

e-postcard from Kokstad, KwaZulu-Natal

10/13/2003

Hello to all,

This message comes to you from the homeland of the Zulu, the feared warriors of this portion of Africa. When you think of our trip to Africa many of you may have images of these warriors, with their long spears and tall shields, spring to mind, rising up from books and black and white movies of long ago. The Zulu were indeed formidable warriors, using their organizational and military skills to drive rival tribes from these prized grazing grounds in past centuries. They were also unique in their ability to withstand the military might of the Europeans during the colonial period, providing the first sustained setbacks to the British army in this part of the world.

We drove here across the Transkei, literally "across the Kei," referring to the Kei river, and the area that lies between the massive Kei river valley and the Drakensberg Mountains. The Transkei was once an autonomous region, with its own government. The Lonely Planet guide says, "If it had been recognized internationally, it would have been one of the poorest nations in Africa, and one of the most densely populated." It is certainly still worthy of these characterizations today. It is very densely populated rural land, and that is not an oxymoron in this context. It also remains economically undeveloped.

Nelson Mandela grew up in the Transkei, and we passed through the village where he spent much of his early life. There is also a museum of the culture and his life in one of the cities along the route we traveled.

The Transkei stands in stark contrast to KwaZulu-Natal, which is a rich tapestry of healthy farms, fat herds and well developed rural communities. Traversing the Transkei is a long day's drive through a gauntlet of economic deprivation, barren landscapes, and free range cattle and goats dotting both lanes of the highway, while KwaZulu-Natal is a relative oasis of vigorous communities, productive pastures and abundant farmlands.

After dinner tonight, we spent the last few hours talking with one of our guides, Willie Joubert. Willie is a native South African. His father was a surveyor, and spent most of his time in the bush (the undeveloped rural outback of Africa). Willie grew up at his father's knee, and consequently spent much of his childhood exploring the bush. When it came time for his compulsory stint in the South African military, his time tracking wildlife, finding water, and sleeping in the wild pointed him towards the Special Forces. Consequently, he spent his military career there, fighting the "shadow wars" that are often the mission of that branch of military forces around the world.

Willie told us of sleeping in the bush while on a mission with his unit. One morning, he awoke before dawn to find a Puff Adder in his sleeping bag with him. The Puff Adder, while being one of the deadliest snakes in Africa, is as attracted to a warm place to sleep as any other reptile in the bush. Willie managed to get the attention of a few of his comrades and had one pull his sleeping bag off by the closed end, while two others simultaneously pulled him out of the open end by his armpits. Fortunately, as the men pulled the sleeping bag/Willie sandwich apart, the snake landed on the ground in the middle and they were able to dispatch it without harm to anyone but the snake.

At that point in history, South Africa and its neighboring countries were being used as pawns in the cold war by the Eastern Bloc and the West. All out war raged between South Africa, Angola and other surrounding nations, as well as the rising tide of guerilla warfare being waged by the black factional groups within South Africa itself. After the Berlin wall fell and the cold war ended, the funding from the protagonists of that conflict disappeared. Lacking superpower money to fuel their causes, the two sides within South Africa soon came to the table and produced the change to representative government that so radically changed this nation.

Willie and his peers stayed on through this period of transition, believing in balancing the inequities that had led to 2% of the population holding 95% of the wealth of the nation. Though as time went on, his enthusiasm for being part of a new nation diminished in the face of the rising tide of crime. He described a typical return from a day's work: "I'd pull through the electric fence of our gated community, drive down to the house, pull through the barbed wire security gate of our house, wait for it to close, open the garage door, pull into the garage, wait for it to close, go through the security gate from the garage, go through the security gate into the house, shut off the alarm system, check on both of our large dogs, unchamber the round in the handgun I carried, check to see if my wife had put her handgun away safely, check the perimeter of the razor wire fenced backyard that was too dangerous for our children to play in, then settle in for the evening."

As the circle of experience of violent crime closed in from 'friends of friends of friends' to 'friends of friends' to 'friends' to two attempted carjackings that he had to fend of with his own gun, Willie and his wife began to wonder what kind of world they were providing for their children. When the new government refused to crack down on the wave of violent crime sweeping the country, they made the decision to emigrate. They now live in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, and have joined the flood of over 50% of the non-black residents of South Africa that have departed in the last ten years.

Although Willie believes in providing equity to those who have had so little in the past, and supported the new government, he was eventually worn down by the high rates of crime and the inability to provide a safe environment and future for his young children. He is, and always will be, a South African. He hopes to retire here someday if the government can provide a safe society free of violent crime. But until that day arrives, he will remain an expatriate, viewing his nation's struggles from afar.

We all got a taste of the level of crime in South Africa. It came to visit our group last night at our hotel in Port Alfred. About 4 AM, a burglar entered the only three rooms of the hotel that were not equipped with bars on the window, all of them occupied by sleeping members of our group. He stole cash, cameras, binoculars, clothes and passports. One of the guys in our group woke up and scared the burglar off, just as he was reaching for another camera.

Needless to say, all of us were shaken by the experience. It easily could have been Steph and I in those rooms. If I had known ground floor rooms were available (as all of those burglarized were), I would have requested one as it would have made our load in/load out much easier. All of us are taking security much more seriously, and have pulled together to replace what has been lost by our fellow travelers. Thankfully, no one was hurt, and the critical items can be replaced, although the pervasive sense of violation, mistrust and fear hung with all of us throughout the day today.

Tomorrow we travel on to Durban to pick up our bikes and begin the trip in earnest.

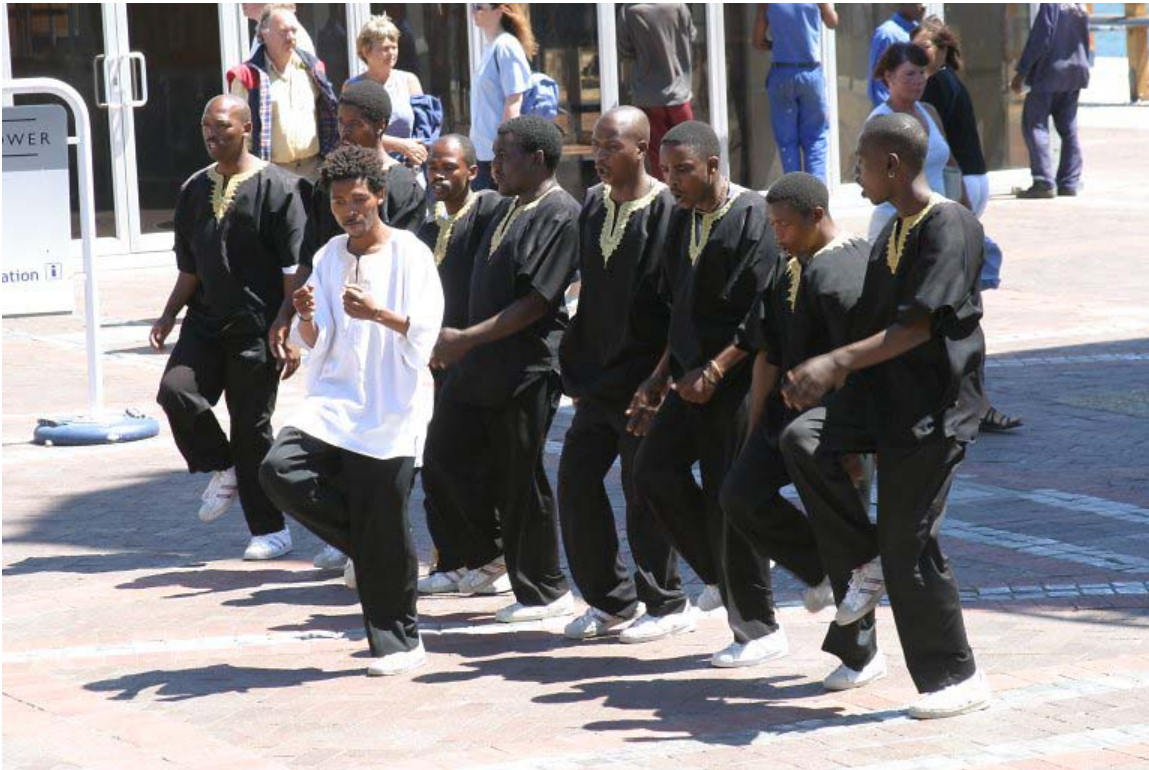
More to follow.

Be well,
Doug

PS: Following are some pictures from the trip so far.

A note about the photos:

- All photos were taken by Douglas Hackney
- All photos, unless otherwise noted, were taken on a Canon EOS 10D digital SLR using one of the following lenses: 16-35mm f2.8L, 100mm f2.8 Macro, 35-350mm f4.5-5.6L. Due to the imaging sensor size, the 10D creates a 1.6 lens magnification factor, so a 100mm lens performs like a 160mm lens on a normal 35mm camera.
- All photos were shot in high resolution, low compression JPEG mode.
- All photos have been reduced in size and resolution in order to keep this document down to a reasonable file size. The result is a significant loss of detail and clarity when compared to the original images.
- Image processing consisted of minor Unsharp Mask (.6) to all images to compensate for resolution reduction and minor contrast adjustment on a few images shot in hazy conditions.
- Several of the images have been cropped.
- A circular polarizing filter was used for several shots, all others were taken with a UV filter.



An Isicathamiya male choral group performing on the Cape Town waterfront. Isicathamiya (from the Zulu word meaning “to walk or step on one’s toes lightly”) groups were formed by groups of young males who left their rural homes to work in the cities and mines in the early twentieth century. The groups were used to preserve the bonds of home and tribe in the crowded urban environments that offered jobs. The best known such group in the U.S. is Ladysmith Black Mambazo who performed on Paul Simon’s 1986 album Graceland.



Beach changing rooms on the beach at St. James.





Penguins from the 4,000 strong colony at Simon's town.





Wild baboons at the Cape of Good Hope National Park eating dinner.



Wild Ostrich eating dinner, Cape of Good Hope National Park.



Steph shooting the wild Ostriches at the Cape of Good Hope National Park.



Countless ships met their fate in the stormy waters off this cape, where the warm waters of the Indian ocean collide with the cold waters of the South Atlantic.



Male lion, lion reserve near Capetown.



Rosie the meerkat, mascot of the staff at the lion reserve.



A tortoise who lives at the lion reserve.



The wine country near Stellenbosch. South African wines are not widely available or well known in the U.S. The reds are of excellent quality and are extremely affordable here. It is hard to find a bottle of quality red for over \$40 USD, with most costing \$5 to \$10 USD.



Steph sampling wine in a tasting room built in a 300 year old barn. (1.5 sec, F22)



Cheetah yawning in a Cheetah preserve near Cape Town.





Steph petting a domesticated cheetah at the preserve. Cheetahs were customarily kept as pets in the courts of royalty. They were known for their peaceful and docile disposition and hunting prowess. This Cheetah was born in captivity and cannot be returned to the wild. It is used for outreach programs such as school visits to raise awareness about the endangered status of the wild cheetah. All proceeds from the interactive sessions such as the one Steph participated in are used to purchase Turkish Anatolian Shepard dogs. The dogs are given to Namibian farmers to guard their herds. As Cheetahs will not attack anything bigger than themselves, the large dogs are effective in keeping the wild cheetahs away from the farmer's herds. Since the free dog program was started, farmer shootings of cheetahs in Namibia have dropped by over 50%.



Scarecrows in a strawberry field east of Cape Town. There were at least 50 scarecrows in this field, every one of them uniquely costumed.



Our thatched roof cottage in Swellendam. (Nikon 3100)



Faces of domestic ostriches, from a field near Wittsan.



English Lawn Bowling in Wittsan. This club was playing on Saturday morning rather than their usual Saturday afternoon time slot because the national rugby team, the Springboks, were playing that afternoon in the Rugby World Cup. The morning start time allowed them to break tradition and play in clothes other than the traditional all white ensemble typified by the man on the left.



A Southern Right Whale breaching in Wittsan bay. There were over 75 whales counted in this bay a few days before we arrived and Wittsan experiences up to 200 whales in the bay during this time of year. The Southern Right Whale is a cousin of the Northern Right Whale, which was hunted to near extinction, with only a handful remaining in North Atlantic waters. They are called the "Right" Whale because they were the "right" whale to hunt. They stayed afloat after they were killed and were easy to tow into the beach to render, which was a requirement prior to the floating whale processing factory ships of today that can process a whale within the ship.



A Southern Right Whale “sailing” in Witsan Bay. A “sailing” whale will stand on its head and hold its tail upright out of the water for 30-60 seconds. It is speculated that they are doing this to cool their bodies. They have just spent the prior months in cold Antarctic waters feeding to build up a layer of blubber. They come to these warm water bays to give birth to their young, who cannot survive in cold waters at an early age. The tail (flukes) of the whale is filled with many blood vessels, and it is thought that the evaporation of the water from the tail while it is exposed to air may provide some cooling effects.



Jungle canopy near Nature Valley.



Our picnic on the beach at Jeffreys Bay, one of the most famous surfing spots in the world. Steph had heard about this beach her whole life, so it was a real treat to stop and have lunch here. The unique shape and depth of the bay enable the formation of long waves called “supertubes,” in which surfers can ride in the tube of the wave for up to three minutes.



Steph's collection of sea shells from Jeffreys Bay beach.



Traditional homestead in the Transkei. This photo was taken in Qunu, the town where Nelson Mandela spent most of his childhood.



Zulu woman walking home from the market, carrying her baby in a traditional binding. Most heavy loads are carried on the head, with amazing dexterity and balance.



Typical Zulu homestead.