

A SOUTH AFRICAN ADVENTURE: March 2023

Norma was lying on the bed, reading. I was in the bathroom. I heard her gently saying, in tones one might use when talking to a cat: 'No, you're not supposed to be in here. Go on, out you go'. I came in, and asked what was going on. 'Oh, a baboon came into the room and I asked it to leave'. Which it did, peacefully, out on to the deck at the back of our chalet.

This was but one encounter with animals among the many – not all as close as that – which we experienced on our visit to South Africa, including visits to wild life reserves and the three major cities. This was all in a memorable few weeks in March, 2023.

The trip was one that was a replacement for a covid-cancelled tour. We chose it because we had never travelled in South Africa, it looked like an interesting country, and a prime focus would be on the creatures we love to see and admire in the wild.

We left the car in the international terminal car park and boarded the Qantas plane for the long non-stop flight to Johannesburg. We flew west with the sun, but the plane's windows were darkened the whole way, frustrating for those – like us – who prefer to read rather than stare at the video screen. Around us in the plane were a few other Tripadeal passengers, and we met more when we took the shuttle bus from the OR Tambo airport (named after Mandela's predecessor as President of the African National Congress) to the Protea hotel nearby.

The Protea was acceptable, albeit a bit weird in the way that it signified its place in the airline world by making its surroundings and fittings look like an old aviation workshop. We had a bar snack before a good sleep.

PRETORIA

In the morning the Tripadeal group piled into one of the ubiquitous Toyota minibuses (one of the Sebatana fleet, and driven by a guide) for a ride of about 55km north to Pretoria, the nation's administrative capital. We were taken first (and foremost) to the Voortrekker Monument, which is set high on a hilltop just south of the city and can be seen from almost everywhere around. The granite structure was raised to commemorate the Voortrekkers who left the Cape Colony for the Great Trek north between 1835 and 1854. It was designed by the architect Gerard Moerdijk, and is said to share architectural resemblance with European monuments such the Dôme des Invalides in Paris and the Monument to the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig. It certainly looked like Germanic triumphalism to us.





The two main points of interest inside the building are the marble frieze and the Cenotaph. The former is the longest marble frieze in the world, and consists of 27 bas-relief panels depicting the history of the Great Trek and incorporating references to everyday life, work methods and the religious beliefs of the Voortrekkers. In the centre of the floor of the Hall of Heroes is a large circular opening through which the Cenotaph in the Cenotaph Hall can be seen. There is meaning in all the architectural features, and a charming statue in the front face of the monument symbolises the participation and role that women and children played in the Great Trek.



It's a fair way up to the monument along a long rise of steps, and Norma chose to stay down to wander round attractive gardens in the shade. I went up to join the group to listen to a monument's guide's description of all the people and the events of the trek depicted in the astonishing 92-metre frieze. The guide's



detailed knowledge and enthusiasm were unquestionable, but I (and a few others) were very uneasy with his heavily biased accounts of conflicts between the trekkers and the indigenous inhabitants of the territories.

The Great Trek, as beautifully depicted in the frieze, was a northward migration of Dutch-speaking settlers, predominantly Protestant zealots, who travelled by wagon trains from the Cape Colony into the interior of modern South Africa from 1836 onwards, seeking to escape the Cape's British colonial administration. The trek arose from tensions between rural descendants of the Cape's original European settlers, primarily Dutch and known collectively as Boers, and the British Empire. Boers who took part in the Great Trek identified themselves as Voortrekkers, meaning pioneers or pathfinders.



Boer resentment of British administrators had grown throughout the late 1820s and early 1830s, especially with the official imposition of the English language and by the decision to abolish slavery in all its colonies in 1834. Many Boers, especially those involved with grain and wine production, were dependent on slave labour.

During the trek north the settlers inevitably came into contact with the black tribes and their leaders. In October 1837 the Boer leader Piet Retief met with Zulu King Dingane to negotiate a treaty for land in what is now Kwa-Zulu Natal. Dingane, suspicious and untrusting because of previous Voortrekker incursions, had Retief and seventy of his followers killed.

A Zulu army of 7,000 impis (Zulu warriors) were then sent out and attacked Voortrekker encampments, leading to a massacre in which 532 people were killed. In contrast to earlier conflicts, the Zulus killed women and children along with men. The Voortrekkers retaliated with a 347-strong punitive raid against the Zulus, but were roundly defeated. However, in December 1838 a force of 468 trekkers and 60 non-white allies fought against and defeated 10,000 to 12,000 Zulu impis at the Battle of Blood River. The Voortrekkers proclaimed the Natalia Republic.

The museum guide's bias and attitudes to this 'miraculous' victory was well to the fore by now, telling us how the Boers attributed their 'miracle' victory to a vow they made to God before the battle: if victorious, they and future generations would commemorate the day as a Sabbath. He disregarded the fact that the Voortrekkers' guns offered them a huge advantage over the Zulu's traditional weaponry of short stabbing spears, fighting sticks, and cattle-hide shields. He dismissed the Zulus as simpletons to be despised, who did not know how to fight and were even unable to swim. Some 3,000 of the natives were killed, while only a handful of trekkers were wounded.



Having absorbed all this, we were driven into the city and to the government precinct. In front of the Union Buildings stands an immense and impressive statue of Nelson Mandela.

Driving through and around Pretoria we were struck by the extent to which houses and shops were protected by big gates, electrified wire and steel grids and rolls of barbed wire. We were to come across such defensive measures in all the regions we covered in our touring.



It was then time to hit the main northwards tollway, through a landscape rather similar to country Australia, lots of scrubby green bush backed by ranges of high hills. After about 100km we forked left off the highway and along a pot-holed and surprisingly busy rural road. We soon came to a stop at a charming little restaurant (Lily) nowhere near anywhere identifiable. They served us a lovely lunch under the trees, complete with champagne that had been brought along in the Sebatana minibus.

We then all continued in a happy mood through the small town of Vaalwater and soon afterwards turned off the tarmac and on to an increasingly rough set of gravel roads. These took us to our destination, the Lion Lodge in the Sebatana Private Reserve. We had travelled about 240km from Pretoria, three hours travel time but with several stops.

SEBATANA LION LODGE



We had a general welcome while checking in, seeing just over the lodge's fence groups of animals that we could only at that stage call 'deer' and 'monkeys'. The manager gave us a briefing on what we should expect over the coming days, and how (not) to interact with the wild animals we would come across. The staff of the operation were introduced, and we would see them again quite soon at dinner, our first, a good steak (from an unknown animal). After that first dinner we were entertained by some enthusiastic singing by staff of the lodge, including the chefs and kitchen staff.



The accommodation was in a line of a dozen or so thatched chalets, each with a pair of suites. The rooms were capacious, each with a small deck at their rear overlooking a stream. On the other side of the waterway we could see from time to time baboons, along with impala, kudu and other antelopes. The beds could be enclosed – when necessary – by mosquito netting.



A feature of the lodge was a highly impressive display of taxidermy, featuring the creatures of the region, put



together by the original owner and developer of the lodge. The mountings were incredibly lifelike and the high-roofed building imposing in an African way.



We were soon confronted by, and got used to, the lights going out on an unpredictable hour. This had all to do with the 'load-shedding' attempt by the country's government to deal with its energy crisis. I write more about this in a postscript. Like most energy users, however, Sebatana now has a big diesel generator that cuts in soon after the power goes out, and restores the lighting and other utilities.



We woke from our first night to a cooler day, and chose a light breakfast from the vast display of food on offer and enthusiastically eaten by most of our group. We were then taken out a short way to a meeting place in the bush, where we were given more information on the schedule and a bit more about the animals we hoped to see.

Getting there we shared our first experience riding in one of the open ten-seat four-wheel drive Toyota Landcruisers in which we would spend



much time in the coming days. They were incredibly good at managing the tracks throughout the reserve, which varied between rough and almost impassable. The guides were the drivers, and we generally stayed with the first driver we had climbed in behind. In our case, this was the lovely Layla, a bubbly youngster very new to the business but full of information and expertise.

We took a rest in the room after lunch. Norma was lying on the bed, and I was out on the porch. I came in to go to the bathroom, from where I heard Norma say quite quietly, “no, you’re not supposed to be in here – out you go.” I emerged, and asked who or what she was talking to. She replied, “oh – a baboon just came in. I told him to leave!”



That story soon went round the group, and Norma became known as the baboon-whisperer. The manager had told us not to leave the door to the deck open, but as we were in the room (unknown to the baboon, of course) we hadn’t thought about it.

Later that afternoon we took our first safari drive around part of the reserve. The three Landcruisers were soon separated, and we went a fair way into the bush and to the general excitement of those in the vehicle we caught our first



sight of a big male giraffe. We thumped and bounced along increasingly rough tracks and were rewarded by sightings of wildebeest, warthog, impala in large numbers, kudu and many groups of zebras.



Over happy hour before dinner there were many discussions about who had seen what, and lots of laughs. New friends were being easily made.



We simply sat around the pool in the sun the following morning, as the group was split into two for the next safari tour. It was a beautiful day, and we enjoyed some casual swims. In the afternoon we were taken to the Welgevonden reserve, much bigger than Sebatana and with a wider range of animals including the 'big five'.

We quite quickly came across groups of the more numerous species, and then marvelled at the sight of an exceptionally tall giraffe towering over the trees.



A close encounter was with a huge elephant wandering right alongside us in the bushes, seemingly close enough to touch. We had been advised that the animals in all the reserves were so used to the sight of the Landcruisers they regarded them as harmless features of the environment, and as long as we kept quiet and avoided much in the way of movement they would ignore us.



In this reserve we saw for the first time several white rhinos, a new treat. More tall giraffes watched us pass by, graceful impalas danced across our path, and buffalos rested peacefully in the long grass. Along the way, Layla managed to keep the Landcruiser moving along the slippery, sandy, rocky and rough trails.



For the evening we were taken to a site where tables circled a big wood fire and a line of barbeques that were cooking our dinner. It was a great night, after we had re-arranged the tables to avoid the worst of the smoke! The evening continued with a night drive, spotlighting to search for animals and birds, but with little success. We had fun teasing the always cheerful Layla for getting lost in the dark among the jumbled network of tracks in the reserve.



Sunday was a quiet day, during which we again enjoyed relaxing by the pool and reading, although many others had taken a bush walk along some well-defined and safe tracks around nearby parts of the reserve. Kudu were pottering around just over behind us.

That evening Norma was not feeling so well (probably as the result of an insect bite last night), but I went out with the group for a 'tribal night' of feasting and dancing, supposedly to experience how the indigenous people once lived – and on occasion, it was said, still do. We ate a simple meal using only our hands and fingers, and were then entertained by extremely noisy (but in my view rather ersatz) tom-tom drums, singing and dancing. Norma would not have enjoyed it, but many of the group did so.



The Pilanesberg National Park is the fourth largest in South Africa. It lies about 180 kilometres, a three-hour drive, south of Sebatana and north-west of Pretoria. We left at 5:30 in the morning for an all-day outing.



We passed through long stretches of rural South Africa, including villages and minute settlements, many of which were simply a collection of tin sheds. Much of the backdrop was of hillside ranges, all very green. This is mining country, and many of the hills were striped red by horizontal excavations and landslides.



Arriving at the park we left our minibuses and clambered into yet more Landcruiser FWDs. The park covers some 55,000 hectares and lies within the crater of an ancient volcano, formed 1.2 billion years ago by overflowing magma. From space, Google Earth shows clearly how the volcano collapsed into concentric circles, so that as we were driven round the park we were always completely surrounded by high hillsides, unusual and spectacular scenery.

In 1979, Operation Genesis was launched, designed to reinforce the game population in the region. 110 kilometres of fencing were established and 6,000 animals introduced to the area. Now, we learnt, there are over 7,000 animals, 360 bird species, and more than 200 kilometres of roads in the park. Some graded roads are open to private vehicles, but to cover the full network visitors need to take one of the tours, mostly along rough tracks.



It started raining when we arrived, which was not unexpected as we had seen heavy clouds and lightning over the volcanic hills several kilometres away, as we approached. The rain didn't last long, to our relief, because when the plastic windows were rolled down to try to keep us dry, the scenery became invisible.

Our first sighting was of a giraffe in the far distance, and I blessed the 30x optical zoom and fast focussing of our little Panasonic TZ95 camera.

We then glimpsed an elephant and some white rhinos. Monkeys were jumping around high on the rock faces. Soon after, we came across some footprints in the mud along the track, which we followed until, as hoped, we came across a group of lions lying peacefully by the trackside. We stopped and watched them lazily rolling over and casually playing in the grass.







We saw several more giraffes, stooping to eat the bush.

There is a large dam near the centre of the park, but simply some black and white birds to be seen at this time. A jackal shared the track with us for a while, as did a large group of guinea fowl. A pair of yellow



hornbills shared a twig. A large white rhino came close, no doubt to farewell us.

Some comments and blogs we had reviewed before the trip did imply that while the surroundings and features of the park were spectacular, animal sightings might be rare. But we were satisfied by what we came across. If you are really keen to see a rarer animal, for example a leopard, it is probably necessary to range wider and for longer to score a sighting.

It was another early start on the following day, for another safari within the Sebatana precinct, hoping to catch sight of animals that would be moving early. First, we encountered a large group of lovely little impala, all around us, overseen by a big male with impressive horns.



We visited a wallow to see the crocodiles in the water, but they did not reveal themselves to any great extent. We could see young ones swimming under the water in the shallower parts.



We were given a challenge on this safari: each group in the three vehicles had to make a hat from the roadside growths, and prepare a presentation for a champagne lunch to be hosted put on by the guides at a scenic location with a great view, Kudu Rock. Our group did not take this affair as seriously as the others, but much fun was had by all.



From the lunch table we looked over a vast expanse of bush, with a small female kudu feasting on hay that the reserve had laid adjacent to our lookout. Later in the day we did some more touring, spotting more giraffes, antelopes of one kind and another and, of course, scores of the ubiquitous zebras.



By this time we were used to getting up with the sun for a quick breakfast, on this occasion for a visit and safari at Kiango, another private reserve near Sebatana, much bigger and with limited access under a special deal between the two reserves. We again enjoyed more sightings of animals with which we were becoming quite familiar, but which again gave rise to special memories.

One was the sight of two male giraffes in what at first sight looked like a graceful dance but which was in fact a physical dispute. It could hardly be called a fight, as the pair waved their heads and wound their long necks around each other.



We then had our first sighting of another antelope variant, the black sable, along with more kudu, wildebeest (often sharing territory with zebra) and buffalo.



Shortly afterwards we stopped to view a pair of large elephants slowly pacing across grassland to our left. One came down to the edge of our track and stopped. The guide determined from various signs that the animal felt stressed in some way, so we stopped and stayed quiet to let him cross the road. He was reluctant to do so, and turned away from us to amble down the track. We could do nothing other than follow him slowly along, as the guide would not risk trying to overtake. Finally, we had to turn back and return to the lodge the long way round.



Over the lunchtime break we had made the bad mistake of leaving open the door to the deck. We entered the front door to see two small baboons climbing over the mosquito net and having a lot of fun. They had already taken fruit from the fruit bowl, which now lay smashed on the floor. They had opened and eaten the content of the coffee creamer and sugar sachets, had a go at the toothpaste in the bathroom, and – we soon found out – stolen Norma’s supply of analgesic tablets, in their silver-backed plastic sheets. We

cleaned up as best we could, and I apologetically reported the invasion to the manager. He brushed aside my apologies and offer to recompense any damage or special cleaning, laughingly saying it was all covered as part of the risk.

The final outing in the Sebatana reserve was to a celebratory farewell with chilled champagne sundowners at the Sunset Rock landmark. Looking over the plains to the Waterburg mountains we watched the sun go down in a cascade of red and orange light. Back at the lodge we were entertained by another gourmet dinner, backed by singing and dancing by the staff to top off what had been a superbly interesting and exciting time at the Sebatana reserve – and others.



JOHANNESBURG

We had decided to extend our visit to South Africa to take in a few days at Cape Town. The first step was to take a four-hour minibus ride back down to Johannesburg, the nation's largest city and seat of its highest court.



We were taken to the Apartheid Museum, inaugurated as the first of its kind in 2001, and which illustrates the rise and fall of apartheid. The entrance exemplified how whites and non-whites were separated at any such entry in the times of apartheid, a story that lies at the heart of the history of 20th century South Africa. Part of the museum is specifically dedicated to Nelson Mandela, whose name of course also features in the general part of the permanent museum and the story it tells.

It is a 'modern' museum, through which we walked in a state of immersion at times. There were several live screens showing statements and speeches by prominent white politicians, condemning themselves by their own words. (For me, the dismissive and patronising tone of these spokesmen had been echoed by our guide at the Voortrekker Museum, of whom I was critical earlier in this account.)

Segregation became official policy when South Africa became a Union in 1910. The four-part racial classification system introduced in 1950 is described in the museum, as is its evolution into apartheid. Movies and other displays showed the horrors of black-white conflict and described the slow changes to the apartheid system and its eventual abolition in 1994.

CAPE TOWN

Later in the day we were flown south to Cape Town and thereon to the Cape Milner hotel, not far from the city centre and a few kilometres from the waterfront docks and tourist centre. The room was capacious and pleasant, and had a welcoming bar and reasonable restaurant. We were now in a much smaller group than at Sebatana, because the Cape Town visit and tours were an extension that we enjoyed among increasingly friendly friends.



The next morning we were taken on a tour of the city and its surrounds. Cape Town is South Africa's oldest and second-largest city. It serves as the country's legislative capital, being the seat of its Parliament. It is dominated by the view of Table Mountain, which we had already been able to see from our bedroom window. Through some misty low clouds we drove down the western seafront, watching the heavy swell from the open Atlantic breaking on a wide array of sharp-looking rocks.

An interesting visit was to the Castle of Good Hope, a bastion fort built by the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century. It was established as a refreshment base for ships en route from Europe to East Asia and to maintain its monopoly over the spice trade.



The castle was originally located on the immediate coastline of Table Bay but, following reclamation, the well-reconstructed fort is now located a short distance inland within the CBD. It is a classic pentagonal fortress of stone. An arch that originally opened to a close view of the sea has been cleverly backed by a painting that depicts the original view. We walked round



its museum and prison cells.

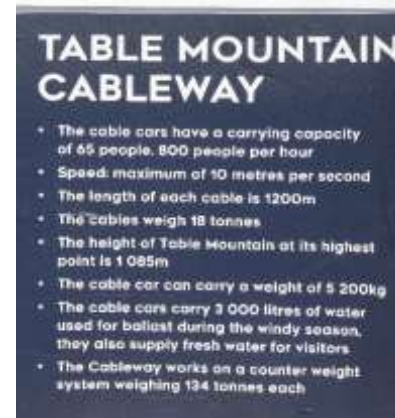


We drove up from the heart of the city to the top of Signal Hill, where two cannons are mounted. It is known for the noon gun that is operated there by the South African Navy and South African Astronomical Observatory. In 1836, a time ball for the correction of chronometers was set up at the Cape Town observatory, but this was superseded by a gun in 1902. One of the two guns has been fired at noon ever since. We watched the firing – it was a very loud bang!

Back down in the city we paused for a walk along a row of brightly painted terraced buildings. A separate house at the lower end of the terraces is now the Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum. This is one of the earliest homes built in the



Bo-Kaap historic area that was home to many Muslims and freed slaves after the abolition of slavery. It is popular with tourists, and the streets are lined with enthusiastic Moslem stall-holders selling tat mostly made in China.



Earlier, we had been keeping an anxious eye on the clouds embracing Table Mountain, but by mid-day they had cleared to perfect conditions. As we were driven up the lower reaches of the mountain towards the cable car that we hoped



would carry us up to the top, we were worried by the long, long queues of both cars and people waiting to take the ride. Also, it was another very long queue and stiff climb from the office to the lower cable station. Our driver took us up to the ticket office and gave us some good advice: when we buy the tickets we should tell the staff that Norma's mobility was such that she would require the elevator to the lower station, and needing our assistance. The helpful and courteous staff immediately shepherded the six of us to the lift, and up we went in a few minutes rather than the hours being taken by the masses.



We were then only waiting a few more minutes before boarding the cable car itself. It was a very impressive ride, nearly vertical in its highest reaches, reminiscent of the most demanding cable rides we had experienced in Europe. We walked out on to the top of Table Mountain and

strolled around the multiple paths winding along its crest. The views were of course absolutely spectacular, in perfect conditions.



We came across some lovely little furry animals, rather like marmots, that we could not identify. Later, we established that they were the Rock Hyrax, locally known as the Dassie (from Old Dutch *dasje*, meaning 'badger') – a brown, furry creature resembling an earless rabbit, and therefore also referred to as a Rock Rabbit. They are widespread in rocky terrains in Africa and the Middle East. We had a basic café lunch before descending.



Another busy day was to follow, a full-day tour of Cape Peninsula. This extends due south from the city to its tip at the Cape of Good Hope. The peninsula forms the western side of the large, wide open False Bay, into which ships with faulty longitude estimations sailed in error.



We started by driving down the west side of the peninsula on the coast road, initially through the developed suburbs of Bantry Bay and Camps Bay. The road became more rural until we turned up into the fairly well protected Hout Bay, where there is a small town with a fishing harbour. Most

of us agreed to take an optional short cruise to Seal (Duiker) Island to see the seal colony there. The excursion boat was well filled when we started off, and as we turned round the point into the open sea the swell became heaped up and steep. The boat was getting tossed around, and laughing teenagers were leaning over the rails. We cut in between the mainland and a broad line of breaking surf (we both thought, "what??") and came to a collection of uncovered rocks, the so-called island. We motored slowly round the rocks, still rolling heavily, and viewed the busy seal colony close to.





Obviously, these trips are happening all the time, and it's fun and an appealing look at the seal colony. However, our later research revealed that in October 2012, a catamaran carrying tourists to Duiker Island did capsize. The incident resulted in the deaths of two men while three women survived by finding air pockets beneath the inverted vessel.



We were encountering several groups of cyclists on the way. They were clearly out for a warm-up before the next day's cycle race, the 45th running of the Cape Town Cycle Tour, the biggest timed bike race in the world for both professional and amateur riders, with some 50,000 competing. We would not have been able to do our tour the next day, as all the roads would be closed.

As we passed through some of the villages on the way we came across several baboons and many signs appealing for people not to feed these – as we well knew – mischievous creatures.

Along the way, in and outside the villages, there were many coloured men lounging on the footpaths. We were told that they were 'day men', waiting to be asked to undertake short-term paid jobs. Along more unpopulated



stretches there were flags placed to notify travellers that with appropriate safeguards marihuana could be obtained up in the bushes.



The tip of the peninsula is the Cape of Good Hope, and there were queues of tourists waiting to have their photographs taken behind the relevant sign. It was an impressive sight, with a steep rocky hill at the tip and more mountainous ridges to be seen further up the peninsula. Ostriches were strolling around. (The southernmost tip of South Africa is further round, at Cape Agulhas.)





On the way back up on the eastern side of the peninsula we stopped to see a large and very busy penguin colony. The location is called Boulders Beach, for the large granite rocks rising up from the water and sand. Just like our penguins at Phillip Island, the African penguins nest in the sand, among the rocks, under the boardwalk, and all the way up the hillside to the houses overlooking the ocean. They are much bigger than the Australian penguins, however; we guessed at double the height. Their call is a dissonant bray. We spent quite a while there, enjoying the sight of the birds so close, before having an excellent lunch at a restaurant recommended by our guide.



Our final visit was to the Kirstenbosche National Botanic Garden, a large facility, but we were all getting a bit tired by this time so we didn't spend much time among the plants and flowers that Norma was not impressed by, even though it's a World Heritage Site. Time of the year, probably, along with maintenance issues.



The pace of the trip did not slow down the next day, Sunday, when we took a full day tour of the wine country, inland to the east of the city. We stopped at three major wineries and had generous tastings of all varieties at all of them. The first was the very posh Anura estate, whose wines featured on the Qantas flight back home. We went then on to L'avenir, through some lovely scenery backdropped by mountain ranges, Hunter Valley style but with higher hills.

A simple outdoor lunch, then, at the attractive old town of Franschhoek, under the shady oak trees, was a welcome rest. French settlers had arrived here in the 17th and 18th centuries.



The third vineyard, near the town of Paarl, was a smaller and family-oriented property, but the wines were as good as all the others.

And so, basically, that was that. The next day we checked out of the Cape Milner, but the plane to



Johannesburg was not until 5:20 pm. To fill the day we took a walk down to the Waterfront precinct and enjoyed a good lunch overlooking the docks and all the goings-on in this tourist area. In 1956 a teenaged Norma had come ashore here, setting foot with her parents on the way to India. She could still remember some features of the shipping docks.



We taxied back to the hotel, and with the others rode a shuttle to the airport for our flight back to Johannesburg.

On the flight we had a reasonable snack before spending another night at the weird Protea Hotel. Again, we had a whole day to fill before flying out to Perth at 10:00pm. We arranged late checkouts, and most of the day lounged around the swimming pool, a pleasant space but noisy from the adjacent motorway.

The next step was the long overnight flight to Perth, arriving in the early afternoon but – again – not flying out until 11:00pm. This time we could only pass the hours in the terminal. The two other couples in our group had Qantas lounge membership and tried to get us in with them, but in vain. Getting home was getting tiresome. So was the flight to Sydney, again agonisingly long, with appalling food. Norma's (aisle) seat wouldn't recline. We were very tired by the time we landed at 6.00am in Sydney, nearly three calendar days after leaving the Cape Town hotel.

We had left the car at the international terminal car park – but had not then appreciated that our final leg back from Perth would be to the domestic terminal! However, we shuttled back to the international, picked up the car and drove home with great relief in acceptably easy traffic.

POSTSCRIPT – SOME THOUGHTS ON SOUTH AFRICA

This was an exceptionally enjoyable and busy trip, with a huge amount of activity every day. It was a lot of fun, stimulating and rewarding, and the Tripadeal arrangements worked pretty well – except for the return flight arrangements!

We have learnt a lot about South Africa. The comments below are based on publicly available sources accessed over the last several weeks, as well as our observations and discussions during the trip.

First, we came to understand that like many other nations in the African continent, South Africa is on the edge of crisis. It faces the immediate risks of rolling blackouts (which we experienced daily), public discontent, and the possibility of social collapse. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, government accountability and quality of life have substantially improved. However, crime, poverty and inequality remain widespread, with about 40% of the total population being unemployed as of 2021, while some 60% of the population live under the poverty line and a quarter with under \$2.15 US a day.

In 1990, South Africa had the African continent's largest economy. But it also had apartheid, the race-based system of government that suppressed the voices of well over two-thirds of the population. In February of that year, Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and his democratic election to South Africa's presidency in 1994 was a step into the sunlight for the nation. Mandela's status at that time meant that South Africa's social cohesion and economic management was maintained, and the ANC's latent tendency toward cronyism was somewhat tempered by Mandela's moral authority. South Africa had become a beacon of administrative competency and – for the briefest of moments after the fall of apartheid – relative social cohesion. It was a country rich in natural resources and the potential of its human capital. But the following three decades of corruption has changed its course.

By the time the presidency had passed from Mandela to his successors, redressing historic imbalances had transformed into wanton cronyism. Merit and competency were disregarded in South African public life.

Mandela's successors began to reject political equality, giving more credence to the concept of political equity. Of course, in South Africa's early democratic years, a corrective was necessary – a country of majority blacks run exclusively by minority whites was hardly democratic, to say the least. But a failure to balance this response set the nation on a slippery slope toward new divisions based on race, effectively a slide into tribal rule. By the time the corrupt Jacob Zuma took control of the Presidency in 2009, the consequences of meritocracy's demise had led to societal collapse. Its once magnificent schooling system started to deteriorate. Petty crime became rampant, and violent crime endemic for the past ten years. The value of the Rand against the US dollar has collapsed. As South Africa continues to grapple with racial issues, one of the proposed solutions has been to pass legislation, such as the pending Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill, to uphold South Africa's ban on racism and commitment to equality.



Particularly in the cities, we saw a veneer of prosperity, especially in Cape Town – which even has a huge Ferrari dealership with many recent models on display in its massive showroom. But in urban areas we were constantly warned to take care of personal effects while out walking, keeping cash and cards close to hand. In Cape Town many people are sleeping in the streets, even in notionally prosperous areas. A pair of men appeared to have their own space right across the road from our hotel, a little corner we watched them tidying up each morning when they went on their way.

By 2020, numerous warnings had been issued that South Africa was heading towards failed state status, with unsustainable government spending, high unemployment, high crime rates, corruption, failing government owned enterprises and collapsing infrastructure. In 2022, the World Economic Forum said that South Africa risked state collapse.

In particular, South Africa today is facing near total breakdown of its electricity infrastructure, as we had personally experienced.

In a December 1998 report, analysts and leaders in Eskom (the primary public electricity utility) and in the South African government predicted that the company would run out of electrical power reserves by 2007 unless action was taken to prevent it. Despite the warnings of the 1998 report and requests by Eskom to be allowed to increase capacity, the Mbeki national government took no action, pleading costs. This resulted in Eskom being unable to add additional generating capacity and thereby keep up with increasing national demand for electricity from 2002 onward. Two new coal plants were commissioned in 2007 but encountered numerous technical problems and cost overruns, while the existing fleet of power plants were not replaced and continued to operate past their operational lifespan.

To address this problem, South Africa began attempting to shift its energy mix from coal to renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power, believing this to be effective and affordable. This transition has been slow, and the shift has simply highlighted the intermittency of wind and solar power, that the power generated is not always available at times of high demand, and that the new infrastructure would also be expensive. Loadshedding increased along with instability and failures in coal power stations, as funds could not be raised either to fix the existing stations or to build a new network for renewables.

Since 2007, as forecast, South Africa has experienced multiple periods of loadshedding as the country's demand for electricity has exceeded its ability, notably Eskom's ability, to supply it. Instances of sabotage and corruption at Eskom have further prolonged the energy crisis by increasing expenses and limiting its ability to maintain existing power generating capacity. In December 2022 the defence forces were brought in to help guard four Eskom stations.

The energy crisis has reduced economic growth and made it more difficult to do business in the country, and has increased crime rates and shaped South African politics. A study by the University of Johannesburg indicated that the repeated periods of load shedding – now at the highest level yet – have significantly reduced ‘the overall happiness of South Africans.’

Meanwhile, the Chinese are watching Africa keenly, ready to deploy their trademark geo-political usury at the slightest hint of an opportunity.

Michael and Norma Henderson, April 2023.