

South Africa

November 2018



Bob and Molly Hillery

This was our fifth visit to South Africa and, as on our first visit in 2004, we decided to drive across the country and see towns and cities other than Cape Town, as well as exploring a little beyond the Garden Route and the Western Cape. Unlike our first visit, however, we did not include a safari for this trip; in fact, we have such fond memories of our one and only safari that we feel we could never get the same wonderful experience again.

This time, we flew to Johannesburg and immediately drove the 35 miles to Pretoria, a city we had never before seen. Pretoria is the Administrative Capital of South Africa and joins Bloemfontein and Cape Town (which were also on our itinerary) as one of three capital cities in the country. We were to spend two full days in Pretoria and then head in a generally southwesterly direction as far as Cape Town, where we would for the third time, spend a week in our nephew's villa overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

We were a direct flight from Atlanta (after a short hop from Cincinnati) to Johannesburg which, although over 15 hours, gave us some good sleeping time and we felt reasonably refreshed by the time we reached our hotel in Pretoria. So much so that, after settling in, we actually went for a meal in the hotel before retiring.

The drive to Bloemfontein for our second stop was a long day of driving but one on which we were able to see some interesting and changing scenery as well as experiencing the differences in driving habits and, to some extent, the culture of this beautiful country. We had visited Bloemfontein in 2005 but, frankly, had forgotten much of what we saw, so exploring this large city in the Free State was very interesting.

Our route then took us to the Karoo, a desert area on the north side of two mountain ranges which separate this high plateau from the Indian Ocean. After an overnight stop in the town of Beaufort West, we were once again in familiar territory as we entered the Garden Route (along the coast) and the Wine Route, a little further inland. These two areas are perhaps the most beautiful in South Africa and are essential to the itinerary for any visit. As we were here during the early spring, the foliage and blossoms were magnificent and the surrounding mountains made from a very impressive backdrop. Unfortunately, this area had experienced some rush and forest fires over recent weeks—in fact, we saw many areas still smoldering—and there were vast areas of blackened countryside.

Our final destination was Cape Town where we were to spend our final week living the life of the rich and famous at the home of our nephew in the ritzy suburb of Bantry Bay. The villa sits about 300 feet above the Atlantic Ocean in the shadow of Table Mountain and it is difficult to imagine a more idyllic spot to spend some time. In addition, it is close to the many tourist attractions in and around the city, so is a perfect place to stay.

The weather throughout our trip was generally sunny and mild (actually hot in the north) but we had a brief cool spell in the middle when overnight temperatures dropped to the low forties. What little rain we saw did nothing to interfere with our sightseeing—and, unfortunately, did nothing to ameliorate the terrible drought being experienced throughout the country.

South Africa, November 2018

Saturday October 27/Sunday October 28

After having breakfast with Elizabeth and Cameron, we drove to Cincinnati airport, returned our rental car and spent about 2 hours in the Delta Lounge before our 2:10 flight to Atlanta. This flight left on time and we arrived in Atlanta with a little over two hours before our long (almost 16 hours) flight to Johannesburg, so we were able to spend some time in the Delta Lounge.

The flight overnight to Johannesburg was surprisingly easy and we both slept for probably 8-10 hours (sometimes fitfully) after enjoying the dinner on board. There were a few bouncy spots but overall it was a smooth flight and we landed in Johannesburg about 15 minutes early – with complete use of auto-pilot right to the ground. The pilot had explained before landing that they do this from time to time “to check that it is working properly”. I think for most passengers, he might have left his little speech until after the landing – or left it unsaid completely!

Getting through Immigration and collecting bags was quite straightforward and quick but waiting in line for the rental car went slowly and it was particularly frustrating as the agent informed us that we could have gone straight to the car! Nevertheless, he gave us a nice, new BMW and we set off for the 35 mile drive to Pretoria, which was fast and easy with the aid of the in-car navigation system. I even drove on the left most of the way – but made one turn into oncoming traffic near the hotel. A few flashing lights soon got us back on track.

The Sheraton Pretoria is an old-style hotel with some very nice rooms – particularly the Diplomat Suite that we had been given. There was a very striking view from our balcony across an expansive lawn to the imposing Union Buildings.

We unpacked, cleaned up and went to the hotel restaurant for dinner; my steak was very good and Molly enjoyed her sandwich – with a bottle of wine and dessert, all for less than \$40. Quite a change in cost from our last vacation meal in Iceland just four weeks ago.

Pretoria is a city in the northern part of Gauteng province in South Africa. It straddles the Apies River and has spread eastwards into the foothills of the Magaliesberg mountains. It is one of the country's three capital cities, serving as the seat of the administrative branch of government, (Cape Town is the legislative capital and Bloemfontein the judicial capital), and of foreign embassies to South Africa. Pretoria has a reputation for being an academic city with three universities and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research located in its eastern suburbs. The city also hosts the South African Bureau of Standards making the city a hub for research. Pretoria is the central part of the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality and there have been proposals to change the name of Pretoria itself to Tshwane.

Pretoria is named after the Voortrekker (“The Great Trek” of the Dutch from the Cape Colonies to the interior of the country) leader Andries Pretorius, and within South Africa sometimes called the “Jacaranda City” due to the thousands of jacaranda trees planted in its streets, parks and gar-

Monday October 29

We were up quite early and had breakfast in the hotel restaurant before starting our day out soon after 8:30.

As South Africa's administrative capital, Pretoria has a number of imposing national buildings, museums and a huge university. Unfortunately, these seem to be spread over quite a wide area and – unlike virtually every other capital city we have visited – has no Hop On Hop Off bus service nor, in fact, much in the way of organized tours within the city. From what we have gathered, if you want to visit Pretoria from Johannesburg, or even Cape Town (1000 miles away!) there are lots of tour bus opportunities but staying in the city your options appear limited to walking.

The Union Buildings form the official seat of the South African Government and also house the offices of the President of South Africa. The imposing buildings are located in Pretoria, atop Meintjieskop at the northern end of Arcadia, close to historic Church Square and the Voortrekker Monument. Though not in the center of Pretoria, the Union Buildings occupy the highest point of Pretoria, and constitute a South African national heritage site

The Buildings are one of the centers of political life in South Africa; They have become an iconic landmark of Pretoria and South Africa in general and is one of the most popular tourist attractions in the city and an emblem of democracy. The Buildings are the location of presidential inaugurations. These buildings, built from light sandstone, were designed by the architect Sir Herbert Baker in the English monumental style and are almost 900 feet long. They have a semi-circular shape, with the two wings at the sides representing the union of a formerly divided people. The clock chimes are identical to those of Big Ben in London. The east and west wings, as well as the twin-domed towers, represent two languages, English and Afrikaans



The Boer Republics of the ZAR (see below) and the Orange Free State were united with the Cape Colony and Natal Colony in 1910 to become the Union of South Africa. Pretoria then became the administrative capital of the whole of South Africa. The new Union required a governmental building which could signify unity and host the new government.

The South African Republic (Dutch: ZAR), often referred to as the Transvaal or as the Transvaal Republic, was an independent and internationally recognized country in Southern Africa from 1852 to 1902. The country defeated the British in what is often referred to as the First Boer War and remained independent until the end of the Second Boer War on 31 May 1902, when it was forced to surrender to the British. The territory of the ZAR became known after this war as the Transvaal Colony.

Our hotel was close to the very impressive Union Buildings, where Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President after the end of apartheid. So, our plan was to spend some time in and around that site after walking to the center of the older part of town, Church Square, a straight shot down the road outside our

hotel. It turned out to be a much longer stroll than the 30 minutes suggested by Google and had little to offer in the way of attractions along the way. However, it gave us a chance to be surrounded by the sounds of the people that make up this town and, indeed, all of South Africa based on our experience. The sidewalks are in poor repair, litter is an ever-present phenomenon and the air is filled with the sound of horns from the hundreds of mini-buses that dash up and down every main road. This is the transportation for most and the drivers solicit customers by sounding the horn at every potential rider. In addition, at busy intersections, additional employees will shout for custom, presumably giving an indication of where the bus is headed – and how many more can be crammed inside.

To a visitor, this untidiness, hustle and noise can be a little disconcerting at first but must be accepted as the way of life in what is still a poor country with massive unemployment. Not that this is reflected in the people themselves who are certainly among the most pleasant and cheery that we have met anywhere and, for the most part, seem oblivious to the conditions around them.

On our walk, we passed many market areas where sellers had set up stalls selling anything and everything. We also passed dozens of single-person sellers who had a tray or table top filled with goods that, while of no appeal to us, presumably would find a buyer at some point. Despite this, and a large number of people who simply sat in the shade where it could be found, we saw very little evidence of begging, were not approached and felt very safe.

When we finally arrived at Church Square, we were pleased that we had made the trek. The very large open area, partly filled with green lawns, was surrounded by a number of very impressive late 19th century buildings and in its center was a statue of South Africa's third president, Paul Kruger (see inset).

Church Square (Wikipedia)



Stephanus Johannes Paulus "Paul" Kruger (10 October 1825 – 14 July 1904) was one of the dominant political and military figures in 19th-century South Africa, and President of the South African Republic (or Transvaal) from 1883 to 1900. Nicknamed Uncle Paul, he came to international prominence as the face of the Boer cause—that of the Transvaal and its neighbor the Orange Free State—against Britain during the Second Boer War of 1899–1902. He has been called a personification of Afrikanerdom, and remains a controversial and divisive figure; admirers venerate him as a tragic folk hero, and critics view him as the obstinate guardian of an unjust cause.



Amongst the buildings we identified were the first parliament (now the town hall) building (right), the courts of justice (where Mandela and others were sentenced and sent to Robben Island—below left), the central post office (below right) and a number of other fine civic buildings. Absent from Church Square was any sign of a church! We later learned that there had been a thatched roof church here when the city was first settled and when the only other signs of habitation were tents.

We did manage to find a coffee shop on the square and a cool place to relax for a while. The owner (we presume) greeted us, asked



where we were from and was helpful in pointing us to the tourist information center. This latter turned out to be of little real value (although the staff were very friendly) and merely confirmed our earlier findings that Pretoria does not count tourism amongst its major sources of income.



We followed a parallel street for our walk back to the hotel on what by now was a very hot day. Other than a rather magnificent mosque (fronted by a gas station!), this street too provided little of interest to the tourist except as another glimpse of life in urban South Africa. The walk brought us directly in front of the Union Building

grounds but by this time we had walked enough (over three miles) and one of Molly's shoes had split (!) so we headed straight to the lounge in the hotel for a cool drink and a sit down. This we followed with an after-



noon nap, so our first day in Pretoria was essentially over – except, of course, for dinner.

We chose an Indian restaurant about 15 minutes drive from the hotel and decided to use Uber for the very first time. Other than the fact that the pickup required us to scan in our credit card (which had already been registered) the driver showed on time. Unfortunately, the restaurant was in a mall (actually, near a mall as it turned out) so we were dropped off near (not at!) an entrance and, with much waving of arms, directed to “our” restaurant. It wasn’t where we were told, nor was it even in the mall. Called another Uber, picked up and dropped at another mall entrance with another set of arm waving. (Think Kenwood or Tri-County Malls in Cincinnati). Still no luck. After wandering the mall and recognizing several shops, we again contacted Uber and went outside to wait – only to be approached by TWO con artists – but no driver. Called another Uber (every time having to do it from Starbucks WiFi as my data signal was non-existent); he never found us. Tried again and we actually met but even he wasn’t sure exactly where our restaurant was. But, he was local, asked another local and within five minutes we were at our destination.

Following many apologies from the restaurant staff (really not their fault except being in a poor Google location) we enjoyed a very good Indian meal – quite different to those we have experienced in the US or England. After paying the bill and with a failing battery on my phone, we tried Uber again. This time our starting point was not recognized! With several attempts by the staff and a request for a “regular” taxi (“not recommended because they are not safe”) the owner of the restaurant gave the keys to his SUV to one of the waiters and told him to take us home. Fortunately, we now knew enough of the local geography to guide him and we arrived safely at the hotel after giving him a good tip (\$7 – yes that’s good tip!) and MANY thanks. Quite an interesting night!

Tuesday October 30

We were up late and only just made the breakfast cut-off time of 10:30. However, we still had plenty of daylight hours to accomplish our goal for today – a visit to the Cradle of Humankind. This is an enormous complex on which are many famous archeological sites, all leading to the conclusion that this part of Africa was indeed where we all came from about 200,000 years ago. The most recent find (only about 15 years ago) , and perhaps most important, was of fifteen virtually complete skeletons buried deep in a cave which, it is claimed, add to the mounting proof that here were the hominids that started the migration “out of Africa”.



The cave is open to visitors (although I doubt that the site of the finds is accessible by the general public as it required specially selected individuals to go to the “burial site”) but we chose to forego that adventure as it required climbing a lot of steps and squeezing through some narrow and low passageways. Instead, we spent two hours in the recently built – and extremely well appointed – visitor center and museum.

The major part of the center (built inside a mound now covered with grass) covers the “working” period of the site, which actually began almost 100 years ago and has been the home to many archeological digs throughout the period. The story is told in commentary by many of the leaders, by simulation and actual footage of the discoveries and, most importantly, with the actual remains of *Homo Naledi*, a now extinct form of hominid. The name “Cradle of Humankind” also reflects the fact that the very first hominids were also found in this area, although there is no evidence that there was any communication between the species as evolution took place.

The painstaking work (not to mention the somewhat dangerous conditions at times) is told in substantial detail and covers the methods used and the excitement as new findings were made. It also covers the process used in the selection of the recovery team members once the most recent findings had been made deep inside the cave.

“...The catch is this - the person must be skinny and preferably small. They must not be claustrophobic, they must be fit, they should have some caving experience... They must be willing to work in cramped quarters, have a good attitude, and be a team player.”

The cave recovery team finalists



This case holds approximately a third of the 1700+ numbered fossils of *Homo naledi* from the Dinaledi Chamber, representing remains of at least 15 individuals of all ages, infant to elderly. The “skeleton” in the centre of the case is made up of bones from a few different individuals in order to illustrate the parts of the body that are represented. Bones of other individuals are surrounding the composite skeleton.

Altogether it makes for a fascinating look at the science – and guesswork – behind what is now widely accepted as the discovery of the ancestors of ALL of us, no matter where we now inhabit the planet. For me it gave substance and visual evidence that complemented a book I had read recently on “The History of the World” which started with a woman called Eve leaving the African continent for the Middle East and beyond.

Following this most interesting area of the museum, the rest of the exhibits covered an interactive look at the history of the Universe and where Man fit on that scale – about the last 2 seconds of the 24 hours depicting billions of years. Finally, the museum brought us right up-to-date with a look at the people of the world: how wealth is distributed, how we (allegedly) are headed for destruction (unless we change) and how population distributions will look by 2050. It seemed to get increasingly political in tone and less focused on what was an amazing story and a superb display of our ancestry.

There have been a number of times in our travels where we have visited sites of immense historical interest (Jerusalem and Hiroshima come to mind for totally different reasons) and where it is humbling to stand exactly (or as near as one can tell) where the world-changing events took place. The Cradle of Humankind was one of those.



The hour long drive back to Pretoria was through some beautiful mountainous scenery and, as if to bring us right up to date, we drove by a space satellite tracking station and the headquarters of South Africa's Nuclear Energy Corporation. Add to this negotiating the rush-hour traffic of the city and you have a wonderful and exciting day out!

Tonight we found another restaurant via Google and used Uber (quite successfully) to get there. We had an excellent meal with superb service and easily got a ride home. The evening was a great success!

Wednesday October 31

Today we drove the 300 miles from Pretoria to Bloemfontein. After checking out around 10:30 we drove out of Pretoria through hilly countryside until we reached the conurbation that is Johannesburg. The motorway ran around an inner ring road and the traffic moved very well and we seemed to get through the city and near the Soweto Township in a relatively short space of time. Then we were out in the country, which at this point – and for most of the way – was what I would have labelled sa-



vanna; very sparsely populated, grassland with very few trees. Cattle grazed on some of the land, but for the most part we were passing through almost barren land and very little cultivation.

We made our first (and only) stop at a motorway service area shortly after we had crossed from the Province of Gauteng (Pretoria/Johannesburg) into the Free State Province (known in our schooldays as the Orange Free State). It was an independent Dutch and then British country but ultimately became part of the Union of South Africa in 1910 following the two Boer Wars.

As we got within about 100 miles of Bloemfontein, the terrain became a little more undulating and there were a few significant hills on each side of the road. It also seemed a little more cultivated and there were a few farmed fields, although the crop was not obvious to us. Cattle still seemed to be the farming of choice.

The roads were generally excellent and well over half the distance was on divided highway or motorway, marking a significant change from our last cross-country drive in 2004. The rest of the road was generally two lanes in one direction, one in the other, alternating every few miles so passing slow-moving trucks (of which there were many) was usually quite straightforward with a little patience. Drivers were generally very considerate (although there were a few too impatient to wait for the passing lanes) and use of the shoulder was accepted as an extra lane to keep traffic moving. The speed limit was 75 MPH throughout, except through small urban areas and construction. Driving in South Africa is so different from that in many other countries that I put together a brief summary of its salient features in the box below

Driving in South Africa

Motorways or expressways as we know them are few and far between in South Africa and exist (as far as we have experienced) around Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town. Here they are exactly similar to ours with only LEFT turn exits (South Africa drives on the LEFT) and no cross-median turning. The speed limit on these roads is 120 KPH (75 MPH).

Outside the major conurbations these motorways become two lane highways – but, with limited exception – still retain the 75MPH speed limit. This might seem a little excessive and potentially dangerous – and it can be – but there are a number of factors that make it reasonable for the country and its traffic – most of the time!

First, the two lanes become three from time to time (perhaps every 10 to 15 miles depending on terrain and other conditions) which allows a passing lane in one or the other direction. So, with a little patience, passing can become easy and safe. This is especially useful in passing trucks which are restricted to 80KPH (50MPH) and generally are very good about staying at that limit, with perhaps just a little excess.

However, the most important factor which facilitates relatively easy and safe driving at these speeds is the use of the wide shoulder that exists in both directions. Trucks (and other slower moving vehicles) will often pull onto this shoulder, allowing faster traffic to pass in the driving lane. It is customary for the passing vehicle to not only signal his passing intention but also his completion of this maneuver by a left signal and then to acknowledge the trucker with a few flashes on the four-way flashers. The trucker usually responds with a flash of his headlights to say “You’re welcome”.

Often trucks will keep on the shoulder for long periods of time, in essence making a one lane road into two. In addition, if a trucker sees the road ahead clear for a car to overtake he will give a few flashes of his RIGHT turn signal. This can be a little confusing since that same signal could mean that he himself was about to pull out and pass someone – but road conditions and relative speeds generally confirm one or the other.

Most drivers, especially truckers, are very courteous and will make every effort to allow faster moving traffic to go by, so the absence of an extra driving lane and the fact that there is no median divider is not an issue - most of the time! Having said that, with vehicles traveling at 75 MPH and with no physical barrier between, it is best to stay alert and sometimes practice a little defensive driving. For example, I have used the shoulder on my side of the road several times to avoid potential collision with a truck going in the opposite direction as he passes another truck. Two trucks side by side using one shoulder and one driving lane will often cause the outer truck to use at least some of the opposing direction lane – that is, MY lane!. The shoulder is very useful at times such as these.

All in all, the system works very well. As with any high speed travel, knowledge of, and acceptance of “the rules” is key to safe driving. So far, we have seen this work well and traffic can travel quickly and safely across country. It is worth pointing out, however, that traffic density is nowhere near that of the US or UK, so how things will work when many more people have cars is yet to be seen.

In cities, where most streets are three or four lanes and speeds far more moderate, the major issue is pedestrians who seem to have little “road sense” and are ever-present in large numbers. Drivers seem to be fully aware of this and the cars’ major contribution to problems is “anticipating” the changing of the lights – often by quite some time! Again, it seems to work!

Finally, I should have mentioned that pedestrians can be – and are – an additional hazard on motorways and the high speed national roads discussed above. They often will cross these roads (and it’s not always apparent where they have come from or where they are going) and will congregate (particularly at on and off ramps) in search of a lift to some distant destination. This is so prevalent that one must believe that they are successful more often than not – creating yet another hazard as vehicle suddenly screech to a halt to pick them up.

Driving in South Africa is different, challenging and fun.

PS My dissertation suggests that driving conditions are generally good and safe, which we have seen to be true. However, the very next morning after writing the above, we were on a stretch of road that was billed as one with many accidents. In fact there was a sign indicating the number of days since the last accident and the “previous record” since an accident on this stretch. Both were posted with a proud “1”.

Maybe not all is at it seems.

The weather had been a little overcast in Pretoria and we actually went through a short period of rain south of Johannesburg. This dropped the temperature into the fifties almost instantaneously, but it jumped back to the mid-eighties as soon as the sun came out again.

Altogether it was an interesting drive despite the long stretches of what could be called “nothingness”. However, we have always found that any terrain offers something worth looking at and this long drive was no exception. Merely seeing the various conveyances and the roadside population

We arrived at our hotel in Bloemfontein around 4:30 and filled out necessary paperwork to enter the gated and guarded complex. If there is a common theme that we have observed in poor and developing countries it is the following: many more people are used to do any one job (presumably helping the unemployment situation) and, in order to make that job “important”, paperwork is necessary for even the most trivial tasks. Perhaps even the paperwork itself is “processed” by yet more people (and even more jobs) but we suspect most of the forms (in triplicate) soon end in a round file somewhere! However, if any of this helps bring the country into a more prosperous state (which would be anathema in the Western World) so be it – and we will put up with the frustration and delays.

Tonight we chose an Italian restaurant about 10 minutes’ drive from the hotel. We found the restaurant with the aid of our phone GPS and, once there, were immediately ushered into a parking space by a local young man. Fortunately, we were familiar with this procedure and recognized that he would require some level of payment for “keeping the car safe” while we were in the restaurant. When we first visited South Africa, 10 Rand (about 75c) was the norm but that had been some time ago. So, when we were seated at our table we asked our waiter what was now acceptable. He basically said it was up to us!

We had a great meal (not specifically Italian – Greek salad and fish and chips!) but the food and service were excellent. Following the meal we ordered espresso and was offered grappa, which I enthusiastically accepted to follow a super meal.

We finished the evening by introducing ourselves to a beautiful family at a nearby table who were celebrating a daughter’s birthday. After a brief, pleasant conversation we left the restaurant and retrieved our car with a 40ZAR (\$3) tip. The drive back to the hotel was straightforward and we were back in our room by 9:30 after a very pleasant evening out.

Thursday November 1

It was a little overcast and quite a bit cooler this morning (mid-fifties) as we ate breakfast in the hotel. The temperature was supposed to get into the low 70s so we figured it would be an ideal day for our walking tour of Bloemfontein.

We drove to the central business district and parked at a convenient spot for our tour. The major attractions were on or close to President Brand Street, widely acclaimed as one of the most beautiful in South Africa, perhaps not so much for the wide avenue itself (although there were a number of trees lining the sidewalks) but rather for the magnificent late nineteenth century buildings.

Indeed, these honey-colored buildings were very attractive and dated from the earliest days of the city, which had been founded by a British soldier (under orders from the south) as the Cape Colony was trying to expand further north in the country and keep pace with the Dutch. At that time, the whole region (the Orange Free State) was ruled by the Boers but there were several native-run “kingdoms” in the area. Treaties between the latter and the British threatened Boer rule and inevitably led to the Anglo-Boer wars later in the century.

We actually visited the oldest building in Bloemfontein, built on a former farm (by Warden and others)

and used as a school, church, the first parliament building and eventually a museum. Today it stands as an annex to the much larger National Museum (also in Bloemfontein) and we were given a very interesting private tour by the curator. Several of the earliest British residents to take office here became presidents of the new Orange Free State. That's the country (as it was then) that we learned about in grammar school and which is now the Free State Province of South Africa.



The First Radstaal and oldest building in Bloemfontein.

The main room still retains its cow dung floor

The later civic buildings (mostly on President Brand Street) are stone-built (unlike the mostly wood and thatch – with a cow dung floor – of the First Raadsaal we had visited) and, although built in a number of styles, are each very fine examples of Victorian masonry. We saw some with towers that were very reminiscent of the Union Building in Pretoria, although that was erected in the early 20th century. We also visited the Anglican Cathedral which is a large brick building with a beautiful stone font, a relatively simple altar and an unusual wooden “sub ceiling”.



The Anglican Cathedral



The beautiful buildings of Bloemfontein along President Brand Street

Top left: The Supreme Court of South Africa

Top right: The Parliament Building (now “capitol” of the Free State

Middle left: The Post Office

Bottom right: The Roman Catholic Cathedral

Following our walk along these main streets we went to a very modern mall, built next to an artificial lake) "Loch Lomond" where we had a light lunch and rested our feet while watching the world go by. As we have seen in most restaurants (and even this small coffee shop) most of the clientele are White whereas by far the majority of shoppers here were Black or Colored. The mall had a number of upscale and trendy stores and seem to be frequented by all colors – as well as by many groups of school children in their smart uniforms – no jeans and tee shirts here!

After lunch we went back to the car (and surprisingly did not see a local "watching" it and looking for a small payment) and drove about 20 minutes to the top of Naval Hill where there is now a huge bronze statue of Nelson Mandela. The statue can be seen from the center of town several miles away and stands 25 feet tall. It depicts a younger Mandela than others we have seen and bears a number of quotations in its granite base. It is an amazing memorial to an amazing individual and commands the most prominent site in the city with views of the otherwise mostly flat terrain in all directions. It also faces the Methodist Church which was where the ANC was first formed in 1912.



So, that ended our five hours of touring the city of Bloemfontein during which we walked about 3 miles, learned a good deal about the city and the Free State and saw some magnificent buildings. A great day out and probably typical of our favorite ways to spend vacation time.

Tonight we ate at the New York restaurant in the same neighborhood as the Italian we ate at last night. It was much bigger and more crowded but still had a very extensive menu. My lamb was superb and Molly enjoyed her kingklip. We were back at the hotel by about 9:30.

Friday November 2

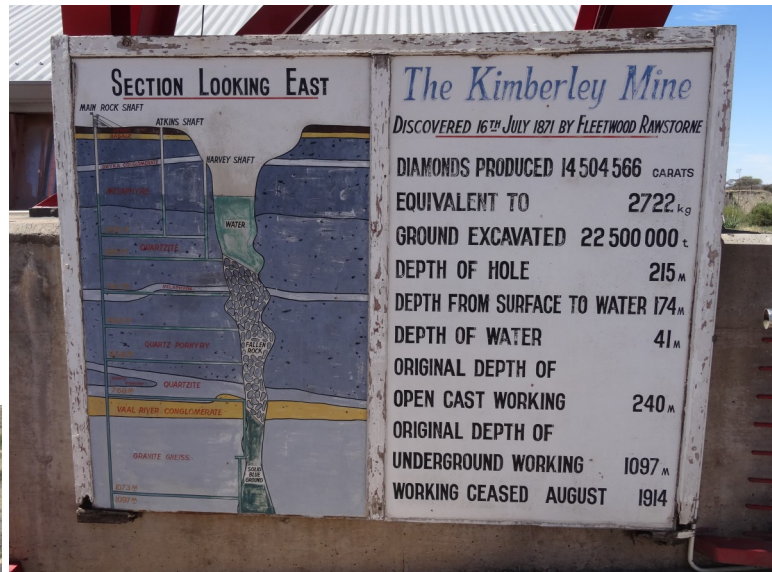
Today we took an approximately 200 mile round trip drive to Kimberley, which is just across the border from the Free State in the Province of the Northern Cape. The drive in both directions (slightly different routes) was along flat lands which were essentially cattle ranches with very little evidence of any other types of farming. There were occasional deer ranches, one or two ostrich farms and perhaps a dozen safari parks or game reserves. We passed through two or three small towns in all – other than that we rarely saw other people.

The plateau was broken by a number of small cone-shaped hills and some larger flat-topped mesas but, other than those, the ground was raised only at the thousands of termite mounds that were everywhere on both sides of the road. We read that there were a number of Boer War battlefields between our outbound and return routes but we saw no evidence of such, except a sign in Kimberley itself that indicated a war dead memorial.

The reason to visit Kimberley, of course, was to visit the “Big Hole”, the largest hand dug mine in the world and the site of the DeBeer Diamond Mining Company. The gold rush in South Africa started a little later than those in California and Australia but this one mine, first dig beginning in 1871, had produced a very large percentage of the world’s gold and some of its more famous specimens by the time it closed in 1920.



Since we last visited Kimberley in 2005, a very modern visitor center and museum has been built as well as a viewing platform way above the hole itself. The sheer size is impressive (1.6Km circumference) but the story of the discovery, the granting of claims, the heroics of those seeking a fortune and, finally, the



amalgamation into the DeBeers single operation is an amazing story which the new center describes in great detail. It is also the story of some of the world’s richest men – from the rather modest DeBeer brothers to Cecil Rhodes, Ernest Oppenheimer, the Rothschilds and JP Morgan. The DeBeers Company was founded by Cecil Rhodes (later a prime minister of the Cape Colony) and it held an essential monopoly for gold production until earlier in the 21st century. It is still a huge multi-national conglomerate and the name seems synonymous with diamonds.

Outside the center and along the rim of the hole is a small “ghost town” made up of buildings and equipment of the early mining period, which is very reminiscent of many Western US silver and gold mining towns in all respects – stores, bars and places of ill repute!. And, as with most of these endeavors, it seems that it was the proprietors of these establishments who actually made money whereas the miners themselves often came away broke – with the obvious few exceptions.



It was a very informative and pleasant way to spend three hours and the drive to Kimberley and back made for another good day out.



*Kimberley “Ghost Town”
And a fine Jacaranda Tree*

For our last dinner in Bloemfontein we went to another nice restaurant called Margeritas, where we enjoyed starters, kingklip, wine and dessert for less than \$60. Excellent.

Saturday November 3

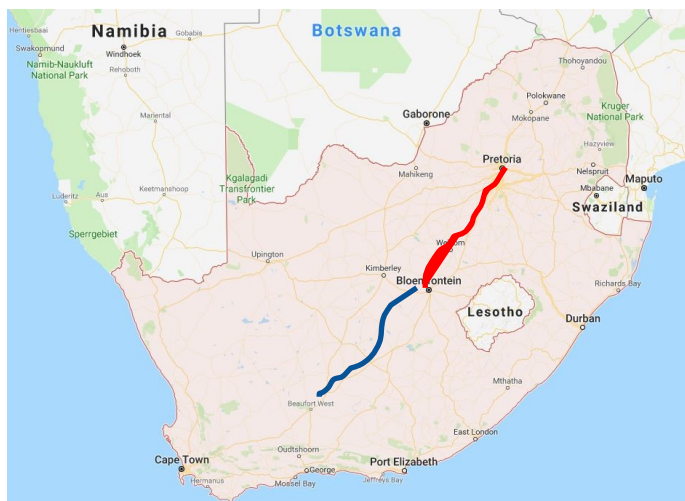
We were up a little earlier today and had breakfast before finishing our packing, checking out and getting on the road about 9:15. We had almost 550 Km to drive today so we were pleased to be off at a good hour.

The road to Beaufort West, our next destination, was the N1 all the way so we had a 120KPH speed limit for much of the drive. It was a two lane highway with passing lanes every 10 to 15 miles but, as usual, the shoulder provided a useful lane for slow moving trucks so slowdowns were minimal.

We made one stop for lunch and another for gas but otherwise kept going. We arrived at the Great Karoo

Guesthouse before 3:30pm and settled in the room to relax before dinner.

The drive had taken us from the flat cattle ranch lands around Bloemfontein to the more mountainous region of the Karoo. It had felt as though we had been slowly climbing for the whole of the drive but in fact Beaufort West (at 3000 feet) is actually 400 feet lower than Bloemfontein. Nevertheless, the terrain as we crossed once again into the Northern Cape was much more rugged and hilly and there were some significant dark brown peaks, many having unusual and “figure-like” shapes. The land at road level still was fundamentally cattle ranches but clearly this farming area was much more restricted than further north as nothing was growing or grazing once the land started to climb.



Although we had enjoyed the flat lands of the Free State, it was nice to have a change to something with a little more variation and we could now plainly see that this entire area had at one time seen a lot of volcanic activity and there were many cone-shaped hills and lava rock. There were also a number of very impressive “table top” mountains which rose perhaps 300 feet above the surrounding flatter land. Altogether it was an easy drive and the time passed quickly as we enjoyed the changes in scenery.

Tonight we ate at the 4 Sheep restaurant recommended by (and owned by?) the receptionist at our guest house. The spartan room was above a shop that was part of a gas station (get the picture?) but the service and meal were fine. The local specialty here is Karoo lamb so we each had a variety of that. It is supposed to be quite a different taste due to the grazing conditions here but neither Molly (who had the shank) nor I (curried lamb) noticed any difference to “normal” lamb. However, the wine and dessert were good and the lamb was adequate and filling!

Sunday November 4

We were awaked before dawn by the sound of something slamming against our bedroom outer wall. It turned out that a very strong wind had suddenly sprung up and had slammed one of our window shutters against the wall. It happened a couple of times before I was able to get it properly closed and, as the wind dropped as quickly as it came, we were able to get back to sleep.

The guest house was very nice and we were given a full breakfast (\$7 per person) cooked to order. There was only one other family at breakfast (maybe even overnight?) so we were able to chat with the hostess. When we asked 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 or more Rand. This we took as an indication that other, better paying jobs may be more available. Perhaps not!

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.

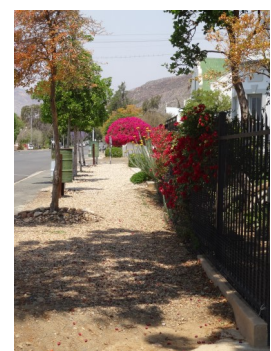


We drove west on the N1 road that had brought us from Pretoria for another 60 miles or so, before turning south towards the town of Prince Albert. We were in the high desert of the Karoo and it is every bit as barren and uncultivated as the Western US states such as Nevada. We were at an altitude of 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.





Prince Albert

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.



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We had booked at a hotel near town at which we have stayed on our previous two visits but they had offered to upgrade us to a nearby lodge which had far more spacious rooms and a more pleasant setting. However, that was the point at which the effect of the smoke started to have a real impact on us. The re-

ception lobby at the main hotel (where I stopped to check in) 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!

Likewise when we reached the second lodge, we were greeted by daylight (smoky) only and, while we were partaking of our welcome drink, 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.

Tonight we had dinner at the Black Swan about ½ mile from the hotel. The service was very relaxed and we were there over 2 hours, but had a very good meal sitting under a canopy outside. It was a little cool but still pleasant and we enjoyed our evening out once again.

Monday November 5

The power had stayed on all night so we felt that the immediate crisis was over. It was very cool (low fifties) as we walked to the breakfast room where we had a full cooked meal – sitting inside!

After breakfast, 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.



Oudtshoorn

