

South Africa, Post #1

We are just finishing our first of three weeks in South Africa, during which time we will have visited the three capital cities and driven essentially across the country to spend our final week at our nephew's villa in Cape Town. We flew overnight last Saturday to Johannesburg and picked up our rental car (a new BMW) 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 and we had a very striking view from our balcony across an expansive lawn to the imposing Union Buildings. These form the administrative capital of South Africa and the president and other civic leaders have their offices here. Bloemfontein (our next stop) is the judicial capital and Cape Town houses the parliament. So each branch of government is separated by several hundred miles; how often they get together (geographically) I don't know but if it's like most governments, it probably occurs as often as they get together politically.

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 to be limited to walking. So, Monday was our day for walking in Pretoria,



As we said, our hotel was close to the very impressive Union Building, 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 previous 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 peo-

ple themselves who are certainly among the most pleasant and cheery that we have met anywhere and, for the most part, seem oblivious to the often squalid 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 first president, Paul Kruger. At that time, what is now South Africa was a number of “states” and we assume that Kruger was president of the predominantly Dutch area here in the north—well away from the British in the Cape Colony.



Amongst the buildings we identified were the first parliament, the courts of justice (where Mandela and others were sentenced and sent to Robben Island), the central post office 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 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 afternoon 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. We had opened an Uber account for use here at the recommendation of our nephew (we have never used the facility in the US) as it is cheap, reliable and safe (unfortunately, the latter is a major consideration anywhere in South Africa, especially after dark. It turned out to be an interesting experience, in which (without giving ALL the details) we had three drives to get TO the restaurant and were unable to get an Uber car home! The restaurant owner gave the keys to his SUV to our waiter who then took us to the hotel. We should say that later experiences with Uber were fine.

On Tuesday we drove out of the city 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 sit”) 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” reflects the fact that the very first hominid 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. 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 gave us one of those “spine-tingling” moments that underscore our love of travel.

The hour long drive back to Pretoria was though 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!

On Wednesday 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 savanna; 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 became part of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

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 2005. 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 area and construction.

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 (yes, even on motorways pedestrians are common and even cross the road where it is convenient). Again, this didn’t seem as common as we recalled from 13 years ago but then motorways and vehicular traffic have significantly increased in that time.

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.

It was a little overcast and quite a bit cooler on Thursday 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, including the Supreme Court for South Africa.





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 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 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”.





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 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.

On Friday 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 Gold Mining Company. The diamond rush in South Africa started a little later than the gold rushes in California and Australia but this one mine, first dig beginning in 1871, had produced a very large percentage of the world’s diamonds 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 diamond 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.

Today (Saturday) we had almost 550 Km to drive today so we were pleased to start relatively early.

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 by 3:30.

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 to 500 feet above the surrounding flatter land. Altogether it was an easy drive and the time passed quickly as we enjoyed the changes in scenery and completed our first week in country.