AN AUSTRALIAN GROUP

ON A WALKING TRIP

IN SOUTH AFRICA

“Did you have a good time in South Africa,” she asked, as she waited for the boarding passes to print out.

Was it a good time? What constitutes a good time? Could ten weeks of excitement, boredom, terror, and achievement be called a good time?

Could I call the rhino a good time? He was big – BIG big. Eight foot high, twelve foot long and ten ton BIG. An African thorn bush is a pretty ordinary savannah (dry plain) tree, maybe eight to ten foot high, average sparse leaves and big thorns. We came within ten feet of walking right into a big white rhino hiding behind a thorn tree. It felt close enough to reach out and touch his horn – if you were game. I was scared. The only defence against a rhino that close is to run very fast, or climb one of those small thorny trees. Neither seemed likely to deter him for long. Luckily he did not fuss about us, and under instruction from our two Zulu guides we slowly and quietly backed off and went around him.

Yet, in retrospect I guess I would call this a good time. We were, after all, in South Africa to experience the wild animals up close and personal, but not this close. It was day three of a four-day walk – yep, a walk – through the **Umfolozi/Hlulhule Game Reserve**, which we shared with lions, hyenas, leopards, baboons, crocodiles, elephants, rhinos (black and white), warthogs,various other large and dangerous mammals. This was not the only time we were happy that we also shared it with two local guides and their large-bore rifles.

I consider this walk one of the highlights of our time in South Africa. Four days’ walking through open savannah scrub in a national game reserve, lying in bed at night listening to the lion’s roar and the hyena’s cackle, and putting our faith in the thought that none of the animals responsible for the strange noises outside in the night had learnt to undo the zips on our flimsy tents

I would also list the **Kruger National Park** as a good time. Kruger is generally regarded as the jewel in the crown of game parks in Africa and was another chance to get close and personal with the wild animals. Unfortunately for us this came too soon after our walk in Umfolozi/Hluhluwe Park. While Kruger is much larger, and we did get close to some amazing animals, it was not as personal. In Kruger you are required to stay in your car and there are severe penalties, financial as well as other more obvious ones, for getting out of the car except in a fenced area. All the accommodation camps (some could more accurately be called bush resorts) are well fenced. We did get the car close, in fact very close, to a pride of lions on one occasion but the knowledge that you can easily accelerate out of harm’s way changes the dynamic. I was never scared in Kruger, although sitting in the path of a large bull elephant whose kneecap is at the roof height of our car did cause a small rise in my blood pressure.

“Yes,” I replied, “It was a good time. It’s an exciting country.”

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The Umfolozi National Park is also a good-news conservation story. It was established in 1913, and is one of Africa's oldest national game parks. More recently it has been the prime mover in a breeding program to save the white rhino, which was on the brink of total extinction with a total population of less than 200 animals. The park is now relocating rhinos excess to their carrying capacity to other parks in Africa. Ironically the black rhino is now threatened and approaching the endangered level.

It is also is a good example of a surprisingly active approach to conservation in South Africa. In a country with a population density six times that of Australia, and with 57 per cent of the population extracting a subsistence living in the rural regions, I would expect the last thing they had time to consider were conservation issues. I know in Australia it would be shelved until better times.

This is not the case in South Africa. There are many examples of this conservation ethic. For instance, Heritage Day is a public holiday dedicated to the country's responsibility for its natural heritage (ie, nature). Another good example is the very effective 27-cent levy on plastic bags in supermarkets, to address what is known as the plastic National Flower syndrome – a similar syndrome of plastic bags spread all over the countryside is experienced in many parts of Australia. (Incidentally, we found that plastic bag levies have also been accepted and work well in England, Ireland, France and Italy, all countries that have a reputation for active opposition to heavy-handed government regulation. I wonder who advises the Australian Government that Australians will not accept similar action.)

More recently, in what I believe is a world-first, the South African Government has just passed legislation making directors of mining companies personally responsible for the cost of rehabilitation, effectively getting around the sham of selling off the responsible company, and eventually winding up the company when the responsibility is sufficiently dispersed. A friend would support similar legislation here, although it is probably a little late to ensure that woodcutters Mine honour their commitment to rehabilitation, eh, Richard.

This is an impressive approach from a country many consider third world.

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Sitting in the departure lounge, with Customs and Immigration behind, and knowing that the South Africa adventure is now over, I began reflecting on those past ten weeks and how it almost didn't happen for me.

I was not scared as my injured leg caught in a tree root and I flew head-first off the steep rock ledge, although I should have been. I was not even scared when I landed on my back and rolled, with my full backpack preventing severe injury. I ended sitting on the edge of a further fall, with both heels dug in to stop going further, and the now familiar internal 'whoomph' signalling the thigh muscle had torn – again. Then I was scared. To this day I still get a cold sweat when I relive that dive, and thank SUTWCEDH – 'she up there who controls everything down here' – for the somersault and the fact that I landed on my back rather than my head. The torn muscle was a small consequence in what could easily have been a major injury, or death.

I had earlier felt that internal 'whoomph' and the sudden cold sweat as my foot slipped on the wet rock while leading a group in Kakadu, three weeks before leaving for South Africa. I knew then that I had torn a major muscle in my leg, and that South Africa was looking doubtful. Immediate treatment from a physiotherapist on the walk, and an intensive program with a Darwin physiotherapist, got me to the plane with the leg feeling as good as new.

I knew that 'whoomph' again as I hit the floor in severe turbulence when the plane descended into Johannesburg. In retrospect, heading for the toilet in defiance of the fasten seat belt sign was the wrong decision. With only two days before the rest of the group joined Sharyn and me in Cape Town, we were in panic mode. A new hiking stick (always thought those were for wusses), plenty of bandaging, and a flat easy walk allowed me to hobble through the first week. Oorlogskloof was the next walk, and the third 'whoomph.'

It was only through the great support from Sharyn, who carried more than her share for the next few walks, and the support from the group of experienced walkers for this one-legged guide, supposedly leading, that made my participation in the rest of the trip possible.

Oorlogskloof squeeze & camp

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But first, I should tell you what we were doing in South Africa. Sharyn and I formed part of a group of ten Australians on a hiking/touring trip organised by Russell Willis, whose company we occasionally work for guiding walks into the Australian wilderness. The group were all experienced walkers and between them had amassed an amazing amount of travel internationally. As you would appreciate this made the task of guiding them almost superfluous, and we became facilitators rather than guides. The trip started in Cape Town (SW corner of the country, pop. 3.4 millio), travelled north to the West Cape National Park, the Cedarberg mountains (berg means mountain in Afrikaan), and the Oorlogskloof canyon, then south through the garden route to the Kogelberg Biosphere, east to Hermanus (and the migration of the whales along the beach), north again to the Bontebok National Park, SE to the Harkerville coastal walk, further east to the Transkei 'Wild Coast', north to the Giants Castle area of the Drakensberg Mountains, east to Umfolozi/Hluhluwe Game Park and the World Heritage St. Lucia wetlands, then north to Kruger National Park, and finished at Johannesburg.

After the group wound up at Johannesburg airport, Sharyn and I spent another three weeks resting up in Swaziland, and spent some time in Pretoria, Johannesburg and Soweto.

Over the twelve weeks we travelled in excess of 7,000 kms (enough to cross the country more than three times) and hiked in some tremendous areas. In my view the most spectacular hiking trips were Umfolozi/Hluhluwe, the Cedarbergs, and the Drakensbergs, in that order.

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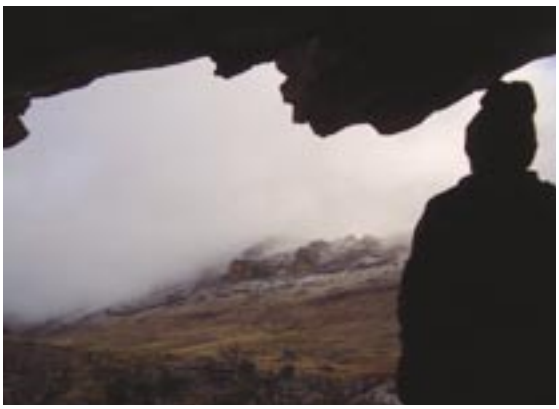
A rondavel

Oolrlogskloof on a bad day

“This is the first and final boarding call for all passengers travelling to Perth on QF304. Would all passengers please present their boarding pass and passport at Gate 23 immediately.”

Picking up our bags, including the extra bags acquired in the duty-free area, we joined the boarding queue. God, I hate queues. Why is flying just a series of queues and doing nothing waiting?

There were no queues in the **Cedarbergs** to get into the overhang camping site. Gee, it was cold that night, eh? We were all in our sleeping bags by 6pm, and some even took their dinner in their sleeping bags – as usual another five-star, three-course meal cooked by Sharyn in a difficult environment. It was the second night of that walk, and already we had experienced pea-soup fogs, a night in the tent with rain and strong wind, beautiful mountain views when the fog lifted briefly, a troop of baboons not far off the track, and what appeared to be a leopard tail disappearing around the corner of a rock we had chosen as shelter for morning tea break. But nothing like the cold in that cave. Geez, it was cold. Some of the group even thought it too cold to get out of their sleeping bags to watch the antics of the Dassies – rock Hyrax – on the nearby ledges.



The view out of the overhang in the morning more than compensated for the cold night. Snow – snow on the nearby hills, snow falling past the front of the overhang. Real snow. To the Northern Territory people this was something else, although I think the Taswegians thought it a bit ordinary – after all, they walk in snow all the time, don’t they? The snow also showed up fresh leopard spoors, an adult and a baby, on the track. We did not need the later confirmation from the park rangers to know that we had seen a leopard, or at least Annemaria had seen a leopard tail. The rangers did confirm that there was at least one leopard in that part of the range, that they are shy and elusive animals, and that there are rangers who have lived on these mountains for years and not seen what we had seen.

The next night we camped at the base of the Wolfberg Arch, a massive natural rock arch dominating the southern end of the Cederberg range. People come from all around the world to see this arch, sixteen metres across and at least as high, and we camped at its base. We photographed it with the tents in the background, with the red hue of the setting sun, with the planet Mars in the middle of the arch, and the cool white light of the rising sun. Boy, did we photograph it!

There were no queues in the **Drakensbergs** when two of us climbed to the top of the Giants Castle and walked the 200 metres to cross the border into Lesotho – an independent country surrounded by South Africa. The Giants Castle, at 3324 metres, is over 1000 metres higher than Mt Kosciusko, the highest mountain in Australia. This was the first time in my life that I was high enough to have difficulty breathing. We also camped in a hut with a flushing loo. Unfortunately it was a dry year and there was no water running to the loo, but if there had been, it was a flushing loo. You don't get that sort of luxury in Australia, not even on the Bibbulmun Track! I suspect the Tasmanians in the group also found this walk a little ho-hum because they climb mountains every day, or so I am told.

There were no queues on the **Harkerville Track** where, in a couple of hours, we walked through the only patch of native forest vegetation we saw in South Africa, and then spent the next two days exploring a wild patch of Atlantic Coast. We climbed through small rock slits, waded through knee-deep shell beaches, and hung from chains off vertical rocks just feet above the surging surf of the Atlantic. That night we camped in a magnificent hut, alas no flushing toilet but surrounded by Australian eucalypt and acacia trees.

Why can't airline companies learn to board planes without queues?

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A 'white' resort hotel in the Transkei

But, you will be beginning to think that all we did for nine weeks was walk. We did that, but we also did other things. For instance, we stayed in B&Bs between most of the walks. These occasions presented an opportunity to meet some white South Africans, mainly Afrikaners, which I found an interesting experience.

I theorise that the Afrikaners, particularly, got as locked into the hard attitudes of apartheid as the black Africans, and now have to justify those attitudes. We even had one who, after telling us about his prayer routine every morning and afternoon, then claimed that he thought the blacks were doing pretty well. He said, and I think he believed it, that all this talk about the blacks still being depressed and poorly paid was rubbish. As evidence he mentioned a black family that had earned enough to buy a house in the same suburb. We did not raise the obvious issues like, who were all those people living in the sprawling shanty-towns on the edge of the 'white' town area; white people should have been in the minority in his suburb on the basis of relative population; and so on.

I found the strongly public religious (Christian?) convictions at odds with their history, their current attitudes and their treatment of staff. There were obviously exceptions to this generalisation, but these only served to make the contradiction more apparent. We did, for instance, spend some time at Kogelberg with a guide who represented the new generation of Afrikaners. He was raised an Afrikaner, but has accepted the need for his people to change and is actively promoting it. I understand that this attitude is not unique in the younger white Africans. However, the more pretentious of the whites tends to dominate, with their shiny Audis and BMWs, and their beach house villas in the middle of poverty-stricken rural communities.

This display of wealth has effects, and the only time I heard an anti-white sentiment expressed by a black African was in relation to some beach houses in his community. His response to our question about who owns them was, "Whities, they have so much money, and they let so little of it go." It was significant that he was a small-businessman himself – he owned the three old dingies in which we had just been ferried across the river – and it was said with a hard edge in his voice.

A recent book (Amy Chua, World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability, Random House 2003) shows how market-dominant ethnic minorities cause jealousy and racial instability, in particular the Chinese in Malaysia & Indonesia, the Croats in Yugoslavia, and the English in Zimbabwe. The laissez faire-style capitalism being exported to the world through globalisation further entrenches these market dominant minorities, and will in time cause further racial explosions. I believe the whites in South Africa should also be on this list.

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Settling into the seat I opened the in-flight magazine and read the story of a well-known restaurant in Sydney. This flight was booked as a Qantas flight and the food and surroundings were no different. But there was a subtle difference: over half the cabin attendants were black. A subtle difference!

Many Australian travellers suffer the alternative-universe syndrome when travelling in South Africa. In the words of one: “The bush looks like Australian bush, and suddenly an elephant appears.” We also noted this effect, where everything was so familiar it could be in Australia, except there was just a subtle something wrong.

It was not just the bush that contributed to this syndrome. Much of the rock is sandstone, similar to Australian sandstone, and has weathered in the same manner. In many cases it was hard to convince my senses that we were in another country and not in the Kimberley area of Western Australia or Kakadu.

Much of the vegetation we were moving through also reinforced the image. The structure of South African flora was formed in Gondwanaland millions of years ago. Consequently South Africa and Australia have apparently similar plants in similar environmental niches. The attraction of the walk in the Kogelberg Biosphere was the similarity of many of the plants in flower. The similarity between some of the proteas and some banksia is difficult to overlook.

Even the recent vegetation is misleading. We spent more time in eucalypt and acacia bush in South Africa than we do in a year in Australia. South Africa adopted these Australian species as their plants of choice after eradicating most of their native bush. There are eucalyptus plantations that go on for hundreds of miles, in fact some of the most extensive plantations I have seen. In addition to plantations, these species have also been used extensively in gardens, as windbreaks, and have grown wild. Even in some of the remotest areas, the feeling of being in the Kimberley or Kakadu areas was very strong.

One area where there was no parallel universe is with the mammals. There is absolutely nothing in Australia that resembles a rhino, lion, or elephant in any way or commands as much respect. Getting up close and personal with these animals is a unique experience, especially in the Umfolozi/Hluhluwe National Park. In itself just this experience would be worth the trip, and the other benefits of interesting people, country, and very good cheap accommodation are really cream on the (South African) cake.

When I thought of it, so much of South Africa could be in Australia. Often it was only small points of difference, like the Afrikaan twang in the voice, or the elephant in the bush, that reminded us that it was not home. I wondered if the kangaroos might be the only reminder that I am back home when I next walk in the bush, and whether I will instinctively freeze when I hear a rustling in the bush. Yep, same but different; a comfortable place to visit and hike.

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In addition to plantations, Australian eucalypts and acacia species have also been used extensively in gardens, as windbreaks, and have grown wild. In an ironical twist South Africa is mounting a campaign to eradicate these species, particularly the eucalypt, for exactly the same reason people in Australia are advocating re-afforestation with these species. A feature of the eucalypt is its heavy water usage. In Australia's sandy soils they act to lower the water table and keep the salt below the surface. In South Africa the last thing they want is for the water table to be declining as subterranean water is a major water source for much of the rural population. In South Africa they knew they had problems when the water table began to fall and village bores ran dry. In Australia we knew we had problems when the water table began to rise and salt came to the surface. In both cases it was because of the eucalypt trees: in South Africa too many were planted; in Australia not enough were left.

Is there a lesson hee?

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Banking to the left after take-off, and a chance to see Johannesburg and Soweto sprawling over the land below. "A violent place," they said. "Watch yourself."

Yesterday, our last day in South Africa, Sharyn and I spent a pleasant day in Soweto with a local guide. The people were friendly. We saw evidence of people living in rough conditions with few services, but there was no violence. We did not spend enough time in Johannesburg to comment, but given the very high unemployment and lack of welfare we accept that some level of lawlessness and violence does exist.

'They' said the same about the **Transkei Wild Coast** where we walked for five days. For us this walk was a unique experience. Transkei was the homeland area where the Xhosa people (second to the Zulu in numbers in South Africa) were forced to reside during the apartheid regime so they could be 'apart' from the white people. There was no way of earning a living off the land in the Transkei, and no welfare, which meant at least one of every family had to find work in a white area and remit money home. During the apartheid regime the Transkei area was one of the most populated areas on the planet, and later also one of the most violent. It is still heavily populated, and still has a reputation for lawlessness and violence. White South Africans were generally aghast that we even considered driving through the Transkei, and the concept of actually walking there was beyond them. In my experience, usually the closer you get to a place the more apparent it is that fears are grossly exaggerated. This time it was different. Even when we got to the area where the walk started there was talk of recent robberies on the trail. In fact, the officials refused to give us a permit to walk until we had a local person as a guide – and presumably bodyguard and negotiator – in the case of any problems on the trail.

Three of our group decided that the risk of violence was too great so we started the walk a smaller group. We did, however, pick up an additional member, Vuyisa (pronounced Vees), the Xhosa guide. Vuyisa, at five foot nothing, did not impress as a bodyguard, but he definitely knew the paths, the people, and I had every confidence in his negotiating skills if we ever needed them. I cannot vouch for this, but am sure either he, or the local people, had made arrangements for our safe passage. At one of the reputed dangerous areas – where the path left the villages and passed through close scrub, and where a German couple had allegedly been held up a gun-point a couple of weeks earlier – we were warned by a local lady to "be careful over the next stage". Just as we cleared that village a fit young local man joined us. We had earlier observed him doing laps of the beach, so could vouch for his fitness. He stayed with us through the danger area, smiling and talking to Vuyisa and saying yes to anything we asked him. He also helped us negotiate a river crossing where there should have been a ferryman, but wasn't. Then he wished us well – through Vuyisa – with a lot of smiles, and went back down the track. When we asked Vuyisa, he basically said the lad was just being friendly and we never did get an explanation of why he joined us for that section of the track. My suspicion is that the local villagers, or Vuyisa, organised a security guide for us, but I probably will never know.

Unfortunately technology, in the form of my u-beaut digital camera, let me down early in this section of the trip. We took a photo of a village lady with a baby on her back and showed it to her on the screen. Obviously she, like several women I know, decided that it did not present her best side and used some of that reputed sorcery to get rid of it! That photograph was not saved, the camera did not work again, and the repairman tells me it never will. An unfortunate offshoot of this is that I have no photographs of the most interesting parts of the whole trip.

Maybe the 'bad' people did not know that I was unable to photograph them and so decided to stay clear of us. Or maybe it was the seven dangerous looking Aussie walkers, all with big 'walking' sticks. Whatever the reason, we saw no evidence of violence on the walk, and were greeted with friendship and interest by all the people we met.

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The last person to see this picture – or any picture – on this camera

The Transkei Wild Coast walk was the first, and almost the only, occasion where we got close to the black South Africans on their turf. It was a brief encounter, and one that I intend to focus on in a return visit as soon as I can. It did, however, give us a glimpse of how the majority of the South African population live. The rural south African villages are generally composed of mud-brick, thatched-roof huts – quaint and picturesque and all that, but very small. Normally there is only one room about as big as a second bedroom in most Australian homes – not too comfortable for a two-parent, three-child family. These villages spread across much of the countryside for as far as you can see in some areas, more particularly the east coast, for instance, Kwa-Zulu/Natal, including Transkei and Mpumalanga). Most do not have anything approaching what we would consider basic facilities. For instance, most do not have electricity or water reticulated, and do not have internal roads. Travel is generally via the dirt walking tracks that crisscross the countryside. We noticed the occasional local shop, but these tended to be on sealed roads, and often kilometres from some of the villages. A couple of the villages we walked through had a much smaller shop that sold only the basics. We saw examples where villagers, often women, had to walk kilometres to get their water and other basics. One of the abiding memories of this part of the country is of a woman striding across the country with a ten-litre container of water balanced on her head. Often some of the many children that always seemed to accompany these women also had a – smaller – container balanced on their heads too.

Our accommodation was in mud-brick thatched huts on the edges of villages with similar one-roomed huts. In one village this gave us a chance to observe an example of the pressures of this African rural life. The caretaker, who lived in an adjacent hut, left his three children after dinner and walked to the nearest shop for the next day's food. The return trip took at least two hours. During this time the three children, ages ranging from possibly two years to eight years, had to look after themselves (apart from some servings of mango custard which Sharyn had cooked surplus to our capacity, and with which she befriended and entertained the little boys). The mother was not around, and we assume she was probably one of the legions of maids working in the major towns in the region, many of who can only return home for one week in three or four.

Recent research suggests that the standard of living of these people has not improved since the end of apartheid in 1994, and may in fact have declined in some areas. Given that they won the struggle against apartheid, and have had nearly ten years of transformation when they should have started to see the benefits of victory, it is difficult to understand how they are as happy with life as they appear.

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Turning the on-board entertainment to the jazz station, reclining the seat while waiting for the beer I had just ordered, I thought back to just how comfortable modern jets have become: nothing like the passenger planes of years ago. Comfort: as a society we seem to have become used to greater comfort.

Comfort: another surprise in South Africa. We stayed at what must be some of the best and most comfortable B&Bs in the world. With the rand exchanging at almost five to the $A maybe we had the opportunity to stay in better class accommodation than I normally do, but in my experience South African B&Bs must be the best value in the world. A memorable example was the Huguenot B. &. B just after the Harkerville track. At R160 per person - the equivalent of $A32 – we got at least five star accommodation, and a typical South African three-course breakfast equivalent to what I would regard as a large serve dinner.

Not all were that way of course. On a couple of occasions we arrived in small rural towns with no bookings looking for accommodation for 10 persons at short notice. On these occasions we had to accept what was available, and in some cases stayed in B&B's that had only been a B&B for 10 minutes before we arrived at the front door.

Regardless of the standard these occasions also presented an opportunity to meet the people – albeit some of the white South Africans. In fact most of the B&B owners were Afrikaners, and I found that an interesting experience. I theorise that the white South Africans got as locked into the hard attitudes of Apartheid as the black Africans, and now have to justify those attitudes.

Yep, guess I could have sacrificed some of those frequent flyer points and gone first class. Then this Qantas 747 may have come close to the comfort of the Hugenot B & B
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Differing housing styles

In another example of that parallel universe effect most of these B & B's appeared as if they existed in a time warp. The architecture, the decor, and the rest of the household were basically of a style that was popular in Australia in the 1950's.Most of these homes papered the walls with wallpaper. It was quite eerie in a way to sit down to breakfast and be back in that part of my memory where I was a six year old in the kitchen of the family home in Perth. Even the social attitudes and conversation were appropriate to that memory.

Some readers may find this next statement a little contentious, but even the approach towards religion in many of these houses was similar to that in Australia when I was six years old (a long time ago)! Much of the population is strongly religious, and bibles, prayers and religious objects feature in the household and also the conversations. I get the impression church attendances is high, at least amongst that sector of the population we contacted through the B&B's – mainly Afrikaners. It seemed that most were members of the Dutch Reform Church, which appears to be a radical Afrikaner based Christian sect. My guess is that the isolation of South Africa during apartheid meant that there was little influence from the rest of the world in these areas, and the insecurity and lack of confidence in the future has not encouraged much investment since.

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A family at rest – and taking the shopping home

“The cabin staff will now move through the cabin to prepare it for landing,” he said, and the cabin staff did. They used to call them hosties in the old days, and they wore uniforms with flowers, didn’t they?

Flowers: The West Cape National Park walk . . . what a fizzer that was! Famous for its wildflowers, it only opens for walking in September and October to take advantage of the flowers, which weren’t there this year. Maybe the drought that has settled on South Africa for the past two years had an affect, but I still think that even in a good year the coastal heath country of WA would have beat it into a cocked hat.

Kogelberg: that was a bit different. We spent a couple of days at a beach area at Betty’s Bay, southeast of Cape Town. As a typical Aussie beach lad of long ago (well, not that long ago really) I found it interesting to compare the South African approach to their beaches to what I regard as normal. In terms of pace and style of development, there really is not much difference, and it is easy to understand why many South Africans find Western Australia so easy to adapt to. But we were in Betty’s Bay to spend time in the Kogelberg Biosphere, one of a very unique few in the world. Apparently in the days when Australia, South Africa, NZ, and Antarctica made up Gondwana, there were two distinct flora strands. For reasons that I was told but do not remember, the heath type of fauna was adapted to the latitude (east-west), and the fynbos (flowering shrub) style adapted to the longitude (north-south). Kogelberg is one point where these two types of fauna met and existed jointly. As I understand it there is only one other place in the world – and again I cannot remember where that is – where these still exist together. Whatever, it was lovely, in spite of a very inclement day. Again, an air of familiarity, with proteas that looked like banksias; kangaroo paw flowers but with something not quite right; and carpenter bees that are bigger than some of our honeyeater birds.

A familiar place, but I would like to have seen it in a good year. And I think I preferred the uniforms with flowers. Now, back to the real universe.

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CONCLUSION:

There you have it – a potted version of an amazing ten weeks in an equally amazing country. I must admit that I had only vague concepts of South Africa before I went, and learnt that almost all of these were wrong. In short, South Africa was a complete surprise to me. I expected broad, open savannah plains populated by lions, elephants and other large, and consequently dangerous, mammals. Given that the land area of South Africa is roughly six per cent of Australia's, and that South Africa has more than twice the population, most of whom live in the rural areas, I also expected those wide open savannas to be heavily populated with South Africans jostling the lions and elephants for space to live. Instead we found rugged mountains with large tracts of remote and spectacular walking/hiking country. As a walking group we did go looking for that type of region, but the extent of it, and its appearance of remoteness, surprised me.

In summary, I enjoyed South Africa as a hiking trip. This meant that a lot of our time was spent in the remote areas, which limited the opportunity to relate to the local population. Albeit from limited contact I was intrigued by the political, economic and social aspects of the country. I think there are many important lessons for the world in general to be learnt from South Africa. I will go back and spend more time with the people of the country.

We can go now, Jim