worshippers and is beautifully decorated with stain-glass windows donated by Poland depicting scenes from Mary's Life (*Regina Mundi* means 'queen of the world'). There are also stain-glass panels inside this church that represent the racial and class struggles of the anti-apartheid movement. In fact, the appeal of this church is not so much religious as it is populous.

Catholicism is not the most prevalent Christian religion in South Africa. Most black South Africans attend what are referred to as African Independent Churches (or AIC). They were once regarded as Ethiopian Churches, but are now called Zionist or Apostolic Churches. Soweto has approximately 900 of these AICs. But despite this, the Regina Mundi Catholic Church has the distinction of being nicknamed 'the people's church' within the townships' community. This honor comes from its unique role as a place of gathering for the people of Soweto before, during and after the anti-apartheid struggles.

Political meetings by non-whites were banned during the apartheid era, so one of the few places people could meet and discuss social issues was inside the church. Supposedly, even funerals around here became heated political debates. This is why Regina Mundi became so popular during the struggles against apartheid. On the first day of the Soweto Uprising in June of 1976, after the national police opened fire into the crowds of protesting students, killing several of them, many students fled into this church seeking sanctuary. Undeterred, the police entered the church and fired into the air to frighten the students and get them to leave. Miraculously, nobody was killed, but many were injured, and the church sustained severe damage from bullet holes and broken furniture, decorations and symbols, including a damaged statue of Christ and a section of the marble altar that was cracked by the force of a policeman's rifle butt. After apartheid ended, monies were collected to restore this symbolic church. But the cracked marble altar and some of the bullet holes have been kept as a reminder of the country's past struggles.

Our bus parked across the street from the church, along a wall that was covered in graffiti bearing social and cultural images. We spent about 45-minutes inside Regina Mundi. An elderly parishioner served as our tour guide, telling us the history of the church; unfortunately, his accent was thick enough to carve diamonds and I understood almost nothing of what he said. (I looked everything up online later). We sat in the pews while he spoke, and then followed him down the sides of the nave, admiring the stain-glass images, up to the altar where he showed us the cracked marble, pointed out the bullet holes and then took us in front of a famous painting of a black Virgin Mary holding a black baby Jesus called "The Madonna and Child of Soweto" (or, simply, the Black Madonna). Locals believe the images of forks facing the Virgin Mary's eyes in the painting represent the violence inflicted on Soweto by the apartheid government, and the cross images

within the pupils represent the guiding hope and protection of the masses. Another interesting aspect of the church is a visitors' logbook in the vestibule area. Everyone is encouraged to sign it. On display are laminated copies of previous entries, including Nelson Mandela's signature, and those of Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Michelle Obama, during their official visits. At the time, President Clinton's visit was seen as controversial. He took communion during church services… *even though he is a Southern Baptist*. But I think what really pissed people off was the fallout from the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal and Clinton's perceived arrogant ability to brush it aside. I guess the concept of 'forgiveness' can be a selective one, based on one's political affiliations.

We left the Regina Mundi Catholic Church and drove back east turning left onto Klipspruit Valley Road and following that north into the township of Orlando West for a visit to the Mandela House. Along the way we saw a series of concrete homes known as "elephant houses", which are built with red domed roofs said to resemble the round backs of elephants. When we reached Orlando West we turned onto Kumalo Main Road and followed it for several blocks before turning left again onto the historic Vilakazi Street, home to two Nobel Peace Prize winners: Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. We passed Tutu's house first, on the left-hand side of the street, its white structure peeping up over a blue-gray security wall. I think Andani told us the 86-year old retired religious leader – who first moved here in 1975 with his family – no longer lives in the house, and it is now the residence of one of his sons. Along the streets, entrepreneuring locals were selling souvenirs to the busloads of tourists that arrive daily.

About two blocks down we parked across from the Mandela House and spent about 30 minutes touring the museum, one of the most popular tourist destinations for people who visit Johannesburg. The house at 8115 Vilakazi Street in Orlando West, Soweto was where the country's future president, Nelson Mandela, lived – on and off – from about 1946 until 1962 when the National Government had him arrested for conspiring to overthrow the state. Mandela was subsequently sentenced to life in prison and served 27 years before he was finally release. In 1997, he donated the house to the Soweto Heritage Trust to be used as a museum, and in 1999 it was declared a National Heritage Site. The house is a small, red brick, single-story 'matchbox' home built in 1945. He lived 12 years here with first wife, Evelyn, and their children before marrying Winnie Madikizela, a social worker he met during his divorce. Winnie, who would go on to become

famous in her own right, gave birth to two daughters. In fact, there are many photographs of her inside the house, where she continued to live with her family until she was forced to vacate under government orders in 1977. The home was fully restored in the mid-2000s; a visitors' center and small museum were added, the rooms filled with memorabilia from Mandela's life, such as personal photographs, letters from prison and even the WBC championship belt Sugar Ray Leonard gave him (a young Mandela once considered a career in boxing). Only small groups are permitted access at a time because of the size of the dwelling, which is not very big, basically three interconnecting rooms, two of which are bedrooms. As you walk through the front entrance there is a life-size photograph of Mandela with his dog that gives you an idea of how tall the man was. In my online research I discovered varying accounts of his height, from six feet on upward. Our female 'house guide' said Mandela was around 6'4. Along the back wall of the house are plaques with numerous quotes from his speeches or writings, including a letter of encouragement and support for the Soweto Uprising of 1976 that was smuggled out of prison.

As we left Vilakazi Street, our driver passed the memorial erected in honor of Hector Pieterson, a 12-year old boy who was one of the first two fatalities of the Soweto Uprising after being shot by the police. South African Sam Nzima photographed the dying boy as he was being carried to a car by an 18-year old student; an iconic image that will be forever linked to the struggle against apartheid. During the drive out of Region D, Andani enlightened us about the Soweto Uprising and its significance for the country. He told us the uprising was initially a street demonstration by Sowetan students against a new government policy that made teaching Afrikaans mandatory in the school system. On June 16, 1976, several thousand students were marching to the Orlando soccer stadium in Soweto to participate in a protest rally against this unpopular school requirement. 1,500 heavily armed police officers were waiting for them. The students were ordered to disperse and when they did not, the officers let loose a police dog on the crowd that was reportedly killed. The police officers then began firing into the crowd of students, killing Hector Pieterson and 15-year old Hastings Ndlovu. All Hell broke loose from that point forward…*and the Soweto Uprising was born.* A total of 23 people were killed on that first day before the violence abated, including several who were seen as government supporters and killed by angry mobs in retaliation.

Between 1976 and 1978 more uprisings occurred that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Sowetans, most of them students. The courage of the Soweto students to rise up against the apartheid government also allowed for the ANC (the African National Congress) to formally become the leading political opposition to apartheid, as it was best able to organize the student movement against the government. Continued marches and protests throughout the country, coupled with a crippling international boycott, eventually eroded the power of the white Nationalists, who were slowly losing control of the people they had all but enslaved through decades of segregation and suppression. And while it took another 14 years after the Soweto Uprising before Nelson Mandela was released from prison, the tone was finally set for 'reunification and reconciliation'. Later that day, when I toured the Nelson Mandela section of the Apartheid Museum I came to understand how important the role of the ANC's concept of *non-racialism* was for the continued survival of this country, especially following the genuinely free elections of 1994 that elected Mandela to the presidency. Instead of bitterness and retribution, and believe me, there could easily have been a lot of *that*, the country has moved forward (however shakily, at times) under a banner of peace and unity which has to be admired, all things considered.

In many ways, South Africa's last twenty years has resembled our own Deep South's emergence from the Jim Crow days following the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act. Is race still an issue here? Of course, but it is now one of economic disparity, not deliberate political oppression. I think the further the country moves away from the 'dark days of apartheid' the more the 'light of equality' will shine through. South Africa is undergoing a great social experiment and has a unique opportunity (just like the United States) – despite its history and some monumental challenges – to show the rest of the world how everyone can live together peacefully. As a Cuban-American living in the Trump era, I can definitely empathize. This is a social experiment that needs to succeed. The future of the human race depends on it.

Andani also spoke about the importance of education in South Africa today, something Mandela really championed while in office. Education through ages 6 to 18 is compulsory. Students from poor families get free tuition, uniforms and are fed (soup kitchen-style) three times a day. There is a final matric exam in order to graduate high school. Currently, 78% of public school students and 99% of private school students graduate. Andani

also mentioned the unique closeness of the Soweto community, a strong bond that helped pave the way for the cooperation seen during the uprising. In other parts of the country, the apartheid government succeeded in dividing the various tribal groups into separate townships and played one group against the other until animosities existed between them. But not in Soweto. Dozens of townships sprung up right next door to each other, creating close community bonds. Andani's childhood friends all came from different neighborhoods, and everyone learned how to speak each other's languages. There are nine major languages spoken in Soweto and the average resident can speak at least five, according to Andani. Another thing he told us was that crime in Soweto was very low compared to the inner city neighborhoods because the community polices itself through an informal, yet effective method of mob justice. People watch out for one another here, and if you break the law in the township everyone will know and the repercussions can be quite brutal. In other words, criminals who live in Soweto go outside of Soweto to commit their crimes!

We passed two historic soccer stadiums: the Orlando soccer stadium (where, in 1976, the students were going to gather for their protest rally before the police attacked them), and the FNB soccer stadium situated in Nasrec, just across the borderline of Soweto heading back to Johannesburg, where Mandela gave his first speech to the Soweto Township following his released from prison. What we did not see, surprisingly enough, were any celebrations or parades. It was Human Rights Day in South Africa, a national holiday. At one point on our way out of Soweto we got stuck in traffic behind a long line of cars leaving a church, and thought perhaps this may be the staging point for a Human Rights Day rally, but it turned out to be a funeral procession.

We arrived at the Gold Reef City amusement park shortly after 12:00pm and spent the next two and a half hours touring the Apartheid Museum. Regardless of how sad, shocking or angry some of the displays will make you feel, no trip to Johannesburg would be complete without visiting this museum. When the national government began offering gambling licenses in 1995, one of the stipulations was that the companies granted a license had to provide some sort of tourism growing venture beyond just the casino. A consortium called *Akani Egoli* (or Gold Reef City) put in a bid for their casino license and proposed the idea for this museum complex. In 2001 they opened it to the public. The facility is administered under an independent non-profit board of directors. Several different architectural firms created the

design of the museum, built over a seven-hectare parcel of land adjacent to the casino. The complex is an interesting mix of space, modern design and landscaping. Unfortunately, photography was only permitted outside.

The concept behind the museum was a simple one: to illustrate the rise and fall of apartheid. This was the first museum of its kind in the world, and is now considered the leading authority on this barbaric system. A team of curators, filmmakers, designers and leading historians came together to create the 22 different exhibition areas within the complex. The exhibits – showcased in chronological order through photographs, provocative short films, panel texts and actual artifacts – take the visitor through an emotionally wrenching journey. From the arrival of the Europeans, to the creation of the state-sanctioned system of discrimination, to the wretched conditions this system produced, and finally to the struggle that led to the overthrow of this tyranny. The entire history of apartheid, in all its ugly forms, is here for everyone to witness. It is an emotionally draining experience, to feel shock, horror, sadness and anger all in such a short period of time. And while the concept of the museum may have been to show the creation and demise of apartheid, its real purpose was to make sure that anyone who ever sets foot inside this place never forgets the *evil* of apartheid. In fact, before we entered the museum, Roger, almost as a disclaimer, told us the museum was not intended to pass judgment or incite anger towards anyone (read: white people). He said this was a terrible part of the country's history, which ended more than two decades ago, and to keep an open mind.

Before entering the museum there is an outdoor exhibit featuring photographs and replicas of early cave art discovered throughout the country. In front of this exhibit runs a wall made of small stones to commemorate the Johannesburg mining community. Visitors enter the museum by passing through one of two separate turnstiles, each has an authentic apartheid-era sign above it; one states 'blankes' (whites) the other 'nie-blankes' (non-whites). And as you walk through and into the museum lobby, you'll see a continuous display of the old passports issued by the former government delineating everyone by race. I guess the entrance is designed to prepare the visitor for what comes next.

The group split up at this point. The exhibits were divided into two sections: the Nelson Mandela exhibit (which showcases his life) and the Apartheid Exhibit. Roger told us to allow at least an hour for each. Lunch

was on our own. We would all meet up later in the food court area. I began my tour in the Nelson Mandela hall. The man's entire life was outlined in photographic panels, from his early days to his term as president. I will not include a summary of his life (this journal is way too long as it is), but you really get a feel for who Mandela was and what motivated him. For me, the most touching aspects were his experiences and the metamorphosis he underwent being incarcerated for 27 years. He went from being a reviled revolutionary at the onset of his imprisonment, to winning over his jailers by the time he was released. It was very touching. But it was the Apartheid Exhibit that really grips you. In this hall you will see the implementation of discriminatory practices through actual posters, films and unbelievable photographs depicting how people of color were unfairly treated. Some of this stuff will make you cry. And here is the most ironic thing: by the end of the exhibition halls you get a sense of the reunification and healing process that has been going on since apartheid ended. You can credit Mandela for his role in the peaceful transition of power from a whites-only government to a majority black one. Remarkably, as terrible as things had been for people of color, they accepted the notion of forgiveness (albeit grudgingly) and moved on for the sake of peace and prosperity. Despite the horror of apartheid, the country still came together to change as one. This, I suspect, was probably an underlying purpose for building such a museum.

We left the Apartheid Museum around 2:45pm (most of us said our 'goodbyes' to Andani and tipped him well for his service). We arrived back at the hotel by 3:30pm. I did not eat lunch inside the museum because I wanted more time to fully view the two exhibition halls. By the time I reached the hotel I was famished. I walked down the street to a plaza where there was a Woolworths store situated on the underground level of a mall. Woolworths is a leading retail chain in South Africa that has no relation to the former F.W. Woolworth chain of the U.S.; they sell everything from clothing to groceries. I purchased a pre-packaged BLT sandwich and some chips and returned to my hotel room. I found a TV station that was broadcasting (for some reason) the senate confirmation hearings of nominee Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court. I was snoring ten minutes later, napping until 6:00pm. I showered again, put on my last 'nice shirt' and met the gang downstairs in the lobby for our Farewell Dinner. We walked two blocks down the street to Pigalle Restaurant, located on the second floor of the same plaza where we had eaten the night before. It was a nice meal, a little on the gourmet side (read: small portions). We were served soup in tiny cups and a spoon-sized portion of lime sorbet to cleanse the palate. I ordered

the stuffed chicken served over risotto. A delicious brownie topped with ice cream for dessert. At my table were the J J's, Tom and Maxine, Mikhail and Sofiya, Tara and Nancy, and Zheng and his wife (sorry, didn't get her first name). We had a great time, talking about the trip and our future plans. This was the last time those of us returning home the following day would see Roger (a small group were continuing on to Victoria Falls with him early the next morning), so we thanked him for a wonderful tour and slipped him our tip envelopes. By 9:30pm we returned to the hotel for a little drama. I misplaced my beloved baseball cap (I inadvertently left it in the restaurant and had to return to retrieve it), but that was nothing compared to Maxine, who had misplaced her purse (with passports inside) somewhere in the lobby. Luckily, both my cap and her purse turned up. *Whew*! Back in my room I was too tired to repack so I went straight to bed.

Days Thirteen and Fourteen

Up at 4:00am. I made several cups of coffee and wrote in my journal for nearly two hours before shaving and showering. I repacked my luggage, neatly folding my dirty laundry so everything would fit, and headed downstairs for breakfast at 7:00am. My airport pickup ride was scheduled for 3:30pm. Roger had spoken to the hotel staff the previous day, securing for us a late afternoon checkout, which meant I had six more hours to sightsee in the city before departing. During breakfast I sat with Tom and Maxine. They, too, had an early evening departure flight. The three of us decided to do a hop-on hope-off tour bus ride through Johannesburg. We met at 8:45am in the lobby and crossed the street in front of our hotel, waiting almost 25 minutes for a free shuttle ride to the Rosebank suburb in Region B where the nearest Red City Tour Bus stop was located. We opted to take the Green Tour route (they have three different routes) that goes through the northern suburbs and the city center. It only had five stops and took roughly an hour roundtrip if you didn't get off the bus. We felt this was a better option than the much longer Red Tour route in case time was

running short and we needed to get back to our hotel in a hurry. The cost for a one-day pass was 190 rand (approximately $15 US).

Rosebank is the route's first stop. This neighborhood is one of many upscale commercial and residential areas north of the city center where the hip and upwardly mobile chose to live in Johannesburg. The streets around here are filled with shopping malls, trendy nightclubs, interesting craft markets and the Design District, a hub for fashion designers and artists. The bus made its way south along Jan Smuts Avenue, a major thoroughfare within the city, through some very pretty neighborhoods. The first two stops included the Zoo Lake, a very popular lake and public park, and the adjacent Johannesburg Zoo, both in the suburb of Parkview. A few minutes further east and we came upon our third stop, the South African National Museum of Military History. The museum was originally built in 1947 for the purpose of preserving the country's involvement in WWII, but in 1975 the museum's function was expanded to include *all* of South Africa's military involvements. This is another popular tourist destination in the city. Sadly, time did not permit us the opportunity to stop and tour the complex.

Beyond here we continued traveling east (I believe on Riviera Road) through the residential neighborhood of Forest Town and then turned right on West Street and traversed the beautiful hilly suburb of Houghton Estate, passing some large British-style mansions in what is probably the wealthiest section of the city. At one point in Upper Houghton we stopped on the road to get a panoramic view of the valley below. This area, according to the information coming over our tour bus headsets, is what separates the green suburbs of north Johannesburg from the city center. We continued on West Street, winding down the hillside into the heart of the city, entering the Parktown area. We passed the University of Witwatersrand's Education Campus and the Wit Graduate School of Business, turning left on Victoria Avenue and crossing one side of the popular Pieter Roos Park. Sandwiched between Parktown and the grittier Hillbrow section of the city center, this public park is considered somewhat of a serene respite from all the bustling traffic surrounding it. Campus students, visitors, workers and residents of the area take advantage of the park's sports facilities and its shady tree-lined paths to escape the summer heat. Just several blocks south of the Pieter Roos Park we came to the fifth and final stop on the Green Tour route: Constitution Hill. We decided to get off here and look around.

Located along Kotze Street in the central suburb of Braamfontein, Constitution Hill is home to the Constitutional Court of South Africa, a judicial body created in the early nineties as a final appellate court for constitutional matters. In 2013, the Superior Courts Act gave the Constitutional Court the added jurisdiction to hear *any* case if it's in the interest of justice. I'm assuming its role is similar to our Supreme Court. Eleven justices make up the court, all appointed by the president from a list of candidates drawn up by the Judicial Service Commission. They serve 12-year terms. A Chief Justice and a Deputy Chief Justice head the court. At least eight justices are required to be in attendance for a case to be heard, but usually all eleven are present. Decisions are reached by majority rule. On the day we visited the court was not in session (perhaps because the previous day was a national holiday). We thought the building would be closed. To our surprise, not only was the building open to the public, it was practically deserted (save for some security detail and maintenance crews). We were given permission to walk freely through the hallways and into the actual court chamber. And what an interesting building!

Constitution Hill was actually the site of one of the country's more notorious prisons known as the Old Fort Prison. The prison was originally built in 1892 to house white male prisoners. In 1896, Paul Kruger, the president of the Boers' Transvaal Republic, ordered a military fort to be constructed around the jail to protect the city in case of a British attack. Ironically, when the British *did* attack, they ended up incarcerating the Boer military leadership inside this very prison. After the Union of South Africa was established, the Old Fort Prison was expanded to include sections for women and striking white mineworkers. Eventually, as the early principles of apartheid were being established and enforced, a litany of famous South African dissidents ended up here. Even Mahatma Gandhi was imprisoned in the Old Fort in 1906 for having the audacity to sit in the 'whites only' section of a commuter train. Criminal activities that could land you in this prison included homosexuality and having interracial sex. Basically, this was a detention jailhouse where the accused were held awaiting trial. Once convicted, the criminals would be carted off to Robben Island in Cape Town or the prison in Pretoria. Beatings and horrible, overcrowded conditions made the Old Fort Prison notorious.

When the Constitutional Court was first established, the government decided to tear down a large section of the old prison and use the bricks in the construction of the new courthouse, a symbolic act showing how the

country had overcome its dark past. The prison's old stairwells have actually been incorporated into the architectural design of the new building, which was completed in 2004. When you enter the building there is a long atrium to the left that serves as a public art gallery. The three of us walked the wide steps down to the bottom admiring the fascinating paintings and sculptures adorning the hallways. The exhibits were very interesting, including one made from a pile of animal bones (a nod to conservationism, I think), and an intricately carved wooden sculpture of indigenous people. We also got to see the Constitutional Courtroom, a large semi-circular chamber. It was empty save for us. We took turns pretending to be arguing a case at the central podium and even went upstairs to the journalists viewing gallery. *It was sooooo cool*!

Adjacent to the Constitutional Court building is the remaining part of the Old Fort Prison, which now serves as a museum. We did not pay the entrance fee to tour the prison grounds (I read it is quite interesting), but we did climb to the top of the fort walls that surround the prison and were able to take some awesome photographs of not only the prison but the surrounding urban area, as well. Several blocks to the east of the prison is the residential inner city neighborhood of Hillbrow, one of the most dangerous places in Johannesburg. During the seventies, Hillbrow was an upscale 'whites only' neighborhood that slowly became a 'gray area', where people of different races and ethnicities lived together. It acquired a cosmopolitan, liberally progressive atmosphere, popular among the intellectual elite of the city and contained one of the first openly gay/lesbian communities in South Africa. Following the end of apartheid, the neighborhood's population exploded with the arrival of poor, unemployed blacks that were no longer bound to live in separate townships. The white upper middle-class moved out of the neighborhood and relocated to the northern suburbs. Businesses soon followed suit and the area and its buildings became neglected, the streets strewn with rubbish and in disrepair. Abandoned apartment buildings soon turned into squatter tenements. Many of the locals that make up the Hillbrow area live in abject poverty. The crime rate here is *very* high.

Just beyond Hillbrow, heading further east, is another inner-city neighborhood called Berea that has also seen better days (although, I read online that attempts are being made to restore this area). From the walls of the Old Fort Prison we could see Berea's landmark circular skyscrapper apartment building known as Ponte City, the tallest such residential building

in South Africa and once considered a desirable place to live among the city's well-to-do. But the same inner-city flight that affected Hillbrow also turned Berea into a rough and tumble district. The Ponte City tower was abandoned – all 54 floors – by its previous owners. Soon, this residential building, which was designed to house only 3,500 people, was overburdened with more than 10,000 squatters. What was once a luxurious living tower became "the shantytown in the sky". Street gangs controlled the building; crime and drugs in the neighborhood proliferated. The tower has a large core, or atrium, and at one point was filled up to the 14th story with garbage, creating a rat and disease nightmare for the city. Tom and Maxine had seen a *60 Minutes* episode featuring Ponte City called "Tower of Death" and wanted to see it up close. I'm not sure if these deplorable conditions still exist at the tower, the top of the building is used now as an advertising billboard for a telecommunications company. We definitely didn't know how bad the neighborhoods just east of Constitution Hill were, and when we asked a member of the courthouse security detail how far a walking distance was Ponte City from Kotse Street, his eyes widened and he shook his head, saying, "*No, no no… you do not want to go through Hillbrow by yourselves, it is too dangerous*." That was enough warning for me! Tom and Maxine seemed disappointed, though. But then again, they're from the Chicago area…

We decided to hop on the bus and head back, stopping first at the Johannesburg Zoo to see the leopards. Of Africa's Big Five animals, the only one we didn't get to see during our two game drives was the elusive solitary leopard…and we were hellbent on seeing one before we left the country later that day. We got off the bus at the Johannesburg Zoo and paid the 80 rand entrance fee and began searching for the leopard cage. Surprisingly, the zoo was nearly empty. We asked several park employees where the leopards were, but no matter what directions we followed we got lost. The Johannesburg Zoo is pretty big, not to mention that every time we spotted an interesting animal, or came across a fascinating exhibit (like the one housing poisonous snakes) we would stop to gawk. Finally, we found the leopard cage and were able to take photographs of this slender, beautifully-spotted large cat. We patted ourselves on the back, content that we had 'seen' the Big Five.

The only problem now was how to get back to our hotel from the zoo. The Green Tour bus route ended in Rosebank, and there were no more shuttle services to Sandton where our hotel was located. Tom asked one of

the employees at the entrance of the zoo if there was a taxi service we could contact. The male employee told us his friend was an Uber driver and he immediately called him. We waited about 15 minutes for the guy to show up. I don't think he had anything to do with Uber. He was a young college man in his mid-twenties who drove a small Toyota sedan (a model I had never seen before) picking up tourists on the side. Before entering the vehicle we negotiated a fee of $20 (US) with the driver to take us back to the Protea Hotel Fire and Ice in Melrose Arch. When we reached the hotel we decided to have lunch inside the restaurant. I ordered a delicious T-bone steak with all the African trimmings: steamed bread, samp (maize) with spicy chakalaka (a vegetable relish) and creamed spinach. I was back in my room by 2:05pm and took another quick shower and then put on my 'airplane clothes' (the last set of clean clothing left in my luggage). By 3:30pm I had checked out of the hotel and was waiting with Carmen, Farhat, Ross and Carolyn in the lobby for our airport shuttle van. Tom and Maxine were leaving an hour later with anther group. The ride to the airport took 30 minutes.

I initially booked all my flights with Lufthansa, but the return trip was on Swissair, one of their affiliates. When I arrived at the terminal building I discovered that my Swissair flight was delayed more than eight hours, which meant I would not be able to catch my connecting flight back to Miami from Zurich. In fact, I had already been re-routed by Swissair to Munich and then Miami. But nobody had bothered to tell me this. I received no phone call or text message from the airline and I hadn't checked my emails while in South Africa. When I got to the ticket counter I was told I was no longer on the passenger list for the Swissair flight and panic mode set in. Luckily, before I could experience a full emotional meltdown, I was escorted to a Swissair customer service counter where a very pleasant representative explained my new flight itinerary to me. The time difference between my original flights and my re-assigned ones was only an extra hour and a half, and they made sure I had comfortable aisles seats throughout. I checked in and waited in the departure area until my flight left at 9:30pm. To kill the time I ate a light dinner inside the terminal, browsed the shops, read a Time magazine and would occasionally bump into other members of my tour group who were also waiting for their flights. I reached Munich the following morning and after a shorter layover flew back to Miami. *Home sweet home*.

I had the rest of the week off from work and busied myself downloading and editing my photos. I excitedly shared my experiences with family and

friends. It took me a while, though, before I actually sat down and started writing the ‘official’ version of this journal, which is why it took more than five months to complete. If I have any ardent fans out there, I apologize for the delay, but sometimes life can keep you so busy! Now that the journal has been written, I can go ahead and close this chapter of my travels. I would like to thank Roger, the J J’s and all the other tour members for a memorably great time. South Africa turned out to be every bit as fun and wondrous as I had anticipated. I think anyone who reads this journal will see that I experienced a fairly representative sampling of South African culture during my short stay. I truly hope I have inspired others to go and visit for themselves.

In closing, I would like to dedicate this travelogue to Alex, my youngest niece, who gave me an awesome journal book last Christmas so I could document my trip. I normally use $2 notebooks I purchase at the local drug store, but I fell in love with this hardcover journal keeper and will continue to use them in the future. Alex is currently finishing her college studies in Florida and is an aspiring world traveler in her own right. I would like to think my written experiences have encouraged her. Thanks, Alex.

Until next time, may the Big Five always grace your safaris…

Richard C. Rodriguez
(this trip occurred from March 9 –23, 2017)