

South Africa 1994 – Johannesburg to Cape Town and Beyond!

In November of 1994, I was invited to conduct several GIS training classes in South Africa, which I was very excited about since it would be my first trip to the country. The journey began with a Delta Airlines flight to Atlanta where I connected with a SwissAir flight to Zurich. My business class seat on the upper deck of the SwissAir 747 was very comfortable, even though the flight was completely booked. It was a very nice flight, especially when dinner was served along with a chilled glass of excellent California wine. I chose the grilled salmon with bell pepper and basil sauce, together with basmati rice and pecans. After dinner, I watched the film “The Green Mile” for a second time and it was still an amazing movie!

Early the next morning we arrived in Zurich, and once I had cleared Immigration and customs, I took the shuttle to the Zurich Airport Hilton Hotel to spend the next 11 hours of the layover catching up on my sleep. Then that evening, I took the shuttle back to the airport to board the overnight SwissAir flight to Johannesburg. Unfortunately, I was unable to upgrade my ticket, so I was assigned a seat in economy class, but at least it was a bulkhead seat on the aisle, so I had a lot of legroom which was very welcome. Even though it was economy class, the food, wine, and service were very nice, in spite of the fact that there wasn't an empty seat anywhere! I was seated next to a nice guy, but he was pretty large, which meant there was a constant “battle of the elbows” throughout the night! Needless to say, it was a long and rather uncomfortable 10 and half hour flight without much sleep!

The next morning, we arrived in Johannesburg and Colin met me as I exited the customs area. He then led me to his old Toyota, and as we loaded my bags into the “boot” (British for trunk), I noticed the car had no windscreen wipers (British for windshield) – luckily it wasn't raining, at least not yet! Colin took the long, (scenic?) route via downtown Johannesburg toward the city of Midrand where I would be staying. The roads were quite modern and in great condition, which reminded me of the German autobahns. We passed many new, tall glass skyscrapers, but they were surrounded by lots of litter in the streets – such a dramatic contrast.



View of downtown Johannesburg

Later we stopped for coffee and breakfast at a little coffee house in the “Hillbron” section of Johannesburg. From there we drove to the “TownLodge” in Midrand, a small but rapidly growing town of high-tech industries and offices located midway between Johannesburg and Pretoria. The TownLodge was a very new hotel with lots of beautiful tropical wood throughout the lobby, and although the guest rooms were small, they were very comfortable. I found the local staff very friendly and courteous, as well as quite helpful. There was no hotel restaurant, though they did provide a substantial full English breakfast, including eggs cooked to order. To keep operating costs low there were no “lifts” (British for elevators) or porters. But surprisingly, the hotel did have a small bar that was open from 4pm – 11pm every evening.



TownLodge - Midrand

After checking into the hotel, Colin gave me a short tour of Midrand which is situated on a high plateau above Johannesburg to the south and Pretoria to the north, from which we had a gorgeous view of the “High Veldt”. It’s an extensive region of grassland with scattered groves of deciduous trees that resemble Eucalyptus – a very soft and gentle landscape! Then we paid a visit to the GIMS office to check out the training facilities, after which, Colin took me to the local shopping center called “The Boulders”. It looked very much like a typical American shopping mall, except that in the center of the mall was a collection of large granite boulders – beautiful and quite unique! We visited a large bookstore where I was able to buy a South Africa travel guide and map, something I had been unable to find back home. After our shopping trip, Colin took me back to the TownLodge. Later in the afternoon as dinner time rolled around, the staff recommended that I order a pizza to be delivered from the local pizza parlor named “Luca’s Pizzeria”, as did a number of other hotel guests. When my pizza arrived, it was called the “special”, a delicious combination of four different kinds of pizza in one!

The next morning, Ken picked me up and took me to the GIMS office for the first of the training classes for their staff. Eventually, there would be five weeks of training classes in three different locations around the country! The class started with many introductions, and when lunchtime came, GIMS had reserved a table for our class in a small restaurant within the office complex. It was here that Colin introduced me to “Windhoek” beer that is brewed in Namibia. Apparently, it originated from the time when Namibia was a German colony and settled by German immigrants in the late 1800’s. And it wasn’t long before they began brewing beer – it was excellent! However, the two most popular South African beers are “Castle Lager” and “Lion Lager” – also excellent. Later, after the class, Colin and I joined two of the students, rangers from Kruger National Park, for dinner at a place called “Hurricane’s” located in a huge new shopping mall known as “Four Ways”. The restaurant looked very much like an African version of TGI Fridays. It was filled with lots of very interesting old antiques and beautiful wooden furniture. Upon his recommendation, Colin and I shared a starter of “grilled Kudu kebab” which tasted like venison – excellent. For the main course I had a superb filet steak that was smothered in a fresh garlic cream sauce, and it was outstanding!

The next day was a typical day of training with not much to write about. But after the class, Colin insisted upon taking me to a very famous restaurant near the office called “The Train” – a collection of old railway carriages that used to be part of the world famous “Blue Train”. We were seated at a table in one of the old dining cars that looked like it had come from the late 1800’s and was very Victorian. The restaurant was very well known for its huge and unique buffet of more than 140 different dishes, many of which were indigenous wildlife of South Africa! As we approached the huge buffet, one of the chefs led us on a “guided tour” of the dishes. As he pointed to each dish, he told us of which animal it was, including hippo, elephant, giraffe, ostrich, cape buffalo, and something he called “mabane” – essentially large worms whose insides had been squeezed out, then fried (sauteed), and presented in some type of cream sauce! I didn’t bother to ask what was in the cream sauce and basically passed over it as I chose my food from the buffet. However,

I did sample quite a few of the other selections on the buffet. After the delicious and unique dinner, we shared a couple of fantastic traditional Afrikaans desserts – bread pudding and custard sauce, along with a small dish of Sherry trifle! The entire evening was a wonderful experience of the best dining in South Africa – thanks so much Colin!



“The Train Restaurant”

When I returned to my hotel room, I turned on the TV and watched the national news which alternated between English and Afrikaans, a unique dialect of Flemish along with words of Zulu and English as well. Yet, it is still understood by many Belgians and Dutch to this day.

The next afternoon, after finishing the training class, Colin took me to a beautiful new (and very expensive) shopping mall in the exclusive and affluent suburb of Sandton. We had a great time browsing through the shops, and while there were lots of amazing things to buy, nothing much was within my budget – but it was a lot of fun to “window shop” none-the-less. However, within the mall we found a wonderful South African “native arts and crafts fair” filled with lots of very unique colors and designs. It was a joy to stroll among the artist’s displays, but I was sad that I couldn’t take more of the beautiful things back home with me. Before leaving the mall, Colin and I had a café latte at “San Marcos Coffee House”. Meanwhile, heavy rain poured down from the dark stormy skies outside – along with an amazing display of lightning and thunder! Very impressive!

After the rain slowly dissipated, we drove into the center of Johannesburg to the “Old Central Market”, an old warehouse that had been converted into a collection of shops, restaurants, and three small theatres designed in the same style as the architecture of the old marketplace. We walked into the old warehouse as evening approached, and it was quite lively. Colin suggested we have a beer at a local pub called “The Yard” across from the theatres. As we entered the pub, we found it to be very crowded, but Colin said it was a typical Friday night “office party”, with a very interesting mix of people of many colors, tribes, and “styles”, not to mention the extraordinary “cacophony” of many different local languages! To me, the pub looked very much like a typical “university bar” and with a very similar atmosphere – lots of energy and a very enjoyable experience! Looking around the pub, it wasn’t difficult to spot one group of young black ladies who were “dressed to the hilt” having a wonderful time sharing dinner together in the midst of the crowd! Some of the ladies wore very traditional and colorful dresses, while others had the latest western fashions – such a very interesting contrast! Meanwhile, as we ordered another beer, Colin identified at least five different languages, even with the loud noise surrounding us!

From “The Yard”, we walked across the street to “Gramadoelas”, a famous Afrikaans restaurant in the Old Central Market. It was beautifully decorated with a fascinating eclectic collection of old antiques from the earliest settlement of South Africa by Dutch immigrants. The menu was a presentation of traditional Afrikaans dishes, many of which were “spicy” Malay foods and quite delicious. Meanwhile, Colin ordered an excellent South African Sauvignon Blanc wine that went very well with dinner, especially the spicy dishes. After dinner, as we prepared to leave the restaurant to attend a play, we looked at the “guest book” which the restaurant owner wanted to show us. He was most proud of the signatures and comments by

Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, and especially Nelson Mandela when they all shared dinner one evening just before Nelson Mandela's inauguration as South Africa's first black president!



"Gramadoelas Restaurant"

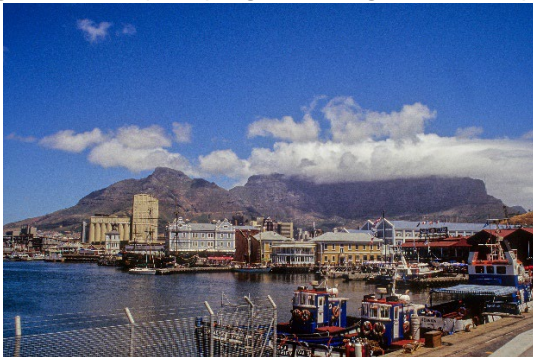
From the restaurant, we walked upstairs to a small theatre to watch a new play entitled "Man Friday", a brilliant satire on the story of "Robinson Crusoe" by Robert Louis Stevenson. To our surprise, the story was told by the black man "Friday" from his perspective – the play was both very funny and an amazing "insight" from a very different view. One of the best live performances I've ever seen! Before the play began, the black actors made their way among the small audience and passed out coconut shells filled with homemade "sorghum Beer", a thick creamy sweet white liquid. During the play there was a lot of beautiful traditional Zulu music and dance. The dialogue throughout the play was a series of very funny conversations between Robinson and Friday that were a very insightful commentary on the current political situation in South Africa! At the end of the play, the audience was asked to "vote" to decide if Robinson should be "invited" to join Friday's tribe? (He was!)

From the theatre, we walked back to Gramadoelas for a luscious dessert of traditional Afrikaans bread pudding and custard sauce! Then we stopped briefly at a new jazz club which just happened to be a "remodel" of the old public toilets in the Old Market Place! The drive back to Midrand was by way of "Rocky Street", a very lively area of nightclubs and lots of hookers on the street! (not a safe part of Johannesburg, but exciting for some!) No sooner had we returned to the TownLodge, a strong thunderstorm erupted – I was "drenched" in running just the short distance from Colin's car to the hotel door, a mere 20 feet! As I bade farewell to Colin, I realized he was going to be at a distinct disadvantage in the violent weather with his broken windscreen wipers and no defroster! I could only wish him well!

I was up early the next morning for the trip to the airport to catch the South African Airways flight to Cape Town. The Airbus 300 was an all-economy class flight, but when I boarded, I noticed the first 14 rows were actually business class seats! When I pointed it out to a flight attendant, I was told the "service" onboard would be the same for everyone. I was a bit "miffed" because I had been told earlier, I couldn't upgrade my ticket since there was no business class section on the flight! While the service may have been the same, the seat comfort was not! (I would be smarter on the return flight) Despite the rather cramped quarters with the flight being overbooked, we were served a very nice breakfast. There was some pretty rough turbulence as we approached the landing in Cape Town, but the weather was nice – partly cloudy and mild. As I looked around, I saw several ranges of steep, rugged mountains surrounding the airport – a very dramatic view! Inside the terminal building, the baggage was delayed due to a delivery belt not working, but eventually my bags came out on a different belt. As I exited the terminal, the driver from "CityLodge" was waiting for me, holding a big sign with my name in large, bold letters – definitely not hard to miss! We drove into the city on a new motorway that went past a huge squatter township – "Soweto"! Beyond it we passed close to the University of Cape Town located on a gentle slope below the sheer rock cliffs of "Devil's Mountain", which form the back side of Table Mountain! The landscape all around us was

beautiful, lush deep green Mediterranean vegetation. Our route took us around the base of the massive Table Mountain and into the heart of Cape Town to the waterfront before arriving at the CityLodge Hotel.

After checking into my room, I walked to the new “Victoria and Alfred Waterfront”, a wonderful redevelopment that carefully combined a working dockyard where large boats were being repaired, with many new, very fashionable boutiques, shops, restaurants, bars, and hotels. It was a delightful mix of the old and new, including an infamous old prison that now housed a new hotel, and the University of Cape Town’s Graduate School of Business! As I walked around the waterfront, I was continually aware of the incredible views of Table Mountain towering in the distance on the edge of the city. There were a few times when thick white clouds rolled in, covering the flat summit of the mountain and spilling over the edge – a phenomenon known the world over as the famous “tablecloth” – absolutely beautiful! As I continued to explore the waterfront, I found a small restaurant called “Arlindo’s” where I enjoyed a wonderful lunch of “fresh line fish of the day” – a very nice filet of firm white fish served with a delicious, spicy Madiera wine sauce, along with a hefty helping of fresh grilled shrimp – outstanding!

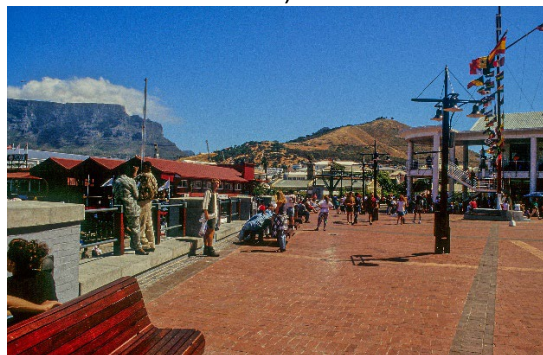


Victoria & Alfred Waterfront



“Arlindo’s Restaurant”

Following lunch, I watched a group of people doing “step aerobics” on the waterfront as part of an event sponsored by the South African Heart Association. Loud rhythms blasted from massive loudspeakers as several aerobics instructors attempted to “lead” the group! After watching the aerobics group for a short time, I walked along the old wharf and visited several arts and crafts shops as artists worked on their paintings, pottery, and batiks. And to my surprise, a number of the artists were white South Africans! Later in the afternoon, I paid a visit to the “Maritime Museum” where there was an amazing display of model ships, as well as a working model shop. Beyond the model ships was a fascinating exhibit of South African maritime history, including newspaper articles and original timetables from the old mail and passenger ship services to Europe and the Far East that called Cape Town one of their major ports. Leaving the museum, I discovered an old brewery and pub called “The Ferryman” where a large crowd had gathered to watch the Rugby finals between Scotland and South Africa. It was an intense match which was finally won by South Africa, followed by loud cheers from the people in the bar and the spirit was infectious! (I wasn’t sure what might have happened if South Africa had lost!)



Victoria & Alfred Waterfront

From the pub, I browsed through the “South African Wine Centre” next door, where there was a very diverse collection of fine wines from all parts of the country, as well as a “few” wines from Europe. (note: there were no wines from California!) Unfortunately, the wine tasting room had just closed.

As the afternoon slowly became evening, I bought a nice sage green sweatshirt before joining the “Sunset Cruise” aboard a beautiful traditional two-masted sailing sloop for a trip along the southern coast. Once we had cleared the harbor breakwater and headed into the open ocean, the crew began to open bottles of champagne and hand out glasses to everyone on board. Soon the ship was under full sail in a strong southeast wind and heeled over at a sharp angle! It wasn’t long, about a half hour out of the harbor, before we encountered heavy southeast swells - that’s when it became a bit “uncomfortable” and the flow of champagne slowed dramatically, with a few people beginning to make their way to the toilets!



Sailing at sunset

During the trip, I met two people from the US government GAO office who were in South Africa to audit some of the USAID projects. We talked about the fact that Thanksgiving was only a few days away and that they would most likely be going to the US Embassy for a traditional holiday dinner. (Meanwhile, I would be lucky to find anything like turkey in an African restaurant!) At the end of the month, they were scheduled to travel to Mozambique for another USAID project audit. After another hour of sailing on a steady southwesterly course that took us “broadside” to the huge ocean swells, we came upon an old rusted Russian freighter anchored about 5 km (3 miles) offshore. As we sailed past it, thick, dark clouds of black smoke billowed from its aft deck – perhaps it was a Russian BBQ? The old ship looked like it was on its last legs! Once we had rounded the old ship, we “tacked” on a new course and “came about” that would take us back toward the Cape Town waterfront. At that point, we had an incredible view of the city lights at sunset – gorgeous! On the return trip, the ocean swells became much larger, and even I began to feel a bit “queasy” as well. But luckily, the fresh ocean breeze and the spectacular sunset seemed to calm my stomach. However, when we finally reached the calm waters of the harbor and the sun had set, I had no appetite for dinner. So, I spent the evening quietly in my hotel room watching TV.

The next day, after breakfast, I checked out of the CityLodge and joined “Windward Tours” for a trip to the tip of the Cape Peninsula south of Cape Town. There were five of us in the minivan with our driver/guide Charley. But, since Table Mountain was socked in by heavy clouds, Charley drove us up to the top of “Signal Hill” instead. We were rewarded with some beautiful views of the city and harbor below, as well as the coastline stretching in the distance, both east and west, as well as south towards Cape Point and north to Namibia! We spent about 20 minutes exploring the hill where I spotted lots of small red flowers that looked just like geraniums. Later, Charley informed us they were “Pelagonium”, the mother plant of all domesticated geraniums around the world. They are native to the Cape Region – who would have known!



“Pelagonium”



“Vineyard Hotel” – Constanca Valley

As we drove back into the city center, we picked up a German couple at the “Vineyard Hotel” – an old wine estate in the Constanca Valley near Cape Town. During our journey, we found out the wife had been an opera star and had performed worldwide. Another couple was from Belgium, and the four of them spent most of the time conversing in German. Then we drove south following the coastline and passing through several affluent suburbs literally “clinging” to the steep cliffs overlooking the ocean. One of the most picturesque was “Bantry Bay”. (later in the week I saw a photo in the newspaper showing a helicopter being used to move a man’s piano into his house in Bantry Bay!) Suddenly the steep cliffs gave way to a small bay called “Hout Baai” (the Afrikaans spelling for bay) where there was a small fishing village famous for “Snoek”, a small, tasty Carp like fish full of bones! Apparently, it was favored very much by the locals, but virtually no one else!



Hout Baai

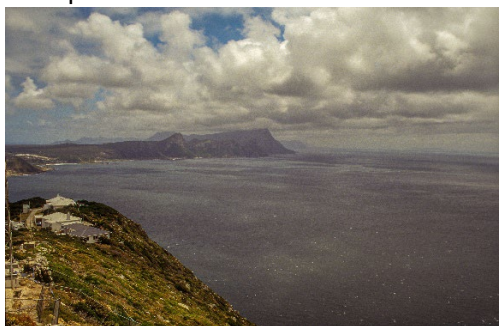
We drove around the waterfront, past row after row of small fishing boats before stopping at the “Wharf Restaurant” and Fish Market. The restaurant and bar were located on the first floor and the fish market below had an amazing display of fresh fish and various local seafood, all of which were carefully labeled – it was actually more like a natural history exhibit. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to buy any of the fish – can’t pack fresh fish in one’s luggage! So, I settled for a couple of photos instead.



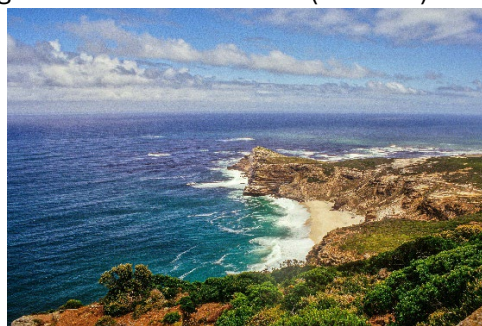
View from Chapman’s Peak Drive

From the restaurant, we had a lovely view of a small beach with steep, rugged mountains beyond that slipped in and out of the heavy grey clouds. Just then, the sun peeked through with ever expanding glimpses of blue sky – a hopeful sign for the rest of the day! Meanwhile, I had a hot cup of coffee as I sat on the upper deck of the restaurant overlooking the bay, beach, and fishing fleet anchored in the harbor. As we departed Hout Bay, the road climbed up the scenic “Chapman’s Peak Drive”, a very narrow, winding route which literally “clung” tenuously to the steep cliffs that plunged hundreds of feet into the ocean below! At times we had magnificent views looking back towards Hout Bay with its entrance guarded by “The Sentinel”, a sharp pointed peak of sheer 1,000-foot-high cliffs! A very dramatic setting! After a spectacular drive along the coast from Hout Bay, one that reminded me very much of the Pacific Coast Highway 1 in California, we came to the northern boundary of the “Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve”. It was an extensive area of low hills without many trees, but with an incredible number of plant species – more than 2,000! In many places it reminded me of the moors in Scotland, but in a much warmer climate.

Then we drove to the very “tip” of the African continent and up to the base of a steep rock cliff upon which was perched the famous “Cape of Good Hope Lighthouse”. At that point, we boarded a small bus for a ride up to the stairway at the foot of the lighthouse. The route was very steep and narrow, but the bus ride saved us from a tough 20-minute hike. Once we reached the stairway at the base of the cliff, we had to climb 240 stairs in a “fierce” southwest wind to reach the platform surrounding the lighthouse. From there, we could see the “meeting” of two oceans – the rough, cold Atlantic to the west and the calm, warm Indian to the east! It was a spectacular view of the surf crashing on the rocks 60 meters (200 feet) below!

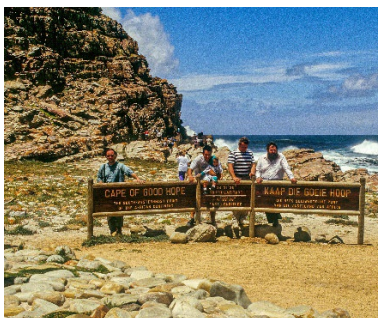


View from the Cape of Good Hope lighthouse



“Cape of Good Hope”

After taking a lot of photos of “Cape Point”, the surf crashing on the beach, the gorgeous flowers, and the rugged coastline in the distance, I joined my fellow passengers in the minibus for the short drive down to the narrowest point of land that forms the “Cape of Good Hope”. It was marked by a large wooden sign with the latitude and longitude of Cape Point marked on it. People were excited to have their pictures taken beside the sign as massive waves were breaking on the shore behind them. Our driver, Charley, insisted upon taking my photo, and the whole time I couldn’t get the image of the world map out of my mind – after all, I was now standing at one of the most important and significant locations in the world! (note: since then, I have also had the opportunity to stand on the Equator, Arctic Circle, International Date Line, and the Greenwich Meridian!) And to make the day even more memorable, it had become brilliantly clear and sunny!



Standing at the Cape of Good Hope

Leaving Cape Point, we drove around a small, but incredibly steep range of cliffs known as the “Shark’s Teeth”, beyond which we came to a small cove on “False Bay”. The name False Bay originated from the days when sailing ships navigating around the southern tip of Africa thought they had passed Cape Point, only to find it led them on the wrong route since they were still on the Indian Ocean side, not the Atlantic! When we reached “Miller’s Bay” we stopped for lunch at the “Black Marlin Restaurant”, an old, white-washed Cape Dutch style house sitting high above the rocky coastline. As we sat outside on the deck, I ordered the fresh grilled filet of yellowtail tuna served with a delicious Madeira wine and shrimp sauce – excellent! After lunch, we all took our coffee while sitting in the warm afternoon sun on the veranda overlooking the Indian Ocean – a wonderful relaxing afternoon!



“False Bay”



“Black Marlin Restaurant”

From the restaurant at Miller’s Bay, we continued north along the “Coastal Road” to Simonstown, one of the oldest towns in South Africa and home to a large naval base. As we drove through the old town, the main street was very well preserved with lots of lovely old Victorian and Cape Dutch buildings, many of them were classic 19th century storefronts with beautiful, covered porticos, old carved columns, and exquisite antique white wrought ironwork. The scene reminded me a bit of 19th century Sydney, Australia. Just north of Simonstown, we stopped to visit a public beach that had recently become a quite unusual and popular place for tourists to visit. As we approached the beach, we came upon a small colony of “Jackass Penguins” that had unexpectedly come ashore a few months before and had begun nesting. Charley told us they normally nest on the offshore islands and avoid the mainland in order to evade predators. But due to a population explosion among the offshore Penguin colonies, they were forced to come ashore. This particular colony was virtually the only one of its kind, consisting of more than 300 birds that were nesting in the shrubs on the edge of the beach. And they would often approach people on the beach, sometimes within 2 or 3 feet!



Penguin colony

Although they appear “awkward” on land, when they enter the ocean, they are very graceful, and it becomes clear why they are at home in the sea! It wasn’t long before Charley introduced us to Mr. Alfred Davis, a retired South African naval officer who had appointed himself as the “chief” of the “Penguin

Patrol”. Apparently, he could be found on the beach every day watching over the birds as if they were his children! Our visit to the Penguin colony would become a highlight of our tour!

Leaving the Penguins and Mr. Davis behind, we continued up the coast, taking the high road which gave us spectacular views of False Bay. In the distance to the east was a gorgeous view of “The Strand”, an enormous 40 km long (25 miles) stretch of pure white sand beach and rugged coastline extending south towards Cape Point. As we continued driving north, we approached the vast suburbs of Cape Town, and on our right was the beautiful “Constantia Valley” at the foot of steep, jagged peaks called “The Twelve Apostles” that formed a sheer wall of rock on the western side of the narrow valley. Constantia is famous as the birthplace of the South African wine industry! Today the vineyards in the valley have been greatly reduced due to the ever-increasing pressure of urbanization. Still, it remains a lush, green valley on the backside of mighty Table Mountain. In the meantime, the wine industry moved north to Stellenbosch, Franschhoek, and Paarl where it remains the heart of winemaking today.

Our last stop of the day was a visit to the world famous “Kirstenbosch Gardens” nestled in a steep valley directly beneath “Devil’s Peak”. Unfortunately, we had only half an hour to see the extensive gardens, though it was very apparent that one could easily spend at least a day or more exploring the place. The entire garden is devoted to showcasing all the indigenous plants of the Cape Region, most of which are very unique in the world of plants. A rather unique feature of the gardens is the “Braille Trail” and “Fragrance Garden” designed for the blind! But in fact, the Fragrance Garden works exceptionally well for the “sighted” too!



Kirstenbosch Gardens

Upon my return to CityLodge, I checked out of the hotel and took a taxi to the “Ritz Protea Hotel” where I was booked for the remainder of my time in Cape Town. When I checked in, I was given a room on the 5th floor, but when I asked to change to a higher floor, the front desk gave me a room on the 20th floor, the top of the hotel. From there I had an incredible view of the city, harbor, and signal hill! Strangely, when I entered the hotel room, I found the windows wide open, which I thought could be quite dangerous being on the top floor, but it did create a very nice, fresh, and spacious feeling – almost like having a balcony! I also discovered that one wall of the bathroom was entirely glass, with no shower curtains! Being on the 20th floor with no surrounding buildings higher than 5 floors, my “privacy” was assured. However, what about those people in rooms on the first 5 floors? Still, I had a very nice experience taking a shower as I looked out the window onto the city below!

Later that evening, I met up with Quibbas, my host in Cape Town, in the hotel’s “Panorama Bar” on the 21st floor for a couple of beers while we watched a gorgeous sunset. After dusk, we walked to a small restaurant near the hotel called “Naughty Nellie’s” – a takeoff on a nautical theme. However, their “specialty” was BBQ ribs, all you could eat! Quibbas was anxious to order the ribs, while I chose the fresh local fish of the day grilled, in keeping with the theme of the restaurant. Both of us were very happy with our choices, and after dinner, we walked back to the hotel and prepared for the first day of the GIS training class the next day.



View of Cape Town from the “Panorama Bar”

After breakfast the next morning, we took a taxi to the “Shell Environmental and Geographical Science Building” on the University of Cape Town campus (UCT), situated in a stunning location at the foot of Devil’s Peak. On the west side of the campus was a wildlife nature reserve where wild Eland and Kudu roamed free, grazing in the thick grassland and scattered groves of Acacia trees. The scene was just as one would imagine of Africa, but not on a university campus! At noon, we joined the class for lunch, and we all walked down a series of steep stairs between beautiful, old ivy-covered red brick buildings to the “Rugby Club”, the university’s faculty club. As we entered, it felt like seeing Harvard in Africa! Quibbas suggested that I try the local brew called “Mitchell’s” and it was a very respectable lager beer that went well with lunch.



University of Cape Town campus

Later, just as the training class ended, Quibbas found several technical problems with the PC’s, but after working on them for 3 hours without any luck, he decided to take them back to the hotel to finish working on them. We took a taxi back to the hotel and I joined him in his room, and although I couldn’t be of much technical assistance, I provided moral support! After another three hours of work trying to fix them, he was almost exhausted. At that point we decided to order some “takeout” food from a nearby pizzeria called “St Elmos”. Quibbas ordered a traditional pepperoni pizza while I had a “simple” order of spaghetti that came with “Tex-Mex” sauce and turned out to be delicious, but quite spicy! Although we enjoyed a great meal, the work on the PC’s continued until almost 1:00am in the morning!

The next day, following the late night work on the PC’s, we had a very successful training class at UCT. At lunchtime, I took a long walk around the campus to shoot some photos. I ended up finding a lovely footpath leading to the “Cecil Rhodes Memorial”, a large stone building with a beautiful colonnade and spectacular view of the “Hottentot Mountains” northeast of the university. There was also a gorgeous view of the steep cliffs of Devil’s Peak just above and behind the memorial building. Later, I was told that this spot was Rhodes’ favorite place to sit and contemplate the world! As I stood where Rhodes must have

stood so many times, I had a commanding view of the full expanse of the Cape Flats, surrounding mountains, and northeast coast – truly amazing!



Cecil Rhodes Memorial

From the memorial, I walked a short distance to the nearby “Garden Café” where I enjoyed a nice, iced coffee as I gazed upon the valley below. It was then that I knew why Rhodes loved this place and insisted upon his memorial being here. Later in the day, we were able to leave the class a bit early and drive to “Gordon’s Bay” on the “Strand” – a 45km (28 miles) long stretch of golden sand beach located at the northern end of False Bay. From the marina in Gordon’s Bay, we had a beautiful view of the backside of Table Mountain in the distance. On the steep, rocky cliffs above the bay, large and very expensive homes clung to the sheer rock face, some with huge sun decks “suspended” on tall, massive cantilevers (giant stilts) that afforded their owners some of the most incredible views anywhere in the world!

As we continued to drive on the narrow road following the coastline, we eventually came to a place where we could see the most “southerly” tip of the African continent, still more than 50 km (31 miles) away in the distance! Leaving Gordon’s Bay, we drove north to the Stellenbosch Valley wine country nestled in the shadow of the Hottentot Mountain range. There were incredible views of countless vineyards and beautiful, white-washed Cape Dutch farmhouses framed by the rugged mountain peaks in the distance.



Vineyards in the Stellenbosch Valley – Hottentot Mountains in the background

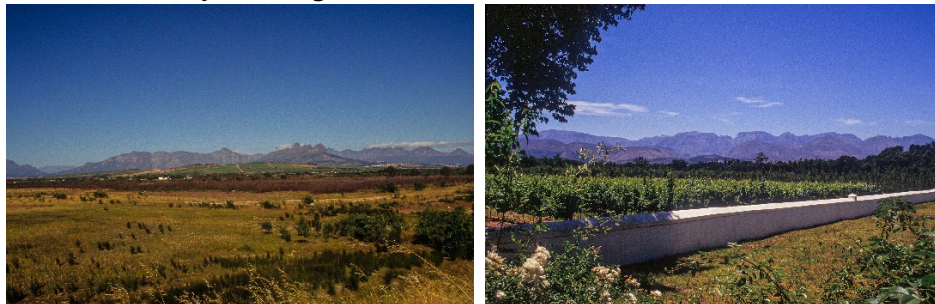
Then Quibbas gave me a quick tour of old town Stellenbosch, the second oldest in the Cape Province. The old town was an amazing collection of traditional Cape Dutch style buildings, carefully white-washed and surrounded by lovely, brilliant purple Jacaranda trees in full bloom! He also showed me many beautiful old homes that dated back to the time of “The Great Trek” – the historic journey of the Boers (Afrikaans for farmers) from the Cape Province to the “Orange Free State” in 1836 during the war with the British. Before leaving the old town, we went to the historic “Volksmushuis Restaurant”, known in Afrikaans as the “People’s Kitchen”, for dinner. As we sat down, two of his friends from Stellenbosch joined us. As the menu arrived, Quibbas suggested that I try a traditional Afrikaans starter called “Waterblommetjie bredie”, a stew made from water lilies and topped with cheese. It was absolutely delicious, with a delicate spicy taste of

anise! For the main dish, he insisted that I have the traditional lamb pie, which was also delicious and in keeping with Afrikaans cuisine. Throughout the dinner, Quibbas made certain we had several excellent South African wines, both white and red. I really enjoyed the evening and especially the conversation about the Afrikaans history of the region.

After class the next day, Quibbas and I had a beer in the bar on the 21st floor of the hotel as we overlooked the ocean. Then we headed to his parent's house in Bellville, an affluent suburb of Cape Town, adjacent to one of the many new squatter townships that have grown up surrounding the city. His father was employed in the broadcasting industry and their home was a very traditional Afrikaans design with gorgeous, rich tropical wood paneling throughout. As we walked into the backyard garden, it was filled with lovely old vines in full bloom on a trellis overlooking the pool. Really a beautiful garden! For dinner, his mother had prepared a very traditional Afrikaans dish called "Bjoodie", a delicious combination of ground meat spiced with several Malaysian spices – outstanding! As we sat down around the dining room table, his father opened an excellent bottle of local KWV Cabernet Sauvignon. After dinner, his mother served us a traditional Malaysian dessert called "Malva" – a very sweet pastry filled with nuts and soaked in sugar cane syrup! (decadent) By this time it was late, so we bid farewell to his parents, and I thanked them for a wonderful evening! The drive back to the hotel gave us some beautiful views of Cape Town at night, especially with Table Mountain illuminated by massive lights – spectacular!

As I awoke the next morning, I realized it was Friday, the last day of the class – TGIF! So, after the class, Quibbas and I drove downtown past the "Castle", an old stone fortress near the harbor, which was originally located at the water's edge, but due to land reclamation of the harbor, it was now at least ½ km (1/3 mile) inland and had become a fascinating military history museum. As we approached the Castle, we saw a film crew setting up their cameras and equipment to shoot a major film. Later in the evening, we walked along the waterfront to a very nice steak and seafood restaurant called "Theo's" where Quibbas had arranged to meet some Esri clients for dinner. We all enjoyed some excellent fresh, local fish and outstanding South African wines. After dinner, Quibbas and I celebrated the successful completion of the training class with a beer in the bar atop the hotel where we enjoyed another magnificent view of the city and ocean beyond at sunset. The feeling and smell of the fresh ocean breeze blowing in our faces was incredible – a really nice, relaxing evening and a very vivid memory!

The next morning, I checked out of the hotel and joined a tour to the Stellenbosch wine country north of Cape Town on the other side of Table Mountain. Our first stop was the "Tigervallei Shopping Mall" where we were to pick up two more people. While we waited for them to arrive, I had a chance to explore the mall, and to my astonishment, there was a full-scale reproduction of an old Mississippi River boat docked at an authentic riverfront wharf in the center of the mall! It was fascinating, but more than a bit strange to see in Africa! Before we left the mall, I enjoyed a café-au-lait at the "San Francisco Coffee House". When our group was complete, we drove north toward the old town of "Paarl" under sunny, brilliant blue skies. As we entered the old town, we were told the name Paarl means "pearls" in Afrikaans because the surrounding mountains resembled black pearls! Later, we visited a huge stone monument dedicated to the Afrikaans language on a hill overlooking the town. Then we drove through a vast expanse of vineyards with the steep, rugged Hottentot Mountains always shining in the distance.



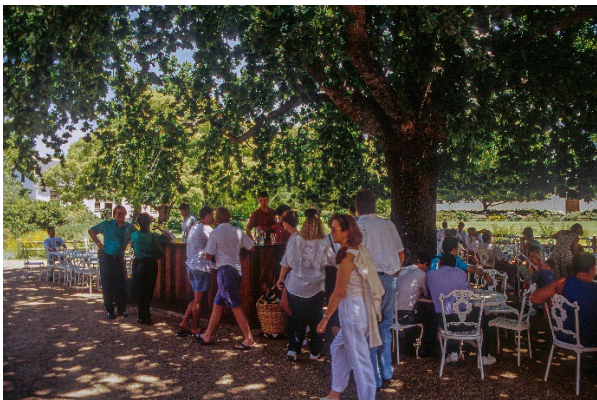
Vineyards in the Paarl Valley

Our first wine tasting stop was at the “Rhlegesbok Wine Estate” where there was a long driveway leading to a beautiful outdoor café located under a grove of Jacaranda trees covered in gorgeous purple blossoms! The mountains in the distance framed the café scene perfectly – a wonderful place. We were invited to taste several wines in the estate’s old wine cellar, which resembled a huge wooden keg! As we sat down, we were given a wine glass along with a list of wines that were available, along with a pitcher of water for rinsing both the glass and our palate between tastings. There was also an old copper pail in the corner for disposing of the water. Among the wines I tasted, both the “Blanc Noir” and “Cabernet Sauvignon” were excellent!



“Rhlegesbok Wine Estate”

Later, we drove south through the “Franschhoek Valley” where French “Huguenots” had immigrated in the 18th century to escape religious persecution. But as a condition of being allowed to settle in the valley, they were forced to learn and speak the Afrikaans language. However, they were allowed to produce wine which has become famous around the world. Our next stop was at the legendary “Boschendal Wine Estate” where we sat at old white wrought iron tables beneath a beautiful grove of huge oak trees next to a lovely, thatched roof wine cellar. We were invited to taste a variety of local wines and I found the two best ones to be the Chardonnay Reserve and a delicate Champagne produced from Pinot Noir grapes. Meanwhile, in the distance the steep, jagged peaks of the Hottentot Mountains glistened in the warm midday sun! It was such a beautiful place to enjoy fine South African wine!

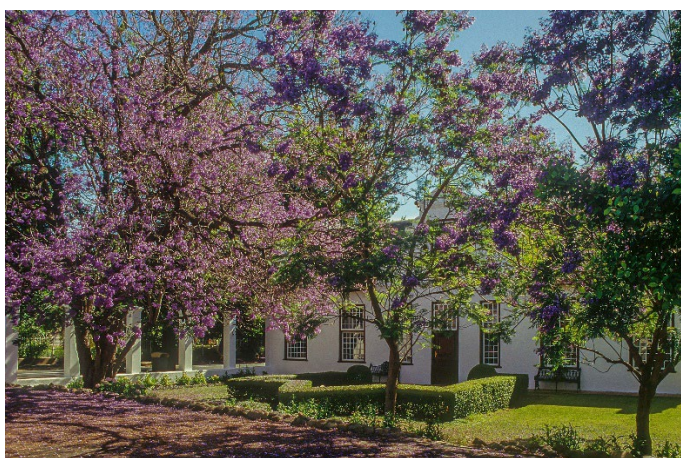
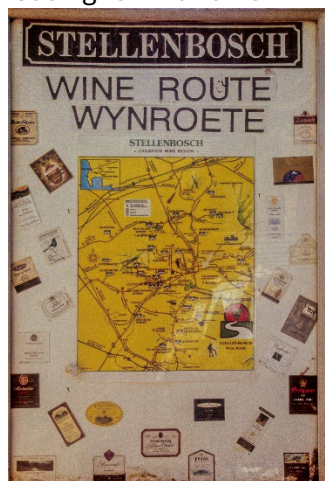


“Boschendal Wine Estate”

After tasting the wines, we were invited to tour the old manor house which was built of local white stone in the traditional Cape Dutch style – gorgeous! Inside the old house were beautiful tropical wood planks that had been worn smooth by years of polishing. All the rooms had high wooden beam ceilings and were filled with traditional old Afrikaans antique furnishings – a lovely decorated historic manor house! It was surrounded by many gorgeous, white-washed stone farm buildings, one of which had been converted into a restaurant and coffee shop. A white stone fence formed a large courtyard around the buildings that made it

a very tranquil setting at the foot of the mountains surrounding the valley. (I literally fell in love with the estate!) Following the relaxed and enjoyable wine tasting at Boschendal Wine Estate, we drove over the mountains and through the Stellenbosch Valley to the old town of Stellenbosch. The route followed the historic old wagon road from Cape Town to the Transvaal that the Boers followed on the “infamous” forced march to the “Orange Free State” where they settled after the “Boer War” with Great Britain in 1836.

Stellenbosch is a beautiful old Afrikaans small town located in a broad, fertile valley surrounded by rugged mountains. The town has a wonderful collection of lovely old homes designed in the traditional Cape Dutch style, and the colorful purple blossoms of the Jacaranda trees were a spectacular contrast to the brilliant, white-washed stone walls – absolutely stunning! We stopped for lunch at the “Lanzerac Wine Estate” where we were served in an old, thatched roof barn that had been beautifully renovated into a restaurant and café. As we sat beneath huge old wooden beams, I couldn’t help imagining we were in England, far away from Africa! The local pan-fried trout I ordered for lunch was excellent, along with the chilled glass of Sauvignon Blanc from the estate vineyards.



“Lanzerac Wine Estate”

After the delicious lunch, we were invited to tour a couple of historic old houses in Stellenbosch that had interiors restored with traditional Afrikaans furnishings. Both houses had very high ceilings, although inside the rooms it seemed rather dark – perhaps that was typical of the period of history. Our last stop before leaving Stellenbosch was a visit to “Oom Samie se Winkel”, an historic old general store that had lovely antique white wrought iron work on the white stone pillars of the covered store front – very classic! Once inside the store, we discovered a fascinating and extraordinary array of items for sale – everything from exotic spices to leather saddles, penny candies, as well as fur coats! And just about everything in between! It was nothing short of amazing! The aromas throughout the store were equally diverse and intense – truly a unique place in the world!



“Oom Samie se Winkel” general store

As we drove back to Cape Town, I was able to have the driver drop me off at the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront where I found a lovely café and enjoyed listening to a local jazz band as I relaxed in the warm late afternoon sunshine with a chilled glass of South African wine. As I strolled along the waterfront, I passed by an event called the “BOC Sailboat Race”, an annual “solo” yacht race around the world sponsored by the BOC company. I had just missed the official start of the first leg of the race from Cape Town to Perth, Australia! The race is one of the toughest sailing events in the world!



Victoria & Alfred Waterfront – start of the “BOC Sailboat Race”

Later that evening, I had a scrumptious dinner at “Arlindo’s Restaurant” overlooking the harbor. I began dinner with an order of fresh calamari grilled over charcoal, followed by fresh grilled salmon topped with a delicious spicy garlic butter sauce – superb! The chilled glass of “Simonsig Vin Fume – 94” aged in an old oak cask was an excellent complement to the salmon! I finished dinner with a fantastic chocolate mousse and a cup of espresso – a memorable dinner! Then, as the sun was rapidly slipping below the horizon, I walked along the seawall near my hotel to “Green Point” past an old lighthouse with its bright beam being thrown out to sea into the darkness of the night sky! As I continued my walk, the ocean breeze was very refreshing and the sound of the surf crashing on the rocky shore was most relaxing!

Before checking out of the hotel the next day, I indulged myself in a lazy morning beside the hotel pool. Later, the wind picked up as heavy, dark clouds began to cover the sky, so I decided to take a short walk along the shore as massive waves were breaking on the rocks. Just then a light rain began to fall, signaling the time to return to the hotel to check out. From the hotel I took the shuttle bus to the airport to check in for the flight to Durban, the location of my next training assignment. When I arrived at the Cape Town airport, I made a last-minute decision to “exchange” my two South Africa Airways “economy class” tickets (Cape Town to Johannesburg, Johannesburg to Durban, and return to Johannesburg) for one business class ticket from Cape Town to Durban and on to Johannesburg. Not only did I get the upgrade, but I also received a “refund” of 93 Rand! (so, it was well worth asking the question) With my business class ticket in hand, I made my way to the South African Airways Business Class Lounge where I found the “no smoking” area very well separated from the smoking section! The lounge was very well stocked with plenty of food and drink. After a cold glass of Lion Lager and a small ham and cheese sandwich in the lounge, I headed to the gate for boarding. The two and half hour flight to Durban was very nice, and the service in business class was much more enjoyable than my earlier economy class flight from Johannesburg to Cape Town. We were served an excellent lunch, along with a chilled glass of superb South African “Fleur de Cap Chardonnay”!

Our approach to Durban was from the southern beaches with an excellent view of many tall hotels lining the beautiful white sand coastline, upon which lovely aquamarine, blue-green waves crashed with huge white-caps! Fifteen minutes after arriving, I met up with Quibbas as he arrived from Johannesburg, and he was **not** happy. Apparently, his new car stereo had been stolen just before he left for the airport, and what made the experience even worse was the fact that his car had been parked in front of his in-laws’

house, all in less than 20 minutes! Despite his anger, he really appreciated that South African Airways had upgraded him to business class for the flight to Durban – his first time flying in business class, and he really enjoyed it! After we gathered our luggage, Quibbas rented a car and we drove west on the N3 motorway towards the historic town of Pietermaritzburg. The N3 was a new 6-lane toll road connecting Johannesburg with Durban. The road climbed steadily from the coast of the Indian Ocean, which was very hot and muggy, into a region known as “The Land of 1,000 Hills”, where we enjoyed cooler weather. The landscape became very lush and green since this was springtime in the southern hemisphere.

An hour later, we entered the small town of Pietermaritzburg, the capitol of the “Kwazulu-Natal” province. It was an old British colonial town with lots of architecture from the Victorian era – gorgeous! We checked into the “Karos Capitol Towers Hotel” near the center of town. The hotel had only 9 floors – not very “tall” for being a “tower”! Then I took a long walk around the center of the old town, as well as the new “Pietermaritzburg Mall”, but unfortunately, being that it was Sunday, everything was closed – including the hotel bar! But as I continued my exploration I came upon the “Keg and Elephant Pub” – and to my surprise, it was open! The pub was part of a large national chain of restaurants, all of which were named “Keg and *something*”. Luckily, I entered the pub just as rain began to fall outside, but I found myself being the only customer in the place. However, it was only a short time later that a large group of young women out for a “night on the town” came in and livened up the place. (they enjoyed a very fun time together) A short time after the ladies had left, Quibbas joined me, and we shared a “Bosun’s Bitter” before going to the “Louisiana Spur Restaurant” next to the hotel. Both of us ordered a delicious spicy chicken “schnitzel”. During dinner, our server informed us that many hotels were doing away with their own restaurants in favor of establishing “arrangements” with local ones. The Louisiana Spur was one of a large national chain of South African restaurants modeled after the American restaurant chain “TGI-Fridays” and was known for serving spicy foods!

The next day, as I walked around town, I saw an advertisement for a local performance of “Handel’s Messiah” that evening at the City Hall, which I thought was most surprising for such a small town. After playing a game of pool with Quibbas at the “Locker Room Pub” near the hotel, I made a quick, last-minute decision to try and get a ticket for the performance. I was very lucky to be able to buy one of the last “single” tickets available, and it turned out to be a center balcony seat – a very good location! The old City Hall building was a huge Victorian era structure with a tall bell tower and happened to be the largest brick building in the southern hemisphere! Inside the large hall was a huge pipe organ above the stage, and with the very high ceilings, the acoustics were amazing!



Pietermaritzburg “City Hall”

The choir of 300 people ranged in age from 18 to 80, while the audience was very mixed, dressed in everything from tuxedos to jeans! The performance was the complete version, almost three and half hours

in length with two short intermissions. The orchestra's performance was exceptional, and I was very impressed – especially with the “Hallelujah Chorus”! During the first intermission, I battled with the sold-out audience for a small cup of tea. The old man sitting next to me had a complete musical score and lyrics to which he continued to refer throughout the performance. Just before the second intermission, we all stood as the choir sang the traditional Hallelujah Chorus – it was a very emotional and moving moment! (and to realize that I was in Africa!) After the concert, I joined Quibbas for a late evening dinner at Louisiana Spur again.

The next day, after the training class, Quibbas and I decided to shoot some pool at the “Locker Room Pub”. We played several games while having a couple pints of “Castle Lager” beer, and we had a fun time, despite our dismal skill at pool! From the pub we walked up the street to a small neighborhood restaurant by the name of “Da Vinci's” which had been recommended by some students in the class. The place was nicely decorated in subtle shades of light pink and green that created a warm, friendly atmosphere. Upon the suggestion of our server, I had a delicious spicy Mediterranean seafood pasta dish, along with a glass of Sauvignon Blanc wine from Stellenbosch. After dinner, Quibbas chose to go back to the hotel while I decided to explore a nearby club called “The Sax”. I was able to hear it even before I saw it more than a block away, and when I entered the club, the volume of the heavy disco beat was almost “deafening”! I found the crowd to be very local, and it was quite interesting to just sit and watch the “action”! But the loud music finally got to me, and I made my way back to the hotel.

The next day, following the conclusion of the training class, Quibbas prepared to return to Johannesburg. But before he departed for the airport, our hosts put on a very nice wine and cheese party for everyone in the class – certainly a very nice way to finish a training class! Later in the afternoon, I went back to the hotel and had a beer in the bar while I watched a variety of South African TV, including (1) part of a cricket “test match” from Sri Lanka, (2) the evening news broadcast in Zulu, and (3) a short sports video about “extreme skiing” in America where guys were skiing down nearly vertical slopes off the top of huge, rugged mountains! Needless to say, it was absolutely spectacular, but so strange to be watching it in Africa! Then I walked next door to the Louisiana Spur for dinner – a fabulous filet mignon in creamy garlic sauce. I finished the evening at the hotel bar watching an amazing program about the making of the “Three Tenors Concert” that had been performed recently in Los Angeles. (note: a few years later, Leslie and I would have the opportunity of attending a performance of the Three Tenors in New York – a magical evening!)

Early the next morning, I walked downtown to the old railway station near the center of town to the historic site where Ghandi had been thrown off the train for riding in the First-Class carriage reserved for “whites only”! Now there's a statue of Ghandi in the outdoor market next to the railway station that was being restored as an historic site.



Statue honoring Ghandi in front of Pietermaritzburg Railway Station

As I began to walk back to the hotel, I passed several large groups of people coming into town for the Saturday morning market which was a hub of activity and noise as vendors were setting up their displays of fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as local handmade crafts – it was fascinating to watch. I walked through the market, passing many small shops having some very interesting names, such as “Kansas City Music”, “Hypersave Liquors”, “Shuter and Shooter Books”, among others. As I continued walking down the street, I came upon a large crowd surrounding a group of young Zulu dancers in traditional dress dancing to the beat of drums. They were really having fun and it was a joy to watch them as they entertained their audience. I loved the music and the rhythm of the dancers! As I got closer to the hotel, the skies grew even darker than before, which made me feel a bit depressed about the chance of seeing the Drakensburg Mountains tomorrow for which I had booked a 2-day tour.

Later in the morning, I checked out of the hotel and joined a German couple in a VW minibus for the start of the tour to the Drakensburg Mountains west of Pietermaritzburg. Our driver/tour guide named Charles had terribly deformed fingers on both hands, but somehow, he managed the driving quite well – a very nice guy also! Our first stop on the tour was at “Howick Falls” in the hills just west of town. It was about 150 meters high (500 feet) and beautiful this time of year.



“Howick Falls”

Then we all had a cold drink at the “Falls Inn” before continuing on our way toward the southwest through high rolling grass covered hills and past lots of dairy farms. Large tanker trucks were parked alongside the road where local farmers brought their milk for delivery to dairies in town. It wasn’t long before the clouds began to lift, and a few bits of blue sky shone through which also lifted our spirits! At one point, we came around a sharp bend in the road and over a high ridge where we were suddenly rewarded with a magnificent view of the rugged Drakensburg Mountains in the distance across a broad, green valley in front of us. The high jagged peaks were just beginning to peek through the clouds and bright rays of sunshine spread out ahead of us, much like a “welcome mat”.

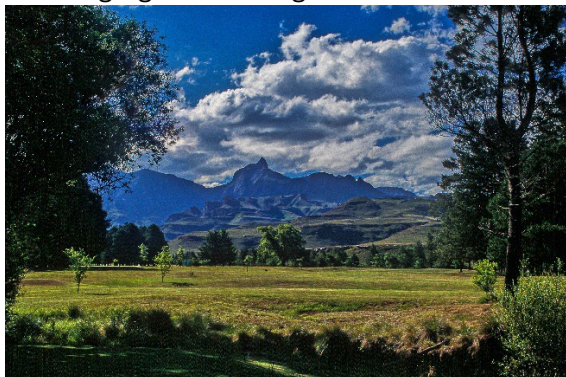


“Land of a Thousand Hills”



View of the Drakensburg Mountains

Then, as we descended into the valley below, we passed many small farms with round mud huts having thatched roofs. It seemed fairly obvious they were “subsistence” farmers and probably poor. When we crossed over a low hill, we suddenly saw a huge new blue and white mansion with tall white stone columns in front and surrounded by a high wire fence topped with triple concertina “barbed” wire! It looked very much like a “fortress”. But rather than being the home of a very wealthy Afrikaans landowner, it was in fact the house of the local Zulu Chief! What a massive contrast to the mud huts of the poor subsistence farmers that surrounded it! (my first reaction was “what must his neighbors think?”) As we continued to drive through the gently rolling countryside, the skies continued to clear, and eventually the afternoon became mostly sunny. Meanwhile, the Drakensburg Mountains seemed to loom ever larger ahead of us. As we approached the village of “Underberg”, the foothills grew bigger and more rugged. From Underberg, where the railway ended, we continued our drive west on a rough gravel road up a narrow valley following the “Mooi River” for the next 26 km (16 miles) past several large ranches. At last, we reached the “Drakensburg Gardens Lodge”, our destination for the night. The lodge was a collection of small cabins and chalets atop a hill overlooking the valley below and at the foot of the jagged mountain peaks which were now entirely free of clouds – a gorgeous setting for sure!

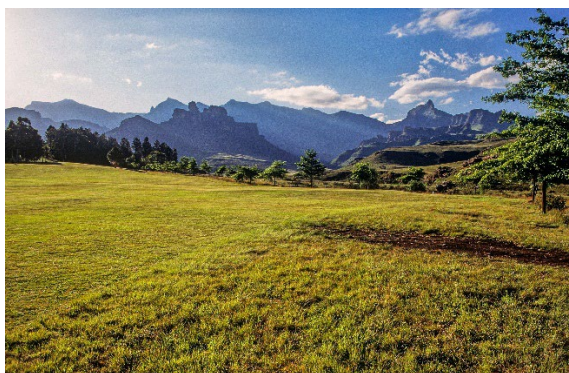


View of the Drakensburg Mountains from the lodge



My “chalet” on the hill

We checked into the lodge, and I was shown to a lovely chalet high on the hill. It was very spacious with a large bedroom, walk-in closet, living room with a fireplace, and a huge balcony overlooking the valley and mountains beyond. An amazing place, but too bad I would be there for only one night. After checking in, we all met up on the sun deck of the lodge for a delicious lunch as we gazed upon the Drakensburg Mountains shining in the distance. After lunch, Charles led us on a short hike up the steep slope behind the lodge where we climbed a rough path through a small grove of Stone Pine trees to reach the grass covered top of the hill. Here we had a spectacular view of the entire southern range of the Drakensburg Mountains. The surrounding foothills were covered in thick, lush green grass and small patches of beautiful wildflowers with bright orange, yellow, and blue blossoms. It was a very peaceful feeling with the only sound being that of a light breeze rustling the grass and the occasional songbird in the distance – I could have stayed there forever!



Drakensburg Mountains from the hill behind the lodge

Then we continued our walk along the broad, grassy ridge before descending the hill toward the golf course, a gorgeous 18-hole course in the shadow of the mountains. Along the way back to the lodge, we passed a new timeshare condominium development of large, stone and timber houses with thatched roofs, some of which were still in the early stages of thatching. (fascinating to see in the modern world)

Back at the lodge, I decided to take another hike following the river upstream where I had to cross a narrow “swinging bridge”. From there it was a bit of a “slog” through the “head high” tall grass that led to a “tundra like” landscape. At one point, I suddenly dropped over two feet in the tall grass before I knew it. But I continued making my way upriver until I reached the foot of the Drakensburg Mountains, just as the sun began its slow descent toward the horizon. When I finally returned to the lodge, I took a nice hot shower, and afterwards, I sat on the balcony with a cold beer as I wrote in my journal and gazed upon the Drakensburg Mountains while the sunset created a beautiful dark blue silhouette of the rugged peaks below the soft pink and orange glow of the sky! It was a memory never to be forgotten.



View from the balcony

That evening, I joined Charles and the German couple for a delightful buffet dinner in the lodge, after which we were treated to a performance of traditional Zulu music and dance. The performers were mostly the lodge staff, and although it probably wasn't the most professional performance, it was undoubtedly “spirited”!

After the performance, the music abruptly changed to loud disco music, so Charles and I decided to retreat to the bar for a “nightcap” of a unique South African liquor called “Amerilla Cream”. It was made from the fermented fruit of the “Elephant Tree”, so named because elephants love to eat the fruit, and when the fruit becomes very ripe it's more than a bit alcoholic, making the elephants a bit “tipsy”! Charles also introduced me to another South African liquor called “Van der Hum”, a very nice brandy made from various native herbs and wildflowers according to an old secret family recipe – very tasty after dinner! (thanks Charles) By now it was almost 11pm and we had to be up early the next morning for breakfast at 7am in order to meet our guide for the journey up to Sani Pass and the Kingdom of Lesotho! That night, as I walked up the stairs to my chalet, I saw the sky was filled with billions of stars sparkling in the blackness of the African night – such a memorable end to a remarkable day!

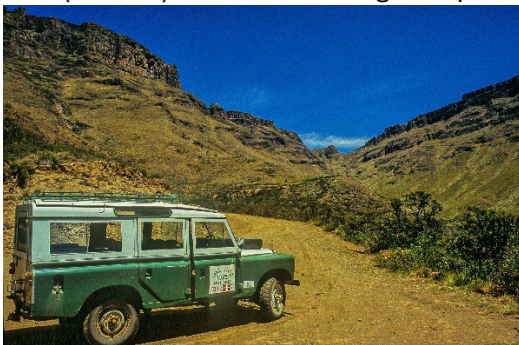
I awoke the next morning at first light (5 am) and got out of bed to look outside. I became very depressed when I saw very heavy fog surrounding the lodge, but I thought that at least we had experienced one really good day, before I crawled back into bed. But the second time when I woke up to take a shower and join Charles for breakfast, the skies were perfectly clear! The early morning fog had been nothing more than mist in the valley. The day dawned beautifully sunny – absolutely spectacular! I became really excited as I joined Charles and the tour group for a traditional “full English breakfast” which included “kippers” – smoked herring that is very popular in Scotland. After breakfast I took a short hike up to the top of the hill above the lodge and was rewarded with some magnificent views of the massive, rugged southern Drakensburg Mountains fully illuminated by the bright morning sun! The tallest and most prominent peak known as “The Rhinoceros Horn” was clearly visible rising more than 3,000 meters (9,800 feet) with 1,000

meter (3,200 feet) high sheer, vertical cliffs on its northern face! It's a very dominant feature of the Drakensburg Range and can be seen from a distance over 50 km (30 miles) away.

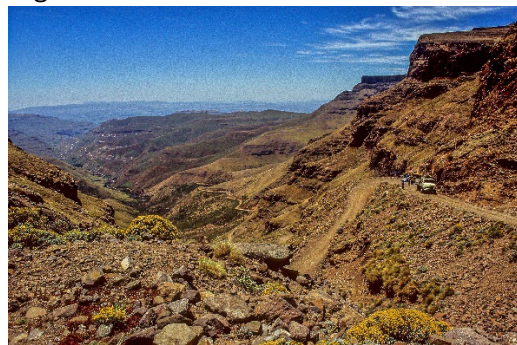
Returning to the lodge, we all checked out and Charles drove rather quickly through the small village of "Himeville" to an old garage next to the "Sani Pass Hotel" where we met up with an old, roughhewn, tall, bearded man named "Artie". He owned the "Sani Pass Tour Company" and would take us in his old Land Rover to the summit of the Drakensburg Mountains and over Sani Pass into the Kingdom of Lesotho. As we arrived at the garage, he came out of his office dressed in khakis and an old pith helmet, looking very much like a "great white hunter" from the 1800's! Artie gathered us together to have each of us sign a "release form", in the "unlikely" event of a crash on the steep, narrow, winding mountain road up to Sani Pass. He also gave us some important "safety" instructions regarding the trip – essentially, they amounted to staying securely seated with our seat belts fastened and listening to his instructions as we headed up to Sani Pass. Then we piled into his old Land Rover for the long slow journey up the steep road and hairpins turns to the independent country of Lesotho, an old Zulu kingdom.

Shortly after leaving Himeville, Artie stopped at a small collection of old stone buildings on the verge of falling apart. They had obviously been abandoned for many years, and as we walked around, Artie began telling us about the history of the old buildings and the surrounding region. White settlers had pushed the local Zulu tribe back toward the mountains, and in turn, the Zulus forced the native "Koishan" people (ancestors of the "Bushmen" today) into the Drakensburg Mountains. However, the Koishan continued to raid the white settler's cattle, and as a result, the settlers organized a party to hunt down the Koishan and established a camp on the summit of Sani Pass. During the battle, a white settler named Hodgson was seriously wounded, and legend had it that the other members of the party either buried him when he died that night **or** while he was still alive because he would have died eventually! However, it was also rumored that he used to "take care of the women folk" while the men were out defending the town, sometimes too well, so no one was sorry when he died. Anyway, his grave is supposedly somewhere on top of the mountain that bears his name. In addition, Artie told us how the old buildings were used to store goods from Lesotho, such as animal hides and meat that were transported over Sani Pass on the backs of mules. The goods were then traded for sugar, salt, and grain to be hauled back over Sani Pass to villages in Lesotho. He proceeded to tell us that the hides were salted to preserve them, and the salt was absorbed by the cement blocks around the base of the buildings. In turn, when the buildings were abandoned, antelopes would often come down from the mountains, attracted by the smell of the salt and begin chewing away the cement to get at the salt! He pointed to an old building where the base of one wall, as well as most of the flooring was missing. Artie was a brilliant and fascinating storyteller!

After listening in awe to Artie's stories, we jumped back into his old Land Rover to continue our journey to Sani Pass. As we bounced along the steep, bumpy narrow road, Artie gave us a running commentary about the wildflowers, birds, and geology that we passed, all of which was truly fascinating. He knew the land very well and obviously loved it. The old Land Rover climbed the very steep, narrow Jeep trail through a series of twisting "switchbacks" that were necessary to scale the 1200 meters (4,000 feet) gain in elevation in less than 10 km (6 miles) – a mind bending 12.5 percent grade!



The start of the journey to Sani Pass



The road up to Sani Pass

Many of the curves in the road were “hairpin” turns where larger Mercedes trucks were forced to “reverse” up the road! Then, just a hundred meters (300 feet) below the summit, we came around a sharp, steep hairpin turn in double low gear to find ourselves confronted by two big trucks broken down in the middle of the road! At that point, Artie asked us to get out and walk up the road around the trucks. Then he carefully negotiated the old Land Rover around the disabled trucks on the steep downhill side of the road that dropped several hundred meters (1,000 feet) to the valley below!



Artie passing the disabled trucks

But just as he managed to get around the trucks and we got back into the vehicle, the engine suddenly stalled. So, we all got back out of the Land Rover as Artie tried in vain to start the engine. After several failed attempts, Artie figured the problem had to be a “vapor lock” and proceeded to “suck” gasoline from the fuel tank into the carburetor. But he was still unsuccessful in restarting the engine and we were in a very precarious position on the edge of the steep hairpin turn! Meanwhile, the big trucks had managed to get started and barely made it around Artie’s Land Rover to continue their slow journey up to Sani Pass. Next, Artie disconnected the fuel line, cooled the fuel pump with some water that he bought from an old Lesotho man who was walking up the road. Finally, he was able to suck enough gasoline up the fuel line with his mouth to get the engine started again! Meanwhile, the German couple were sure that we would end up stranded and never to be heard from again!

Despite all the problems, at last we arrived at the summit of Sani Pass, at an elevation of almost 10,000 feet where we crossed the border into the “Kingdom of Lesotho”. While the road up to Sani Pass had been incredibly steep, it now gradually descended into a high plateau, the heart of Lesotho. Just beyond the summit, we found a small village with “Africa’s highest pub”! The village was a collection of small stone huts with thatched roofs. It was well above the tree line and the surrounding landscape resembled an Arctic tundra, even though it wasn’t that far south of the equator. We were invited into one of the huts where a large fire fueled by sheep dung burned in the middle of the room. Heavy black smoke filled the air and eventually came out the only opening, the front door, since there was no chimney! (ugh!)

As I walked around the village, I stopped to listen to a man playing a strange musical instrument – it was nothing more than a long round wooden stick with just one string and a feather attached to one end. He played it by placing his mouth on the feather and blowing across it to vibrate the string. The sound was incredible – soft and ethereal that resembled that of an Indian Sitar – beautiful! Following the “impromptu concert”, I joined the rest of the tour group for a beer in the one and only pub in the village called “The Summit House” at over 3,000 meters (10,000 feet) elevation was clearly the highest pub on the African continent! When we entered, I couldn’t help but notice a half dozen pairs of old cross-country skis and boots for rent. Apparently, in a favorable winter season, enough snow falls to make cross-country skiing possible. We all sat down to have a glass of the local beer, “Maluti Premium Lager”, as we looked out a huge window to the rocky gorge over 1500 meters (5,000 feet) deep below us – a gorgeous view!



Village on the summit of Sani Pass (10,000 feet elevation)



Highest pub on the African continent

An hour later, we jumped back into Artie’s Land Rover and headed back down the steep, twisting road, which according to Artie, he travels almost daily. On the way down, he continued his fascinating commentary about the natural history of the region.



On the way down from Sani Pass

When we returned to Himeville from our experience in Lesotho, we stopped for lunch at the Sani Pass Hotel at the foot of the road. It was a very nice buffet lunch by the pool with a magnificent vista of the Drakensburg Mountains in the distance – an awesome trip! After lunch, we joined Charley and got back into our tour bus for the drive back through the “Valley of a Thousand Hills” to Durban. Along the way we passed many new forest plantations and crossed over the tracks of an old narrow gauge logging railroad that had been abandoned for many years. The highway followed the old railroad as it weaved its way through several small villages and sugar cane fields as we approached Durban and the coast of the Indian Ocean. We drove along the coast road as heavy surf crashed on the beach, and by this time in the afternoon, dark grey clouds began to fill the sky. After Charles dropped me off at the hotel downtown, I bade a fond farewell to him and wished him well! Then I took the hotel shuttle to the airport to catch my flight to Johannesburg. Although it was a fairly short flight on South African Airways, they were able to serve a very nice dinner. As we approached Johannesburg, the skies were filled with bright flashes of lightning from some very strong thunderstorms that seemed to be all around us! At times the lightning illuminated the entire sky – very impressive, but also a bit scary! Luckily, we landed just before heavy rain began to fall, because from the aircraft we had to walk across the tarmac to the terminal building. And once inside the terminal, the skies opened up in full force and the rain soon flooded everything outside. The rain and wind became so intense that it blew open the automatic doors and rain swept into the building at least as far as 20 meters (65 feet)! Everyone was trying their best not to get soaked by the rain! Finally, after a half hour, the storm suddenly ended as quickly as it had begun. Once the rain stopped, I was lucky to be offered a ride to Midrand with two black guys who worked at the airport. As we drove away from the airport, virtually all the roads were

flooded – more like rivers than roads. But when we arrived in Midrand, it was perfectly dry! I checked into the TownLodge again and the same room as I had before. Then I joined some other hotel guests for a cold beer in the bar before ordering a pizza from the same local pizzeria. As late afternoon became evening, I retired to my room and prepared for the first day of the next training class in Johannesburg.

The next morning, Colin picked me up and we drove to the GIMS Training Centre in Johannesburg to set up for the GIS training class. All went well for the first day of the class, and at the end of the day, Colin invited me to share dinner at a small Greek “Shawarma” café in the city’s Jewish Quarter. While we enjoyed a delicious meal, a strong thunderstorm raged outside, which was typical in the evenings for this time of year. After dinner, we browsed through a very upscale fashionable shopping center in the suburb of Rosebank. In one of the music stores, we listened to a new CD of classical European music performed by the “Soweto String Quartet”, with a distinct African “interpretation” – beautiful!

The next day, I took a long break from the class to walk around the lovely, landscaped grounds of the office complex, and I was fortunate to spot a small flock of bright red-headed, orange-bodied little birds gathered around a nearby pond. Later, I found out they were “African Weaver Birds”. After class, Ken took me on a scenic tour of Pretoria as the sun was beginning to set. The view from the summit of the hills surrounding the city was magnificent, especially with the bright city lights in the distance. The view of the Parliament Buildings on the top of the hill to the north was very impressive as they commanded a spectacular vista of the whole city. The buildings were of old “colonial” style constructed of lovely pink sandstone with massive stone colonnades that were gorgeously lighted in the dark night. As we stood atop the hill, we could see spectacular bolts of lightning to the south that lit up the entire sky in the distance. My impression of Pretoria was that it was a very modern, clean, green city, in stark contrast to the many shabby shantytowns around Johannesburg. That evening Ken invited me for dinner at the 4-star “Protea Hotel Restaurant”, but first, we stopped at his house to pick up his wife. While I waited for them to get ready to go out for dinner, I had time to spend a few minutes with their new kitten who was very playful and a lot of fun! That evening we enjoyed a fantastic dinner in the hotel restaurant on the top floor overlooking the city lights!

The next evening after class, Colin and Ken took me out to dinner at a beautiful, old restaurant in Johannesburg called “Leipoldt’s”. As we entered the restaurant, I was very impressed with the authentic old Victorian decor and antique furniture, which made the experience of dinner memorable. It was famous for having a huge buffet of wonderful dishes, including “Bobotie”, a traditional Afrikaans lamb stew, as well as a fabulous Gammon (ham) steak smothered with a very tasty whiskey and apricot sauce! The chilled glass of Chardonnay from the Paarl wine region complemented dinner perfectly. Then after dinner, Ken took us on a tour of the Christmas lights in downtown Johannesburg – a stunning display!

The next morning, Colin picked me up from the hotel to do some shopping for Christmas gifts in the Rosebank Mall. We found many great displays of native arts and crafts, and I spotted several things that I felt would make nice gifts. When I saw a beautiful “spider” crafted from silver and amethyst, I knew right away I had to buy it as a gift to myself that would always remind me of South Africa! (note: to this day, the little spider remains on top of my bedroom dresser) Meanwhile, we watched an old man as he carved wooden sculptures of various kinds of fish. It was fascinating to see how he delicately carved the intricate details of each fish. From the mall we went to a large flea market in downtown Johannesburg where there was an extensive collection of artists and craftsmen from all over southern Africa, including Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, and Namibia – it was a very colorful scene! After a short walk around the outdoor market, we sat down at the “Yard Pub” in the market for a cold pint of “Zambezi Lager”, the national brew of Zambia. As we enjoyed our beer, we watched the pub staff making pizzas in an old brick pizza oven, while at the same time, a group of people stood around giving “advice” to the chef about how to do the pizzas “just right” – as if he needed their advice! He chose to ignore them, and it was hilarious to watch!



Flea market in downtown Johannesburg

Later that afternoon, Colin insisted that we had to have lunch at “Nando’s”, a small chain of fast-food restaurants famous for serving Portuguese spicy foods with a variety of spicy sauces. The spicy chicken we ordered was fabulous, and I bought some of the sauces to take home. (note: since then, I’ve used them in cooking many times) After the delicious lunch, Colin took me to visit “Gold Reef City”, an extensive local attraction that resembled a version of “Disneyland” developed on the theme of an old South African gold mining town which represented the historic gold mining district north of the city. We joined a tour that took us to many authentic reproductions, including the old mint where bars of gold were cast, a fascinating mining museum, a ride aboard an old mining railway, and a tour of the old gold mine itself! The tour of the old mine only took us down the first four levels, however, the full depth of the mine shaft descended over 3,000 meters (10,000 feet). But the experience of descending just four levels was more than sufficient to give us a vivid appreciation for the hard life of the miners, virtually all of whom were black Africans. Before we entered the elevator (a wire cage) for the descent into the depths of the mine shaft, we were issued standard hard hats and headlamps, much the same as the miners wore. Then we slowly descended by steel cable to a depth of 700 meters (2,300 feet), and once we had arrived on level four, we walked along the old tunnels following the rails of the mining railroad as our guide told us the fascinating history of the mine, which had been operating until just 10 years ago. In the past, mining was done in a primitive way, which was demonstrated for us by a black man who proceeded to bore a hole in the solid rock using nothing more than a long star shaped steel drill and a heavy hammer. It required him to strike the end of the drill continuously as he “rotated” the drill a quarter turn after each blow of the hammer. Once the hole had been drilled to a depth of at least 6 feet, it would be loaded with dynamite for blasting the rock face to expose the gold bearing ore. Amazingly, only one hole could be “drilled” by a man each day! (in modern times, the same hole can be done by a drill powered by compressed air in just 15 minutes!) And on top of the hand labor to drill into the hard rock, the work of drilling by hand had to be done in a very confined space barely 30 inches high, with no way to “stand up”. Needless to say, it would have been a very hard and miserable job, but it was the only option for most of the local African men. And, when the tour guide told us that all the work underground used to be done using only “candlelight”, the image of the miner’s experience became almost unbelievable!

After our tour of the old gold mine, we were led to a building where the gold bars were being cast from the crushed ore that had been melted in a 1,000 degrees C (1,800 F) furnace! After we entered the building, the doors were locked because each 12 kg (26 pounds) bar of gold about to be cast was worth about \$350,000! But as I watched the process of casting, I had to wonder how anyone would be able to steal a **very** hot bar of gold – was tight security really necessary? After the impressive demonstration of casting a bar of gold, Colin and I strolled around the old gold mining town replica admiring the many beautiful old Victorian era buildings with their gorgeous white wrought iron railings and wooden porches.



Casting a gold bar – “Gold Reef City”

Along the way, we stopped for a cold pint of beer at “Barney’s Pub”. After we finished our beer, Colin insisted that we ride the small, vintage steam train that circled “Gold Reef City”. The views of the “Gold Reef” landscape from the train were amazing and gave us a great sense of the gold mining industry in South Africa. From Gold Reef City, we drove to “George Harrison Park” (no relation to the Beatles) where gold was first discovered in South Africa. It was found within a massive quartzite geologic formation that was destined to become famous as the “Gold Reef”.



“Barney’s Pub” – Gold Reef City

As evening approached, Colin took me to the top of the “Carleton Tower Hotel” downtown to enjoy a spectacular view of the city from the 50th floor – the highest building on the African continent at the time. As we sat in the “Panorama Bar” with glasses of fine South African wine, we were treated to a gorgeous sunset that slowly unfolded before us as the lights of Soweto township glowed in the distance. We could also see a steady stream of mini-buses arriving in the township, heralding the end of the workday for their passengers. Later that evening, we drove to “The Old Marketplace” for a delicious dinner at the “Yard Restaurant”. It was very crowded due to hosting a large private party, so we had to sit at a table outside on the patio in a rather chilly wind. But the meal was definitely worth it with some very tasty grilled lamb and fresh vegetables. After dinner, we walked next door to a local theatre to see a very funny play with only two actors on a small stage that had no props or scenery! The play turned out to be a brilliant satire on the food industry and was titled “feedback”. During the play, the two actors performed lots of clever “mime” and satirical dialogue being at least six different characters playing an incredible number of different roles! Not only was it an amazing performance, but it was also a wonderful evening – lots of fun! (Thanks Colin) Then, back at the hotel I packed my bags in preparation for the final leg of my trip on a flight to Nairobi, Kenya in the morning.

The next day, as I arrived at the airport to check in for the South African Airways flight to Nairobi, I made a quick decision to upgrade my ticket to business class which allowed me 60 kg (132 pounds) of baggage at no charge, compared to just 30 kg (65 pounds) in economy class. The incoming flight from Mauritius was over an hour late, but I was fortunate to be able to spend the time enjoying the peace and quiet of the South African Airways Business Class Lounge – very pleasant and relaxing. I took advantage of the lounge amenities and had a couple of sandwiches and a cup of coffee as my breakfast before the departure of the delayed flight. Eventually, boarding was called for the flight, and I settled into a very comfortable business class seat. The four-hour flight to Nairobi was a bit “bumpy” at times and the cabin was rather chilly, but lunch was excellent – grilled fresh salmon with a ginger and basil sauce, along with roasted potatoes and carrots. The chilled glass of KMV Chardonnay from Stellenbosch accompanied lunch very well. After lunch I had a glass of “Van der Hum”, the South African liquor made from herbs and wildflowers native to the Cape Region – wonderful! Then I looked back on the past 3 weeks I had spent in South Africa and marveled at all I had experienced – the delicious food and wine, the beautiful landscapes I had seen, and the wonderful people I had met, especially Colin and Quibbas who became my new friends. It was a trip I will remember for a lifetime.

[Stay tuned for further adventures in Nairobi]

Map of South Africa

