

Tuesday November 22

After breakfast at the hotel and a few more minutes taking in the spectacular view from our balcony, we started our relatively long journey (250 miles) to Wilderness, in the heart of the Garden Route.

Only about 20 miles from Hermanus we drove through the “Victorian” village of **Stanford**. This has a number of (mostly white painted) homes and a very nice stone church and supposedly is a Heritage Site.



The houses and other buildings are similar in many respects to those in Stellenbosch and a number have thatched roofs and fine gables. Molly looked at all the dates she could see on the homes and saw none earlier than 1924 – so, either we missed the oldest ones, or some liberty has been taken with the name Victorian. Nevertheless it was a pleasant short detour.

The first third of the journey was through farm land with only a few fences and changes in the angle of



the terrain to break-up a seemingly endless series of vast grain fields. Again, most of the crop had been cut and much of it had been rolled into bales ready for taking from the fields. There was very little green on this rolling plateau (perhaps 1000-1500 feet above sea level); an occasional clump of trees near a river or stream or ground cover near the road.

Slowly, however, the golden fields seemed to diminish in size and larger areas of green began to appear.

There were more trees, a much more varied brush in many areas and the beginnings of planted crops of cactus and aloe. We made a brief coffee stop in a small town and had our drink sitting on the stoop overlooking the main (only) road and then kept going until the town of Albertinia where we stopped again for a drink – and to visit the aloe factory store. We did our little bit for the local economy and then continued our journey.



As we approached Mossel Bay and the official start of the Garden Route, we caught glimpses of the Indian Ocean and had a wonderful panorama of the shipping town as we descended to sea level. We had stayed here on our last visit and had found little of interest except a fine maritime museum which contained a full scale model of the ship in which Bartholomew Dias had arrived over 500 years earlier. To be fair, the day we spent in Mossel Bay two years ago was one of heavy rain so we probably didn't catch it at its best.

Today we by-passed the town and were now well into the more lush lands of the famous Garden Route. Trees were prominent, flowering plants and bushes were more plentiful and – as we covered the last 30 miles or so – we were essentially in forested area with several views of the magnificent sandy bays as we approached Wilderness and descended to sea level once more.



We had stayed here on three previous occasions but the B&B of choice has closed down for reasons unknown (it's now a wine tasting venue and small shopping area). Fortunately, on our last visit we had dinner at a nearby establishment that not only served a superb dinner but, as we found out later, has several rooms for overnight guests. So, tonight and Wednesday we will be at Serendipity where we have already found the room to be as pleasant as the dining room we remembered.

Tonight's meal was a five course menu with choices of dishes on each. We chose to go with the wine pairings that are selected (and described in great detail) for each dish. For less than \$100 we had a superb meal with excellent service – in great surroundings.

Wednesday November 23

After a good breakfast at the hotel, we drove east along the coast road (although not always in sight of the ocean) to Knysna. It was raining a little as we drove there and there was an odd sprinkle as we shopped at the new Waterfront area – a smaller version of the V&A in Cape Town. We made some progress in our Christmas shopping and had a coffee, which happened to coincide with the heaviest of the showers.

From Knysna town waterfront we drove to “The Heads”, a clifftop viewpoint high above the narrow entrance to Knysna Lagoon. It has a spectacular view across the narrows which is navigable only by the smallest of ships and the rafts that take visitors out to the rough waters, which means that the huge lagoon has never been used as a harbor for shipping of any size.



From Knysna Head we drove another 25 miles to Plettenburg Bay, a place where we had stayed on two previous occasions. It has a very dramatic Indian



Ocean view but we spent our time in the central area where we strolled the main street and had a great sandwich lunch. On the way back to our hotel, we stopped to shop a little more in Knysna, this time at the African Craft Market on the main street. We then headed back to the hotel in Wilderness which by now was bathed in glorious sunshine and the temperature had reached 77F.



The Garden Route

We had another wonderful dinner in the hotel restaurant to end another very pleasant visit to this Garden Route beauty spot.

Thursday November 24

We had breakfast and checked out of Serendipity and started our journey to Oudtshoorn. Rather than take the one hour direct route we decided on a somewhat longer drive via Knysna and De Rust. So we headed east for 25 miles and then turned north to cross the mountain range. The map indicated that we would go via two passes (probably less than 2000 feet each) but this would be on a 45 mile stretch of unpaved road. Since we had come through a heavy shower on the way to Knysna, we wondered about the condition of the road we would be on for about 3 hours (yes that was the prediction on

Google Maps!). Would the rain have simply made the road less dusty or would we end up trying to negotiate very muddy and slippery conditions?

There was only one way to find out so we started on the unpaved road that climbed rather sedately for about an hour. It was generally wide enough for two to pass with care but we were still grateful that all we saw coming in the opposite direction were a handful of cars and a few logging trucks! There were some slick-looking spots but for the most part the road was dry, with the occasional puddle and rut with collected water. At times the sun came out and we were on perfectly dry surface.



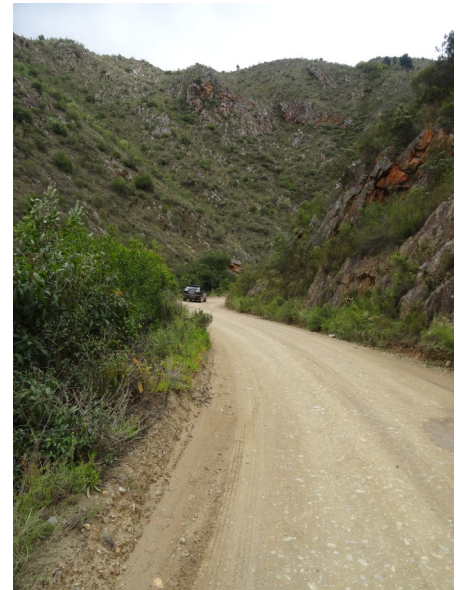
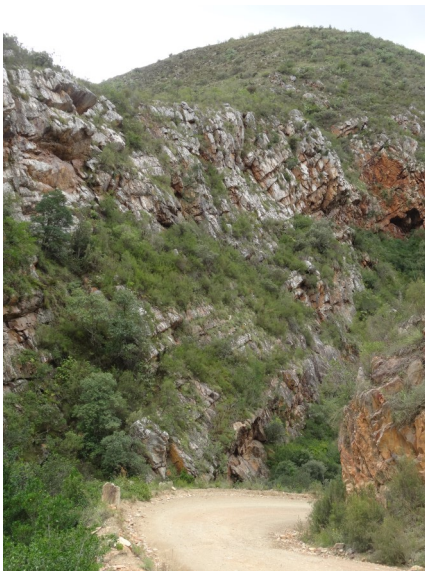
*Started out easily enough, then
got a little more exiting*



The scenery was stunning! We passed through heavily forested areas, with every species of tree imaginable – including conifers planted for harvesting – and an equal number of different ground covers and plants and bushes. We were at a loss to name almost any of these but they changed every few kilometers so we just admired the variety and the new vista around every bend. Starting to climb the first of the two passes, there were many bends and a number of hair-raising climbs and descents.



At a number of points we had superb views across the mountains and the valleys, most of which were simply forested or rock formations but with occasional patches of farm land and even the odd tiny hamlet. At times we passed between sheer rock faces (of every rock color you might want) and there were even a couple of waterfalls to add a little more variety. In all, it was a remarkable road and a



beautiful journey – if a little tense at times for both driver and passenger. We have taken the pass from Oudtshoorn to Prince Albert on two previous occasions but we both felt that this was as picturesque and perhaps even a little more daring.

After three hours (Google was right) we emerged on to a paved road and soon were in the tiny town of

Uniondale where we soon found a coffee shop to quench our thirst and relax our nerves. From there we drove directly to Oudtshoorn via De Rust, along the valley between the mountains we had just crossed and the higher range to the north. This was the Klein Karoo, an essentially desert valley of perhaps 30 to 50 miles width.



At first it seemed like we were traveling across Nevada – except for the occasional ostrich farm – but as we approached our destination we began to see grain fields (at this elevation still being harvested), green crops and the first of the vineyards in what is now the eastern end of the wine route that stretches all the way to Cape Town and up the west coast. It really is remarkable how significantly, and at times how suddenly, the landscape and its flora and fauna can change in this part of the world and everywhere seems vast – from the farm fields, to the vine-

yards and, especially, to the huge mountain ranges with their jagged peaks.

The final 50 miles or so into Oudtshoorn were on fast roads, still with amazing scenery but much more open than the closed-in passes we had crossed earlier in the day. Spectacular!

We arrived at the hotel around 3:30 after a truly memorable drive and were greeted with a welcome drink and shown to our room. All rooms here are individual thatched buildings arranged in a large circle from the main reception area. It certainly wasn't your normal hotel complex but was very pleasing in appearance with wide expanses of lawn separating the rooms.

Tonight we dined at Jemima's just down the road from the hotel. It was a beautiful evening so we sat outside and watched the light blue Jacaranda tree blossoms snowing down in the gentle breeze. We also had a super Thanksgiving Dinner – with Ostrich and Venison as a great substitute for the turkey. We sent messages to our family and birthday wishes and a toast to Sammy.



Friday November 25

We had breakfast sitting outside on the porch of the Queens Hotel and did a little shopping before our drive out of town. Our destination today was the "tourist town" of Willowmore, about 1 ½ hours' drive away. We started by retracing our steps of yesterday through De Rust and then headed north to Willowmore. The drive was much like yesterday with very little vegetation and very rocky soil but always with wide expansive views of the desert landscape and the mountains, now generally much more

rounded than the ones nearer the coast.



Willowmore turned out to be little more than a dot on the map with one main street and lots of locals shopping or simply standing or sitting around. This seems to be a typical trait in these smaller towns and we assume it to be a reflection of the high unemployment still prevalent, particularly amongst the Black population. In addition to the supermarkets, ATMs and liquor stores, the town also had several boutique shops for tourists. Molly particularly enjoyed the mohair store!



We found the main restaurant/coffee shop/antique store (Sophie's Choice) and enjoyed a light snack on the stoop on a hot (mid-eighties) and sunny day. Molly was impressed with the china and tea service for her Roibus.



For the return we decided on yet another unpaved route for about 60

miles of our journey. This time, however, it was relatively flat and straight and we managed to average about 40 MPH for most of the drive. Again, the roadside landscape was pretty barren but the mountains to our south, north and west were a magnificent sight.



Shortly after re-joining the main road (paved) back to Oudtshoorn we went through an amazing gorge at Meiringspoort where the road dropped steeply between jagged cliffs of several hundred feet in height. The rock was mostly orange in color but the striations, spalled areas and the changing light combined to make a multi-colored and multi-faceted gorge which almost seemed to close us in completely at times.



We arrived back in Oudtshoorn around 4:30 after another very pleasant drive in this beautiful country and one in which we had spent a little time in the Eastern Cape Region of the Karoo. We ate once again at Jemima's but this time we were in the garden at the rear of the restaurant. Again, it was an excellent meal with superb service in very pleasant surroundings.

Saturday November 26

We checked out of our hotel in Oudtshoorn and went downtown for a car wash (\$3.50 for a super hand wash), gas and a very nice breakfast sitting on the stoop outdoors on a pleasantly warm and sunny morning. About 11 we started our journey to Montagu on the famous Route 62 (with signs reminiscent of Route 66 in the US) which is named the Klein Karoo Wine Route.

Despite that name, the first half or more of the route was predominantly through more desert land-

scape with the occasional ostrich farm and even fewer vineyards. However, the landscape is far from uninteresting as we were passing through several mountain passes and always had at least



two major ranges in sight. There was only one town, Ladismith (not the famous one of the Boer War), between Oudtshoorn and our first stop in Barrymore.



Barrymore is an interesting little town if only for its now famous restaurant and coffee shop; the Blue Cow “on the water”. The last thing we expected as we entered town was to see anything on the water after about 100 miles of desert and a few almost dry farm ponds. However, the Blue Cow does indeed



sit just above a small pond in which there are some very large fish and many ducks. A variety of birds have nested near the deck and the whole is set against a backdrop of the farm and the mountains.

Molly had remembered visiting here two years ago but the contrast between the dusty exterior and the lush views from the deck was still totally unexpected. The tea and scones, too, were very good, making the whole experience one that will stay in our many fond memories of South Africa.

On leaving Barrymore for the remaining 40 miles to Montagu we were now in wine country proper. In some areas there were vineyards on both sides of the road stretching to the base of the surrounding hills and, where there weren't vines, there were large fruit orchards. With a clear blue sky (and a tem-

perature now near 90F) it is difficult to imagine more idyllic views.

We arrived in Montagu and our B&B at 7 Church Street before 3pm and were greeted by Mike and May (he from Manchester, she from somewhere in Scotland) who remembered us from two years ago and took time to show us our room, describe tours around the area and suggest restaurants in town.

We had one of the ground floor rooms in this garden setting which, although it didn't have quite the same view of their beautiful flower gardens, it certainly made getting the suitcases in a lot easier than lugging them up a steep outside staircase to the room we had had last time.

We had booked at the Four Oaks restaurant (two minutes' walk) for tonight as we had enjoyed a meal there last time. Once again, we were not disappointed.

Sunday November 27



Breakfast was served for the two of us in a shaded courtyard of the garden just outside our room on what was supposed to be the hottest day so far with the temperature predicted to top 100F. We had a nice chat with Mike and May and then set off on our drive around the wine estates of the area – at least that was the plan. The car wouldn't start (it had been a little hesitant for a couple of days) so Mike gave us a jump and insisted that we take our drive (with the cables) and call us if we got really stuck.

So, off we went on a circular route of less than 50 miles but one with dozens of estates and some more magnificent scenery, with some especially beautiful trees in bloom.



We stopped at a gas station to get the battery checked (no meter involved, but water level was

OK!), had to get another jump and then kept moving.



We did stop once more for a wine and cheese tasting (Vanloveren Estate) where we had five wines each with its own cheese pairing (for about \$7), sitting in the shade outside, next to a fish pond and with views over the estate and mountains. It was yet another wonderful experience, only slightly offset by needing another jump – from a very obliging patron.



We drove to a brandy distillers for two sample bottles (but didn't stop the car) and then went directly back to our B&B, where Mike immediately promised to help us get the car fixed on Monday morning. The brandy we bought was one that had been used in the dessert at the restaurant last night and I felt it was the smoothest I had ever tasted – so we just had to take some as a souvenir. Tonight we ate at the Olde Village Tavern, again just a few minutes' walk from our room. It was not as elegant as last night's dinner but good food, good service and pleasant seating on the stoop.

Monday November 28



After another good breakfast outside our room, Mike gave me a jump again and I went into town to get a new battery while Molly stayed in the garden. I went to a large garage with lots of work bays and was immediately ushered in. A mechanic checked the battery, convinced me that was the problem and had a new one installed within 20 minutes. So after spending less than an hour of the day and about \$80, we

were ready to leave Montagu and the very helpful Mike and May.

We drove almost to Worcester and then, rather than join the motorway, we detoured via Villiersdorp, Franschhoek and Stellenbosh on our way back to Cape Town. This gave us a final run through some of



the most scenic areas and allowed us to have a very pleasant coffee stop in Villiersdorp. It was almost 3pm by the time we reached Bantry Bay and greeted by Pat. She informed us that Natasha would be here to prepare dinner and she had confirmed that Jerome would pick us up at nine to take us to the airport.

So, we set about re-packing our suitcases to accommodate our souvenirs (everything fit but both cases were now very heavy), had a shower and then sat on the deck for our pre-dinner drinks and canapes. Natasha had prepared a lovely fish dish with vegetables and a super salad for our meal, accompanied by a chilled white wine and completed with homemade cheesecake and espresso. On a cooler evening with the sun setting over the south Atlantic, it is difficult to imagine a nicer way to complete this fantastic trip. We said our farewell to Natasha. Jerome was punctual as usual, Pat was back at the house to say goodbye – and we were on our way home. The drive to the airport was quick, we were soon checked in and spent about 1 ½ hours in the lounge before our flight to Amsterdam. We were a little late leaving Cape Town but were assured of an on-time arrival in Amsterdam. We both slept very well for about eight hours of the 11 hour flight.

Tuesday November 29

We arrived in Amsterdam about 11am local time (one hour behind Cape Town) and had over two hours to find our flight to New York in this huge – and rather difficult to maneuver) airport. The transit is further complicated by the fact that we had to go through Security again, but at least the line moved quickly and we had an hour or more in the KLM Lounge. Our flight to New York left about 15 minutes late but we still arrived on time after a relatively smooth flight which seemed to go quite quickly. At JFK we cleared Customs and immigration and then had more time in the lounge before our final leg to Cincinnati. We arrived at CVG airport around 8:30 pm (now Eastern Time), picked up a rental car and were back home in Mason before 10pm.

This concluded another great visit to South Africa and one in which we saw a lot but, at the same time, we felt it was a very relaxed trip. We also felt that we saw some significant changes from previous trips – in a positive direction – but this was not fully borne out by the discussions we had with some who lived there. We have some thoughts and observations in the Appendix but suffice it to say at this point that everyone we met was extremely friendly the service we received was first class.

Appendix: Thoughts and Observations

This was our fourth visit to South Africa, the first of which was in 2005, and I wanted to capture some thoughts and observations on what has changed – and what has not. These are simply my comments and are based solely on what we saw and heard during this trip.

The first comment is one that stems from our first trip, eleven years after the end of the Apartheid Regime, and it is one that we heard from everyone we talked to at that time. Black or White were unanimous in stating that the country would have progressed further and more positively had Nelson Mandela been able to stay in power for a longer period of time. His vision for the country seemed to have been universally accepted but his time in office did not permit the degree of change that everyone wanted. Even then, almost 12 years ago, there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the government that followed Mandela's years as president.

Although we didn't have as many conversations on that subject during our most recent trip, the same sentiment was echoed: if only Mandela could have had more time. Now, at least amongst Whites, there is a good deal of despondency about their future, significant distrust of the leadership and a sense that the government is corrupt in many ways. Some more mature Whites who perhaps had experienced "better times", are anticipating an increase in emigration, especially amongst the younger generation.

We did not have that same conversation with Blacks, but the extent of unemployment, particularly of that Race, must be creating some disappointment in the leadership and in the pace of progress. Even amongst those with jobs, it must be clear that the vast majority are relatively unskilled labor positions and, therefore, very poorly paid. We did not get a sense of whether Blacks felt better with a majority Black government or their feelings on its level of corruption, although the end to Apartheid must be seen as a positive.

Against this backdrop, however, we did see what we consider to be progress since our previous visits. I should say that these observations could be seen as sexist or racist (or both) but that is certainly not the intent. They are based on having seen similar changes over the years in both the UK and the USA and, I feel, are indicators of a positive trend, albeit far too late and progressing more slowly than anyone would want. The observations may be seen also as trivial or trite, and clearly should not be presented as "statistics" or official "trends"; just the observations (and projections) of a visitor.

When we drove across the country on our first visit, every stop to re-fuel the car was an unusual and exciting experience. Somewhere between 6 and 10 Black male youth would surround the car and, while filling the tank, would wash every glass surface, offer to check battery, oil and tires and tend to any other need, and expect, but be very happy with, a 50 cent (US) tip to share. Today, a fill-up is still a full-service affair (carried out with the same cheerful attentiveness) but most likely involves only a couple of attendants and "requires" a \$1+ tip. I would like to think that this reflects a little more in the pockets of the fewer attendants – and, hopefully – a number of youth with other, somewhat less menial tasks. Naïve? Maybe. Positive? I hope so.

Similarly, in 2005, parking a car anywhere, at any time, on any street, was “assisted” by young Blacks (often, it seemed, of school age) who would watch the car in your absence (whether 10 minutes or several hours) and be there when you returned to accept a 50 cent fee. At that time, this activity was unregulated and unsponsored but (as the guide book suggested) something to be acknowledged and accepted – or not, but at your peril.

On this trip (and to a lesser extent in 2009 and 2014) the parking “attendants” were far less omnipresent, wore official badges and vests (often sponsored by businesses), and were not all under 15. This could merely be a bureaucratic influence demanding more “licensing” but I prefer to believe again that those displaced from this job have found something a little more rewarding and better rewarded. Naïve? I hope not.

On this trip we drove several hundred miles (on excellent roads, I should add) and experienced many areas where road works were in progress – in itself, perhaps, a reflection of the overall economy – and employing many people. The actual construction personnel (especially the “technical” or “supervisor” roles) were often White, but the traffic controllers (flaggers, light and sign operators) – of which there were many – were predominantly, if not exclusively, Black. But, a large percentage of these were women. Rather than look on this as sexist, I would prefer to think that the work force was becoming a little more diverse and that perhaps the men had found somewhat more lucrative employment. It may also be because there are now two earner families (just as in the West over the past 50 years) – or, more pessimistically, that the former male workers have left the workforce altogether. I have no data to support either possibility but I hope it is the more positive one that prevails.

One final observation on the workforce and its apparent shift; this one from the restaurant business, on which we have quite a lot of anecdotal experience from our three week visit! In virtually all the restaurants we visited, the customers were almost exclusively White, although that might be largely due to the locations we were visiting, either high-end tourist regions (Stellenbosch would be a good example) or the “better” restaurants in small towns that also cater to tourism. Perhaps in large cities such as Cape Town or Johannesburg there would be a more significant number of Black diners and, indeed, during our two visits to the Waterfront in Cape Town there was a somewhat greater percentage of non-Whites in the outdoor cafes.

But the real change since our first visits to South Africa was in the wait staff. In what had been an almost exclusively Black domain, now there are many Whites – male and female – as restaurant and wine estate servers. Similarly, there appeared to be a much more even split in the higher level positions of these businesses, which at one point would have been exclusively White. At a wine tasting, for example, we could be presented with expert information on the wines by a 25 year old Black man and have the table cleared by a White woman. Again, there are a number of ways to interpret these observations but maybe we were witnessing examples of Equal Opportunity at work in a country that had essentially no measure of equality only 20 years ago.

I should stress again that these are my observations and my interpretations and I have done little research in an attempt to support or debunk the conclusions I reached. It might be interesting to get

some more statistically sound data and more expert interpretation but that is not the aim of this short journal entry. And again I should state that a much more pessimistic analysis was given by the several Whites who offered their opinions.

Whatever the truth about South Africa's direction and South Africans' feelings about it, it is safe to say that "everyone" is proud of their country (maybe not of all its inhabitants, particularly those in power) and feel that it is a wonderful place to live. And, no matter what their station in life, everyone gives the appearance of being very happy and wants to share that with others. How often have you seen a gas station attendant literally run to greet you to attend to your needs, wear a broad smile while doing it, and sincerely thank you for your patronage as he waves you goodbye and hopes you enjoy "his" country? I suspect most of us have experienced excellent service in a number of places around the world, including in our own country, but I don't think that I have seen a higher degree of sincere service and a genuine concern for satisfaction than that we experienced in all aspects of our visit.

Despite tremendous poverty for some groups, very high unemployment for many and the predictable by-product of petty crime and alcohol and drug abuse, the people of South Africa are friendly, warm and proud. And they have a lot to be proud of. The country that we saw during this and previous visits is spectacular in its scenery and has an abundance of natural resources; it has pockets of high technology and world-renowned medical science breakthroughs; and – one we very much appreciated – an excellent road system with some superb examples of design and engineering. For a visitor it is almost ideal; let's hope that it can approach that level for all its citizens.