

# SOUTH AFRICA

## 2006

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Lanai, Hawaii to Cape Town, South Africa...a grueling sixty-five hours of travel including check in and security lines, layovers, and cooling your heels at shuttle stands. Twenty-eight hours door to door from Hawaii to our hotel in Washington, D.C., that saw us travel in trucks, ferry boats, cars, jets capable of cross-continental distances, airport trams, vans and taxicabs. We opted to skip dinner in favor of fourteen hours of solid sleep, awakening refreshed and recharged only to do it all over again, twenty-three hours from D.C. to sprawling Johannesburg, where we rushed to change planes and make the final hop to Cape Town, where I promptly again skipped dinner in favor of a bed, pillow and another fourteen hours straight of sleep.

The odd thing is that you wouldn't think that simply sitting in a chair for double digit hours would be so trying; that is, until you add in all the elements: degrading airport cattle-calls of security lines, the stern examining looks of the security people, too many of them swelled with the self-importance of being a big fish in small pond, the constant heightened awareness of what's going on around you, mentally checking every few minutes that all your belongings are still there, all the while surrounded by the constant droning announcements about parking, security, departures, arrivals, other travelers being paged, the rush of people, the occasional bright surge of anger and conflict as some fellow traveler is detained or realizes they are going to miss their flight. I was walking in the Dulles airport and a severe woman's voice on the PA system informed the thronging thousands in the building in deadly seriousness that today's

security level was orange, and I felt as if I'd walked into a cheap science fiction film. As a child train stations were exciting, magical places brimming with promise and the same carried over to airports as I grew older, but these days they are vast palaces of tension pulsing with an unnerving potential that slowly accumulates in the mind and heart. On the international flights, boarding time is accompanied by a feeling of palpable relief.

But then all that is replaced by a new set of constrictions, locked into a tube with several hundred strangers, breathing the same air, gripping the seat arms during turbulence, trying to pace yourself with patience and forbearance as the hours slowly tick by to the steady hum of jet engines. Though there's every distraction, from reading to movies to computer work, that all pales against the sheer number of hours that stretch monotonously ahead, and you wonder how people managed it before jet power. There always comes that point in these long, long journeys that heartlessly reveal just how big the planet really is, and you say to your self, "Never again...nothing is worth this." Until you arrive and within minutes realize that double the distance and rigors would still have been worth it.

A week exploring just a portion of the three hundred-fifty square mile expanse of Kruger National Park on photo safari was worth it a hundred times over. While our South African experience began with ten wonderful, amazing days in Cape Town and surrounding areas, what separated the trip from simply looking through a window on other culture was a week on photo safari in the Kruger, park and so that's where we should begin.

Located a little over three hundred miles northeast of Johannesburg, we flew into the nearest town with an airport, Nelspruit. We drove for miles then, skirting the southwest expanse of the park and I got my first real sense of the vastness and enduring space. Established over a hundred years ago, Kruger is testimony to the love of the land and animals here by the Dutch. Around 1840 Dutch Voortrekker expeditions moving in from the coast successfully established forward outposts. That opened the door for hundreds of Europeans and farmers,

drawn to the Lowveld region, lured by rumors of gold and the great quantity of valuable commodities such as ivory and skins. Naturally, the number of game dramatically decreased due to uncontrolled hunting and trading of animal skins and horns. President Paul Kruger reacted to the rapid destruction of wildlife in the area by hunters, and persuaded the Transvaal parliament to set aside a protected area for the wildlife in the Lowveld. In 1898 they established the vast Sabie Game Reserve, bordered by the Crocodile River in the south, the Sabie River in the north, the Lebombo Mountains in the east and the majestic Drakensberg Mountains in the west. This reserve would eventually expand into today's Kruger National Park.

After winning the Anglo-Boer War, the British proceeded with the ongoing plan to develop the Sabie Game Reserve and gave the task to major James Stevenson-Hamilton in 1902 to protect the animals against hunters, ivory poachers and cattle farmers. The Park was opened to the public in 1927 for visitors to view animals and plant life in a natural and protected space.

There are numerous guide companies with a wide range of services to take you on all kinds of adventures in the park, from morning, afternoon or night drives to specialized offerings like camping, hot air balloon rides or guided bush walks. As this was our first time in the country, let alone on photo safari, we chose to only book activities for the first day or two until we had a feel for things. We opted for just a morning game drive on day one, with day two consisting of a dawn bush walk, a long break in the afternoon, followed by a night drive. And with that, we set in motion a lovely chain of beginner's luck.

Our schedule called for us to be in the hotel lobby for pickup by 6 a.m. the next morning. We arrived sleepy but excited, bundled up in layers, knowing the 40-degree Fahrenheit temperature would quickly dissipate as the sun vaulted into the sky. Outside the hotel, sat a row of olive green safari trucks, the drivers in their khakis and boots congregating, comparing notes for the day. Two long tables with coffee and tea service were set up in the sprawling open air lobby and a crowd of close to seventy-five people were jammed around them, projecting a wall of chattered German.

Speaking in the international language of smiles with these fellow early-morning risers, we helped ourselves to coffee. The drivers came into view, calling out for passengers and various groups and everyone headed outside. We hung back having not heard our name called, but when we were the only souls left in the lobby, we went outside. To our dismay, the vehicles were packed. We'd be lucky to get two seats together, let alone in the best viewing spots. The trucks were designed with three tiered rows of padded bench seats behind the driver holding three people each, offering a nearly unobstructed view; unless of course, you were seated in the middle of a row. One of the drivers noticed our visible confusion, checked his list and directed us to a truck just arriving. It turned out that the Germans were a large group that had booked together. Our guide, an affable, warm man named Jurie, with a manner that put you at ease, told us with a smile that we were the only two people booked for his morning drive.



We laughed excitedly like kids as our now-private tour motored out to the park entrance gate, and parked in the long line of vehicles as the drivers all climbed out and went up to the office to buy their permits for the day. It was a little moment you could tell most of the visitors were missing, caught up in the cool fragrance of the morning air, the inky red tip of dawn across the river and the prospect of the day to come. But I also saw, as if frozen in a painting, the common moment for our drivers, as they moved through a regular landmark in their day, companionably joking and talking in line, just moving today's batch of folks in and out, hoping for no flat tires or ignorant riders. It was easy to see the potential for at least the latter as the driver of the truck in front of us stood talking up to one his passengers in the highest back row. You couldn't hear what the guest was saying, but then you didn't need to from the guide's clearly audible responses.

"No, I cannot *guarantee* that you'll see elephants, sir. The animals go where they please, not necessarily staying near the roads." Even to

a novice visitor, that simple fact was not only obvious, it was one of the things that I loved about the idea of the park from the beginning. Jurie said at one point, "Many visitors don't realize that here it's the *people* that are in cages." Slowly cruising into the park, clearly trying to gain a feel for what the next five hours of his life would be like, Jurie began to feel us out, "So...do you have any animals high on your list?"

This is the currency of many people who go to Kruger, with the highest denominations being what is referred to as "The Big Five": Lion, Leopard, Rhino, Elephant and Buffalo. This term describes the five most dangerous animals to attempt to kill, originating from guided hunting trips decades before photo safaris became a common business. Realizing later that Jurie was most likely expecting one of those five names, I simply responded with what I was feeling at the moment, riding comfortably down a dirt road out in the wilderness on a bright South African morning with the day ahead of me. "We're just happy to be here."

We got along great after that and better as the day went along. The drivers sit in the lowest first row and speak without the aid of microphones, so our private tour enabled us to not only hear every word he was saying without the distraction of other people talking or asking questions, but actually discuss and converse with him. All the vehicles are equipped with two-way radios and when someone comes across a sighting, they usually call it out. If you're reasonably close, the guides always make the effort to take you there. That's how we came across our first major sighting, one of the luckiest, as well as most powerful experiences all our time in Kruger. Jurie simply said, "Cheetahs...close by." and we were off, rounding a corner to see what always indicates something special; cars and safari trucks pulled off on either side of the road. We pulled up and Jurie shut the engine off just as a pack of four cheetahs, supremely confident and lovely, padded casually across the road and right along the line of vehicles.

There are approximately four hundred

cheetahs living inside Kruger National Park. Contrast that with over one hundred thousand impalas.

Two days later we met a woman who'd worked in the park for three years and she said she'd never once since a cheetah. And here we were so close to four of those wiry, elegant, feral creatures that we could almost graze our fingertips along their backs. After they'd drifted away, we knew without a doubt how special this sighting was when Jurie started up the truck, crying out, "That was excellent!" his eyes bright with enthusiasm, voice brimming with pleasure. These elegant predators



are valued there almost as much as we treasure these photos and those fleeting moments on an African morning when you could see moisture on the big cat's velvet noses and faintly breathe their scent.

Our beginner's luck continued the next day on our morning bush walk. The bush walks are a fascinating and varied experience. Friends of ours who'd taken it talked glowingly about being out in open country, learning about the vegetation, how to read animal spoor. I'd envisioned a portion of the park somehow isolated from the big predators, possibly a place where they'd even transplanted vegetation that normally isn't found in one area. A place where you would learn things like how to always find true north, (termite hills that stand taller than I am slant north because the sun rotates east to west across the northern sky and bakes the moisture out of northern side, so that side dips - *Thank you, Jurie!*). Or which plant serves well as toilet paper (turns out to be the willow wattle plant—soft and also makes great bedding), or that if lost in the bush, either the Marula tree or elephant dung can save your life; seeds of the fruit can be eaten and the roots are composed of sixty percent water, as is elephant poop. Nice to learn that even in desperate survival, there are better and worse choices.

There were four other people in our group, a comfortable size, plus a park ranger and our guide, a tall thin man with kind eyes name Ewout. We drove miles in the freezing pre-dawn



of

dark, saw a sunrise to take your breath away for the rest of your days and climbed stiffly out of the Land Rover trembling more from anticipation than the chill air. If I didn't have a clue as to how far off my imaginings of this adventure were when the guide and ranger armed themselves with rifles, I knew it when we hadn't walked a quarter mile into the bush and Ewout silently held up a palm, gestured to our left and we turned as one to see two white rhinos placidly grazing in dense brush. A great start to an incredible day. We learned that the white rhino is the third largest land mammal. Massive, stocky, and with a reputation of being not quite as aggressive as the black rhino. By the 1890's, white rhino were extinct in the Lowveld, while elsewhere a relic fifty animals survived between the White and Black Umfolozi rivers in Zululand. Successful conservation measures made it possible to re-introduce three hundred-some rhino from 1961 onwards, and the Kruger Park now safeguards the world's largest population. White rhino require a reliable supply of water, both for drinking (every two to three days) and for the protective layer of mud that helps shield their hides from biting insects.



We'd no sooner moved off from the rhinos when, thanks to the amazingly sharp eyes of our guide, we were made aware of an elephant with noble tusks quite a distance away, though the animal was impressive enough through binoculars. Ewout looked at us with an excited grin and said, "What do you say? Shall we get a bit closer?" We were launched then into a steady march through unbroken terrain, often losing sight of the creature for long stretches as we hiked along, the only sounds our breathing and the thick brush whispering against our legs. We learned that elephant trunks consist of thousands of nerves, no bones, and are capable of picking up a coin. They can lose the tips to crocodiles, or more insidiously, to the wire traps of poachers. If they should suffer such a calamity, they have fourteen days to adapt before they die of starvation. Other elephants in the herd will help them by stripping tree branches down for them to feed on will even feed them water. An elephant's trunk, a union of the nose and upper lip, is a highly sensitive organ with over

one hundred thousand muscle units. Elephants cry, play, have incredible memories, and laugh. They're sensitive and compassionate; if a baby complains, the entire family will rumble and go over to touch and caress it. They have greeting ceremonies when a friend that has been away for some time returns to the group, and grieve at a loss of a stillborn baby, a family member, and in many cases other elephants. Elephants don't drink with their trunks, but use them as "tools" to drink with. This is accomplished by filling the trunk with water and then using it as a hose to pour it into the elephant's mouth. A few days later we would get the opportunity to see this at close range, but for now, we crossed a small stream, stepping up on terraced flats of mud to climb out the other side.

One of the great memories of the trip will always be looking down and seeing that I wasn't standing on natural steps but actually walking inside the quite-recent footprints of the elephant, which dwarfed both of my booted feet. Thinking back over our winding direct path, I was impressed by Ewout's tracking skill when he signalled the elephant was close. We came over a small rise and there the bull was, so close you could hear him breathing, snapping branches off the tree as he fed.



Ewout gathered us together with hand signals, everyone instinctively treading silently. He whispered, "You'll notice while he should be able to see us, he's oblivious to our presence because we are downwind, making no sudden moves and are very quiet. Sharp vision is not one of the elephant's strengths."

At that instant, one of the members in our party coughed. I have an indelible image in my mind now of that great massive head swiveling, the body turning amazingly swiftly to face us, his

ears flaring flat out with an audible woosh. He lowered his tusks and took two steps forward, little puffs of dust clouds rising from his drum-like feet. We all froze without needing the guide's sudden arresting hand gesture, and it was so quiet I realized everyone was holding their breath. Silently and moving in steady, unhurried motion, Ewout lined us up in single file behind a tree, whispering that the elephant could make another mock charge and to be still and not to move. He and the ranger then took a step or two forward and farther apart, facing the elephant, rifles at the ready. I was horrified; the worst thing in the world would be for this magnificent creature to be killed just so we could come out here and see it close up, but Ewout and the ranger were projecting a calm that made me feel it would not go beyond mock charges.

As soon as we were lined up behind the tree I leaned my head out to one side to see what was going on. The bright morning light was behind us and I saw the silhouette of the tree, dark and sharp and flaring out across the ground towards the elephant and like a cartoon, the distinct rounded, dark shapes of everyone's heads poking out on one side or another of the tree. One of those things you laugh about later. We'd been closer than that to elephants, but ensconced in the comparative height and safety of the safari vehicles. This was something worlds away. On foot before that mighty creature and the focused object of its attention, I felt small the way one does lying on your back under a sky full of stars.

Driving back that afternoon, we chanced upon two elephants feeding right at road's edge and passed a timeless, wondrous twenty minutes just parked there so close at times that you were loathe to look at the animal with anything but your naked eye. Partly because of the concern that the click of the shutter would alarm her, but mostly because it was enough to stare slowly, absorbing the small details, unaided by binoculars or camera lens, down even to the creature's long eyelashes. The only sounds were the chirp of birds, the snap of brush breaking under the elephant's feet, it's stripping of the vegetation from the bushes and it's steady, snuffling breathing. I felt the hair on



my neck rising and tears rose unbidden to my eyes, triggered just by the proximity to such an amazing slice of daily life for these awe-inspiring creatures. It was a very privileged moment.

Our beginner's luck peaked on that morning bush walk when a small herd of zebra (30 - 40) took flight, running parallel to us seventy-five to a hundred yards away. You could feel the drumming of their hooves through the soles of your shoes; a remarkable sensation. They passed us on the other side of a low rise, only their backs, manes and tails visible, and for a minute this textured, coruscating mass of black and white stripes flowed across my field of vision. That in itself was a brilliant experience, but it quickly escalated when we saw the zebras were on the run from one of the rarest of the animals in Kruger; the endangered African wild dog. While the dog pack was out on the hunt, we had entered the vicinity of their den. On the drive in, Ewout had told us that he checks on them, but not so often that they get spooked enough to move their den, though he cautioned us that we would be very lucky to see one. As the last zebra went past we were suddenly challenged by the dominant male of the wild dog pack. He ran directly towards us, coming to a sudden, confronting stop only fifty feet away, reared up on his back legs and barked a sharp, raspy, two-note bark at us repeatedly.

Other members of the pack loped in from the same direction and as they reached the dominant male, they peeled off to his left, moving stealthily but swiftly, absolutely focused on us. At periodic intervals one of the dogs would drop off from the group. I stared at the dominant male; the colors in his markings were from the same palette as a calico cat, his coat thick and healthy, his eyes bright and sharp with intelligence, his teeth white even from a distance. You could also tell that they had made a kill; the jaws of several of the beasts were stained red. It was with an effort that I turned my head to see that the



other dogs had almost surrounded us, placed as if by x's on a map at assigned strategic posts in the brush, one up on a rock, forming a three-quarter circle around us. Ewout gently guided us out the open end of the circle, whispering that they were simply escorting us away from their den, indicating its location with a nod of his head. We could hear tiny little high-pitched barks and with binoculars, you'd catch the occasional flash of a puffy tip of a tail or the sharp outline of an orange ear. The curious thing about the experience later was the complete absence of fear, that primal emotion completely and easily submerged not just by the presence of two calm, armed men, but also by the fascination of watching the intelligence and communication within the pack. All I have to do is close my eyes and I can be standing again on the hard packed red South African soil in bright early morning, my heart and spirit full of the mute eloquence of the lives and world of rhinos, elephants, zebras and wild dogs.

Only wild dogs will adopt young from outside the pack. Zebras, like lions and other species, are caninistic; when a new dominant male takes over a herd of zebras or pack of lions, they kill all the existing young. Ewout told us how a pack of orphaned wild dogs were brought to the area and they left them overnight in their cage so they could adjust to the smells of the land. The pack of wild dogs came in the night and regurgitated fresh kill into the cage, feeding the pups.

Zebra are common game for the wild dogs partly because zebras live in patriarchal herds with up to six mares and their foals, all below only one stallion zebra. The foals can stand on their own long thin legs about an hour after birth. The hair along their necks stands up instead of hanging down like a horse's mane, which add to their distinctive look. The neck stripes go right up into the mane. Like the giraffe, every zebra has its own special pattern which others recognize.

These are Burchell's zebra, the most common, with about three hundred thousand of them living wild throughout all of Africa. A little bird, called a fork-tailed drongo, often travels with them, sitting on the zebra's back and eating the insects kicked up by its hooves. Young males live



together in groups until they start a herd of their own. When competing for a young female, the stallions will bite and kick one another, but don't fight to the death. When one has had enough, he lowers his head and trots away. Most of the time zebras get along well together. They also get along well with other animals and can be seen drinking along side a kudu or a giraffe at a water hole. In this photo, a foal is nursing as mom cautions us with her eyes and posture.



If I had to name favorite animal, the word "zebra" would



certainly pop quickly to the tip of my tongue. The picture to the left is one of my personal favorites from the entire trip; the lone zebra staring at the car heading off into

the distance. One of those moments when the creature's mind clearly *must* be at work in deep thought. Our guide on a night drive, a round-faced, warm and open black man named Isaac was asked if zebras were black with white stripes or white with black stripes. His jolly, matter-of-fact reply was, "Why, black with white stripes of course. In Africa, black always comes first."

Well, between the cheetahs on Day One and the wild dogs on Day Two, word of beginner's luck and good fortune must have spread. We would meet people in the tour office or hotel grounds and they'd say, "Oh, you're the folks who saw the wild dogs! How fortunate!" And indeed, we didn't need anyone to tell us that.

To get home each afternoon we would cross a large four lane concrete bridge that straddled the Sabie River, and we'd always stop and get out of the truck to stand first on one side, then



on the other, observing the animals water and socialize in the cool of late afternoon, early evening. The hippos on the next page were there every



night, and most mornings. Though we were up on a thirty-foot high bridge and many yards away, I could still feel the roar of that

hippo in my collarbone. The large hippo is an aggressive animal; old scars (easily visible in this photo), or fresh, deep wounds are signs of daily fights that are accompanied by much bellowing, neighing and snorting. The huge open-mouthed "yawn" that reveals formidable teeth is one of the most aggressive postures. With the long, razor-sharp incisors and tusklike canines, the hippo is well-armed and dangerous. They move easily in water, either swimming by kicking their hind legs or walking on the bottom and are well-adapted to aquatic life with small ears, eyes and nostrils set at the top of the head. By closing its ears and nostrils, the adult can stay under water for as long as six minutes. Hippos have a flexible social system defined by hierarchy and by feed and water conditions. They prefer mixed groups of about fifteen individuals, but in periods of drought large numbers are forced to congregate near limited pools of water. This overcrowding disrupts the hierarchical system, resulting in even higher levels of aggression, with the oldest and strongest males most dominant. Hippos are unpredictable. If they are encountered away from the safety of water, anything that gets between them and their refuge may be bitten or trampled.



through the park. Night drives consist of the Land Rovers driving slowly through park roads with four to six powerful hand held lights available for people to shine out the sides, and



them and their refuge may be bitten or trampled.

This lioness was cat napping right in the road as we began our night drive

through the park. Night drives consist of the Land Rovers driving slowly through park roads with four to six powerful hand held lights available for people to shine out the sides, and

the vehicles cruise the darkness with many erratic bright eyes tilting and flashing. I was told that night drives afford opportunities to observe things you don't see in the daytime, and are particularly favorable for spotting packs of lions. In the first few minutes it was kind of cool, you'd look out on the brush lit by moving pools of yellow light and see dozens of tiny glinting pairs of eyes like diamonds, just like in the great Warner Brothers cartoons set in the jungle, and it made you realize how many animals must be out there that are simply invisible in the daytime. But after we came upon our first couple of close sightings with the animals looking back at us dumbly, blinking and clearly disturbed, I found the experience to be arrogantly intrusive to the creatures who called this place home. The next day, discussing my impressions with Jurie, he said that on one night drive, despite being cautioned to shine the lights below the animal's eyes, one group pinned a herd of impala so harshly that when they bolted one of them charged full-tilt right into a tree because it's night vision had been washed out. No, I didn't care for the night drives too much.



This lioness was basking with her mate in the morning sun screened from the road by brush. When you see something special, the best thing to do is coast to a stop, shut off your engine and be so quiet your breathing sounds loud as you try to absorb the wildlife. Unfortunately, our experience with this noble creature was cut short by a white sedan parked with the engine running and their stereo system dull thumping. After a couple of minutes of this, the feline pair slipped off into the bush like smoke. Such a pity.



This amazing male baboon was serenely seated right at the side of the road, watching his clan. We pulled to a stop and he could have reached out and touched the car, but he

never turned his head towards us. Remaining stoically staring ahead, you could see his eyes frequently flicking ever so slightly towards us. We were struck by the rich, woody brown of his eyes. It occurred to me that we were epitomizing the foolish tourist, stopped with our windows down literally within inches of an animal capable of such speed and agility that he could have leapt up into the opening in a heart beat, but there was something in his eyes and demeanor that belied all that, and when we finally pulled away slowly, only then did he turn his head to watch us go and while



I suppose it was just an unthinking movement, he raised his hand in a gesture that seemed for all intents and purposes like a small, acknowledging wave.

Baboons are born after a gestation period of six months, and are carefully cared for by their mothers, which can be seen in the photo of the little duo close to mom. Although other females in the troop like to play with the infant, the mother will only allow them to hold it once it has learned to walk. We were told that when an adult male is threatened by dominant



males, he will often grab an infant from any female in the troop, which successfully foils the attack.

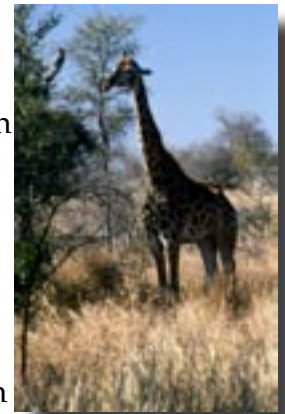


Young vervet monkeys like the one sunning himself on a

bridge are born mainly from October to January after a gestation period of almost five months. As they share the riverine forest with a host of birds, including one of their major predators—the crowned eagle—young monkeys must quickly learn to distinguish between dangerous birds and harmless ones. We watched one vervet torment the manager of an outdoor bar at the hotel fronting on the park until the man’s face grew set and hard and he began stalking the patio area, red-faced and sweating, with a slingshot in his hand and murder in his eye. While it was understandable

that the potential for injury to a guest would be any establishment’s greatest and justifiable fear, it was also clear that it was quite the game for the vervet, who would preen and chitter as its actions sparked laughter from the small crowd.

When you try and talk about favorite animals, a difficult prospect at best because they all have certain fascinating aspects, the giraffe is a name that also leaps to mind for me. One of the few animals that uses mostly its front legs when it runs, and moves left and right legs in tandem instead of fore and aft. This



giraffe went from a standstill to full flight across the road in front of us in the blink of an eye and what was most astonishing was how this hooved animal weighing three to four-thousand pounds landed and moved absolutely silently. These elegant creatures possess an intricate blood mechanism to pump blood up to their heads and backs, enabling them to bend over to graze without blacking out. The spot patterns are unique as fingerprints and their coats get darker as they get older which is also a form of heat control. Giraffes rarely lie down, and give birth standing up. The babies drop as far as 6 - 10 feet. If they do not get their feet under them on their own in fifteen minutes, they rarely survive. Males



are smooth-coated and horned on the top of head, females have furry crests on theirs. Males often have bald throats under their jaws from head-butting

combat. This photo is a rare and unnerving sight; a lone baby giraffe, lost or parents killed. The odds against its’ survival are staggering, but our guide said a good sign was that it seemed to have latched on to a herd of impala, using them to warn it of impending danger.

Impalas can hold and delay the birth of newborns up to one month. From the birth of the



first impala, all babies in the herd are born within twenty-four hours. On our first morning out with Jurie, we hadn't driven five minutes into the park when we both

had cameras out at our first sighting; three small impalas a little way off the road in some light brush. Jurie dryly said, "Save your film. We will see them much better, much closer, they are *everywhere*." He was right, and these pictures are the result. Because their numbers are so profligate, these skittish but lovely animals are jokingly referred to as "fast food" for predators.



Also smilingly called the "McDonald's of the bush" for the black stripes on their butts often shaped like the McDonald's arches. Really lovely, sensitive creatures, even the bucks wear a certain delicacy about them.



Of the seventy-seven species of African antelope, only the waterbuck has a distinctive white ring around the rump. After awhile you learn to ignore the quick jokes about toilet seats when looking at these gorgeous grazing beasts. Grasses of a high nutritional quality and a regular supply of water are both essential habitat requirements for these animals. Relative to their small population size, more waterbuck are killed by lion than any other antelope in Kruger, and 60 to 80 per cent of deaths can be attributed to these predators. Waterbuck are uncommon throughout their range in South Africa and currently number a modest 1400 in Kruger.



Kudus (female left, dining male below right) sport tawny-brown to grey-brown coats, marked with white stripes



on the flanks which vary greatly in shape, size and pattern. Notice the V-shaped band on forehead (visible on the female) and white spots on cheeks and over the eyes. Males

display manes of long hair extending from the back of the head along the back to the tail, as well as on the lower neck to the belly. A kudu bull displays the longest horns of all the Kruger antelope. The horns grown with age into a distinctive corkscrew shape. There have been several observations of jousting kudu bulls interlocking their spiral horns and being unable to disengage. Unable to disentangle their horns or flee, the helpless contestants soon fall prey to predators.

Cows and their young form social groups of four to ten. We loved the deep rose tint in the female's ears and when you would see them backlit the ears just glowed.



The spotted hyena is well known for its macabre chuckle or "laugh", which is an indispensable sound of the African bush at night. The large head, sloping back and a keen sense of smell is unique to this species. Females dominate the social hierarchy and are larger than males. We watched this male walk warily along the side of the truck, curious and unafraid. He visibly dismissed us as unthreatening, inedible or both, and calmly headed towards a concrete storm culvert poured beneath the road. Jurie said those were favorite spots for napping.



Warthogs have naked skin with sparse, long bristles. A characteristic feature of the warthog is the protruding curved tusks, which in boars grow into formidable weapons. These tusks are used to dig up roots, which they relish. I liked the tuft of hair at the end of the thin tail, which was very visible when they run with the tail stiffly erect as if it were a rudder. Warthogs have the peculiar habit of kneeling on the front knees while feeding and foraging. One of those creatures that make you feel as if you'd stepped back millennia in time.

The running joke about wildebeests is that they were made last, out of the remaining spare parts at



hand. Despite their disproportionate appearance and ungainly movements, I found them to be admirable creatures with a placidity that was calming to observe. Blue wildebeest favor short grasses and need to drink less than other grazers such as zebra and buffalo. Although wildebeest are dependent on water, the severe drought of the early nineties' had little effect on their population, currently estimated at about thirteen thousand. The pastoral scene with the wildebeest grazing alongside impala is one of my favorites from the journey.



A large and powerful bovine, the African buffalo reaches shoulder heights of up to five feet and a mass of as much as a ton. Both sexes have horns,

those of the bulls are characterized by a heavy boss and upward curved horns as is evident in the noble male above and female below here. Mainly preyed upon by lions, when a herd member is attacked, others will rush to its defense. Jurie said that collectively a number of buffalo are more than capable to stave off an attack by an entire pride of lions. A wounded buffalo bull is regarded as most dangerous by hunters.



We were surprised to learn that these lovable little creatures, Rock Dassies, are the African elephant's closest living relative.

In spite of the size difference, their close evolutionary relationship is deduced from similarities in the structure of the feet and teeth. Rock Dassies like basking in the sun on large rocks, particularly during mornings and late

afternoons. Dassies are heavily preyed upon by eagles, caracal and leopards. We spent some time watching this community of Dassies while watching for whales at Hermanus and while the few dozen tourists and sightseers were all oohing and aahing at the tiny black sliver of a single whale back hundreds of yards out, I happened



to turn around to see what people often miss when traveling, preoccupied with the scenery or wildlife; the little vignettes that capture the life of the

people there. The old man seated on the bench was looking into a lovely cove, but it seemed his eyes were focused somewhere far beyond that, and I loved the eye-to-eye communication of the young man seated at the waterside café with his dog patiently waiting across the street on the grassy area.



We spent a smiling afternoon at Boulders Beach, a lovely spot between Simon's Town and Cape Point. Penguins are among the most social of all birds. All penguins

are colonial to some degree. Penguins use their bills to preen their feathers frequently, which must be maintained in prime condition to ensure waterproofing and insulation. A gland near the base of the tail secretes oil that the penguin distributes throughout its feathers. They also preen for several minutes in the water by rubbing their bodies with their flippers while twisting and turning over. Watching a protected community such as this, it was hard not to be struck by the group's resemblance to a convention of jolly, industrious little old men dressed to the nines in tuxes and tails. Some of these images seem to show several high-level conferences going on.





The Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town is smaller than some we have visited, and not even near the scale of the amazing aquarium in Valencia,

Spain, but they do an impressive job in Cape Town. One of the great, unique features is that certified divers can pay to go diving in the main salt water tank with sharks and more...which Heidi did as I snapped happily away outside the tank. A great day and experience for both of us. Sharks teeth



move like a conveyer belt to replace their teeth, they will go through as many as 20,000 teeth in their lifetime. Heidi found one on the rock bed of the tank and it was not only as sharp as a just-ground knife edge, it survived the journey home to begin a second life as a cool souvenir.



We were touched by the clear reverence and love of the park and its precious inhabitants by every single person we met there. Though Kruger was clearly one of the great spots on earth to work if you're suited for it, a job is still a job. If you were interested and respectful, just opened up, eager and happy to share their precious knowledge. I guarantee we got better service than a the group of French tourists we heard about who piled onto their safari truck, spent the entire time talking and yakking, one woman exclusively on her cell phone. The tour guides also face the benign frustrations of cross-cultural differences, like the story of a group of Japanese tourists who came upon a lion right in the road by the truck, and the guide was busy pointing out leonine features and facts when he realized the Japanese were photographing birds on the other side, so



with a shrug of his shoulders, switched over to background on the birds. The Japanese tour guide and interpreter then indicated they were ready to move on. Several hours later, after lunch, they asked to be taken back to see the lion as it they were at a zoo or the animals punched a clock.

There were sad, harsh realities, too. We heard about a couple who were living in the park studying the elephants and for no apparent reason, one afternoon an elephant entered the compound and killed the woman.

One night over dinner, people were talking about missionaries and we mentioned there was a religious group of twenty or thirty on our flight in from the States, and someone laughed and said that Africa attracts missionaries like Hawaii or Bermuda attract tourists. While not faulting their sincerity, he said they tend to look at other cultures through their own mirror, citing a young fellow from the States who'd been bursting with pride over how many bibles he'd distributed and the natives' clear desire to get them. The man added, "I didn't have the heart to tell that man of God that out in the bush, the good book is coveted not for how it can soothe the spirit, but the body; as a handy, portable supply of toilet paper."

One of the tour company folks related a favorite joke: Each night all the animals gather in a circle and receive their assignments for the next day: "Alright, wildebeests, you're off for the next two days, have a good vacation and remember the rest of us poor working slobbs out there pounding the bush beat. Baboons, you can drag your asses across the roads as slow as you want, but you better stay out of the Skusuza campground for a couple of days." I was remembering a Gary Larson cartoon that depicted that same hilarious sequence of events.





And that was the South African bush for me; sights both touching and feral, some both.

Poignant stories of life, love and preservation. It was conflicts and rewards, challenges and achievements, heart-in-your mouth excitement, deep-in-your-belly contentment and pleasure, all from so many delightful and incredible sights, conversations and images. The small things add up to a new universe, too; the incongruity of being in Africa in winter, the way the water swirled in the opposite direction when rushing down the sink or the toilet, a visible, elementally simple fact confirming that we truly were on the other side of the world, as if the panorama of unfamiliar stars in the night sky wasn't testimony enough. Even now individual images pop into my mind; from the near-silhouette sculpture of a tree with three vultures killing time, to a cocky little bright beaked hornbill that strutted right up to the truck brave as you please, looking us right in the eye so assessingly that you wouldn't have been surprised in the least to hear him suddenly speak in a cartoon voice.



The whole experience is defined and framed in memory by motion; the leap of an impala, the glide of the cheetah, the lumbering but graceful gait of the elephant, the odd rhythm of the giraffes and how quickly they get up to speed, the flash of brightly colored birds through the trees, and above all else, the hours motoring slowly down dirt roads with the driver leaning out over the door tracking the spoor. One afternoon Jurie suddenly stopped, backed up a few feet, opened his door and reached down, came back handing us a single, perfect eight-inch long ivory and brown-striped porcupine quill, needle sharp. We walked into a large outdoor



eating space at noon covered by a thatched bamboo roof and once inside you looked up to see the ceiling was

thick with large, bright bats, their velvety wings hooded. You could walk the elevated wooden walkways around the hotel and look down on impala quietly feeding, or be driving back to the park gate spellbound by an impossibly orange sunset. Game drives always began with the instruction that if you even *think* you have spotted something, to call out and they are great about stopping, no matter if it is for a blue headed tiny bird, a bright blossom of wild flowers or so I could freeze a full moon already risen in late afternoon, pale white and sharp in the blue sky



above a sepia carpet of brush and trees. We spent long delightful hours rolling along roads at ten or twenty miles an hour watching the brush glide by, eyes alert for shapes and movement. At night I would lay back in the bed and close my eyes only to see the road edge and a blur of brown and tan brush flowing by, and some nights, even though we're back at home many weeks, I still see that flowing, whispering image in my dreams.



# On History, Change, Color and Conflict

We were on the ground in Cape Town barely twenty-four hours and much was already clear. Where travels to Mexico, Canada, Finland and Spain were windows on new worlds, Africa was instantly on parallel with our journeys to China and Russia—not windows at all, but vast doorways brimming with conflict and challenge so powerful you can practically feel your eyes widening. Upon arriving in Cape Town, I was touched initially by the simplest things; faces of every color on all sides, people paying with currency that not only isn't shades of green but is ornamented by the faces of noble animals instead



of dead politicians, all the while



immersed in a tumble of languages. The air right off the plane is different, infused with a spice, as one instinctively knows the difference between the tang of fall or the balm of a spring morning. This sensation slowly grew to encompass small facts that all add up to remind you this isn't Kansas anymore, Toto: Everyone driving on the wrong side of the road, signs in English and Afrikaans, and black people speaking not in the anger-fueled, deliberately mis-spelled, challenging street hip-hop patois we hear so often in the USA, but in genteel accents, many of them faintly British, a not-so-subtle echo of only one of the nationalities that tried and failed to dominate this continent over generations and generations.

South Africa is a complicated place with a dense history of conflict. Most people today think only of apartheid. The first non-racial

elections in 1994 and the achievement of universal franchise were truly historic victories after many decades of struggle.

The African National Congress (ANC), the largest political party within the broad-based national liberation movement, won 62.6% of the national vote and formed the majority party in a Government of National Unity. They squarely faced the mammoth legacies of apartheid. Of a population then estimated at between 40 and 43.5 million, about 55% lived in huts, outbuildings and in shacks. Overall unemployment was conservatively estimated at close to 30% and African unemployment, at over 35%. The educational system was racially skewed. About 30% of the population was illiterate, with more than half of the student population dropping out of both primary and secondary school. Health services in many areas were non-existent.

But many of the problems that South Africa faces today have long-term historical roots that extend back over four hundred years ago, when Portuguese and Dutch explorers made contact with inhabitants along the South African coast



in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Every history book I read said the same thing: Much like the Spanish in the New World, the sixteenth century Calvinist Dutch frontiersman's view was that God had undeniably conveyed these cultured Europeans to bring enlightenment to the uneducated, barbaric masses (with no regard to their rich, ancient culture) and to reap the lush riches of the land. This view was extended and amplified by the British, who's sole claim to superiority over the Dutch in much of their handling of the South African policy and activities, was that the sons of England were the first whites on the continent to ban slavery. The British took control of the Cape Colony in 1806, leading to an exodus of Dutch colonists, known as Afrikaners, north and east, in the 1830s.



The basis of the African tribal societies, pastoralism and shifting cultivation, was destroyed by two things. The first was the gradual extension of merchant capitalism through trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The second was the expansion of the frontier through the century-long series of wars between British and Boers, moving north and east, and of course, the indigenous Africans were in their path. These wars of conquest brought many African peoples, such as the Basutos and the Zulus, into the capitalist system. The mineral discoveries of the late nineteenth century led to further social and economic upheavals. Diamonds were discovered in 1867; by 1870 there were an estimated 10,000 diamond diggers. Africans had traded in gold from the region for centuries; in 1871, however, a white man "discovered" gold in the Eastern Transvaal. British workers came to South Africa, attracted by new opportunities. The gold discoveries precipitated the rapid development of the mining industry and further military struggles, culminating in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, in which Britain defeated the South African Republic and Orange Free State. Almost fifty years later, the South Africans, leveraged post- World War II confusion and uncertainties among the voters, regained control of the government and took the first steps towards apartheid.

But if it were simply a case of blacks versus whites, that would be one thing. No less evil, but a simple, all too familiar scenario. Seeds of further complication were sown by these pious, myopic Europeans. British capitalist interests faced the critical problem of securing a labor force. The problem of labor scarcity had bedevilled colonial authorities, large landowners and Afrikaner or Boer pastoralists throughout the nineteenth century. An official report of 1876 asked the Government of the Cape Colony "to survey mankind from China to Peru, in the hope of creating a class of cheap laborers who will thankfully accept the position of helots and not be troubled with the inconvenient ambition of bettering their condition". Dissatisfied with the quality of communication, labor and energy among the tribal slaves, the British began to import workers from other spots on the globe; industrious folk from India, golden-skinned people from Malaysia and the Orient. Many of

these people arrived as bright-eyed indentured slaves with contracts in their pockets that guaranteed their freedom after a minimum number of years of servitude, ranging anywhere from five years to a decade. Surprisingly enough, many of those contracts were honored, and a new class was created on the continent. The boiling pot expanded from whites and blacks to include what were euphemistically known as coloureds.

Growing up in pre-Civil Rights era United States, African Americans were commonly referred to in polite, sensitive white homes such as ours first as negroes, then coloreds, and eventually, by the 70's and 80's, as blacks. Uttering the word "nigger" was a capital offense that would land you in your bedroom with a sore bottom and no dinner. So imagine my confusion in the late 70's when African-American rap groups began using the forbidden expletive to describe themselves. A vague shadow of that same sense of confusion struck me when doing my pre-trip research and discovering that "coloreds" were yet a third component of South African society.

Soon after arriving, we discovered that nomenclature was not a clear-cut thing. Some black

Africans resent being called "natives", other dislike the connotations of the word "tribal", while still others seize on their tribal origins. A phrase we heard over and over in discussion with people about social issues in South Africa was, "It's not that simple." It never is, but in this lush, sprawling land, that turned out to be an understatement of the highest order.

I have a real problem with people who travel to far-flung places without taking the trouble to familiarize themselves with such basic things as weather, let alone history, customs and more. We visited South Africa in August, which of course, on that side of the globe, is their wintertime. A French woman dressed in flowing light white cotton was shivering in the lobby of the hotel, complaining bitterly and loudly to anyone who cared to listen or couldn't get enough distance from her about how cold it was in her summer weight outfit. When someone mentioned to her



that it was winter after all, she snapped, "Winter in Africa? Who would have imagined such a thing?" She shot venomous glances at the black hotel staff passing by, as if it were all their fault. Yet all too often when in conversation with locals and people familiar from years of contact and frequent visits, I felt as obtuse as that rude, ignorant woman, despite all my research and reading.

One night we were speaking of a current concern; that at the upcoming election, if not certainly when Nelson Mandela dies, the conflict between rival factions of black natives could explode into civil war. The opposing points of view range from virulent extremists who want the power, resources and riches that the whites have reserved for themselves to completely revert back into black native hands, to moderates who have been working since the demise of apartheid to bring equality to blacks and build a new cooperation with the whites. Both extremes and all between still face a deeply rooted and powerful white community; a white community that still controls most of the diamonds and gold, as well as much of the technology. And caught in between, as always from what I could discern, are the coloureds. I blithely remarked that the same inability of the various tribes to work together is what enabled the Dutch, and then the British, to completely subjugate the native clans. The response from our companions across the dinner table? "It's not that simple."

Followed by a discussion on age-old differences, grudges and separations that have existed between tribes since long before the white man bullied his way onto the continent. Why should the Hutu, Masai or Zulu abandon habits and social structures thousands of years old because of the arrival of fresh-faced new intruders? And shouldn't those thousands of years on the land more than outweigh the few hundred of the usurping, technologically advanced whites? But as anywhere in the world, there are few absolutes. The only thing that was simple is the sad fact that South Africa is a proud, beautiful, complex land caught up in the aftermath of four hundred years of exploitation, and a sea of absolutes. I thought of traveling in Spain and how the Spanish have always referred to the four hundred years of domination by the invading Moors as an "occupation".

Of course, no discussion of the African continent is complete without mention of the AIDS crisis. As everywhere in the world, ignorance and education are the simplest but largest problems. That it is compounded there by a strange blend of tribalism and folklore that has somehow been twisted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to such beliefs that if you get infected, you can purge and cure the disease by having sex with virgins. All I could think was that in this patriarchal society, only a man could have had the gall to start that creepy modern equivalent to an old wife's tale. The result is that as the virus spreads, so does the incidence of rape, which spreads the virus in an expanding, destructive loop. While we were there, a prominent politician named Jacob Zuma, who was at the front of the line to assume the Presidency, was arrested for rape, with his alleged victim HIV-positive. He says it was consensual sex, she says he raped her, and it was like reading the sports page back home talking about the latest professional athlete facing the same situation. Zuma was fired from his former high-level post after allegations (and an upcoming trial) for graft on a grand scale. His supporters say both are orchestrated efforts to discredit Zuma ahead of upcoming elections. That sort of deadly political maneuvering is not any more surprising to me in South Africa than it is back home. What *was* frightening was a story someone told that when Zuma was questioned as to how safe it was for him to return to his family possibly infected, he replied that he'd *showered and washed his hands afterwards*. One of those stories that might be true and maybe not, but just has that sense of being grounded in reality, as if those very words are being spoken more than once a day in homes and bedrooms and accepted as reassuring fact.

But positivity abounds. For every story like that, you could read two about new clinics, new schools, new construction, new prosperity. We were treated kindly and with great warmth by everyone we met, black, white or coloured, taxi driver or orchestra conductor. Everywhere we looked, we saw signs of how hard



people are working to balance the inequities and injustices of apartheid. Housing projects funded by investment groups as far away as Ireland are rapidly replacing the sprawling corrugated tin and cardboard hovel shanty towns known as townships. A four-page article in the in-flight magazine proudly profiled a beer distributor with over 70% of their black delivery drivers now owner-operators. Everywhere we went, from restaurants to museums to shopping, we saw people of all colors interacting. Walking in downtown Cape Town was perfectly safe at the massive V&A Waterfront where security guards could be seen every hundred yards, but walking in town was unnerving and we quickly shifted to taxicabs, even for short hops. One of the best things about the V&A was the diversity of street performers permitted to work on the grounds, especially this young man who played with fire. Amazing to think many of the everyday scenes and conversations we witnessed would have been punishable by prison terms with no appeal, beatings and worse just a decade ago. People we spoke with who had been visiting the country for



years said that the change from even five years ago, let alone ten, were astonishing and quite inspiring.

But unemployment is high, with the naturally resulting peaks in the crime rate. I needed no further sign of how much a problem this is than to read a bold headline on a Johannesburg newspaper that asked if vigilante groups needed to be regulated. Another said, "Police Alone Cannot Win the War on Crime." It was also apparent in every neighborhood, from middle class to high end; not a single home was

without wrought iron or metal bars on all the windows, most were walled in by high stucco or cinder block walls, many of them topped with broken glass shards, and 90% of the homes sport signs warning in large bold print that the domicile is protect by ARMED security.

We were warned that if driving in Johannesburg, to never, ever stop if pulled over by a police car, but rather, to drive to the nearest police station because there were organized groups of predators with vehicles painted and liveried to duplicate official police cars. How a stranger in a foreign country might know where the nearest police station might be located did not enter into this macabre conversation. We were told frightening stories of people who'd been pulled over only to be immediately hemmed in by the "police" car in back and a truck or van darting in out of nowhere to block them in front, after which they were dragged from their vehicle, severely beaten, robbed of all their belongings and left for dead. This anarchist chaos in Joburg, as it is commonly called, is a major concern for the country, with a contract to host the World Cup soccer matches in 2008 in their uneasy pocket

Another sign of mis-directed growth was someone telling us that the police force is now composed 70% of black officers, yet close to 30% of them cannot read or write. And both colored people and whites evidenced growing frustration with what they see as an equal opportunity program that gives blacks preference in jobs, regardless of their qualifications...or lack of them. Coloured people of Indian descent spoke in grave tones describing the increasing exodus of coloured friends, family and acquaintances from the country as the new black government gives that portion of the society short shrift. It was easy and unsettling to see multiple sides; white young or middle age Afrikaners raised with the unspoken implied knowledge that they would always be first in line for education, for jobs, for resources and suddenly one day, though you've never mistreated a black or a colored, you sit with your kids trying to explain how the world has turned upside down. The sea of change is lapping even at the solid walls of such institutions as the oldest university in the country at Stellenbosch, where Afrikaans has been the official language since it's inception. Younger

faculty in the Sciences are calling for the language of their courses to be designated as English, which has become the universal language of scientists and technology throughout the world. The force of the Internet is also a factor, with the university's web pages that had traditionally been in Afrikaans only, now available in English as well.

Change is hard, especially on this scale. Both whites and blacks we spoke with bemoaned changes in the curriculum at schools that eliminates history or social conventions both Afrikaaner *and* tribal. An Afrikaaner woman in her late fifties, when driving some friends back to the hotel, gestured at the hillsides dotted with the lights of all the new cubical, but clean homes occupied by natives, and crisply snapped, "As you can see, they are *everywhere* these days."

Jump back forty-odd years when she was in her twenties'. Pass laws were in effect that barred any blacks and many coloureds from traveling without a valid pass. Open protests were growing in both urban and rural areas until the repressive policies of the 1950s finally exploded in March 1960 when police shot and killed many unarmed demonstrators at a Pan-Africanist Congress anti-pass campaign in Sharpeville. This mobilized protests around the country. In order to stop these massive protests the South African government imposed a state of emergency; many organizations were banned. The next years saw a turn to underground armed struggle between native political groups. The country was in turmoil and armed guerilla violence was not far down the road. By 1964 the state had arrested the first wave of activists connected with armed struggle, and sent them to Robben Island and other prisons around the country over the next decades. Many went into exile. All this had occurred in this woman's life, and I thought she had a right to be bitter, even if I didn't agree with her philosophy.

Today, you can visit the prison, where former inmates work as docents and guides. Everyone we'd talked to said it is something everyone should do, though it probably wouldn't be the highlight story you tell back home about your fantastic vacation. Modern ferries holding around 150 passengers ply across the harbor between the Cape Town waterfront and Robben Island. It was a very unique experience. The boat

we took contained several groups of youngsters, and they were boisterous but grew as solemn as every adult the minute we entered the narrow-halled structure that was as forbidding and confining as any jail the world over. Our guide explained that he could not speak too loudly because his larynx had been damaged during a beating by prison guards. In a hour of walking around the grounds where the men exercised, ate, labored and slept in bare long rooms with eight or ten double bunks, you got an unnerving feel for what life had been like here, in these very rooms, day in and day out, not for months or years, but in many cases, decades. Yet the man said that years later after the end of apartheid, he invited the same guard who had been so abusive to share a meal at his home with his family. "It was important that he see we are people...just like him." It was tragic and uplifting, gut-wrenching. Melancholy filled the place like smoke. It was like visiting Auschwitz or the World Trade Center, forcing yourself to look at what people can be capable of. And we were glad that we'd gone. Yet even the youngsters hadn't fully regained their spirits on the ride back in the bright morning on the lovely blue water.



We had a reflective quiet meal after returning, disturbed only by a newscast on a TV mounted in the café. The talking head was detailing the latest developments in a scandal that had filled the papers for days. Out of several thousand black civil service workers, over two thousand had just been indicted for corruption following a long investigation. In an interview, Nelson Mandela was asked what most surprised him in the post-apartheid period. He replied that he was shocked to see so many blacks exploiting their own people in the exactly the same manner as they'd been exploited by the whites. It seems to me that Mandela, the father and symbol of so much to so many, has always been thought of as an exceptional African man, and that recent events have caused people to make the distinction that he is an exceptional *human being*, setting standards that raise the bar not just in race and politics, but in the pressures and temptations in daily life.



# On Songs and Music



38<sup>th</sup> International  
Horn Symposium

Our international trips are always to attend the annual workshop and symposium organized for French Horn players by the International Horn Society. The conference draws across the spectrum; from the very best professional horn players from around the globe to music professors and educators, amateurs and students. The symposium consists of master classes and workshops on everything from music theory to horn technique and style. There are concerts scheduled throughout the event; daytime concerts are often for young players or feature the debut of original compositions. The main evening concerts feature top players performing a wide variety of repertoire as well as original pieces commissioned especially for the horn by the Society. As always, I enjoyed many amazing performances.

Each year there are always one or two, with some very special highlights that etch themselves into the heart and memory. In Spain, it was the performance of the Russian Horn Choir, a group of about twenty players each playing ancient megaphone-shaped horns that are capable of sounding only a single note. This really puts the test to the performers, who must be in perfect synchronization. The only thing I've ever heard that puts similar demands on the musicians is a bell-choir, where each musician rings hand bells, and they must all strike their notes at the exact time. The Russians created a sound that was like a giant, living music box. Here in Cape Town, I was really touched by the debut of a special piece of music written for horn and marimba, of all things. It was just amazing, the rich textures of the horn filling the concert hall over the warm, woody

percussive music of the marimba.

As always at these annual conferences, every evening offered a different program of music; not all to my taste but all interesting, ranging from brand-new, specially commissioned pieces to renditions of masterworks by Haydn, Mozart, Brahms and many more. No matter whether it was modern works that I failed to understand and grasp, horn quartets or some lush, incredible orchestral work, there's no substitute for live performances and to sit in concert halls ranging from Cape Town



to the grounds of the University at Stellenbosch, watching musicians in their concert black clothing, the lights winking off

the brass, warming the violins, violas, cellos and basses in their ranks, the stillness of the mesmerized audience all around me like a cloak, I knew without a doubt how lucky I was to be here soaking it all in.

A great delight was the performance of one of my favorite Haydn concertos, one of those pieces written strictly as a training exercise, and consequently you hear it often, every young orchestral musician knows it by heart, but I love it all the same; two horns trading solos over a soaring orchestra. The horn players were two of the very best in the world, first chair players who have worked for the London Philharmonic and Prague Philharmonic orchestras. There were long moments where I lounged back in my padded seat looking around this truly lovely concert hall that seated maybe a thousand people, very intimate, but large enough for a full orchestra. The walls, paneled in some lovely red-toned African wood, soared in delicate patterns reaching maybe three stories high, where an ivory-painted ceiling dotted with spokes designed to reflect the sound seemed to hover above us. It was such a potent, powerful stretch of time, ensconced in that concert hall on the African continent, thinking of halls I've been lucky enough to have enjoyed from Denver to Seattle, Amsterdam to Madrid, listening to music composed over three hundred

years ago by one of the great musical geniuses of this world and performed by some of the master musicians on the planet today. My heart swelled, and I wanted it to just go on and on and on. All the trials and tribulations and stress of the eleven thousand mile journey to get here were simply washed away, and nothing existed but the live music washing over and through me. Afterwards, I came outside to look up into a deep blue black sky dotted with the stars that shine on the other end of the world, the strains of Haydn and Mozart still echoing in my head. It was quite the night.

Another incredible highlight for me was the performance of an African troupe of five musicians playing traditional African music played on original instruments, most of them hand-made. Their leader was a tall, broad-faced man with skin the warm color of a half cup of coffee filled to the brim with rich, thick cream. His deep baritone voice was incredibly soothing; I could visualize his children dropping off to sleep as that voice crooned bedtime stories to them. Before each piece of music, he would describe how the instruments they were using had been created, moving on then to talk about how the music itself was structured. For one song, they used instruments that were rows of thin bamboo tubes about a foot long glued together until they formed a rippled sheet of tubes maybe eighteen inches wide. The tubes were filled with tiny beads or rocks and sealed on the ends. When tilted side to side, they uncannily created the unmistakable sound of ocean waves rushing onto a beach. The players would tilt them back and forth, slapping and tapping on the ends to create a percussive base composed of the rush of water and the rhythmic patterns they wanted. He then showed how one musician would play in two-two time, tipping the bamboo sheets and slapping the ends to a count of 1-2, 1-2, 1-2, then the second player would come in playing to a count of 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. He smiled widely then, saying, "You will notice however, in Western music the second player usually will come in on the beat, playing their first sound just as the first player completes their second. In African music, we play on the off-beat, coming in



between the 1 and 2 and emphasizing the third beat. If we didn't it just would sound...*wrong*." And then they played, just the two percussion players to demonstrate. When the song began, with the percussion instruments driving along beneath their rhythmic stamping feet, flutes, blown horns and incredible voices, you understood exactly what he'd been saying and the music acquired a greater depth, texture and emotion, because you knew what to listen for and held a deeper understanding of what they were doing.



They were all dressed in brightly colored, tie-dyed clothing, two of the men in swaying tribal headdresses of ostrich, owl and African eagle feathers that swayed and flowed majestically as the performers danced and stamped their feet and the music built and built and swept us all away in its intricate rhythms.

One night in Beijing, China, our guides slipped a small group of us into a show in a neighborhood theater featuring Chinese acrobats. We were but a handful of white faces in a bustling, loud little neighborhood theater packed to bursting with families who had all brought baskets filled with home-made snacks and treats. The air was bright with the gabble of darting bright-eyed children, and when the acrobats came out, the music was garish, almost painfully loud and the skill of the performers was awesome, a word that has lost much of its meaning these days. We looked at each other wide-eyed, knowing for a short while, we were lucky enough to have been in the center of the real, unadulterated, undistilled China. That is exactly how I felt in Cape Town watching and listening to these five brilliantly-clad performers as they chanted, danced, sang and played with a fervor and honesty that touched you to your very soul with the essence of Africa.

But it wasn't all scheduled and rehearsed classical concerts by any means. It never is. Walking one crisp but sunny afternoon down at the Victoria and Albert waterfront, I came across a street musician. A lean, elegant, graying gentleman sat loose-limbed with his guitar on a shaded bench. He wore a crisp tan suit that was

spotless, if out of style, was sharply clean-shaven and embraced a lovely guitar with a pickup mounted in the fretboard, from which snaked a thin black cable to a tiny square amplifier. The music issuing from that small box froze me in my tracks from the first clear note. I was struck by how parallels in art and culture from different countries so often interweave to evoke a new perception or sensation or even train of thought. Here I was world's away from home, exploring South Africa, never suspecting I would discover music that transported me to Paris Le Hot Jazz clubs of the 1930's. Over the course of thirty minutes, effortlessly playing both rhythm and leads simultaneously, the guitarist noticed me not drifting away as most people did and his playing turned outward; more a performance, even if it was for an audience of one. He was capable of creating such a wide range of sounds from his instrument; everything from slow, sustained, mournful notes and sweet melodies to fleeting, nimble chains of sixteenth notes, each of them crystal clear and defined, yet so fast you couldn't count the rhythmic spaces in between. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine the famous three-fingered French guitarist Django Reinhardt right there, not ten feet away, such was this man's skill and emotion. I'd been planning to do some small shopping but when he stopped for a break, I gave him everything I had in my pocket save taxi fare back to the hotel, and it was worth every rand.

A personal musical highlight took place on a bright, sweaty, brilliant night when I was able to sit in with a South African jazz band in a packed, smoky club. It was jam night at this club, a place called "Swingers", a name echoing with the snazzy monickers USA clubs sported in neon and flashing lights during the disco era, but there was nothing even remotely close to disco in the music being played that night.

The occasion was arranged by a young British horn player who'd been living in Cape Town for some time, along with a black professor of African studies from Virginia who's been visiting the country for almost twenty years. They put out an invitation to visit the jazz club and a professor of music from Washington state feverishly began working to arrange a jazz piece, vibraphone master Milt Jackson's soothing, flowing "Bag's Groove". Following an evening classical concert,

the professor gathered a group of students and a professional player from New York in the lobby of the theater; the pros eager-faced, the young, exclusively classically-trained horn students less so.

After a short drive, we pulled up to a low slung building that looked smaller on the outside than it turned out to be upon entering. There were so many cars parked outside that they had two men in orange vests directing people to park in a dirt lot across the street. We trooped into the low-ceilinged, smoke-hazed club, several people in our group lugging bulky horn cases and attracting our fair share of looks, but there was nothing threatening in the faces that turned our way, only curiosity. The club was packed to capacity, and we had to wedge ourselves into a small area by the service bar, standing with beers and drinks in hand, craning our heads to get a look at the four musicians on the bandstand as they worked out, performing a lovely and smoking version of Miles Davis' classic, *All Blues*.

The band was composed of four black men, all apparently in their mid-to late 40's. You could see in the casually competent way they held and worked their instruments that these were seasoned pros, as the house band for regular jam sessions must be, the world over. To stage left, a tall, beefy black man stood possessively over a small mixing board, long, supple fingers dextrous and delicate on the knobs and sliders. His chiseled face was serious and set in concentration as each player came and went and he bent to the task of adjusting for their sound, accommodating their style, and in some cases, clearly compensating for or lessening shortcomings. In forty minutes of music he didn't smile once. We sat (stood actually, the club was so packed) and listened to a full set, just to get the lay of the land and relax a bit. I got to chatting with a blonde beanpole of a young Texan named Max, a soldier on leave for the horn conference, who played in the V Corps Army Band. As is often the case when musicians meet, a fine deal was struck; after the conference, I would help him broaden his knowledge of recorded blues in exchange for him broadening my horizons in country music.

We were greeted by the club host, who explained the jam night structure. Anyone was welcome to get up and play at either of the two microphones set on the club floor immediately

in front of the low riser for the band. If you responded to the tune the band was playing, you got in line to play. Most of the musicians awaiting their turn sat on a row of stools up against the opposite wall. Half way through the set I spotted a stool open up and I made a beeline for it. Enjoying a much better view of the stage plus the room and its boisterous patrons, the unspoken order also quickly came clear: If there was a line of musicians to play behind you, you were expected to play a chorus and one solo. If no one was in line behind, you could extend your performance through a few choruses, or more than one solo. The band were indeed, real pros. When musicians who weren't quite as talented as they believed (or hoped) strayed beyond what was polite (or tolerable), the keyboard player and drummer would drop in a quick rhythm change that immediately bounced out the errant players. Very slick.

The horn professor coordinating the group explained to the host that they'd created basic charts for the group to use and for the house band to follow. When introducing this large and unique group of musicians, the man described the Horn Symposium, and what a significant event it was for South Africa, saying, "We are excited now to bring you a instrument that has never graced the stage in thirty years of jazz music in this club. The French Horn. Now all our regulars and usual suspects know written music is strictly forbidden on jam nights, but we're happy to make an exception for these folks. Please join me in a giving a warm welcome to our guests from the International Horn Society Symposium!"

The players trooped across the room and lined up standing just in front of the bandstand. It was quite the sight—the colored and dim lights of the room randomly reflected in the deep curved expanse of the burnished horns, gleaming golden, or buttery yellow or chrome, some bright as coins, others dull as pewter. The brass group lined up across the entire stage front, so close to the first row of tables that patrons offered to hold up the sheet music for them. The



music kicked off raggedly, the band and horn players reaching for unison, finding it quickly and then sailing off. The horns, even without the amplified band

of guitar, bass, drums and keyboard behind them propelled a wall of sound across and through the room that you could feel in your collarbone. It was a rare and strong treat to watch the reaction sweep across the room like a swift-moving wave; people were nudging their neighbors, smiling widely, many with mouths open, especially along the lines of sax and trumpet players who'd come in to jam with the band.

When the music opened out to the solos, the horn professor kicked it off, playing a smooth sequence that captured the lilt of Milt Jackson's composition. He turned to pass the solo along to the young player to his right and she held her own credibly, though she dropped back the very instant her few bars of solo were completed, relief and triumph visible on her shining face. Looking out with trepidation at the massed, moving crowd, the next student stepped up uncertainly, blew a hesitant couple of notes, and then cast a look of panic at the professor who acknowledged it and immediately cued the next player, Max, the Texan. Suddenly I saw this blonde head pop up in front of the bandstand and Max just cut loose, fully in the spirit of the thing. The discipline of the service coupled with the demanding and varied schedule of the military band served him well and it was wonderful, or brilliant, as they are fond of saying over there.

The solos wound up on my side of the stage with the professional hornist from New York who took the music and audience for a stunning ride in his timeless solo. He and the music professor traded off then, fully exploiting the range of their instruments, in motion and harmony and free concentration like any other jazz player the stunned audience had ever seen. But it was the *sound* that was opening eyes...to hear a French horn *improvising*...darting from one end of the scale to the other and back, shifting from breathy, rhythmic note patterns to soulful slides to that rich, rich inspiring quality that breathes the word *anthem*. They loved it.

It was on the crest of this that the host introduced me as "...the smallest instrument" they'd ever had in the club and I walked into the lights with my harmonica in my outstretched palm for the band and crowd to see. The guitar player leaned down and I asked for a blues shuffle in C. He called it out to the band, I settled in at the mike and heard this understated soft

music that was soulful but...waiting. In the international and universal language of live music, the four men were saying in unison; "OK, show us what you got."

I usually start off with people I have never performed with before by hanging back, listening to where they are where they might be going, but having had the benefit of hearing this band for a full set, I was happy to be assertive and knocked out a snappy, bright melody of five notes, went back and repeated it, then went back and embellished it slightly, brought it back to where we started and suddenly the band kicked in.

That sensation is exactly what I'd gone out into the night in strange, difficult, challenging country with a complete group of strangers to find. It was one of the times when all the world smiles on you; without even worrying about cracking or missing a note, you sail up to your highest with confidence and sustain it longer than ever before. Patterns and melodies leap into your head unbidden, jig-saw puzzle parts that float effortlessly together, constantly building to a fuller, richer, deeper statement and image. With my back to the stage there was no eye contact, which forces you to concentrate solely on what you are *hearing*.



Sweat was pouring off me, I had to blink its sting away from my eyes, occasionally a mustache hair would catch in the harp reed cover and be yanked free as I slid

up the scale, but that piercing, sharp pain was muffled by my adrenalin and pure pleasure. I played as well and freely as I ever have in my life. We traded solos around the room three times and when the guitar player stepped out with a stinging restatement of our original five notes, I dropped down from single clear bright notes to mouth-wide deep chording, suddenly riding down low with the bass and keyboards. I glanced over my shoulder to see them both welcome me to their world with huge smiles and we built a solid, shimmering driving bottom that the guitar player could walk on like water. If we needed any further sign of how in synch we had become, instead of the usual semi-halting, ragged wind down to a finish of a jam, we traded the theme one last time, all hard and close together and then

swooped down to a closing chord with satisfied finality.

Coming on the heels of the french horn performance, the place erupted. People were reaching out from the first row to shake my hand, others patting me on the back as I turned around to trade thank you looks and hand shakes with the band. Perhaps best of all, I looked over and the guy on the little mixing board was finally smiling, hugely. Hours later, wide awake and wired in my hotel bed, I listened to the song we'd created over and over, would close my eyes to look out on a smoky sea of faces of all colors, all smiles, all alive and my body thrummed with strength of the images, communication, connection and energy I'd forged in a tiny dot on the map in South Africa where musicians gather, just like any other bar or club in the world, in the space of a few minutes. The power of music.

The thing about traveling is you're always on the move every day, with lots of things to see and experience, lots of maps, lists and bus or tram schedules. Even on longer trips of a month or so in any given country, you hate to waste a day. Or at least we do. So you come to really savor quiet, reflective stretches like the times I wrote sections of this at day's end, sitting happily looking out on the bush hoping for some wild animal to walk by the window, tucked up high on balconies



dwarfed by the stolid and unique bulk of Table Mountain or overlooking the Atlantic ocean where huge rollers flashed whitely in

the dark night, the waves ending their long journey from distant places. I love those moments contentedly laboring to shape and compress the flood of thoughts, emotions, sights, sounds and scents into words on paper, all the while thinking how daunting it is to try and capture that lovely,





tortured and complicated place, knowing that some of it would have to wait until I had the perspective of Home.

I will always remember the day we stood on Cape Point, the southernmost spot of the continent with Antarctica the next landmass beyond where the Indian and Atlantic oceans meet. It made

me remember visiting the North Pole for a work assignment in years past. The link of the two moments, separated by thousands of miles and many years, the simple image of having stood at those two far-flung points on the globe generated a sensation of accomplishment. This trip was trying, challenging, fun, fun, fun and so exciting and interesting that sometimes it seemed you could actually feel time stopping. Not the most demonstrable person in the world, I surprised even myself when our bush walk guide asked how everyone was doing when we settled down for lunch of power bars and juice boxes on a high stone rock offering a three-hundred sixty degree view of the park and without even thinking, I enthusiastically cried, "I'm having a *great* time."

Knowing it would be winter, we each took favorite sweaters. This is not as simple a thing as it sounds. Living in Hawaii now for almost four years we had to dig these sweaters out of mothballs, and all the crisp fall days and chill winter evenings of the past came out with them. My choice was a plain black V-neck sweater that I'd loved for years, Heidi took a cream cardigan. We wore those sweaters constantly in chilly, rainy Cape Town and every night once we were in Kruger. We ate several nights in Kruger at an open air dining space, lent heat and atmosphere by big braziers burning huge chunks of split wood and in the mornings we'd layer up for the day's excursion and the tang of wood smoke on our sweaters was potent. After we got back home and unpacked, I saw the cream sweater sitting out just as Heidi walked in the room. She smiled and picked it up gently, softly saying can't bring myself to get it cleaned yet."

She held it out to me.



"I

"It smells like Africa."

I bent my nose to the soft fabric and it was all there; the droning plane flights where putting on your favorite sweater not only fended off the artificial chill, but gave you some small cloak of invulnerability against the hundreds of strangers. I inhaled the crisp scent of Cape Town the day we stepped off the airplane from the States, the tang of Cape Town Harbor, the oil they used on the wood paneled concert house at the university, the excellent coffee we were served almost everywhere, the dampness of walking in clouds at the top of Table Mountain, the mouth-watering aromas floating from kitchens of the many restaurants where we experimented happily, the sharp wood smoke of our outdoor Kruger dinners. I didn't need a mirror to know the smile I sent her was a melancholy one. That was weeks



ago now, Halloween is right around the corner, and the sweaters have been cleaned and tucked away. And in this instant, writing these closing words, I wished we'd waited awhile longer to do that.

