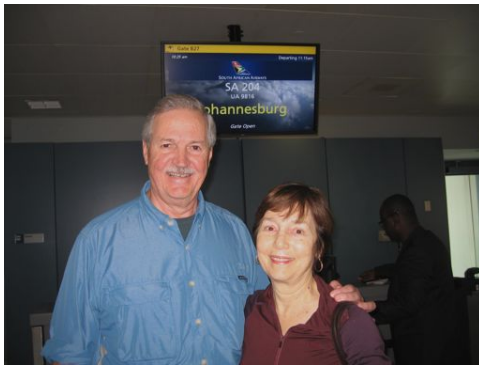


Southern Africa Adventure

October 26 – November 11, 2010

Thursday, October 26th

Jeanie and I are off this morning on our trip to southern Africa that will include time in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana. We met up with old friends from Atlanta, Roland and Diane Gaasch, at JFK airport prior to our departure on South African Airways. Roly I have been friends since our Air Force flying days back in the 60's, and he and Diane are among our favorite traveling companions. Roly's brother, Ken (also an ex Air Force flyer), is joining us on this year's adventure.



We had planned a trip to Australia and New Zealand for this year, however this southern Africa tour became a very interesting idea.....and it's also south of the equator. Everyone we've talked to has been thrilled with their experiences in this part of the world, so we'll see. And our good friends and neighbors in Ann Arbor are from South Africa.....providing some great planning ideas.

We'll arrive in Cape Town tomorrow afternoon after about 20+ hours of travel from New York through Johannesburg. After a few days exploring Cape Town and the south coast area we'll move on to the major game reserves at Hluhluwe and Kruger Park for the main focus of the trip: game viewing safaris. From South Africa we will go to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe and then on to the Chobe game reserve in Botswana.

Thursday, October 28th

Today was our first full day in South Africa after arriving at the Protea President Hotel in Cape Town mid-afternoon yesterday. South African Airways did a great job from New York, however there is no way to overcome the exhaustion of a 26-hour, hotel-to-hotel trip.

We had a great tour of Cape Town today, with a number of lectures on the history of South Africa and Cape Town. The first known European to stop in this part of Africa was a Portuguese sailor sent by his government in 1488 to circumnavigate the world. Over the next approximate 150 years European sailing ships stopped for fresh water and whatever provisions that they could barter from the natives. In 1652 the Dutch set up a permanent colony in what is now Cape Town to raise animals, fruit and vegetables in support of Dutch East India Company sailing vessels plying the route between Europe and the spice islands of India and the east. Subsequently the British took over the Cape colony in 1795, during their wars with the French, as a way of protecting their trading routes to the Far East. British rule and the abolition of slavery in the 1830's, forced the Dutch (with their slaves) to leave the Cape Colony and settle as farmers (Boers, subsequently Afrikaners) in the interior of southern Africa.

After the discovery of valuable natural resources (gold, silver and diamonds) in the mid 1850's the British fought the Dutch settlers for control of the area, thus solidifying the dominance of the white Europeans throughout southern Africa. British rule over the entire area was consummated with the Boer Wars in the early 1900's, with the Union of South Africa formed in 1910.

Until shortly after World War II South Africa was a member of the British Commonwealth and after independence elected a government dominated by the Afrikaner political class. Most of the infamous, institutionalized racial (apartheid) laws date from this period and remained in effect until 1994. At the end of apartheid, the 80+ percent black population, led by Nelson Mandela gained control of the country through a new constitution and democratic vote. The end of apartheid meant the end of isolation from the rest of the world and increased foreign investment so that today South Africa is the commercial and financial capital for the entire African continent. Unemployment in this nation of 49 million is high (43%), particularly among the black population who are historically under-educated as a result of apartheid (by law blacks were provided very little education). Because of this large under-educated, unemployed segment of the population there are still many social, political and financial challenges, however the country is very optimistic about the future and the races appear to be working together to solve these problems.

Cape Town today is a vibrant international city in an absolutely stunning setting that I think rivals San Francisco (one of my favorite world cities) in both charm and dynamism. The city surrounds a natural harbor and is backed by the impressive Table Mountain range. The harbor, Table Mountain and the Cape of Good Hope to the south of the city have been important nautical landmarks to the sailing ships over the centuries. The original Dutch agricultural enterprises expanded around Table Mountain into a valley that is now known throughout the world for South African wines.

We spent quite a bit of time today walking through the Company Gardens, the original site of the Dutch vegetable gardens, viewing the city from the top of Table Mountain and touring the harbor waterfront.



Tonight Jeanie and I had dinner with our Ann Arbor neighbor's parents, who are 3rd generation South Africans. Restaurants in Cape Town are world class and the cost of a meal and wine is a bargain compared to eating out in the USA.

Friday, October 29th

We spent today exploring the Cape Peninsula and its dramatic seacoast. This is spectacular countryside with many old seaport, fishing and beach communities, most dating back to the sailing ship era. The Cape of Good Hope, famous as a nautical landmark and the assumed joining of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, is at the end of the Peninsula and the view from the lighthouse on the Cape is pretty intimidating; open ocean for approximately 4,000 miles west to South America and 2,200 miles south to Antarctica.



On the way back up the other side of the Peninsula we visited the Kirstinbosch Gardens, one of the largest botanical gardens in the world solely dedicated to plants and trees indigenous to southern Africa. The Gardens sit on the backside of the Table Mountain range, enjoy a tropical climate setting and are home to some of the most spectacular flora that I've ever experienced, including lots of varieties of the national flower, the Protea.



I also had my first “encounter” with Nelson Mandela in the Gardens.



Saturday, October 30th

Our plan for today was a leisurely drive through the wine country, looking for a great meal and interesting wine opportunities. We rented a large car to accommodate 6 people,

so I had another experience of driving “on the wrong side of the road”; though after our 3 weeks of driving around Ireland last Fall I was still conditioned for the challenge.

I’m a fan of Napa and Sonoma Valleys in California, and have enjoyed many wine, eating, scenery, etc experiences over the years. Less than an hour from Cape Town, the South African Winelands are a chain of verdant valleys and dramatic mountains that remind me of the California wine valleys.....on steroids and absolutely stunning.



We visited the Graff Estate and then had an outdoor lunch at the Boschendal Wine Estate, one of the oldest vineyards in South Africa, dating from 1654, and still a producer of world-class wines.

Sunday, October 31st

This morning we flew to Durban and picked up a motor coach for the remainder of our trip through South Africa. Our brief time in Durban was not terribly interesting, and clearly does not live up to the exotic description found in the guidebooks. The city was, and still is, a major trading port on the Indian Ocean, with all of the grittiness that you might expect. It does have some interesting architecture, parks and other sights from European colonial era and East Indian influences abound; however everything is pretty run down.

After a quick tour of Durbin we drove for some number of hours across the Kwazulu-Natal Province to the Hluhluwe Safari Lodge at the Hluhluwe Game Reserve.

South Africa has a temperate to tropical climate and has been home to a number of indigenous animals (as well as fabulous flora) for eons. During the influx of European much of the countryside was converted to agriculture, with the obvious impact on the wild game population. Fortunately massive tracts of land were set aside for the protection of the animals, and are now managed as national parks or game reserves.



Monday, November 1st

We were off on our first game ride this morning at 4:30 to see if we could catch the large cats on a kill.

Hluhluwe Game Reserve is approximately 800 square miles of wilderness where all of the major species thrive, with a unique concentration of rhinoceros.....approximately 20% of the world's rhino population. On our safari tour this morning we were particularly lucky in the number and size of the various herds of species roaming about, as a result of last night's much needed rain. We saw, up close and personal, lots of rhinos, elephants, giraffes, cape buffalo, various antelope species, wart hogs, monkeys, etc. A successful safari trip to southern Africa includes viewing the Big 5: rhino, elephant, Cape buffalo, lion and leopard. So, we were fortunate to see 3 of the Big 5 this morning. Cats are elusive!





After the morning safari we had lunch at a Zulu village.....our first (and I hope last) “touristy” event on the trip. The Zulus are one of two Nguni nations in southern Africa that comprise most of the black population. The ancient people in this part of the Africa were nomadic tribes known as the San people. The Nguni came to southern Africa centuries ago as a migration from the equatorial region and became settlers. It was these fierce, settled tribes that the European settlers conquered to take over the land.

Most of these people still live in a rural setting, and support themselves on herding and subsistence farming. Though the lunch was a tourist event it provided an interesting history lesson.

Tuesday, November 2nd

We're off to Kruger National Park today, via Swaziland. Swaziland is an independent Kingdom, ceded to the Zulu nation by the British in the late 1800's because the land was deemed to be worthless and too mountainous to defend. Today this mountainous countryside is very prosperous and productive; planted with vast tracts of timber, fruit orchards and sugar cane. The Kingdom is completely surrounded by South Africa and transit requires dealing with immigration and customs, both entering one side and leaving the other.....another of the many idiosyncrasies of Africa.

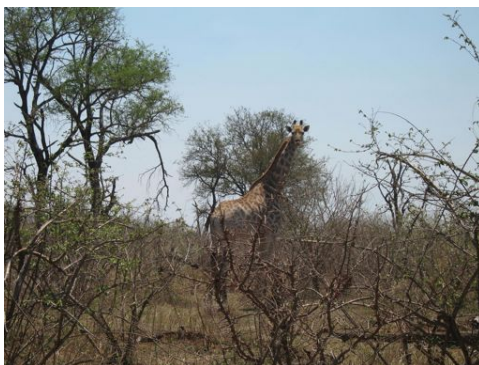
We spent the night en-route at the Lugugo Sun Lodge.

Wednesday, November 3rd

We arrived at the Kruger National Park mid-morning today for our first safari tour in this game reserve.

Kruger Park was created in 1902 (second oldest national park in the world, after Yellowstone) to provide a refuge for animals indigent to southern Africa, both as habitat and protection from the rampant hunting and poaching. The park is approximately 5 million acres in South Africa and another 2 million spilling over into Mozambique and Zimbabwe. By comparison the Hluhluwe Reserve in Zululand is 230 thousand acres. We are in the southern part of the Park where the terrain is mostly flat bush country and climate is dry and hot (high 90's). There are 6 distinct climate zones over the approximate 200-mile south to north distance in the park.

Because it is so hot and dry, and because of the vast geographic size of the park, we did not see the concentrated numbers of game that we had seen at Hluhluwe. However this afternoon we did score with a rare black rhino (very few in existence) and a pride of lions, in addition to hippopotamuses, white rhino, elephants, Cape buffalo, giraffe, exotic birds and various species of antelope.





We are staying at the Protea Kruger Game Lodge, the nicest accommodation so far on the trip, though they have all been excellent. Except for the sleeping rooms this lodge is completely open to the elements and curious, thieving monkeys.



Thursday, November 4th

We departed the Lodge at 5:15 this morning for more game viewing and were treated to a spectacular African sunrise and some excellent early-light pictures of the animals.





The elephant herds in southern Africa have grown to extraordinary numbers because of their protected status and lack of natural predators. The predators in the reserves (lion and leopard prides) have an ample, easy food supply with the abundance of antelope species and usually do not go after the young elephant. The tree and bush growth in the reserves is being destroyed by foraging elephant herds as they strip bark and leaves, and push over larger trees to feed on the roots that have absorbed ground moisture. In many cases the trees are just knocked over as an expedient way to feed on the leaves. It's strange to hear the sound of large trees and vegetation being splintered by these huge beasts.



We had another safari ride this mid-afternoon until dark; attempting to find cats.

According to our ranger this young leopard has been ejected from his pride because of his maturing age and sexual aggression. Leopards are curious animals by nature, with very little fear, so there's a high probability that this cat will not survive to create his own pride. Other male leopards will kill him, or more probably a lion will get him. Less than 25% of these young male leopards survive to mate.



The culmination of today's game viewing was a very large male giraffe standing in the bush near a watering hole, appearing to be tentative about drinking. Our ranger said that this area is full of lions at the end of the day and the giraffe did not want to make himself vulnerable to attack while kneeling down for water. At a moment of indecision a number of Cape buffalo came out of the bush to the water and drank with no fear. This gave the giraffe confidence to return, however after we had waited for approximately 45 minutes he never drank, nor did we see any lions. It's very interesting to observe these animals in their natural habitat.

Many of the watering holes in the park are man-made with solar-powered pumps to ensure a good water supply.....climate change, and resulting long dry spells, has had an effect on this part of Africa.



Friday, November 5th

Today's journey was an approximate 400-mile trip to Johannesburg across the part of South Africa that was once known as the Transvaal. After leaving Kruger Park we drove across the Lebombo Mountains with dramatic views of river valleys and a number of old historic mining towns. This area was settled in the mid 1800's for its gold and silver

resources, and is now primarily set aside for timber farming. South Africa is a major supplier of timber and paper products throughout Africa, and the millions of acres of planted pine and eucalyptus cover the mountainsides and valleys. Most of the land is government-owned and leased to large timber operators. A clever law that requires re-planting 1.5 acres for each harvested acre, however improves and protects the ecology. As a result there are vast, dense forests, somewhat resembling the Black Forest in Germany. The mountains give way to 100's of miles of high prairie, all the way to Johannesburg with large industrial-scale cattle and grain farming operations.

We stopped at a number of historical sites related to the Dutch and British settlement of the Transvaal during the 1800's and lunched at a perfectly preserved old hotel in the perfectly preserved old mining town of Pilgrim's Rest. You could almost feel the presence of these Victorian era miners, though the mines played out generations ago.



Later in the day we arrived at the Balalaika Hotel in Sandton, an upscale suburb of Johannesburg. This is one of the older accommodations that we've stayed in however very nice with a number of lush gardens, such as the view from our room.



Johannesburg is a very cosmopolitan, bustling city of 8.5 million people and is the financial, business and mining center for South Africa, and the African continent.

Saturday, November 6th

We spent this morning with a guide on a drive and walking tour around Soweto Township, learning about the racial and social history of South Africa.

With the advent of the industrialized mining businesses in the late 1800's the white mine owners turned to the black population as a source of labor. Prior to this need for industrial labor the blacks had lived primarily in the rural parts of the country and were not accepted as an important, necessary or recognized part of the population by the white Europeans. Mining companies set up "barracks-style" living accommodations in the late 1800's, early 1900's near mining operations for the black male workers who were expected to live apart from their rural families. Over time many of the laborers brought their families to the mining centers to live near them. By early 1900's the Afrikaner racial biases had become institutionalized in the South African government and white society, therefore these migratory black families were relegated to setting up homes in closely controlled areas that subsequently became the infamous black townships of South Africa.

One of the most egregious apartheid laws (written into the constitution) dating from 1946 declared that native blacks were not citizens of South Africa, were not entitled to any civil protections, were not to be educated and were required to carry an approved government passbook to leave the black townships. These laws were enforced at gun-point even though the blacks made up over 80% of the population.

Soweto is the largest and most infamous of these townships and today comprises approximately 2.5 million of Johannesburg's population, in a relatively small geographic area. This township was the home of many of the anti-apartheid protest leaders, including Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. Some of the most violent anti-apartheid protests and revolts dating back to the 1960's through the 1990's were centered in Soweto, leading to the imprisonment of black leaders including Nelson Mandela.

After years of internal strife, international political pressure and world commercial isolation the South African government began to relax the most extreme of the apartheid laws. In 1994 the government under the leadership of a visionary president agreed to rewrite the constitution to include all races in a democratic process. Nelson Mandela who had recently been released from prison was voted in as the first black president of the "new" South Africa.

Since the new government was set up in 1994 much has improved in the country, particularly with the influx of foreign investment. Education for the masses is gradually improving, however many generations of blacks and coloreds are chronically under-educated and under-skilled. Unemployment currently is running at a national rate of 43%, predominantly among the black population, with native blacks being displaced in

the workforce by more educated visitor-workers from other parts of Africa. As a result of this high unemployment and foreign labor, income tax revenues remain depressed as compared to the population and infrastructure needs. There is no national health, social security, unemployment or other social safety net systems in the country; therefore social problems and petty crime is pervasive.

Much of Soweto Township is a good example of the current social situation in South Africa. It is basically a slum, not much changed from the pre-1994 era, as compared to the prosperous neighborhood near our hotel in Sandton. However, despite the challenges, the average person that you talk to in South Africa, white, black or colored, is optimistic that social conditions will improve.....as a result of the emphasis on broader based education. Relations among the racial groups also appear to be amicable with a sense of common purpose.



Sunday, November 7th

We flew from Johannesburg to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, arriving early this afternoon and finally took a few hours break from our hectic pace. The Victoria Falls Safari Lodge is very nice and the most unusual accommodation on the trip. Situated within the Victoria Falls National Game Reserve with open-air construction in all of the common areas, there are lots of critters to watch out for, particularly in the dining area (and your bedroom if you leave the louvered doors unlocked!). Our bedroom porch overlooks a large, natural watering hole so lots of game to observe. The room has louvered shutters for privacy and bed netting for sleep comfort, though we've not had too many problems with mosquitoes on the entire trip (probably negating the need for our anti-malarial medications).

Late this afternoon and early evening we took a sundown cruise up the Zambezi River that runs just in front of the lodge. The Zambezi is one of Africa's largest and longest rivers, and is the national boundary between Zimbabwe and Zambia. This cruise presented a totally different view of the wild animals along the river, including Nile crocodiles and hippos, and was culminated with a great African sunset.



Monday, November 8th

Today we spent the morning hiking along the gorge across from the Victoria Falls, and they are indeed one of the world's 7 wonders. The falls were created eons ago by a geological fault, resulting in the 400 foot deep, 75 mile long Batoka Gorge diverting the course of the Zambezi. This is the end of the dry season in southern Africa and the rivers are running on the slow side (though still plenty wide and strong), therefore the falls are significantly reduced in width; only a quarter of the width at high water flows. During high water flows the Zambezi is over a mile wide at the falls.

Most of the terrain in this part of Africa is high desert with bush and low trees, however the mist from the falls creates a rain forest along the Zimbabwe side of the gorge. We were fortunate that the lower water flows at this time of year also produce lower levels of mist, therefore providing us with exceptional visibility.

After last night and today's experience at the Falls I can now claim to be a "native"; slept under a mosquito netting and was peed on by a large monkey up in a tree while walking through the rain forest....good thing it wasn't one of the numerous baboons!





Tuesday, November 9th

We drove over to Kasane in Botswana for a day in the Chobe National Park, which includes the Chobe River. The highlight of this trip was over 4 hours floating up the Chobe with fantastic views of huge herds (at and in the river) of elephants, large pods of hippos in the river, very large Nile crocodile attacking game along the riverbank and herds of Cape buffalo. The Chobe River trip was by far the most interesting game viewing of the whole trip.

After a nice lunch at the luxurious Mowana Safari Lodge we took a drive through the game park for yet another viewing perspective of the wild animals. Chobe Park is in the large Kalahari Desert with totally different terrain from the previous parks, and the 200,000+ elephant population is doing a number on the trees and other vegetation. Because of the dry season, lack of vegetation in the interior of the park and the abundance of greenery along the river, most of the animals tended to congregate near the water.



Wednesday, November 10th

This morning Roly and I took a helicopter ride to get a different look at Victoria Falls. It was just after sunrise and, with the early-morning light, the views were spectacular.



Zimbabwe definitely has a different feel than South Africa, in large part due to the political, social and economic chaos that has existed in the country since the overthrow of the white government of Rhodesia approximately 30 years ago. Victoria Falls is relatively isolated from the strife found in other parts of Zimbabwe, though the country's economic health definitely can be seen and felt here. Basic necessities like food and clothing are very difficult for the average citizen to acquire. Crime is an integral part of daily life as people struggle to survive, and this is the stop where we had the most trouble with pilfered luggage and theft from our lodging.

Our Zimbabwe guide/ranger, Stanley, and his brother (who is politically active) have both been imprisoned and tortured a number of times, so he had an interesting perspective on life in the country.....though he is optimistic that life for them is improving. I persuaded Stanley to give up his San Antonio Spurs cap and donated my Ann Arbor Trout Unlimited version as a replacement.



We left Victoria Falls this afternoon and flew back to Johannesburg where we are now awaiting the South African Airways flight back to NYC. Airport security processes in this part of the world for flights back to the USA is both tedious and intrusive; all mandated by the U.S. government TSA rules.



Thursday, November 11th

Arrived home this afternoon after a 42 hour Victoria Falls Lodge to Ann Arbor trip..... exhausted!

This trip was, indeed, an interesting adventure. South Africa is a beautiful and hospitable country, worth more exploration, though a very long travel distance from the USA.

Should we be fortunate enough to return to this part of the world again Jeanie and I would do the trip entirely differently. We would break up the long air journey by laying over in London, Amsterdam or Frankfurt for a few days, coming and going to Cape Town. Cape Town, Winelands and the Cape Peninsula definitely deserve much more time, exploration and enjoyment with the food and wine. Travel to the game reserves would be a long automobile journey from Cape Town to Durban along the Garden Route along the south coast of the country. Our next stop would be a week or so exploring Zululand and the Hluhluwe Game Reserve. Next we would fly to Victoria Falls for a day or so exploring, and then on to Chobe Park in Botswana where we would spend 3 to 5 days unwinding at the Mowana Safari Lodge.

In essence we would spend much more time in fewer areas, at a much slower pace.....on our own. We've decided that long organized tours are not the way we like to travel. Though this trip was very well organized and hosted.