

South Africa: The Garden Route

On Thursday (November 20) we had a very leisurely morning sitting on the deck at the Bantry Bay house before packing and setting out on our twelve day driving trip of South Africa. We had only a short drive today (less than 2 hours) to the southern Atlantic Ocean resort town of Hermanus. We checked into our seafront hotel around 3:30 pm and shortly afterwards went for a short walk around the very attractive small town.

We then spent a couple of hours in the room watching the ocean surf splash against the rocks just below our window and we were fortunate to see several whales. This area is famous for its whale watching as the Southern Right Whale makes its way from Antarctica to its breeding grounds further up the South African coast. We are at the tail end of the prime whale-watching season so we felt lucky to see some quite close in and many spouts both here and further out to sea. We plan to take a walk on the cliff side tomorrow and see if we can catch more views.



On Friday we spent the entire day in Hermanus and never got in the car. It was a beautiful sunny day with temperatures in the low seventies so it was perfect for walking into the shopping area as well as on the cliff walk. The latter stretches for about seven miles along Walker Bay and is maybe 20 to 50 feet about the water in most places. It is very nicely landscaped in places and full of natural flora in others. It is also an ideal area for whale watching and we were fortunate to see a number out in the bay. Mostly we recognized them by their V-shaped spouting but in some cases we could see the giant black bodies in the water. I even saw the tail fins extending out of the water on one occasion when I was using the binoculars at just the right time.



English towns may have a Town Crier, but.....

From the Cliff Walk

In addition to the 2-3 mile walk, we also spent a little time buying African souvenirs in a local market and had a light lunch sitting outside overlooking the bay. Certainly this must be one of the most beautiful places in South Africa (and even beyond) and we wondered how we had managed to bypass it on our previous two visits. We won't make that mistake again.

Tonight we walked to another cliff top hotel about 15 minutes from ours where there are two recommended restaurants. We ate at the Pavilion and had the six course tasting menu with wine pairings. It was excellent and once again the service was as good as the food.

The end to the evening was not quite so good. When we were walking back on the harbor road and had almost reached the hotel, someone rushed by and snatched Molly's purse. He was around the corner and up a dark street before we knew it. We actually followed his route because Molly realized there was no cash or credit cards in the purse (total value, purse and contents, less than \$20) and we thought he might simply drop it when he had had a chance to look inside. However, we didn't see him or the purse again. We talked with several people on the streets and they seemed eager to help but we soon chalked this one up to experience. It could have been a lot worse and certainly doesn't change our views on this beautiful country and its lovely people.

On Saturday we made the 320 Km drive to our next destination at Mossel Bay. Leaving Hermanus we climbed from the water and inland to follow the N2 main road east all the way to Mossel Bay. After the hill near the coast, we were on an essentially flat plain (some undulations) which was rich farmland – grains, cattle, sheep (with lambs) and some ostrich – all with a northerly backdrop of the mountains of the Little Karoo. We will be traveling on the other side of these mountains as we head back to Cape Town next week.

We made our first stop at a small town where we spotted a bakery that also had a small café with indoor and outdoor seating; great for morning coffee with a pastry! Our only other stop was at the Acare Aloe factory and shop – which also has a café. We had coffee again and then visited the shop with its wide selection of creams, ointments and lotions containing the local aloe, similar to aloe vera but claiming even better therapeutic ingredients. We made our purchases, so we will see.....

It was only another 45 minutes to the Protea Hotel in Mossel Bay. Protea is a large chain of hotels in South Africa that appear to have been taken over by Marriott, although not yet offering rewards points, etc. However, the Marriott name (and our Platinum Elite status) counted for something as we were upgraded to a three floor suite. Our room had good views over the bay and of the harbor, which appears to be home to some rather large ocean going vessels. The views to the less commercial side were very nice and we were told that the hotel restaurant not only faced that direction but was "the best in town". We made a reservation for tonight.

Although it had been a very nice day – sunny with some haze – the weather was clearly changing and there was rain forecast for the next two days. However, for dinner tonight it was dry and mild enough for us to sit outside and enjoy another leisurely meal, at a very reasonable price.

On Sunday we woke up to a very cloudy view – we could barely see the harbor – and there was a little drizzle as we walked across a short open stretch to the restaurant for breakfast. As we ate the rain picked up a little (not a heavy downpour, just a continuing heavy drizzle) so we decided to visit the nearby Dias Museum complex. This is primarily a museum dedicated to the Portuguese explorations of this part of Africa in the late 15th century and is named for Bartholomew Dias who first set foot in Mossel Bay after rounding the Cape. He paved the way for Vasco de Gama to follow the same route and eventually reach India, thereby creating the first sea route between Europe and the spice and silk



The Dias Replica ship arriving in Mossel Bay 1988

riches of the Far East. The sea route avoided the many taxes that were levied on the old cross-country routes.

The museum has a full scale replica of Dias' ship as the centerpiece. In fact, the ship was built specifically for the 500th anniversary of Dias' voyage and was sailed from Portugal to Mossel Bay in 1988. Part of the museum shows a series of photographs taken at the time and it was clearly a huge celebration at which the whole population of the area must have turned out.

The museum also contains many maps and pictures of the Voyages of Discovery and very openly declares Portugal (not Spain!) as the more important country in opening up (and colonizing) Africa and India. Spain was obviously a player, however, and there were a number of "debates" over sovereignty of the new lands, one of which divided South America between the two in roughly equal parts, giving Brazil to Portugal. Hence that is the only South American country to have Portuguese as its language, not Spanish.



Dias Replica in Museum



From the Maritime building we walked to another which contained many aquariums and other exhibits of the fish and sea life of this area. Finally, in outside areas of the complex there are reconstructed homes that were originally built in the early 1800s by a Scot (Munro), a small cemetery containing the remains of Malay Muslims (presumably part of the "reverse flow" of population from the East) and the "Tree Post Office". This latter is supposedly where one of the early explorers hid a boot containing a letter and other items associated with the voyages east and was later found by another traveler. Apparently the items provided interesting and/or important information on the explorations.

The "Post Office" Tree

We made another sortie of the town in the late afternoon and made a reservation at the Lighthouse Restaurant. Then something unusual happened. About 6pm all the power in our room(s) went off. For a while we wondered if it was just us but it soon became obvious that the whole ho-

tel was out. I walked along a candle-lit corridor to the reception desk where I was told that it was the whole TOWN that was out and it would be 8pm before power was restored. We were assured, however, since most places cooked with gas, our restaurant reservation would still be OK.

So, we drove to the restaurant only to be told on arrival that they could not cook because the extractor fans were not operable. Apologies all round but we had to return to our hotel and eat again in the restaurant there. We had a good meal, mostly in semi-darkness, but right on 8pm the power came back and we could see what we were eating!

Monday was much brighter, although still overcast, as we left Mossel Bay. Today was another driving day, although it was only a short drive to our next stop in Wilderness.

We actually drove beyond Wilderness along the Garden Route as far as Knysna. The Garden Route keeps generally close to the ocean but goes inland – and quite high – from time to time. Hence, there are some magnificent views of the water, and the beaches, as well as a great deal of greenery. There are not gardens to see per se, but the whole area is lush with trees and other greenery which provides a vivid contrast to the sea views.

In Knysna we first visited their version of the Cape Town Waterfront complex – but on a far smaller scale. There are many restaurants and cafes and several boutique and souvenir shops and the whole area is a series of boardwalks along the lagoon (that is a feature of the town) and a small canal. It was very pleasant strolling the area and enjoying a light lunch sitting outside under what by now were essentially clear blue skies.



The Town of Wilderness on the Garden Route

We checked into our hotel, The Palms, around 3:30. We had stayed here twice before and enjoyed both visits, in part because of their excellent restaurant. Unfortunately, we were told that they no longer do evening meals but the rooms are as good as we remembered. Each is a small thatched cottage and this time we were shown to a large upstairs room. We had always been on the ground level previously; in fact, we didn't even know there were upstairs rooms. The whole area is surrounded by beautiful greenery and small water features so it gives the feel of a little home in the jungle.

There are still some good restaurants in the village and our hostess spent some time trying to get us into one that had a tempting tasting menu. She was unable to get us in tonight (but we are set for tomorrow) so she suggested a café in the village where the food and service were excellent and we had a three course meal, a bottle of wine and espresso and walked out for \$50, including tip!

Today (Tuesday) we started with breakfast sitting outside at the Palms. This was served to all the guests by the hostess and included fruit, cereal, "Full English" and tea/coffee. It was a little overcast but certainly warm enough for outdoor dini



The Garden Route with forests and lagoons.



Sedgefield

We then spent the rest of the day on the Garden Route between Wilderness and Plettenberg Bay, a distance of about 50 miles through magnificent scenery of dense forest, some open farmland and, of course, superb ocean views.

We made three stops before reaching Plettenberg Bay. The first was at a small village on one of the many lagoons that reach inland from the Indian Ocean. The village is called Sedgefield and has formally adopted the name of “Slow Town” to maintain its feel and its desire to remain unspoiled by tourism.

Next we had coffee in Knysna – at a very pleasant coffee shop right on the main street – and then drove to The Heads , a little way out of the town. Here the neck of the Knysna lagoon meets the ocean and forms a narrow and turbulent stretch of waterway between high cliffs. We saw whale watching boats leaving for the sea just outside the lagoon and even spotted a few spouts from our high vantage point.

Finally, we headed to the town of Plettenberg Bay (where we have stayed twice in the past) and which is the “rich and famous” spot on the Garden Route. We strolled along the main shopping street, had afternoon tea in a shaded courtyard and then drove to the ocean front and watched the surf for a while.



By this time it was getting close to 3pm, so we decided to head back to Wilderness. We had seen a stretch of road work on the way out which warned of long delays. However, it turned out that we didn’t have too long a wait and, even with a “routine traffic stop” (license and registration check by a very polite police officer), we were back in our room before 4:30.

This gave us time to rest and clean up before the short drive to Serendipity, the highly recommended tasting menu restaurant which was indeed excellent—bringing our stay along the Garden Route to a very pleasant close. Tomorrow we head inland over the coastal range before starting our drive west back to Cape Town.

More in a week.....