

SAFARI THROUGH SOUTH AFRICA - III THE GARDEN ROUTE & BACK TO CAPE TOWN

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After the excitement of Kruger Park I wonder if the rest of the journey will prove a disappointment but no – the landscapes of this country are magnificent and visiting all the coastal towns, villages and Capes along the famous Garden Route provides a fascinating experience.

One day we explore Limpopo Province and the Drakensberg Escarpment, the Dragon's Mountains. From God's Window, with its stunning panoramic views high above the Lowveld, Kruger Park can be seen in the distance. We glimpse the three Rondavels and the scenic Blyde River Canyon in Moremela and stop to discover Bourke's Luck potholes, a natural phenomenon caused by water erosion over thousands of years. Lunch is at a darling village not far from Middelburg, its one main street lined with the glorious deep purple-blue Jacaranda trees and plentiful naughty monkeys. After lunch the entire Kitchen staff of the Restaurant come out to sing for us – music and rhythm is so naturally inbuilt into this nation, every single person seems to have a beautiful singing voice, the African harmonies thrilling and easy on the ear.

Leaving Kruger Park we drive into Swaziland entering at the Pig's Peak gate. This proves quite a performance with strict border controls for entering and leaving, passports visas and stamps and a lot of queuing. But it is

worth it, a lovely country, much greener, lusher, somehow more prosperous than its huge neighbour. There are many fruit crops, mangoes, bananas, macademia nuts, lychees, to name a few and the farms seem well managed and neat.

We visit an impressive Glass Factory along the route to Manzini. It is fascinating looking down from the Gallery on the workshop below where an obviously Master Craftsman is blowing a beautiful vase out of a lump of red-hot glass on a long pole, swinging the pole to draw it out, pulling and moulding, surrounded by his highly skilled team of workers. The men are all cheery and laughing, enjoying the work, and one man stretches up to give me a small glass animal on a pole but I cannot reach it and he is reprimanded by his boss. The factory was closed down for many years then bought by a Frenchman who brought back many of the original workers and sent them to study glassblowing in Europe, making this an outstandingly successful enterprise.

That night we are at Ezulwini and some of us venture into the Royal Swazi Hotel Casino for a quick gamble, but it is not quite Monte Carlo! Laws in South Africa dating from 1673 heavily restricted Gambling for 300 years, and although since 1996 certain cities have been granted licences for Casinos, it has become traditional to cross the border into Swaziland to gamble, where it is allowed freely, probably why it is such a palaver getting into the country. Next day we leave Swaziland quite as ceremoniously as we entered but by the Golela Gate, and take the road south to Jozini.

Jozini is at the heart of the ancient Kingdom of Zululand and we are staying in a charming hotel in the middle of nowhere called the Ghost Mountain Inn. The Ghost Mountain caves are the traditional burial place of many Zulu chieftains who are said to haunt the mountain,

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View of Table Bay from Table Mountain

the craggy rock on its peak resembling a haggard old woman. We cruise on Lake Jozini and although there are plenty of Hippo and Crocodiles, it is cold and windy and they are not very forthcoming – it is more fun watching the Ostriches and Rhino on the banks. In the morning there is a Game Drive in the nearby Manyoni Reserve where we spot plenty of small game and in the Hides we see Terrapins and colourful Egyptian Geese, and the occasional Giraffe and Zebra. In the afternoon I visit a Zulu village, a simple farming village whose headman, Justice, shows me around proudly. He is charming, educated and well-spoken as he stresses the importance of the Ancestors, who are buried in the ceremonial Burial Hut which has pride of place in the village, and who are consulted on all important matters.

After a brief night in Durban we take the plane to Port Elizabeth, a pretty town on the edge of the Garden Route. Apparently it was named by Sir Rufane Donkin, a soldier poet and politician who became Governor of the yet unnamed town in 1820, for his young wife Elizabeth who had died a few months previously in India.

On the way to Knysna we stop at Storms River in Tsitsikamma National Park and walk over the breathtaking suspension bridge, also spotting the entire South African Rugby Team and their coach there – the Springboks have just won the Rugby World Cup!

Knysna is a quaint town beside a tranquil lagoon, with two sandstone headlands out in the Bay which dramatically protect it from the pounding surf of the Indian

Ocean. We are staying for two days so I opt out of touring an Oyster Farm and have a lazy sunny day instead, exploring the village and lunching on the charming waterfront. Next day we take the road to Arniston, passing by the Outeniqua Railway Museum, full of old locomotives and fancy carriages from the 1890's fitted out as dining rooms and salons. We then take the small Power Van railway from the town of George to Groot Brakrivier, a winding, scenic coastal mountain route. A different experience and slight relief from the coach!

Arniston, our next stop, is a small town named after an East Indiaman (and Ship of the Line) which wrecked off this coast in 1815, and was swiftly plundered by the local inhabitants. The *HMS Arniston* had made many successful

voyages for the British East India Company but due to lack of navigational equipment thought she had passed Cape Point and smashed in heavy storms on the rocks at Cape Agulhas, (the Needles), about 30 kms from the present-day town of Arniston. The town is charming with a little fishing village beside it and we dine royally from the local day's catch and traditional Malva Pudding which I am getting to like, a light succulent sponge cake. Malva means Geranium in Afrikaans and since people used the leaves to line their pudding tins, hence the name.

The actual southernmost point of Africa is Cape Agulhas not, as many believe, the Cape of Good Hope which is further along. It is a pretty drive through farmland, plenty of beef cattle and sheep. The Cape is dramatic and beautiful, with ferocious stormy seas and seals and cormorants aplenty. The confluence of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans creates wild turbulent waves round the headland, rather like Kanya Kumari at the southernmost tip of India, and there is a classic red and white striped Lighthouse warning sailors of its treacherous waters.

The countryside along the Garden Route is very rural, rather like England – rolling green hills and wavy yellow cornfields against a distant mountain range to our right, a spine which runs the whole length of the coast, the sea to our left. As we travel through the famous Winelands of South Africa Brenda our guide points out a wide variety of different flowers birds and animals, including Blue Cranes and Buzzards, Llamas and Springbok.

Coming down the mountain we see pretty Franschoek

town laid out below us deep in the valley surrounded by vineyards spreading for miles in every direction. After a mediocre wine-tasting and lunch at the Rickety Bridge winery we move on into Cape Town itself and since it is a glorious day Brenda decides to take us up Table Mountain right away.

The fabled Table Mountain! An iconic landmark famous not only for towering over South Africa's most well-known city, but also for having been a Beacon to sailors for centuries, this flat-topped mountain looms out of the sea rising over 1,000m. Flanked to the east by the Devil's Peak and to the west by the Lion's Head, it provides a dramatic backdrop to the city, and is acknowledged as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World. We ascend in a large cable car and as we walk over the top, clouds are rolling in around us, moving so fast that within minutes there is hardly anything to see of the landscape, but not before we have caught spectacular views of Table Bay harbour, Devil's Peak, the Lion's Head and the surrounding amphitheatre of hills. This blanket fog or mist phenomenon is known locally as the "Table Cloth" as the top of the mountain is regularly shrouded in orographic cloud, the origin of which, legend says, is a Smoking Contest between the Devil on Devil's Peak and a local pirate – at any rate it was a good decision to go up this afternoon.

Next day we explore Cape Town itself. We drive past Bo Kaap, with its pretty coloured houses originally owned by Dutch settlers but which are now allotted to ex-slaves and prisoners who can own them but not change them in any way. Stopping at St George's Cathedral, Brenda is surprised to find it closed – later we discover that the Priest was badly beaten up and several objects stolen just two days before, another reminder of the underlying viciousness and crime prevalent in this country. Inside there is a rather extraordinary "*Pietà*" made entirely from meal-meal, the grain which is the staple diet of millions of Africans, and some beautiful stained glass windows – every era is invited to make an addition to the Church, to leave its legacy.

Adderley Street runs through the heart of old Cape Town. It traverses the Company's Garden, the oldest

garden in Africa dating back to the 1650's, beautifully laid out with many unique specimens of flowers bushes and trees. Originally spread over 48 acres, it was created by the East India Company to grow vegetables and fruit to replenish supplies for the ships rounding the Cape or coming in to port, and is still a formidable Botanical display, although today reduced to just 6 acres. We pass De Tuynhuys, the Government House in Cape Town now used by the President when he is here and Royal visitors from around the world. There is a statue of Cecil Rhodes half way and at the top is the famous Deville Wood equestrian statue of a Man and Horse designed by Sir Herbert Baker to commemorate 2,000 South African soldiers who died in a single battle in WWI.

Down at the Waterfront, Cape Town's newest development is an area which is completely safe to walk around. Pretty grey and white buildings line the front as the sea laps the quayside, housing colourful shops and restaurants, and there is Street Art and musicians on every corner – a lively scene. There are many Tourist Police and security guards and the shops are heavily surveyed – in a city where crime and violence is rife it is comforting to be able to wander without fear of being mugged. I think of going out to Robben Island where Mandela was incarcerated for 30 years but time is too short, though it would be interesting as the guides who take people round the Island are all ex-inmates of the prison, so give a rather special insight into life there in times past.

Later I go for a Cream Tea at the Mount Nelson Hotel, probably the oldest hotel in Cape Town and surely the most elegant – and a Cream Tea with warm scones, real clotted cream and home-made strawberry jam is not to be missed! Along with Eggs Benedict, this is another favourite found in most top hotels here and hard to find properly made outside Britain.

So that night with a Farewell Dinner the Tour ends and suddenly I am on my own again – quite refreshing though I enjoyed the company and would not have been able to get around and see as much as I did without it. The last article about South Africa will recount what I did in my last ten days in this fascinating and beautiful country ... □