

South Africa, Blog #3

We are now on our final day in Cape Town for this trip, after a wonderful three week vacation that has taken across almost the whole of the country, to each of its three capital cities and to some of the most spectacular scenery that we have ever seen.

We started in Pretoria and the last time we wrote (a week ago) we had just arrived in Cape Town to spend a week in our nephew's villa here—living in the most luxurious surroundings and once again enjoying everything that this wonderful city has to offer. We have been treated to meals cooked for us by the resident chef, chauffer-driven trips to fantastic wine estates and days out on our own in the city and surrounding area.

On Monday we visited the Cape of Good Hope. The weather in Bantry Bay where we are staying was very misty and we couldn't see the ocean only a few hundred feet below us but we were told that this could change as we rounded Table Mountain. Indeed, even before we reached the city, let alone the cape peninsula, there were breaks in the cloud and some blue sky. This just got better as we drove down the east coast of the peninsula and made our first stop in Simon's Town. This town has a main street of beautiful buildings and is one of the first settlements of the Cape Colony. It is also the home of the South African Navy and there is a significant naval presence here. Indeed, it was a strategic port for the Commonwealth in World War II.



From here it was to be a relatively short drive to the Cape – except that we had to get through the gates into the National Park and pay our fee of a little over \$20 per person (or about one half of that if a South African resident). We didn't mind the fee but the queue to the toll gate moved VERY slowly and we were in line for the best part of an hour. However, we eventually made it and then were soon at the hectic parking area at the Southwesterly tip of the African Continent. This is NOT the point at which the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet (as we had thought for many years) but is, of course, the place where everyone flocks to and was named the Cape of Good Hope by a Dutch king (or Portuguese, if you prefer) who saw the value of the treasures of the East that were “just around the corner”. The marker indicating the coordinates for this point

(surprisingly to me about 18 degrees east of Greenwich) was mobbed by people wanting the perfect picture. Interestingly, most were from India whereas in the past we have always been surrounded by Japanese at this locale. Another sign of the changing global economy?

Obviously, the attraction to this particular spot is the geographical location (and its importance over the centuries) but the scenery both here and all along the eastern and (particularly) western coasts is stunning. Huge hills of barren rock jump directly from the water and often are enhanced by wide, white sandy beaches. The plateau above the ocean is filled with low growing cover in green and (in spring) beautiful yellows, pinks and purples. There are also a couple of historical monuments to commemorate the pioneer journeys of Bartholomew Dias and Vasco de Gama (both Portuguese) who first rounded this headland almost 600 years ago.



We drove down the east coast and back via the west side and, as we said, there was stunning mountain and ocean scenery on both. However, the toll road known as Chapman's Pass on the west coast is one of the most spectacular drives anywhere that we have seen. It certainly compares with California Route 1 and rivals (if not beats) some of the coast roads that we traveled in Taiwan a year ago. It truly is spectacular and a masterpiece in road engineering.



On Wednesday we took a two hour drive to the town of Hermanus. We have stayed there at least twice on previous visits and have always enjoyed it.



Hermanus is famous as a good place to spot the Southern Right Whale as it migrates east. The best part of the season is over but we were lucky to see a couple quite close into the shore. We had a

brief – but obvious – glimpse of a tail fin at one point and several spouting bursts. I took a few photographs but all I got was a number of views of the blue ocean!

We had a leisurely tapas lunch sitting in the main restaurant area of town and then simply sat and watched the waves crashing on the rocky shore.

The drive there and back is motorway/divided highway just about all the way so is a relatively easy route. There is a spectacular pass (Sir Lowry's Pass) which, at 1500 feet, provides a spectacular view of the Cape

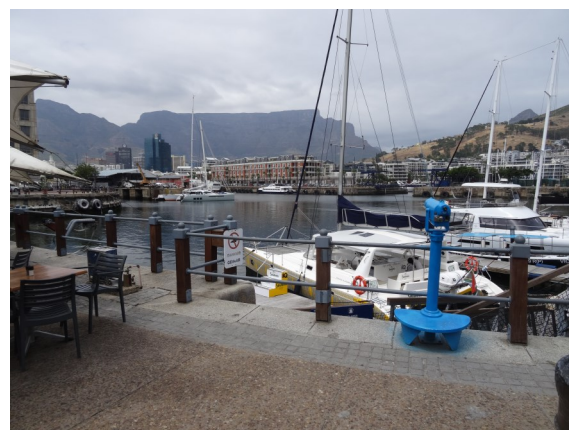
Town valley and the mountains to the north. In addition, the weather was perfect – sunny and a high about 75F, so it really was a very nice day out.

The other days spent in Cape Town were somewhat more leisurely and we stayed in or close to the city limits. We visited the huge V&A Waterfront—a complex of indoor and outdoor malls with some very high end stores, dozens of restaurants and cafes, and pleasant areas to just stroll and watch the world go by. In this complex is Nobel Square where statues of four of South Africa’s Nobel Peace Prize winners stand as a reminder to the Apartheid regime and, more importantly, to its end.



There are always a number of street entertainers to add to the ambiance. The area also has great views of Table Mountain and the city as well as parts of the old docklands. Cape Town now has an

large container ship port just outside the city but several smaller ships and some cruise ships still dock at this central location.



On another day we took the Cape Town Hop On/Hop Off bus.

Actually, there are several routes that are covered and we used three of them throughout the day. First, we drove about a mile to a parking area on the shore “below” the Bantry Bay villa and there picked up the “Red Route” bus, which took us into town, passing the V&A Waterfront, the Central Business District and then up Strand Street, which a hundred years ago was the waterfront of the city – now much of the city is on re-claimed ground to the north of this street.



We got off this first bus and walked through the market as far as the Cathedral, where Desmond Tutu was the archbishop in the late 80s and 90s and, of course, he was one of the leaders of the anti-Apartheid movement. We recall meeting him when he visited our church in West Chester and, although he is short physically, he is a very imposing figure and great speaker and, clearly, a leader. As we said earlier, his statue sits with three

other South African Nobel Peace Prize winners at the V&A, all of whom were instrumental in bringing about the end of Apartheid regime.

From the cathedral, we walked through the Company’s Gardens, an



area originally set aside by the Dutch East India Company to grow supplies for their ships as they sailed between Europe and the Far East. Now the area is a beautiful park filled with indigenous and other trees but has a small area still dedicated to vegetable growing. To get to the Gardens we walked past the Parliament building, thereby completing the three offices of government in South Africa on this trip: the administrative capital in Pretoria, the legal capital in Bloemfontein and now the parliament in Cape Town.



At the top end of the Gardens, directly in front of the imposing Table Mountain, is the Mount Nelson Hotel where the rich and famous stay when in Cape Town and home to the “world’s best afternoon tea” (Sunday Times), which Molly and I enjoyed on a previous visit to this city. After a light lunch in the Gardens and our walk through this oasis in the city, we caught the Yellow Route bus which follows a relatively short, but very interesting, route through the center of the city. It passes places as varied as the many churches and museums in the center of town, to the “night life” areas (where jazz is very popular) to the original Dutch fort and the spot where Nelson Mandela addressed tens of thousands after his release from prison. Perhaps the most poignant spot is an area of grassland called District Six. This is where, in the 1960s and ’70s, tens of thousands were forced out of their homes (as the bulldozers crushed them) in an effort to force segregation and eliminate any areas where the three major races could co-exist. Fifty years on, this large area is still mostly bare and serves as a memorial to the worst years of Apartheid.



Back in the market area, we took the “Blue Route” bus which makes an almost two hour circuit around greater Cape Town, visiting such places as the world famous Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, the original Wine Estates of Constantia, a shanty town (“Townships” right next to million dollar mansions) where 30, 000 live in very overcrowded and primitive

conditions, and finally to the ritzy beach areas of Hout Bay, Camps Bay, Clifton and Bantry Bay. This last 30 minutes along the Atlantic coast is certainly

the most scenic but the rest of the trip underscores the diversity and range of wealth that





exist side-by-side in this wonderful city. And all the time, the mountain that includes Devil's Peak, Table Mountain and Lion's Head provides a steep and rocky backdrop as well as a beautiful green slope at its base. On a warm and sunny day such as the one we experienced, it is difficult to imagine a more beautiful location for one of the world's finest cities.

Our other activities over the past week have mainly involved eating and/or wine tasting! We have dined at the villa on three evenings and have been driven to restaurants on the others.

Two of the restaurants were on exclusive wine

estates in Stellenbosch, about an hour's drive from the city. It is difficult to describe the superb food, wine and service which once again underscored for us the observation we make on every visit that South Africa is perhaps the best country in the world that we have visited for dining experiences. On a couple of other occasions we took just a short drive to Camps Bay where we had a light lunch overlooking the sandy beaches of this trendy area.



Our nephew's villa, Cape Town



So, as we prepare to leave Cape Town for the long journey home, we are leaving sunny and warm (70s) ocean-side luxury and are headed back to what we understand will be quite a thermal shock as we land in Mason. For this—and so many

other reasons—we are already looking forward to our next visit to South Africa.