

South Africa, Blog #2

When we last wrote we had just finished our first week of driving from Pretoria to Beaufort West, about 1200 kilometers with our side trips. Before leaving our guest house last Sunday morning we asked our hostess about conditions in South Africa – and, specifically were things getting better. She was very emphatic that progress was not only not being made but things were rapidly getting worse. Obviously, one opinion doesn't count for all but she certainly was convinced of hers. We clearly need to do some more questioning. Our sense (not at all scientific or substantiated) was that there has been progress over the 13 years that we have been visiting South Africa. Just one indication was when we filled the car with gas. 10 years ago, there would have been 10 attendants around the car, cleaning every glass surface and being thrilled with a 10 Rand (75c) tip. Now, only one attendant pumps the gas, asks whether or not we need the windshield cleaning and seems very accepting of 20 Rand or more. This we took as an indication that other, better paying jobs may be more available. Perhaps not! In fact, we later learned that it may be that the unions have fought for higher wages but this has had the unintended consequences of putting more people out of work.

We left Beaufort West by driving through the town center and were quite impressed with its architecture and overall “charm”. The city had been founded as a stopover for Cape Town vacationers headed into the Karoo and beyond and so has many hotels and some fine churches and other buildings. Modern traffic has changed many of the hotels into hostels and cheaper overnight accommodation, but the overall sense of opulence remains. The city's most famous son is Dr Christian Barnard.

We drove west on the N1 road that had brought us from Pretoria for another 60 miles or so, before turning south towards the town of Prince Albert. We were in the high desert of the karoo and it is every bit as barren and uncultivated as the Western US states such as Nevada. We were at an altitude of about 3000 feet but there were far more significant mountains to the west and south. Unfortunately, the distant hills were shrouded in mist – actually it was smoke from a recent, and ongoing, brush and forest fire about 70 miles east of us. The impact on us, minimal at this point, turned into something more before our day ended.



We arrived in the lovely town of Prince Albert around lunch time and soon found a coffee shop that was part of a very upscale hotel in the center of town. We sat outside on the veranda and enjoyed tea and

scones in the pleasant sunshine. There was a strong breeze blowing and the temperature wasn't too high so we felt very comfortable. After lunch we spent about 30 minutes walking the main (essentially only) street of town admiring the buildings, trees and other flora – and the cleanliness of the place. No litter, streets and sidewalks in good repair and an overall feeling of affluence. Again, it must have been – and still is – an easy stopover for Cape Town residents.

Our major purpose in going via Prince Albert, however, was to drive the Swartberg Pass to our destination of Outdshoorn. This pass, which climbs to about 5000 feet, is a 25 KM unpaved road that was built by a Scot over 100 years ago and is a masterpiece of road engineering – and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The first part on leaving Prince Albert was relatively well surfaced but that was just a teaser of things to come. The road climbs steeply and winds its way up the mountainside with only a small wall (two feet high) between us and a several hundred feet drop.



The road is more or less two lanes, but the uneven surface and potholes cause most drivers to find a central “good spot” such that any traffic going the other way results in one vehicle giving way to another and

another slow down or stop. Fortunately the road is not very busy (although today being Sunday it was far more heavily trafficked than on any of our previous visits) but clearly motorway speeds are not the order of the day.



In fact the 25 KM took about 2 hours; admittedly with a few photo stops but really a direct result of the driving conditions.

After reaching the summit – with absolutely spectacular views in all directions as far as the smoke would allow – the down slope was more heavily rutted than the ascent and we had to pick our way very carefully, and slowly, to avoid most of the deep ruts and high standing rocks. Our compact BMW did not have much clearance and I certainly didn't want anything puncturing a tire – or transmission housing. So, all the road was fair game (except when passing other traffic) and it required a good deal of concentration and a constant foot on the brake to make it down without incident to the paved road that then took us the remaining 30 kilometers to Outdshoorn.

That was the point at which the effect of the smoke started to have a real impact on us. The reception lobby

was in darkness except for four candles burning on the desk. It seemed that the fire had burned through a cable at the main substation (60KM away) and the whole of this town was without power!

We were given options as to where we might be able to eat – at restaurants that had auxiliary power or gas. It turned out that only one was offering their full menu so that was our choice. With a reservation made for 7:30, we now had to do all our preparations (unload, shower, change and get ready to leave) before dusk, which we recall came about 6:30.

Then a miracle occurred! As we were getting ready, there was a click and the sound of flowing air in our room as the air conditioning kicked in. Power had been restored – but we had no information as to how long it would last so we began re-charging everything in sight just in case.

The power had stayed on all Sunday night so we felt that the immediate crisis was over. It was very cool (low fifties) as we drove into town, stopped at the Tourist Office to pick up a brochure and then began a walking tour of Oudtshoorn. It took us along the main street of town and along a couple of parallel streets to take a look at the buildings that had been constructed as this town began. Oudtshoorn is known as the ostrich capital of the world and it got its start during two Victorian era ostrich feather “booms” for the ladies of Europe – first in the 1860s and again at the turn of the century. Consequently, many of the early and finer buildings in the town (population 60,000 and in the Western Cape) are of late 19th century vintage and, as such, have a grand and, often, ornate style. This is probably more true of the inside than the exteriors that we saw, but we could feel the “European” grandeur (and money) that went into many that we saw.



Most were built in a local sandstone but there were a number that had more the feel of Antebellum Southern US or New Orleans, with some fine wrought iron work. There were several early churches, the largest of which was the Nederduitse Gereformeerde (Dutch Reformed Church) building. Again it was stone built but for reasons that are not clear it appears to have been given a coat of paint in almost the same color. So much for “maintenance free”.

There were churches of all denominations, including a small but attractive Anglican church, and a number of civic buildings and homes of the former rich and famous, presumably built on ostrich feather money. The CP Nel Museum, which we had spent some time inside during our last visit, was originally built as a boys’ school and is perhaps the most imposing in the town and sits at the junction between the main street and

the east-west road that runs from Beaufort West to Cape Town. This road as it heads runs through the huge wine district of South Africa.

A feature of this town that we have seen on every visit (now four) and which must have existed much longer, is the corner just mentioned at which there are always six to ten African ladies selling ostrich feather dusters. Trade today was slow as a result of the cool (and later, rainy) weather, but presumably it remains worth their while to sit at this important crossroads and sell the local product.



In the afternoon we took a 50KM drive east to the Meiringspoort Pass in the Swatberg Mountains. This is somewhat similar to the road we had taken yesterday from Prince Albert but this is paved and, if anything, even more spectacular in its geological formations. The gorge was formed as a result of two huge upheavals of the earth's crust – one when this area was still part of the “super continent” Gondwanaland – and a second over 100 million years later

that not only threw more rock down the ravine but allowed the waterflow that is now the river which we crossed two dozen times on the 15 KM drive in this spectacular “crack” in the rock.

At the top of the pass (where we turned round and headed back to Oudtshoorn) the weather was beautiful and we were very impressed with the white cloud formations that streamed over the mountain tops in much the same vein as that on Table Mountain in Cape Town.



We returned to our hotel, through a little rain. It was still cold (barely above 50F) so dining outside was not to be an option tonight.

Then, about 5pm, the power went out again and we were once again in the mode of “getting things done” while we could see.



Despite this outage, our chosen restaurant (Jemima's, where we have eaten several times) was open, albeit with a limited menu. There were only three other tables occupied and there was no background music to interfere with conversation, so we settled in for a very pleasant evening, eating by candlelight next to a roaring wood fire. We both enjoyed ostrich with the usual compliments of salad, wine and desert, all of which were excellent. This was one of our best and most expensive meals to date at \$73.

The power remained off until the early hours of Tuesday morning but we were able to have breakfast and get ready to leave with light and heat! From Oudtshoorn, we drove south via yet another mountain pass, this time in the Outeniqua Range. It was cloudy and we went through several patches of rain as we climbed to the summit and then started the descent. It was here that we saw the full extent of the recent fires with entire hillsides completely blackened, with most vegetation burned to a crisp. A huge area had been devastated and we later learned that the fire had spread over an east-west area of about 100KM. Several people had lost their lives and there had been mass evacuation in some parts; clearly the effects are going to be felt for some time – making our experience with a few hours out of power seem insignificant.



As we drove through the prosperous town of George and then along the coast to Knysna, the sun came out and the temperature rose into the low sixties. We had a light lunch in a relatively new waterfront complex in Knysna and then drove slowly to our hotel for the next two nights, just outside the small town of Wilderness. We had stayed here two years ago and had been first introduced to its restaurant two years before that. The meals were excellent on each occasion, so we are hoping for continued good food, wine and service.

The evening did not disappoint! We were first ushered into the lounge for a pre-dinner drink and some talk with fellow guests (all from Germany). This was followed by the chef discussing the menu for the evening; not simply what we would eat, but also where it was from, how it was prepared and (in the case of meats) whether or not he had a hand in the hunt! Then we went in for a five course meal accompanied by excellent wine. The owners, two chefs (husband and wife) and the two waiters recognized us from previous visits – or at least they put on a fine show of remembering.

On Wednesday morning we chatted with the owner for quite some time (mostly about politics and change in South Africa—which he saw as modestly improving) before starting out on our day out. It was a beautiful sunny day, although the high temperature was predicted to get to 70F only.

We were now on the Garden Route, widely regarded as the most beautiful stretch in South Africa and certainly the most well-known. And, as we are in early spring, everything is very green and the blossoms are beautiful reds, purple and orange. This part of the route had been spared the fires (although not by much) so everything looked fantastic – all with a backdrop of the Indian Ocean with its sandy beaches, blue waters and rolling white caps. Beautiful!

We drove east to Knysna and immediately went up to an area called the Knysna Heads. Here there is a breach in the 300 feet high cliffs that allows water from the Indian Ocean to reach the large Knysna lagoon. The narrow channel between the cliffs generates some swift and choppy currents and in the past we have seen speed boats carrying frightened and very wet tourists through the choppy and somewhat dangerous waters. There were none today, however, but still the view was magnificent.



We then went another 20 miles to Plettenberg Bay we took our first swim in the Indian Ocean (13 years ago!!). We spent time simply watching the waves crash against the beach and the rocks along the shoreline. With clear blue skies it was an idyllic picture. We returned to the hotel for another superb dinner.



We left the small but quaint town of Wilderness soon after 10am and headed west along the remaining portion of the Garden Route as far as Mossel Bay. Here we left the ocean (or, rather, the coastline headed south to the Indian and Atlantic Ocean “border”) and, still driving west,

we were inland with mountains in what seemed like every direction.

We stopped in the small town of Albertinia (known for its giant aloe tree and many aloe products) for a light lunch sitting outside under a veranda. It was now into the seventies and very pleasant after a few cool days. The café was one of those that are common in South Africa (and New Zealand) that in most other parts of the world we would just drive by and look for a Starbucks-equivalent. But here, even the most modest of eating places not only provides service but many touches that you might expect in the finer (and way more expensive) cafes of Europe. Elegant tableware (albeit with a plastic cloth when outside), all the silverware one could need and everything presented “just so”. Obviously I am showing a little (perhaps more than a little) taste of stereotyping but of all the places we have eaten (and you may have reached the conclusion that eating is important!) who would guess that the most “elegant” (Victorian, old-fashioned, tasteful) service-oriented restaurants would be in England and in South Africa? No offense intended to any other country in the world!!



We left Albertinia and the main road to Cape Town and turned north towards the mountains. For perhaps 20 miles we were in farm land with many crops just being started and some already being harvested. In ei-

ther case, the land was very green and looked to be a very prosperous farming area. Quite suddenly, however, we began to climb (Garcia's Pass) into the hills and were in much more barren surroundings. Once again, many areas were blackened, although most gave the appearance that it had been quite some time since the fire, so not the ones of the past two weeks. Nevertheless the next fifty miles were a steady climb through desert, much like parts of Nevada or Utah.

When we reached the highest point on our journey today, we turned on to Route 62, which is billed as the South Africa Wine Route and many establishments copy the US Route 66 symbolism to underscore its tourist attraction features. Not that we would have known as we turned west again that we were in grape-growing country as the whole region seemed almost devoid of vegetation and pretty barren. We knew from previous travels on this road that there were many vineyards to the east (which stretches to Oudtshoorn of three days ago) but not at this high point on the road.

Then, first a small vineyard, followed by a fruit orchard, then a few fields of greens and, soon, we were in heavily cultivated lands where orchards and vineyards predominated. Then followed a number of wine tasting establishments, wine estates with restaurants and the dozens of roadside stores where the local product could be sampled and bought. We were now in the heart of the South African wine country, which follows this road almost to Cape Town and then north along the Atlantic Coast, almost to the border with Namibia.

Here again, at the risk of sounding prejudiced, the South Africans certainly know how to market their wares in the most enticing and sophisticated manner. Over the next week or so, we will visit many estates and their restaurants and hopefully will be able to show how different (and in our opinion) how much more pleasant are the experiences here than in California, or in Perth and Adelaide (Australia). That is not to "knock" those wine areas cited but rather to extoll the virtues of the SA experience. Or, maybe, it's just something that Molly and I prefer; perhaps it's the experience rather than the product. Whatever it is, we are fully intent on about ten more days of sampling!

Thursday and Friday nights were spent in a lovely guest house in the small town of Montagu. We had breakfast both days in the courtyard just outside our room and had another good conversation with our hosts who hail from Manchester, England. On Friday we drove south from Montagu and visited the town of Swellendam which was one of the first predominantly Dutch towns to be established as the Cape Colony

became more and more British. It has a lot of buildings similar to those in Stellenbosch (closer to Cape Town) but doesn't appear as prosperous, although there are many high-end guest houses in town. There is also a magnificent Dutch Reformed Church on the main street which we were able to visit.

We then set out for the wine route proper, where we were in an absolutely fabulous area covered in vineyards on both sides of the road and stretching as far as they could into the foothills of the mountains. There were dozens of wine



tasting houses and we chose one where we could get a small sampling with a light lunch. Molly chose a three wine pairing with olives and breads and I went for the five wines, each with its own cheese. We both agreed that our selections were delicious and, at a total cost of \$8, a great competition to our usual Starbucks “lunch” at home.



On Saturday (yesterday) we drove west from Montagu and then turned south to take a big bend around the mountains to Franschhoek. This was a fantastic drive with almost every type of scenery imaginable. The backdrop in all directions was moun-

tains but the foreground was at one point desert, around the bend it was cultivated farmland with the odd small village – but mostly it was vineyards. Each vineyard it seems had its tasting rooms and every field of vines was bordered by beautiful colorful shrubs or roses. Again, we were reminded that this setting is far more beautiful than similar wine routes in California or Australia (although they, too, are a magnificent drive) and belie (or maybe underscore) the range of income levels amongst South Africans.

Extreme poverty to very wealthy is a state that exists in many, if not all, countries, and is probably at one of the more extreme levels here in South Africa. Or, perhaps, it is more obvious here since the picture I have painted in the previous paragraph exists so close to shanty towns where thousands live in cardboard or corrugated iron shacks with limited water and electricity supply. They walk miles (or attempt to hitch a ride) to perform a menial task – or even to search for the same – often walking right by the “million dollar” mansions and wine estates. Here in South Africa in the 21st century it must be difficult “not to know” of the “other world”, when you are a native Black, walking along a dusty road past beautiful homes (mostly owned by Whites or Coloreds) and it must be doubly difficult to either ignore or to accept. In addition, with world-wide media available to virtually all, there can be no escaping the fact that your world is TOTALLY different to that which many enjoy. It’s all right there - either on the TV or right across the street.

The drive via Franschhoek took us over a mountain pass and then to a stunning view of the town and its surrounding vineyards. Here we stopped for a light lunch before completing the journey to Cape Town where we were to turn in the car and stay for a week at our nephew’s villa overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.





Once we had dropped off our rental car in Cape Town, our life jumped to another level thanks to the kindness of our nephew. We were met by Jerome, who drove us to the villa where we were greeted by the concierge who served us a glass of wine as we rested in the living room. At 4:30, the chef arrived, asked us at what time we would like to eat and would the deck be ok (or would we prefer inside?); she then set to work preparing a four course meal that she served as we sat overlooking the ocean – and, coincidentally Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela and others were incarcerated during the Apartheid period. Admittedly, he eventually tasted a life similar to ours – but what a fight he (and thousands of others) had to get there. And, of course, tens of millions of his race are still waiting and hoping for that promised land which, even with the change to a Black government and being in a vast majority, still must seem beyond reach.

In closing this rather lengthy missive, I should emphasize that our observations are just that—observations—supplemented by a few conversations with residents. It should not be taken as an authoritative narrative on the real situation in South Africa.

Hopefully we will be able to post one more blog about our stay in Cape Town before we leave for home next weekend.

Bob and Molly