

AFRICAN DIARY

November 1 and 2, 2009

Well, we started off today with a first. I was ready (packed, dressed, with suitcases waiting by the door, almost an hour before we had to leave to drive to Stratford. I spent the last hour thinking that I had to have forgotten something because I was ready too early! But we left on time, arrived in Stratford on time and were on our way to the airport within 10 minutes of when we said we would leave. (Considering that both couples are usually late, this was truly a miracle!)

It's good that we arrived at Pearson in Toronto when we did though, as it was chaos as usual there. Long lines everywhere; even though they had kiosks to check in at (provided you had an e ticket) you had to stand in line to check your luggage. Security wasn't too much of a problem though and we were at our boarding gate well in advance of when we needed to be there.

The KLM flight was a 747 and it was jammed crammed with people. There were one or two empty seats that I could see, but for the most part, it was a sold out flight. I expected a little more room in cattle class, but there was hardly any space. I had the middle of three seats and felt like a sardine must feel.... all squished in a little tin can. Our flight was a smooth one, the service was OK, the food was edible but not good. The only thing I can say about the flight was that it went by quickly. We arrived 45 minutes before our predicted arrival time, and boy, was I happy to get off that plane. I can honestly say that I have never felt quite so restricted as far as space goes.

We landed at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam around 6:00 am. I dozed a bit on the plane but it was hard to sleep sitting up. First, we found a table and started to play bridge. The coffee cost over 6 euros for 2 coffees...expensive! Then we decided to take in an art exhibit by Jan Bruegel, which was set up in a room at the airport. We were planning to take in the toilet exhibit as well, but Mary started to feel unwell, so we went to the boarding gate for our flight to Cape Town, so that she could rest a bit. I hope that she is not coming down with the flu! She was exposed to it, of course, last week when Sarah's whole family got sick, so it is a possibility. But it could just be a cold too. At this point, it is hard to tell, but she went from feeling fine to being unwell so quickly that I wonder. What a shame it would be if she came down with the flu right at the beginning of the holiday.

We are actually well into November 2nd now. This trip seems to be lasting forever. I do believe that this is the longest flight that I have ever been on (now I know it is not the longest flight, but that is what it feels like!) I don't know if it is the fact that we are travelling economy class for the first time on a flight of this length, or whether it is the timing of the flight, but this is L-O-N-G. We have done nothing but eat and sit. The food isn't the worst airline food that I have ever eaten, but neither is it the best. About every 6 hours, no matter what time it actually is, the flight attendants trot out the food. So far I have had pasta (a tomato sauce) with a tuna salad and a brownie, a chicken with rice dish that was quite spicy, considering that it served on an airline, a quiche (good) with a lettuce potato salad, a fruit/yogurt plate with coffee and ice cream. I defy you to choose which was breakfast and which was lunch or dinner. And, since some of the meals were served in the middle of "my" night, it makes the job even more difficult. All I know is that I haven't been hungry, but boy, my butt has been sore! I have dutifully gotten up and walked the aisles occasionally, which the flight attendants and the other passengers

resent, it seems, since you are always bumping into something.

I have also read until I couldn't really focus any more, knitted (although to be honest, most of the time I worked on picking up a dropped stitch rather than ripping out seven rows (do you know what helped... a dinner fork! I hadn't packed a crochet hook, so a plastic dinner fork saved my day), worked crossword puzzles that I have been saving from the newspaper, and slept (on and off in bits and snatches). I have talked to my neighbour (I am in the middle seat), and to Frank, Mary and Perry, but I still find that I am both tired and bored. My eyes get to the point where they won't focus anymore and then I sleep a bit.

The first leg of the flight was on a 747, my most detested type of airplane. It is old technology, cramped beyond belief and has totally uncomfortable seats (and this opinion was formed when I was still flying business class! You can imagine how I feel now! The second (and longer) leg was on a much more modern aircraft, slightly roomier with individual TV screens even in economy. Unfortunately, there was nothing on that I wished to watch. No movies, no TV shows, no music...nothing. I tried, honestly I did. I guess I just wasn't in the mood for a 6 X10 inch screen that you could barely see accompanied by two uncomfortable pieces of a head set in my ears. I suppose I should be grateful that I didn't have to buy it as you do on most North American airlines.

But we made it...actually arriving early by about 20 minutes, clearing immigration and customs with no problems. Our luggage arrived, and miracle of miracles, it didn't take an hour to unload the plane. And we were met at the airport and taken to our hotel - which was greatly appreciated, since by that time, it was November 3rd and we hadn't been to bed yet!

Our hotel, The Commodore is what I'd call an old fashioned "empire" sort of hotel. Comfortable, well kept up, in the best district, but slightly past its prime. I think it's great. Our rooms are comfortable, the lobby is wonderful, it is within walking distance of the waterfront, which is one of the most interesting places in Cape Town.

I'm just hoping that I get some sleep tonight.

November 3, 2009

Today, we were up bright and early... earlier than we wanted to be, given the fact that we didn't get to the hotel until midnight. Frank went to bed right away, but I felt grimy, took a shower and then had trouble falling asleep.

But up we were, had a lovely breakfast at the hotel and walked down to the waterfront to catch the ferry for a 30 minute ride to Robben Island where we were to take a tour. Robben Island (which means seal) in Afrikaans, was used in its time as a leper colony, guns were put there during the Second World War so that they could defend Cape Town (but were never used) and finally, and most famously, a prison. The first prisoners were criminals, but by the time the 1960's rolled around, political prisoners were added to the numbers of people who were incarcerated there.

Our tour of Robben Island started off with a bus tour of the island to see the leper cemetery, which acts as a testament to the island's roll in the past as a leper colony, a small church and a small Kramat, dedicated to Tuan Guru, who was an Islamic cleric

jailed on the island by the Dutch in the 18th century.

We also saw the limestone quarry where the prisoners were forced into hard labor and the cave where they answered the calls of nature, ate lunch, talked politics, and where, those with education taught the uneducated to read and write. In 1990, at a reunion of former prisoners, they each put a stone on a cairn which now stands at the entrance to the quarry. And, we saw the lighthouse, which was built in 1865 and is still in use.

Our guide on the bus was a young black South African man who was both proud of his heritage and grateful for the assistance from other countries in achieving the end of apartheid. He asked each guest on the bus where they were from, and if he could identify some particular contribution from any of the countries, he thanked that person as a representative of their country on behalf of his country. It was quite moving, actually. For example, there were people from England on the bus who were thanked for educating some of the more notable leaders of the apartheid movement. Others were thanked for participating in boycotts, for their support in general. Everyone was recognized as a person who cared about African freedoms (or they would not have been on the tour).

Then we went to the actual maximum security prison itself. Our tour guide was a former prisoner, who was incarcerated near the end of the time that prisoners were held on the island. He was sentenced to 25 years, but only served 7 of them, because all prisoners were released at that time.

We were told of the daily life of the prisoners, what they ate, how they slept and some of the brutal conditions that some of them endured. Even so, our guide certainly distinguished the cruel wardens from the humane ones, and did not condemn everyone. Certainly, in his public persona, there was no hint of resentment, only joy that so much had been accomplished in this breeding ground for freedom. There was almost a bewildered tone to his voice as he told a story of one prisoner who was ordered to dig a trench as part of his punishment. The warden made him lie down in the trench and ordered others to bury him up to his neck. He was made to stay there in the hot sun, and then the warden ordered others to force his mouth open and that warden plus some others urinated in the buried prisoner's mouth. Our guide's reaction was "I don't know how one human being can do that to another human being", but it was said with sorrow, not hatred.

Of course, there is no question that people were most interested in seeing the cell in which Nelson Mandela was kept prisoner for 18 years. He was first incarcerated there in 1964, under charges of treason. His cell was located in the solitary confinement section of the prison (one prisoner, one cell), where in other areas of the prison, up to 60 or more prisoners were held in one large room all together. Mandela's cell was the only one still "furnished" with its red bucket (served as a toilet), and mats (for sleeping) plus a few other small items. It couldn't have been more that about 8 feet square, if that much. All of the solitary confinement cells were placed so that no one prisoner could see another prisoner, although at some time, they must have been able to talk to one another through the bars. And, they were taken out in the courtyard for forced labour... breaking up rocks from the limestone quarry. Each prisoner had a certain amount of rock that had to be crushed each day.

Mandela was finally freed from incarceration in 1990, was awarded the Nobel Peace

Prize in 1993, and became president of South Africa in 1994.

The food that the prisoners were given was quite a small amount, and even more limited if you were a political prisoner. For example, the regular prisoners were allowed bread, but the political prisoners were not, except on special occasions. It was hard to imagine how they could have kept their spirits up and not lost their resolve over those many hard years, but they were dedicated to their cause.

We took the ferry back, had a lovely lunch in the harbour area (outside). The weather was quite warm (about 30C at this time and very sunny- which is a bit unusual for this time of the year, since it is the end of the spring season).

That afternoon, we met our guide, Kosie, who took us to the place where we would catch the cable car to the top of Table Mountain, a flat topped mountain pretty well in the middle of today's Cape Town. It is reckoned to be the world's most climbed mountain, but we (and most of the other people visiting the mountain) caught a gondola to the top... and a very unusual gondola it was too. Once it got started on the climb up the mountain, the floor started to rotate around, so every one got a 360 view of the climb up the side without having to move at all. It was quite nice as all of the views, even the one nearest the side of the mountain, had interesting things to see and appreciate. Once on top, we walked on trails around the top of the mountain. We didn't have the time to walk the whole way around, but we did get to see the view from all four sides. We were quite lucky as there was no mist at all on top of the mountain and we had fine views. Our guide told us that heat holds back the mist which often acts like a "tablecloth", just spilling over the sides of the mountain and falling partway down the sides (hence, the name table mountain). There wasn't even much pollution over the city, although I get the impression that there usually isn't much pollution on any day. From the top of the mountain, we could see the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, Cape Town and the surrounding countryside.

We even managed to see our first animal on top of Table Mountain. We spotted a dassie, a small, plump and tail-less guinea-pig-like animal is about as large as a big rabbit, which haunts rock outcrops, hillocks and mountain cliffs. Evidently, this animal is the closest living relative to the African elephant. He was asleep in the sun on an outcropping of rock. He was quite unworried by all of the people around, as, where he was lying, no one would have dared try to go!

When we had finished on top of the mountain, we took a gondola down and off we went to Kirstenbosh Gardens, which is one of the world's great botanical gardens. It was established in 1913 to protect the Western Cape's immense floral wealth. It was established on property bequeathed to the people by CJ Rhodes (of Rhodes scholarship fame). We certainly agreed with that statement when we finally got there. We walked for several hours in the garden, relaxing amid a myriad of plants and beautifully kept lawns. The proteus is South Africa's national flower, so we made for the protea gardens, which were at the very rear of the acreage. SO BEAUTIFUL! I love protea and I have never seen so many varieties or colors of them. They ranged from big to small and came in just about every colour possible. All were blooming still, and I spend quite a bit of time photographing them, as well as the ducks and guinea fowl who were wandering about the gardens.

Another interesting aspect of the garden was the "wellness" section or "useful plants"

section, where there were many plants and herbs, each marked with its use as a medicinal treatment. Every sort of ailment (or it seemed to me) could be treated by one of these herbs... right from headaches and impotence to secondary symptoms if HIV/AIDS.

Then we strolled down the hill and went to the sculpture garden, where they had statues from artists in Zimbabwe, Zambia and other places strategically placed among ferns, trees, and all sorts of other places, as well as being out in the open on the lawn. I just love that art and again, spent a long time wandering from statue to statue looking at them and photographing them. By this point, it was beginning to get dark, being just about 7 pm. We had intended to stop by the store at the gardens, but by the time we got there, it was closed. I was quite frustrated by that fact, but there was nothing to be done about it. Still, those three hours that we spend wandering calmly through the gardens was a perfect juxtaposition for the emotional visit to Robben Island that morning and the LONG flight the day before.

We arrived back at the hotel around 8:00 pm, too tired to seek out a restaurant for dinner. We decided to eat in the restaurant of our hotel (The Commodore Hotel) and were very pleasantly surprised by the quality of the food (and the wine) and the fact that restaurant meals don't seem to be overpriced here. I had a Malvos pudding for dessert (it's sort of a steamed cake-like pudding, served with a rooibos based sauce), which is a South African specialty and very good, too. No one was up to anything after dinner! Off to bed we went for far too short a night's sleep.

November 4, 2009

Quick fact about South Africa - only 7 million people (out of 47 million) earn enough money to pay income taxes. The minimum amount needed to pay income tax is 40,000 rand or around \$5,500)

Today was another wonderful day. The day started out looking as if it was going to rain; Very cloudy with what I normally call mizzle. Table Mountain was completely covered with its "tablecloth" so we were very grateful that we had visited yesterday in the bright sunshine. However, Kozie, our guide, assured us that the mist was a frequent occurrence and would burn off by mid-morning (although, perhaps not on Table Mountain). So off we went in the car for our trip to the Cape Peninsula. Kozie took a lovely rout (the Chapman's Peak Drive) which was quite scenic. However, in recent times, there have been a number of injuries and one death attributed to rock falling on cars, so up until recently, the road was closed so that the government could add safety netting. They have taken extensive measures to avoid people getting injured. Most of the rock has now been enclosed in netting of nearly the same color, so it is unobtrusive. Where that wasn't possible, nets have been suspended to catch rock which might fall from above. The road winds around, a curvy "s" shaped road, where each time you turn the corner, there is another breathtaking view in front of you.

We stopped first in Hout Bay where we took another ferry ride out to Duiker Island to see the Cape Fur Seal colony. It was a short ride out in the ferry, although because it was a windy day, a bouncy one. It was fun to see the seals, lying about on the rock, arguing with each other, and as you could clearly see, just having fun in the water. They'd slip in, just like a swimmer in a pool and then do back rolls under the water, or swim with on flipper out of the water, or do rolls as they swam. They weren't afraid of the boat, but

neither did they approach it, so it was evident that they hadn't been fed and were actually a wild colony.

We hopped back into the car and continued to drive until we reached a residential area called the Boulders. For unknown reasons, a colony of African penguins has established their home in the middle of a suburb, much to the horror of the residents, as they are now inundated with tourists who come to laugh at the antics of the penguins. Since they are, in fact, an endangered species, a lot of protection had to be put into place. Boardwalks were built so that you could see the penguins but not approach them too closely. People used to be able to swim at the beach, but too many injured the penguins or stepped on nests so now that is forbidden. However, you can get close enough to watch their antics and appreciate their comical qualities. During one mating session, the on-lookers provided all sorts of appropriate (and inappropriate) commentary. They are monogamous and mate for life. Penguins lay only two eggs a year, in nests dug into the sand. .

Back in the car, we drove a little further on to the Black Marlin Restaurant, where we had lunch at a table looking on to the sea. The restaurant was sheltered enough that dining al fresco was not a problem and the views simply made the delicious lunch more enjoyable. I tried a Cape Malay curry, which was delightful. Again, it is a South African specialty. Of course, the problem which will no doubt "arise" is the fact that I don't normally eat a lot of lunch! I can only hope that the extra walking that we are doing will compensate for some of the extra calories. Frank tried crayfish, which is really lobster done in a coconut milk based sauce with fruit and loved every bite.

We headed on down the Cape Peninsula to the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve. This area had originally been two farms raising cattle, and in the 1930's, people in Cape Town had the foresight to authorize the government to purchase the two farms. It did, and declared them a nature reserve. If the developers had gotten this land, it would have been lost forever. Now, however, it is home to baboons, elands, zebras, tortoises, and ostriches as well as being the official site of the Cape of Good Hope, where the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans meet.

There is quite a temperature difference between these two oceans, with the Indian Ocean being the warmer of the two. It is because of the way the currents flow, but the water temperature at the beaches on the Indian Ocean side is much warmer (as much as 6 or 7 degrees Celsius) than the Atlantic side. This gives beach aficionados quite a choice as to what they want to swim in. Beaches are beautiful white sand, and stretch on for many kilometers. Kozie told us that there is one stretch of beach that runs on for around 50 kilometers! All beaches are public, with easy access.

Once inside the nature reserve we went to the Cape Point. Just past the Cape of Good Hope, we took a funicular (called the Flying Dutchman) to reach the lighthouse. We walked around to various observation points, and also climbed the lighthouse. At Cape Point, the granite cliffs plunge 850ft into the sea and are South Africa's tallest sea cliffs. We walked back down as it was not a difficult thing to do... up would have been the harder part. However, a number of people did climb to the light house and even more walked down. Not too many actually took the funicular both ways, although Frank did, because his hip and knees make climbing and descending painful for him.

It is my impression, and I could be wrong, that South Africans are outdoor people. We

see people outside, walking or jogging very often. We saw quite a number of people in the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve who did not seem to be tourists, but rather people just enjoying the outdoors. Certainly, we have not seen the number of overweight people that you would normally see on a trip anywhere on the North American continent.

But back to the Nature Reserve. We were quite lucky yesterday. While we were there, we saw baboons (although our guide warned us not to get out of the car to try to take a picture because they can be dangerous as they associate people with food.), we saw a whole ostrich family (which was really thrilling) as there was daddy on guard, mommy looking after the little ones, and four little guys. They were feeding along side of the road and were totally unconcerned by our presence. Then, a little later, we saw a whole herd of eland. We counted about 26 of them, plus what seemed to be a reigning male, who stood on the hill "on guard" for the herd's safety. They were quite a distance away from us, and even with my zoom lens, I couldn't get a really good picture of them. Today, I will bring my little tripod, although I'm not sure that it would have been much help as it doesn't have long legs. We also saw, and avoided hitting, a tortoise who was crossing the road, totally unconcerned about the traffic. However, when we came closer to him, we discovered that a tortoise can move pretty quickly when he senses what he thinks of as danger. Now, I really to believe that he beat the hare!

We also went to the Cape of Good Hope, originally named the Cape of Sorrows, for the number of ships lost there. It is the point the furthest south west in Africa and believed to be where the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean meet. It is not, as that distinction belongs to Cape Agulus, which lies not too far away. However, the Cape of Good Hope is savagely beautiful. It was quite windy the day we were there and we ventured out on to the rocks to take hundreds of pictures of the waves crashing against the shore. They were absolutely mesmerizing and I could have happily watched them for hours. Wild and wonderful are two very inadequate words that come to mind and I am certain that the sights of those waves will be one of the high points of the trip. (Of course, it didn't hurt that it was warm, the sun was brilliant, and the wind was whipping the waves into a veritable frenzy.

After returning to the hotel, we set out with slightly more energy than the previous night, to find a restaurant in the V & A Waterfront area. Now this is not a difficult task as there are seemingly hundreds to choose from. However, we were going on a recommendation from a woman who lived in Cape Town whom we met and spoke to while visiting Kirstenbug Botanical Gardens. She highly recommended a place called Willoughby and Company and said, unequivocally, that they had the best fresh fish in town. It turned out that the restaurant was in the middle of a high end shopping center ("oh, it's easy to find... go to Gucci, turn left and go down the escalator"). We found ourselves standing in line for a table and were, not too long later, seating at a table in between the escalator and a digital photography store. Not the ritziest atmosphere in the world, but the food was excellent. They have an extensive Japanese menu with a sushi bar, but also a rather eclectic seafood menu, featuring all sorts of fresh fish and seafood I tried Kingklip, a local fish which is a medium firm fish, and which, they had pan fried in lemon and butter. DELICIOUS! It was served with what had to be the biggest freshly made "chips" (also delicious) and of which I ate far too many! Frank had calamari done in a spicy Malay sauce, which he loved. Of course, all this was on top of the wonderful lunch that we had earlier on in the day.

All in all, a thoroughly memorable day!

November 5, 2009

Did you know that South Africa has eleven official languages? Even the ATM machines have all eleven programmed into them. They are English, Afrikaans, and nine ethnic tongues, most of which you have never heard of, but Zulu and Xhosa are the two spoken by the greatest number of people. A nickname for South Africa is the "rainbow nation" because the population consists of nine African, three Asian, and half dozen European cultures.

Did you know that South Africa has more animal species than North and South America combined, or Europe and Asia combined? South Africa is home to the world's largest land mammal (the elephant), the world's tallest (the giraffe), the fastest (cheetah), the largest bird (ostrich) and the largest antelope (eland). It is also home to 6000 different spider species, 175 different varieties of scorpion and 100 different snakes. Shudder!!!

Today, we woke up to rain and much colder weather. Everyone told us that this was "winter" weather. Evidently, though, the area around the Cape has not received its normal amount of rainfall, so they welcome rain. However, we did not share their enthusiasm! Today was the day that we had scheduled to see the wine country east of Cape Town, but with the mist and the rainfall, we could hardly see anything. So... we went shopping! Our guide took us to a shop that, according to him, sold nice quality things. It was called "The Gift shop" (a very original name), but they did have nice things. I purchased 3 African masks (not elegant ones, but ones that are worn in tribal ceremonies). Two will most likely go to Florida, and one will stay in London. I also bought an ostrich egg, which is huge, and is painting with a very stylistic animal scene. They also had some very interesting sculpture, but, thanks to Sue, we already have one nice piece. I also bought some t-shirts for the grandchildren. By that point, it was still raining, but the sky looked as if it were going to clear up, so off we went.

The countryside around in the wine area of South Africa is quite beautiful... but until it cleared, we couldn't see much. Fortunately, by the time we reached Boschendal estate, where we were to have lunch, it had cleared and we again had blue sky. We had lunch in what was the old wine cellar of the estate, but which now is a restaurant. They served a buffet lunch, (I hate buffets, except at breakfast), but the food turned out to be delicious. Among other things, I tried babotie with sambals, a South African specialty, which was very flavorful... a bit like the flavors found in the Cape Malay curry, but very nice. The buffet tables were laden with choice dishes... many interesting salads, roast lamb, beef, veggies, and a huge table of desserts. Louise told me that I had to try the Cape Malvos pudding again, so I did. It was definitely better than my first try (actually, it was quite delicious), but I have decided to remain true to chocolate! If I am going to "waste" calories, it might as well be a dessert that I am willing to die for (and that's not Cape Malvos puddings).

We did have wine with lunch, a lovely thing to do, but something that makes it a little difficult to stay awake in the afternoons. After lunch, we walked around the estate and then went off to our next wine tasting, at Morganhof Estates. This did not involve eating, which was fortunate, as we all had overeaten earlier in the day. However, we did try one sauvignon blanc, 3 reds- a merlot, a cabernet sauvignon, a new wine that they were very proud of, but which was a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and three other grapes that I can't remember and finally a port. Both Frank and I really liked the

sauvignon blanc, which sold for under \$10 a bottle, but found the reds a little rough around the edges. Frank actually hasn't found a red that he really loves yet, although all of them that he has tried have been very drinkable.

Then, of course, it was really hard to stay awake in the car, but our guide took us to Stellenbosch, a town founded in 1679, which makes it the second oldest town in South Africa. It's a lovely little town, with streets lined with old Cape Dutch buildings (impeccably kept) and huge old oak trees. It has a beautiful old church right on the village green (the Anglican church of Saint Mary). Dorp Street is a very long street of buildings housing little shops and ones that are still homes. There is a university here as well The University of Stellenbosch, which was founded in 1866. Evidently, there is quite a modern part of the town, but we didn't go there. I would have liked to have a little more time just to stroll the streets more, but by this time, it was getting late and Mary, who came down with a rotten cold on the plane, was not feeling well and wanted to go back to the hotel in Cape Town.

We said good-bye to our guide, Kozié de Koch, as tomorrow, we will be in charge of our own destiny and will have our own car. None of us was really hungry and Mary wanted to lie down, so we went to the restaurant in the hotel for a light meal.

Not our best day weather-wise, but that's the one thing that you can't control when you are travelling. We are supposed to have more rain later on in the week, which would be a shame, as South Africa is like Florida. Most of the interesting things to do are outside in the open.

In the "did you know" category, did you know that South Africa produces about one-third of the sub-Saharan GDP and has more cars and phones than the rest of Africa put together.

A darker side of South Africa is that this country also has, by the latest estimation, about 5.7 million people infected with HIV/AIDS or 11.7% of the population. What surprised me was that this figure is the highest number of any country in the world. In addition, the incidence of TB has surged as well.

November 6, 2009

Did you know that South Africa has produced a number of Nobel Prize winners; four for Peace (Mandela, de Klerk, Tutu and Luthuli) and in Literature and Medicine.

There are also seven World Heritage Sites in South Africa- three of which we will see or have already seen this trip; they are: Robben Island, Mapungubwe, Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, Cape Floral Kingdom, Cradle of Humankind, uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park and the Vredefort Dome.

Today, our fate rests in our own hands! No more driver, no more guide... we're off on our own, and happy to be so. Since the car was not delivered until 10 am (by our request) we had a bit of a sleep-in, a leisurely breakfast (our hotel has a great breakfast buffet... lots to eat, but I seldom look past the fresh fruit, yogurt and good bread. Again though, the hotel puts on a buffet for all nations...lots of cheeses, meat, salads, eggs, cereals etc., etc. No matter what country you come from, you can find what you'd like for your breakfast. The coffee is passable.)

So, after breakfast, and after completing our packing, Mary and I went off to do some last minute shopping at a craft market where the artists sell their own goods. I had seen some things there that were of interest, so we went there (a five minute walk from our hotel on the V & A waterfront) and walked around. Of course, we found a few things that we liked! I got into a nice conversation with a young black man who, along with his brother, made and painted suede pillow covers. I bought two because they were lovely, but I also enjoyed the conversation. He wanted to know about Canada and I wanted to know about his life in South Africa after apartheid. Interestingly enough, he said that his generation was the one that was "skipped" and when he explained, I understood. He said that schooling in SA was poor to non-existent for blacks under the apartheid regime. Many got no education at all but it was all changed now, and all people got education and health care (that is still not what it should be, but is better than it was) and that South Africa was a good place to live now. He said that it was a good country for people who wanted to work hard and get ahead. I thought that was tremendously positive. He felt that things would be even better for this next generation. He was, of course, a great admirer of Mandela. But frankly, so was our guide.... but our guide was raised in an Afrikaans family and was well educated. He worked for Pfizer most of his life and had travelled the world over. However, he was a great admirer of Mandela and felt that he had rescued South Africa from certain destruction.

But by eleven o'clock, we were ready to leave Cape Town. We had rented a Toyota Avanza, which is a nice little car, with room for four adults and lots of room for luggage. It was a standard shift car however, something which has given us a fair amount of amusement in our initial voyage. Frank and Perry were the designated drivers.... something that is both good and bad. Frank hadn't driven a standard shift car in a good many years, and Perry, while familiar with the standard shift, has a tendency to fall asleep at a moment's notice. We always need to keep an eye on him while he is driving.

Thanks to our guide, we had good instructions about the easiest way to get out of Cape Town, and by 11 o'clock, there was no rush hour traffic, so off we went. Our first moments were amusing to say the least. In South Africa, they drive on the left hand side of the road. This means, of course, that the steering wheel is on the right hand side of the car. That actually proved to be no problem at all, but lo and behold, the positions of the turn signal and the windshield wipers were also reversed!

THAT created quite a few problems... each and every time Perry or Frank wanted to signal, they turned on the wipers. Unfortunately, Mary and I, who were sitting in the back seat would burst into gales of laughter. We weren't laughing at them... in fact, we would have most likely done the same thing, or worse, but it was amusing to have the wipers on so often. We definitely have the cleanest windshield in all of South Africa! And, we had a lot of fun. We drove merrily along the N1, the N60 and the N62, windshield wipers waving merrily in the breeze.

Perry started off driving since he was familiar with a standard shift and Frank hadn't driven one in a while. Perry got us out of Cape Town with the wipers on only about 20 times or so and drove until he began to feel tired. Then Frank took over. We only had about a two hour drive to Montagu, the place we are staying. But it did take us quite a bit longer as we weren't pushing the speed limit at all and were trying to adjust to the driving conditions. It's very difficult to adjust to the fact that the slow lane is the left hand one while the cars whiz by on the right! It just feels wrong. You really have to THINK about

every move you make when you are driving as all of your instinctive reactions are wrong.

The scenery on the way was absolutely breathtaking. The mountains were quite stratified with distinct and colourful layers, but instead of the usual horizontal layers, all of these mountain layers were vertical. They were so unusual that I could barely take my eyes off of them.

It's interesting driving in South Africa. For the most part, the drivers are quite polite and good. There seems to be photo radar everywhere, and we were told a number of times not to exceed the speed limit. (and we didn't). The roads were good- usually two lanes, with a passing lane which alternated between the two directions of traffic flow. But on each side of the road, there was a yellow line and on the outside of the yellow line, there was about a half of a lane, which was paved. When someone wanted to pass, the car ahead would move over to be half over the yellow line and half in the regular lane. That gave the car that was passing a chance to get by quickly without really going too far into the lane where the cars were travelling in the opposite direction. It seemed to work very well.

We arrived in Montagu without having had lunch so we stopped in a small restaurant and had what I had hoped would be a light lunch... no such luck! I ordered a sandwich of spinach and feta cheese, thinking that it would be a bit like spanakopita. It was delicious, but more like 20 spanakopitas than one. And it came with three salads. Of course, I could have not eaten it all... but it just doesn't work that way! Ah well, I will pay for this at the end of the holiday.

We arrived at our inn, Les Hauts de Montagu, around 3:00 pm and it was though we changed continents. Les Hauts is run by a French couple (from France) and is hard to describe. It is as if you were transported into a perfect little in southern France. Lavender was growing at the front of the inn. The rooms are delightful, with wooden beams, but the best of beds and bathroom facilities. On one side of our room, there is a private terrace which looks down over an olive grove, open fields, vineyards, and on down to the town of Montagu. On the other side, there are those incredible mountains with hiking trails.

We each promptly did our own thing. Mary wasn't feeling well, so she decided on a nap and a quiet afternoon. Perry went hiking. Frank read a book, which is a luxury for him, and I went walking around the property, which is large. I took my camera and had a delightful afternoon photographing whatever I saw...bugs, birds, ostriches.... yes, ostriches. They were in one of the fields. They are not tame, not pets, but I imagine that they find the life rather easy here with the fields of grass. There are no fences to keep them in, but they choose to co-habit with the people here. They are most suspicious of humans and watched me carefully as I "stalked" them (not getting too close, believe me) with my camera. I wanted to practice for the safari (plus, I admit, I am completely intrigued by my new camera and learning about how it works). I must have taken 300 pictures in the several hours that I was out...most of which I deleted, since I was trying the same picture with different exposures, shutter speeds, etc., etc. I had a delightful afternoon, wandering in the olive groves, the fields, and taking pictures of what interested me.

I discovered that taking pictures of animals is not easy and the best solution is to take hundreds and then delete the bad ones later. You also have to be quick as they don't

stand still and pose for you. I am definitely going to hunt out a photography course this winter and spend some time learning about something past point and shoot.

Then, we changed so slightly better clothes for dinner, which could not have possibly been more French if I had been in France. It was wonderful! First course, galette de saumon fumee et truit fumee followed by a sorbet de pomme, then a poulet with a sauce I can't even begin to describe, haricots verts, and finally, two sorts of chocolate mousse for dessert all accompanied by some really fine wine. Superb! The people who work here are all French, right down to our server, a sweet girl named Cindy Mercier, who had arrived only three weeks ago from Besancon France, to work in the kitchen and learn and also to improve her English. We had quite a chat with her in French, and then had her sit with us and speak English for some practice. It was so wonderful to be able to speak French again and to hear that beautiful accent. She and her boyfriend are working here because, although they hope to own their own restaurant someday, they need lots of experience in order to do so.

At any rate, we did very little sightseeing today, but it was a thoroughly wonderful day.

November 7, 2009

Ah, this morning, another unique experience. After a lovely night's sleep (we came to bed find that our beds had been turned down with a small little glass of sweet rose wine by the bed (when I say small, I mean small - just a few mouthfuls) but it was a different way to wish someone good night! The only thing that it needed was a chocolate to go along with it.

We got up, took our morning showers (OUTSIDE)....yes, outside, looking at the mountains, the little pond and listening to the birds. The ostrich had disappeared overnight. Although the weather is coolish for me, the water was nice and warm and a warm towel was awaiting me just inside the door. It was altogether a very pleasant experience. Fortunately, the three ostriches were not around to watch!

Breakfast was another gourmet delight, but not typically French. They have set a small table with cereals, juices and yogurt, which guests could have or not - their choice. The first served course for breakfast was an exquisite fruit place. I can't even begin to describe how beautifully the fruit was cut and served, but it was so pretty that I took a picture of it! Just as an example, the bit of fresh pineapple, which was perfectly ripe and juicy, was cut into small sticks (elongated cubes, all the same size) which were very carefully stacked to make a small "house" of pineapple. It sounds silly now, but it was lovely this morning.

South Africa grows almost all of its fresh food, which makes it delightful as it is picked when ripe and served right away. The climate is such that most things can't be grown easily. If you were trying to follow the 100 mile diet, it would be reasonably possible if you lived in this region.

After the fruit came eggs, if you wanted them, accompanied by a roasted fresh tomato, some lamb sausage and fresh bread, which had been toasted. The coffee was strong and wonderful!

Food is very, very reasonably priced here. We have been enjoying meals that would

have cost MUCH more in Canada. Last night's dinner could not have been beaten anywhere in the world and it cost us about \$125, including wine, but it was an exquisite meal that would have easily cost twice that anywhere else. Tonight's dinner, cost us about \$60 FOR FOUR people, all of whom had a glass of wine. I had confit of duck, Mary and Frank had lamb and Perry had beef tenderloin. Now, none of us but Perry had dessert. Still, gourmet dining is not expensive. It seems like South Africans have adopted many different cuisines, just as we have in North America. I have tried a number of South African dishes (at lunch today, I tried a beef stew which was great...just too much to eat), but it is very easy to get curries, risotto, all sorts of fresh fish etc., etc. What we haven't seen much of is fast food. Strangely enough, we have seen several Kentucky Fried chicken outlets, one McDonalds and that's pretty well it. There are lots of local restaurants and cafes and it seems that most people eat in them.

South African people don't seem to be in a real rush. Our hostess tonight was laughing and saying that all South Africa operates on a special time... they joke about what will happen when South African hosts the world cup for soccer next summer. She laughed and said that if the opening kick-off was supposed to be at 3:00 pm, she could guarantee that it would take place before 4:00 pm, but that's all she would be willing to bet on. She explained two sayings... "now, now" and "just now". If someone asks you to do something and you say that you will do it now, now... it will be done within the next 24 hours. If you say you will do it just now, it will be whenever you happen to feel like it, even if it is next week. It sounds backwards, but when you heard the inflection of the words, you knew that nothing was going to be done quickly!

But I digress, back at Les Hauts.... after loading the car, we drove off on our adventure. We got as far as Montagu again, when we spied a market set up in the town square, so we stopped. It was a sort of a flea market with people selling home made breads, jams, second hand stuff and crafts. I got into quite a discussion with the man who was selling second hand books. We were talking about conflict resolution and he had what I thought was a marvelous theory... HATS. Sounds silly, but it goes something like this. Suppose a town wanted to buy some land. The person who says he is wearing the white hat can state ONLY the facts. "The price of the 4 acres that we are considering buying is \$500,000." If you want to say something against this, you say I'm wearing the black hat and everyone knows that what you will be saying is negative, BUT you must have a reason. "We can't afford to do this without raising taxes" The person who wants to say something positive tells people that they are wearing the yellow hat. They might say "This is a good idea as we need a park for the children to play in because our children need more exercise to combat a growing concern with their weight." The person who wants to say something strictly emotional, says that he is wearing the red hat..."I am angry about this disruption in our town center!" (this statement is recognized for what it is... pure emotion. A person who says I am wearing the green hat might come up with an idea that requires thinking outside of the box... "Perhaps the playground could be built with volunteer labour" or "Perhaps we can raise the money for the land through a lottery" and finally, there needs to be a person who is wearing a blue hat... that person summarizes the results of the discussion. People can wear more than one hat, but the hat makes them think about what "category" their statement falls into. Unfortunately, my discussion was interrupted because we had to get going, but I thought it was a really interesting idea. I find South African people remarkably friendly and eager to talk about anything, even their recent political history. Uniformly, they are admirers of Mandela, are grateful that the whole change was made without bloodshed and are positive about their future.... and I've talked to both white and black people about this.

Everyone in South Africa speaks English and Afrikaans. The black or coloured people usually also have a language based on their culture as well. Our hostess tonight said that in the English schools that she attended, if you failed your course in Afrikaans, you were held back a year, even if you had gotten passing grades in all of your other subjects. The same was true for the Afrikaans schools. .

Again I digress.... this is not going to make sense at all. We drove all afternoon, with some stops... one at Ronnie's Sex Shop where we were going to grab a bite of lunch at The Roadkill Cafe, but we decided to drive on to Calzidorp, where we had lunch in an equally eccentric Afrikaans restaurant there. Evidently, Ronnie, whose little restaurant is literally in the middle of nowhere, thought that business was too slow. No one was stopping to have a drink or eat. So he changed the name of the place to Ronnie's Sex Shop and business picked up immediately. The place turned out to be not very sexy... he had hung up a few bras and that was about it. I laughed when I heard that story. People might be disappointed when they stopped and looked around, but most of them stayed to eat!

We are now in an area called the Klein Karoo, or the little dry area. This region is known for its ostrich farming. Everyone but me had ostrich for lunch, but I wanted to try the stew. No doubt, tomorrow, I will try ostrich as all three of the others thought it was delicious and it is supposed to be a very "healthy" meat. One interesting incident happened as we were eating lunch on the outdoor patio. We had parked our car across the street in plain view. Mary noticed two boys (black) who were on the opposite side of the car and who were staying there quite a while. I told Frank to stroll over as if he wanted something from the car. He did and reported back that the boys were just sitting there on the wall by the car. All of a sudden a man came out of the restaurant carrying a red riding crop and he went towards the boys, brandishing the riding crop in his hand. The two boys took off like a shot and did not come back. No words were spoken, and the man never came to our table to explain his actions. He sat down at another table with friends and resumed his conversation. We should have gone over and asked for an explanation, but we did not, and he did not offer one.

After lunch, we drove another 60 or so kilometers to Oudtshoorn, where we are staying for the next two nights at the Tonquani Cottages, a very nice B & B (of which there are many). We each have a separate little cottage with complete private bathroom. There is a lovely courtyard in between with a small swimming pool... As the weather is just lovely again, we drove out of town for a "sundowner" at a local game lodge. Our hostess said that we would most likely see some animals come down to the man-made lake for water, but we really did not. However, it was a lovely time to be having a glass of wine, and sitting by a small lake watching the sun go down. When we had stayed for a while, we drove back to our cottages and went out to dinner at a restaurant that was about 5 minutes walk away. It was called Jemimah's and again, we ate outside.

We are not meeting many tourists from North America here, but have met a fascinating array of tourists from many, many other countries (Hungary, Poland, England, China, Japan, and Ireland). Again, we have had some fascinating conversations with them. Last night, while having an aperitif we talked to a couple who were project managers for many different companies. Basically, what they did was go in BEFORE the company set up shop and make sure that offices were available, medical care could be gotten, local workers could be hired when possible. They had done a large assignment for Exxon

which caused them to live four years in Angola. He was just getting ready for another new assignment and she was just finishing one in Siberia! They were spending a week's holiday before heading off to their respective jobs, in very different parts of the world. Some people do lead amazing lives.

At any rate, that's about all for today. I feel like I am learning by leaps and bounds and I love that on a holiday.

November 8, 2009

Did you know: There are no commercially navigable rivers in South Africa and many rivers in the drier areas flow only in the rainy season?

South Africa has a literacy rate of 86.4% (people over 15 who can read and write at least one language) as compared to the USA (99%), India (61) China (90.9%. The life expectancy is 49 years as compared to 78 in the US, 69 in India, 73 in China. The infant mortality rate per 1000 live births is 45 in South Africa, 6 in the US, 32 in India, and 21 in China. So it is easy to see that there are still great problems to overcome in this country.

Today started out with a nice leisurely breakfast at our B & B. There is one other couple staying here, a younger couple from Manchester, England. They said that this is their second trip to South Africa because they love it here, but also, the pound has weakened so much that travel in Europe is very expensive. We have noticed that the majority of the tourists here seem to be from England or Germany, although other Europeans are here as well. We have met no other Canadians or Americans.

We set off for Cango Caves this morning, which are about a 1/2 hour drive from Oudtshoorn. At one time, humans lived in the very front part of the caves, but there is no evidence that they ever went beyond that. No one has any idea of how many caves are there. Tourists are only allowed into the first cave. Cango 2, 3, and 4 have all been explored, but are not open to the public. In fact, to get to Cango 3 from Cango 2, a pond has to be drained and the spelunkers have to crawl through a very small tunnel a distance of 700 meters. The water will refill the lake within two hours, so when the explorers wanted to come out, the water had to be drained again. The last expedition that was allowed there was a few years ago, in order to film it for a documentary about the caves that is shown in the information center.

Cango Caves were first explored in 1780 by a local farmer. The hall that he discovered is named after him "Van Zyn Hall" and it has some truly incredible limestone formations. Some of these formations are as much as 250 million years old. Of course, the fact that thousands of tourists have been through the cave means that there has been considerable damage. The caretakers of the cave fight a constant battle with problems caused by lights and human breath (algae, for example, which forms on the limestone). There are two tours that you can take, one regular tour that lasts about an hour and an "adventure" tour, which lasts about 90 minutes. Frank, Mary and I all took the regular tour, but Perry, who loves a challenge, decided to take the longer tour. It was advertised as being only for the physically fit, and after he got back we understood why. He IS a fit person who hikes and bikes and golfs, etc all of the time, but he was soaked with sweat and said that there were times he wasn't sure he'd make it. Most of the people in his "group" (about 8 people) were young (the oldest being perhaps in his thirties) and Perry is 69. They had to crawl on their stomachs through tunnels where you could not move

your arms, you had to wriggle in an opening of 28 x 30 centimeters, through to a tunnel beyond it, you had to climb up through a whole where you needed toe holds, but they were slippery and Perry said that he slipped several times. He arrived back dirty and sweaty and tired! (Actually, they did say, quite explicitly, that you should not try it unless you had good medical insurance and insurance that would pay for a rescue attempt. We thought that was perhaps over-stated, but Perry said that he imagined there would be people who would get started and couldn't finish.... and there was no easy way out!

At any rate, the rest of us were very happy that we had chosen the easier tour, (which wasn't at all difficult) and thoroughly enjoyed the walk through the cave admiring the stalagmites and stalactites, which were illuminated with white lights. After Perry finished his tour, we all had lunch at the restaurant at the caves. Mary had an ostrich salad, Perry, an ostrich platter; Frank, an ostrich burger, and I had ostrich spring rolls! This area is the prime ostrich producing area in South America. Eighty percent of the meat goes to Europe, and 20% is kept and sold within South Africa. Ostrich meat is a red meat (looks a lot like the dark meat of a chicken or turkey, but is a bit redder in colour. It is cholesterol-free and supposedly very healthy. It also tastes good. It doesn't have a strong flavour, but it is a distinctly different flavour from chicken or turkey. Everyone in the group liked it.

Then, feeling like monsters, we left the restaurant to go visit an ostrich farm! The ostrich is the primary source of income for Oudtshoorn. There are some 400 ostrich farms in the area, most devoted to commercial production and not open to the public. We chose one called Congo, because it was smaller and we were taken around in a group of 4, which is much better for Perry, who is partially deaf. Our guide showed us the eggs in the incubator, some of which were in the process of hatching. (This must be difficult for the baby ostrich, as the egg shells are really tough and can, when laying on their sides, hold a weight of 150 kilograms. On their ends, the eggs can withstand 300 kg. However, if you drop one, it will break... they can not withstand impact). We also saw some 2 week old chicks, also in the incubator (temperature 34C) and then went on to see the younger birds, the adults. We were invited to ride an ostrich (and I did, as did Perry). I also got a hug from an ostrich (actually reaching for food just out of reach), but it was an interesting feeling to have the ostrich's neck wrapped around me. Their necks are very strong, and very long. The ostrich farm that we visited was actually a small part of a much larger farm which was located elsewhere, so what we saw was a "sample" of how the whole thing works on a much larger scale. One interesting thing was after the chicks are about 3 weeks old, they are all put in a large corral with a breeding pair, called Adam and Eve. I'm not sure if this would be the case at the larger farm, but Adam and Eve take on the task of teaching the chicks to eat and to care for themselves. Adam and Eve have been together for almost 20 years and are allowed to hatch and raise their own chicks. As long as the baby chicks that are consigned to their care are not larger than their own chicks, Adam and Eve will care for everyone (they must have had about 20 chicks with them when we saw them. What they can not do is give chicks to Adam and Eve which are larger than their own because they will be considered a threat to their own chicks.

Interesting ostrich facts - Ostrich mate for life. However, if the female dies, the male will not seek a replacement. If the male dies, the female will replace her mate. Ostrich can live to be 70 years old. They are about 2 years old when they begin to lay eggs, but the first egg that the female lays, is useless and will almost never hatch. You can't tell the sexes apart until they get their adult plumage, when the males become black with white feathers on the wings. The females are a grayish-brown colour and their feathers are

considered to be useless and are made into feather dusters and sold. In fact, every part of the ostrich is sold. The eggs which are not fertilized are drained of their contents and either painted or carved as decorative pieces, the skin is tanned into leather (and very good leather too... only kangaroo leather is tougher. Ostrich leather also has little bumps in it, from the spots where the feathers were attached. The eyes of an ostrich are quite larger (larger than their brains) and they can see very well.

Ostriches can run very fast (I discovered that!) and although they are not usually aggressive, they can be in mating season. If you are chased by an ostrich, the best thing to do is to lie down on your stomach and play dead. An ostrich has a huge nail on its foot and when they want to, they can eviscerate a person or an animal pretty easily with one kick of this claw.

Now, a little lesson on how to ride an ostrich... first you need a couple of men to blindfold the ostrich and hold him while you climb on. Then you grip the bird with your legs, and if you can, wrap your legs around his front. Put your hands on his wings, one hand on each wing and hold on tightly. The men will remove the blindfold and off you go... hanging on for dear life and feeling like you are moving about 100 km an hour. Eventually, the men catch the ostrich as you are not in an open field, but rather a corral and you can get off, or you can fall off! (You ride at your own risk). It was an interesting sensation. After all the people had ridden who wanted to do so, the men who were helping the riders showed us how to really ride... evidently, you can steer an ostrich by pointing his head in a different direction. It's a bit haphazard however and the ostrich still is not under control.

After visiting the ostrich farm, we returned to our B & B and Mary took a bit of a nap. She has a terrible cold. It's getting better, but it is nice when she can get a bit of extra rest.

We went out to a different restaurant for dinner, a place called Zalinka's. Again, wonderful food! I can not remember a trip where the food has been so uniformly excellent- real gourmet dining at pretty ordinary prices. I had a pasta craving tonight, so I had homemade pasta, with pesto, feta, kalamata olives, fresh asparagus and okra. It was just wonderful. I caved to ice cream too... a homemade nut and cinnamon ice cream which was delicious, along with a scoop of homemade orange. Frank had ostrich again- he seems to have found a new favorite meat. Perry had a t-bone steak and Mary had lamb. We all had dessert and 4 glasses of wine. The bill came to about \$125 for the four of us. I know that I am going to regret all this wonderful food when I return home and step on the scales, but right now, I don't care.

We had an interesting experience in the restaurant tonight. Two men were dining in the same room as we were and they got up to leave. We exchanged pleasantries and they asked where we were from. One of them was from Germany and the other said he lived in South Africa and Munich. He asked how we liked South Africa. We answered that we love it and I continued that I felt it was an optimistic country. He inquired what I meant by that. I replied that I thought that the end of apartheid could have resulted in real conflict and that I admired the resolve of the South Africans who had resisted that route. He launched into a lecture, more or less saying that what they had now was a reverse sort of apartheid... all of the blacks and coloured people got preference over whites. When I asked him what he meant, he more or less gave the same reasons as people who were against affirmative action in the US. I told him that I thought the scale had to be balanced in some way and that these people needed to be given a chance. I asked

him for an example of what he was talking about...something that had affected him or someone he knew. He said that he was a pilot and that the new pilots were in the cockpit with inadequate training, and he went on about people in management positions without the necessary skills...he was really on a soapbox. His companion was so embarrassed that he didn't know where to look. I was quite interested in listening to what he had to say as he is the first person whom we have met who was bitter. His companion practically had to drag him out of the restaurant! I knew that this sort of sentiment must exist, but of all the people I have talked to, he is the first who has complained. He also made some horrifying statements about blacks.... "they live for the moment and if they need a little money for a drink so that they can have fun with their girlfriends, they will kill for a dollar." was one of the things he said (and this in the presence of several of the staff members, all of whom were black. Such ignorance!

We have not ever felt in danger in South Africa and we have taken no more precautions than we would in any other country that we visit. Last night, we walked to our restaurant and back again. We watch where we leave our passports and don't wave money around, but we would do that anywhere. We have encountered a few people who have asked to watch our car for us, but when we say no, they go away and nothing has happened to the car.

I am well aware that there are problems. We have driven by some "houses", if you can call them that, that no one should have to live in, but conditions in India were far worse. I know that there is poverty (for example, this morning we saw a black woman rummaging through the garbage. The lady who runs the B & B called to her in Afrikaans and then said to me, "I don't mind if they go through the garbage, but I did ask her to put back what she doesn't take so I don't have to go pick it up and pack it myself."

Still though, I can't help but feel quite positive about this country. Not all is perfect, but almost everyone agrees that things have improved greatly. And EVERYONE, including the man in the restaurant recognizes that it was Nelson Mandela who personally contributed to the absence of real out and out battles starting. I have not heard one person say anything bad about him.

Well, enough for this evening. Tomorrow, we leave Oudtshoorn and drive to Mossel Bay, where we have a hotel on the ocean. It should prove to be a relaxing day... a beautiful drive through a mountain pass and then a chance to listen to the ocean at night. It is raining at the moment, a fact that thrills everyone who lives here (they get so little rain) but which does not make us happy. Hopefully, it will rain only overnight and we will see the return of the beautiful weather tomorrow.

November 9, 2009

This has been our first disappointing day, but much of it is due to the weather. According to our hostess, this area never gets much rain, but it did last night... and there is obviously a front going through today, as it is very windy and the weather is quite changeable. Sometimes we have sunshine and then 30 minutes later, the clouds are back overhead and we have rain. It is not warm today either (perhaps 16 or 17 C but it feels much colder in the wind).

We started out from our B & B this morning and went to look at the drive that we had not done yesterday, the Swartburg Pass (it is supposed to be a beautiful drive although our

hostess thought that the Robinson Pass was just as pretty). When we arrived at the road and looked at the mountain pass and found it shrouded in cloud. (the day before when we could have done it, was a perfect day, but we elected to do the caves and the ostriches instead). We got to the bottom of the gravel switchback road that was the only road we could take if we were going to do the pass, and decided to turn back...

Plan B - We decided to take another pass, one called the Robinson Pass. We started off again from Oudtshoorn to go through the pass to Mossel Bay where we were to spend the night and were stopped by the police. It seems that a tanker truck had overturned on the road and the pass was closed (and would remain so all day)

Plan C - As recommended by the policeman, we took the only other available road to Mossel Bay, which again went over the mountains, but was not terribly picturesque. There were some lovely views, but we were all a bit disappointed that we had missed out on the "holy shit" roads of the other passes. (I say that because, the first time that Frank ever drove a standard shift car was in Europe and when we hit the Alps, every other sentence that came out of his mouth was "Holy shit, this is steep or Holy shit, this road is narrow!" The only time I ever said something like that was when he accidentally got the car in a forward gear when he intended to back out of a lookout and we literally came close to going over the side!) But I digress... both Frank and Perry are doing a marvelous job of driving after having adjusted to the windshield wiper control's location and we have been just fine with the standard shift car. I doubt if anyone would have had to say anything except to comment on the scenery had we been able to take the mountain pass roads.

At any rate, we arrived at our hotel in Mossel Bay and had a light, late lunch. We have rooms overlooking the ocean and the waves are just breathtakingly beautiful because of the wind, but it is too chilly to spend much time outside (at least for me) Perry has gone for a hike, Mary wanted a nap as she still is struggling with her cold, and Frank and I went out in the car to see a bit of the town. We ended up getting lost in quite a poor black area. I was more worried that the people would think that we had come to stare at them like animals in a zoo than I was worried about any danger. After we found our way back out of the area, we ended up stopping at a shopping mall, just because I wanted to see what it was like. There were no stores with any familiar names, except Woolworths (which seems to be just about the only chain sort of store around... well there is another one that we have seen called "Shop and Pay" (unusual name), but all of the rest were little shops). The mall was only partially enclosed, which is understandable, given this climate. There was a partial roof, with shops on both sides of the walk. The entrances were completely open. We looked around, but didn't stay long. The stores don't stay open late here. By 5 or 6 pm, most of the stores are closed for the day. Nothing was open on Sunday in Oudtshoorn. I don't know if it would be that way in Cape Town or Johannesburg (I doubt it), but it was certainly true of Oudtshoorn.

Mossel Bay is a resort city, really built around the beach, but no one is out today, except some surfers dressed in bodysuits who are out in the Indian Ocean enjoying the waves. There doesn't seem to be too much to do that isn't outdoors and beach related. There are lots of nice houses, apartments and condo-type places, but many of them appear to be unoccupied. I imagine that Mossel Bay is quite busy in the hot summer weather of January and February, but we have hit a cold spell and not many tourists are here.

Dinner tonight seemed to fall into the same pattern as the rest of the day. We looked at

menus, chose what we thought was a good restaurant, and had one of the worst meals that I have ever had. We went to a restaurant named Kingfisher Seafood restaurant. It was very crowded so we thought that we had made a good choice. Well, it isn't often that I can't eat prawns, but I couldn't get the meat out of these because they were so overcooked. Mary's fish (angel fish) was also overcooked to the extreme, and so was Perry's meal. Frank had the best choice with the calamari, but it wasn't great. When asked if the meal was OK, we told the truth. The restaurant offered a dessert or an Irish coffee, but since we had just heard the man next to us complaining bitterly about his dessert, we declined and got out.

All in all, not the best travel day... but it really hasn't dimmed my enthusiasm for South Africa. It was just a bad travel day. Hopefully, it will be better tomorrow.

Oh, yes... did you know that "waitron" is a word? The first time we saw it on a menu, we commented that whoever translated the menu must have made a mistake, but no, waitron is the unisex version of waiter/waitress. The words are still used in South Africa, but on the menu, it will appear as "waitron"...as in "ask your waitron about the specials of the day" ... because it is the unisex version. I guess we use "server" for the same purpose.

South African population by age group: 0 -14 years 29.2%; 15 - 64 years 65.5%; 65 & over 5.3%. South African population by race: white 9.2%; coloured 9.0%; Asians 2.6%; Blacks 79.2% Doctors and physicians per 10,000 people: USA - 26; UK - 23; China - 14; Russia - 43; South Africa - 8.

November 10, 2009

Ah, another day, and another experience... this time a great one. We woke up to bright sunshine, which simply makes everything look wonderful. After breakfast, went on a small hike along the cliffs. The first thing that we came upon was a huge cave, one of many that are in these cliffs, but this one had been used by early man at a point in time when the tribes began to settle in caves and to fish from the ocean.

We continued along the trail, and I could barely take two steps without finding something wonderful to photograph. There is something about water which is fascinating, and when you add in waves, rocks, brilliant colours in the sunshine... well, you have a mesmerizing scene. Even if I hadn't had a camera, I could easily have sat on the cliffs and watched the ocean waves.

Another fascinating subject was the animal life... there was a dassie colony which lived among the rocks near our hotel, and while I wouldn't call them tame, they at least did not scurry into their holes at the first sight of a human being. So I could get close enough and then used the telephoto lens to get some pretty good close up pictures. The gulls were fascinating to watch as well; they would take off from the cliffs and soar round and round, never flapping their wings. I tried so hard to get a picture of one, but didn't really succeed. It worries me a bit how hard it is to get pictures of wild animals.... I hope that I am successful!

After our walk, we packed up the luggage and left the hotel. The unfriendly woman at the desk told us that the Diaz museum was not worth seeing, but fortunately, we ignored her advice and went anyway. What a delightful set of museums. There were three; the Diaz

museum. a museum devoted to marine life in the area, and a museum devoted to the mountain passes and wildlife. Plus, of course, there was the post office tree. What she told us scornfully would take 20 minutes to see, took us (and happily so) 2 hours. The marine museum was delightful and very informative, with mollusks, and crustaceans, sea horses and lobsters, crabs, and coral... all alive and explained in detail. The object of the museum was to inform people about the fragile ocean ecosystem in order to gain their co-operation in conserving it.

The next museum was the Bartholomew Diaz museum, which contained maps and records of his voyage in 1488. Having battled a fearsome storm, he landed in Mossel Bay. The Maritime Museum relates the early Portuguese, Dutch, and British seafaring history. There was also a replica of his ship, which had been built to celebrate the ----- anniversary of his voyage and landing here. The replica had actually made the same voyage as the original boat did, except that they did it in 30 days, not the 60 that Diaz and his crew needed. However, when you saw the size of the ship (seemingly the size of a large toy), plus the sort of navigational equipment that they had, it was a wonder that they made it at all. People were allowed to roam around the replica and go below decks to get a feeling of just how small the ship really was.

The post office tree was interesting. You can mail post cards there and they will get a special stamp. When they are mailed, it seems that the post office tree began when the captain of a ship left a message there. He put the message in his shoe and tied it to the tree. The message was found and delivered. Nowadays, the postcards are not tied to trees, but rather, are put in a great big concrete shoe, which sits under the tree. Needless to say, I had to send some postcards to the grandchildren.

After spending several hours at a beautiful museum complex that "wasn't worth seeing", we went to lunch at a restaurant called Cafe Gannet Restaurant and had an absolutely delicious lunch. I am eating way too much here, but the food has been wonderful. I had a lunch of stuffed baby "cob" (not cod), which is a local fish that was stuffed with grilled veggies done in soy sauce and then baked in the oven. It was delightful but of course, I usually don't eat that sort of lunch! By rights, I shouldn't have had dinner, but somehow, I soldiered through another wonderful dinner of chicken wrapped in bacon with tarragon and taggilitelle (sp?) that evening.

We set off to Knysna (pronounced neyez nah) where we will spend two days at Belvedere Manor and finally get to meet Louise Pannell, our travel agent with whom I have been corresponding for many months. The drive was an easy one, right along the N2 and didn't take much time at all. There were some beautiful views of the Indian Ocean and miles of white beaches. (But then, everywhere you look, there are beautiful views in South Africa)

Belvedere Manor turned out to be another gem. We have a cottage, with two bedrooms and two bathrooms, a kitchen and a living room complete with fireplace. (not that we will use the kitchen!) Belvedere also has a lovely restaurant, and we ate there. Belvedere looks like something special right from the first moment you see it. It is located in the middle of a residential area across the lagoon from Knysna. There are beautiful gardens, which, at the moment are in full bloom with all sorts of different flowers. The "manor" house is located at the top of a long hill which slopes down towards the lagoon. The cottages line the slope, facing inwards, but each offering a lovely view of the lake from the covered porch. There is a small swimming pool in the middle of the lawn. The owner

whom we met last night, Sue, has a large staff working for her. She is not the sole owner as she told us that her family owns Belvedere. They certainly do have a gem of a property. The fact that it is located right in the middle of a private residential area makes me think that her family must have owned all of the property. Otherwise, I can't imagine how they would have gotten permission to operate. But it is beautiful and quiet, you can walk down to the jetty on the lake and you have a clear view of Knysna,

It was beginning to drizzle as we walked up to dinner last night, but the weather is supposed to clear tomorrow. I hope so, as we are supposed to be outside touring Featherbed Nature Reserve tomorrow and it will be much more pleasant if it is not raining. We have had some rain (but we expected that), but except for the one day, the weather has always been clear when we wanted it to be. It has mostly rained at night, which I believe, is quite obliging of the weather gods.

Did you know that the proper response to "thank you" in South Africa is "pleasure"?

November 11, 2009

Did you know that wine made from imported grape varieties such as chenin blanc, chardonnay, merlot and shiraz has been made in the Western Cape for three centuries? Two local specialties are muscat d'alexandrie, a sweet dessert wine, and pinotage, a uniquely South Africa cultivar blended from pinot noir and hermitage grapes. There are a lot of excellent wines here and we have certainly been trying them out.

The land reform policy of the South African government rests on three pillars - Restitution, aimed at restoring ownership or paying compensation to those forced off their land by apartheid; Tenure reform, aimed at giving tenure to farm workers, some of whom have lived on farms for generations; and Redistribution, aimed at transferring 30% of agricultural land to formerly disadvantaged groups by 2014. (The cost of this exercise is currently estimated to be R75 billion over five years, while current budgetary projections are only R28 billion.)

Today was a wonderful day. It wasn't supposed to be great, but we awoke to bright sunshine and warm temperatures. In fact, I believe the temperatures reached near 30C (88F) with bright sunshine and blue skies filled with fluffy clouds. It was a perfect day for our trip to Featherbed Nature Reserve. (It is named Featherbed after the bay... which is called Featherbed Bay) after the rough seas and the very, very dangerous entrance to the Knysna harbour, the sailors said that sleeping in the ship when it was in the bay was like sleeping in a featherbed.)

We left the ferry dock this morning at 10:00 am and took a short ferry boat ride to the Featherbed reserve. We rode up to the top of the "mountain" in wagons pulled by huge four wheel drives, and then walked back down. It was a relatively easy 2 km walk down the hill with a group and a guide. I quite enjoyed the walk, but Frank didn't do it as he felt that it would be hard on his knees and legs. He rode down the mountain and then did the level walk that made up the end of our walk (along the shore). On the way down, we were supposed to see wildlife, and local plant life, as well as beautiful views. Certainly there were abundant beautiful views, and the plant life was plentiful as well, and pretty well described. The animal life was a tad lacking. I heard birds, but never spotted one of them. I guess I am not a great bird watcher. There are also blue duiker on the mountain (the world's smallest antelope), but we didn't see any of those either. Still, after riding in

the car over mountain passes etc. I thoroughly enjoyed the walk down the mountain this morning. At the bottom, they did have a few blue duiker in a corral so that you could actually see them, and I did get a picture of an oyster catcher (an endangered bird), but basically, it was just a nice hike in gorgeous weather.

Lunch was a part of the deal, so we ate outside on the terraces of the lodge. The food wasn't bad, considering it was for mass consumption.

After lunch, we reboarded the ferry and came back to Knysna harbour. We then went to the waterfront, intending to make reservations at a restaurant for dinner, but the more we thought about it, the more appealing it became to eat at Belvedere again. We are tired at the end of the day, and having to drive back from town to the B & B really didn't appeal. We opted to eat at "home" again. However, we enjoyed strolling around the waterfront.

Then we went to an area of exquisite homes called the Heads, where there were lookouts allowing us to see the entrance to the Knysna harbour. Evidently, it is one of the most dangerous harbours to enter in the whole world. Lloyds of London, whose reputation is built on insuring anything (for a price) will not insure a ship if it is entering the Knysna harbour. This is a good explanation for why the harbour is not really used any more except for small pleasure craft! Evidently around 49 ships sank in the Knysna harbour over the years (and this is out of something between 300 and 400 ships who attempted to get into the harbour!)

After admiring the view, we decided to shop for art in some of the local galleries. We went to Leisure Island to a gallery (Leisure Island is an island of very expensive homes with some stores. The homes are beautiful, but most are vacation homes for wealthy South Africans and a lot of them are unoccupied, except in high season, which is, as yet, a few weeks away. I am most happy that we came when we did, as everyone says that in a couple of weeks from now... it ALL changes. The roads are crowded, the restaurants are crowded, and the hotels and beaches are crowded. December is the prime month for South Africans to travel in their own country (and they do, particularly as the rand is not a strong currency, so it is cheaper to stay home and enjoy their own wonderful views, oceans, restaurants and temperatures. January, February and March bring hordes of tourists from the rest of the world. If I judge by all of the places to stay and the huge number of restaurants, South Africa has a huge tourist industry. (Rightfully so. It is truly a great place to see)

We came back to town, explored a few more galleries, but, although Mary found a small painting that she liked, I didn't find much to tempt me. Maybe as we move on!

Dinner tonight at the manor restaurant was delicious (as was the bottle of Sauvignon Blanc). I am so sleepy that I can't keep my eyes open, so I'll stop now.

November 12, 2009

Before I start today's diary, I must tell you about a flyer that we found tucked under the windshield of our car when we were in Mossel Bay. I forgot about it until today, but I just had to pass on the news that "Dr. Niko and Irene" have set up a "marriage consultant with the best African medicine"... Oh, I wish that I had a scanner and I would simply scan and attach the whole flyer! Evidently, either Dr Niko or Irene (or both) is a "penis expert". The flyer urges you to "try my new steaming method". "I have your last solution- Try me"

reads the next line. There are "no pills needed! Just bring your penis to me" Next line, "Will work on your penis and you will leave with surprise". There are quite a few things that these two wonder workers can fix, but it is hard to duplicate seeing the original. By the time we finished reading it, we certainly had started our day with a laugh.

Today was an absolutely wonderful day. After a leisurely breakfast at Belvedere Manor, we packed up the car and left, although we did quite a few things before actually leaving Knysna. First we went to a delightful little Anglican church, the first one built in the area. It is 154 years old and just a tiny little gem of a building. After visiting the church, we went to the beach for a walk in order to put our toes in the Indian Ocean. The waves were ferocious and the water was COLD. South Africa has had a cooler spring than normal this year, so the ocean hadn't warmed up yet. The beach was a lovely white sand beach, but it would be not the best as a family beach as there is quite an undertow. Every year a number of people drown, despite the presence of lifeguards. The undertow is particularly bad if the waves are large, and today, even just wading knee-deep in the water you could certainly feel the pull. It would take a pretty strong swimmer to be safe in that water. Perhaps on a calmer day, it would be better. (Although today was beautiful and sunny, just a little cool. I don't know why the waves were so high).

The beach was very clean. It was interesting, as there were washrooms at the top of the stairs, with change rooms and showers if you wanted them. There was also a dispenser with plastic bags and visitors were urged to take one with them for their trash, and any other trash they might see (either left behind or washed in). It was pretty obvious that some one was cleaning up the beach. In fact, South Africa is one of the cleanest countries I have ever visited. (Well, when you drive by the squatter hovels, you see some garbage, but nowhere else. The government is gradually building "houses" for the poor people who have been squatting on whatever land they can find and building shelters out of used wood, plastic, etc. The new houses are simple... two rooms and the newest of them now have a toilet, but they are a vast improvement in conditions for the people. But you see many black and coloured people living in better levels of housing that just this very basic shelter. However, there is no question that the white people live in better housing and there are many, many houses that are very upscale.)

But I digress again. After walking and wading and getting wet pants, despite our best intentions, we left the beach and drove to our travel agents' home. Louise and James Pannell invited us for lunch at their house, which was located between Knysna and Plettenburg Bay. Louise made a lovely lunch with several South African specialties. We had an interesting couple of hours with them. They have, of course, travelled extensively, and their home is chock full of mementos of their travels, from a puppet collection which was hung on the wall, a hat collection- again on the wall, to art. It was very interesting to meet them as I have been e-mailing Louise for a full 5 or 6 months now and felt that I knew her well. She turned out to be a short, dark haired, quite sophisticated lady who was very well spoken. I would guess that she was in her early 60's. Her husband, James, was tall and thin and looked to be a little older than she was. They used to live in Knysna and operated a large travel agency there, but have recently sized-down operations and do mostly Rotary tours (they are active Rotarians) and a few private tours. Since it is as much work to arrange a trip for four as it is for forty, they are doing more of the larger tour than individual ones. But they still will arrange things for a few people and former clients. I guess we were lucky that they took us on!

They have moved and built a house in a fairly strange "retirement area" (a lot of which is

fragile care). But they built a lovely two story house and operate the business from the second floor. Since they have down-sized, they only have one assistant who comes in daily to help. Their house which is right on the edge of the complex has lots of birds (weaver birds) and James, at least, is quite an avid birder. They even have a wild peacock that comes to visit them. He arrives every morning at daybreak and "yells" until James goes out with some seed for him. Then they get some peace and quiet: there used to be peahens (3) as well, but they haven't seen any of them recently. The poor thing, they believe, is quite lonely without his harem. James and Louis were full of stories of the area, all of which were entertaining.

For example, the man who "founded" Knysna, was rumoured to be the illegitimate son of George III. He arrived in Knysna as a very, very rich man with a huge stipend from England, on the condition that he never marry. (Supposedly, George had married at 15 to a young girl with whom he was in love, but who was not an "acceptable" person to become queen. They had a son, who was the man that came to Africa. He immediately purchased huge amounts of land and started several industries, not the least of which was logging. He never married, although he did have quite a number of children with his common-law wife. His descendants still live in Knysna today and of course, if the story has any truth to it at all, it means that the wrong woman is now the Queen of England. It has never been either proved or disproved, although Louise said that recently, some very old parish records had been discovered which seemed to say that George had actually married. Most likely the answer will never be known.

We ate her delicious lunch (sweet bean soup, smoked snook pate, two different salads and a cold spiced fish dish, made from Hake) and chatted away for several hours, but then they shooed us out the door as they wanted us to have time to see Tsitsikama National Park on our drive to our next stop, the Tsitsikama Lodge. The park is huge It is located right along the ocean with magnificent vistas from its many hiking trails. We arrived later in the afternoon, so we decided to take one of the shorter trails which led to a suspension bridge at the edge of the ocean. We had a nice hike, as the sun was still shining, but the weather wasn't too hot. When we got to the bridge, it was not as nerve wracking as it had been rumoured to be and Mary and Frank didn't have any problems with vertigo.

But, as Mary and I stood, looking out into the ocean, she said that she wished she could see whales. (This area is noted for whales, and it is time for them to be migrating) At any rate, jokingly, I said "well, we will just have to call them". I don't know if you have seen the movie "On Golden Pond" with Henry Fonda and Katherine Hepburn, but it is one of my favorites. In it, there is one scene where she calls to the loons... So I called the whales, just as she did the loons in the movie. Not two minutes later, I said to Mary that I thought something was "out there". Sure enough, a whale broke the surface of the ocean and leapt up high in the air. For the next 15 or 20 minutes, we saw a whale "dance"... tails, flippers, jumps, spouts, etc as they frolicked in the waters reasonably near us. I even managed to get a fair picture of one. At first, we thought there was only one, but there had to have been a pod of them as, at one time, we saw two separate flippers and at the same time, a tail (too far away to be the same whale). It was such a thrilling experience! We were entranced, literally entranced. Finally, as the light was beginning to go, we thought we needed to head back to the car, so we did, but the whole thing surely made our day. I felt like Katherine Hepburn!!!

We left the park and drove to our lodge, where we ended up in a log cabin on stilts.

When we walked in the room, there stood a bed shrouded with mosquito netting. To the left and down a stem or two, was a large spa bath, and to the right, down a step or two was a cozy little nook with a stove in which you could build a fire. It is just lovely. We are actually almost in a tree. Such fun! We feel almost like pampered honeymooners. Dinner was at the main lodge tonight... not one of the best meals we have had, but the fish was nice. Still, it is the only restaurant for miles around and the meal certainly was not bad, just not as good as we have been accustomed to getting here. We met and talked to Jeff, one of the owners of the lodge. He told us that when they began to build cabin 9 (our cabin) they found a large number of hard, heavy white balls (slightly larger than billiard balls and heavier) buried in the soil. They were used to crush ore, most particularly gold (which was found in this region). He took some of them for souvenirs of that time period, but left the rest buried. He said that he was lucky there wasn't much gold found. Otherwise, today, instead of the lodge, there would have been a McDonalds or a parking lot instead of this beautiful sight.

Tomorrow, we leave for Port Elizabeth where we will drop off the car and head off to Johannesburg.

November 13, 2009

From now on, the word accent will never mean the same thing! Perry was commenting on a very friendly girl, whom, he said, had a wonderful accent and was so helpful with directions. When we caught a glimpse of the girl, we discovered that she was very pretty, with some very nice "accents". Needless to say, Perry will forever be accused of looking at her "accents" rather than listening to her "accent" (Perry is a bit hard of hearing, so hearing him comment on her "accent" was a bit of a surprise)

Today has been mostly a travel day for us. After breakfast at the lodge, we loaded up our little Toyota car for the last time and drove the 150km to Port Elizabeth and the airport. We arrived in plenty of time as we had to check the car back in at 11:00 am and weren't flying out until 2:05 pm, but we went to Wimpy's (the only restaurant in the airport) and had lunch, cleared security, and it was time to board. Bye, bye, to the Cape... hello Johannesburg.

Our flight, on "One Time" Airlines (honestly, don't you think they could have found a better name? I just hope that their motto isn't "no return flight needed"!) turned out to be quite nice. There was more leg room than on most North American planes and the luggage was waiting for us when we got to the luggage pick up. The only different aspect was that the plane was an MD80 (an older plane) so they boarded in Port Elizabeth not only from the side stairs but from the rear ramp by the tail. That was a first for us. We also walked out to the plane because Port Elizabeth is a small airport... but handles far more flights than the airport at London does.

Johannesburg is a huge airport and very modern. Our pick up person arrived, a young black woman who was very nice and who talked to us the whole way into town. She had been born in SOWETO and still lived there, but her parents were able to send her away "during the turbulent years" (her phrase) to school in Swaziland, so she was educated. She was hugely enthusiastic about the changes taking place and like most South Africans, patient and accepting that it all hadn't happened "yesterday" The government is building housing for the squatters and they have built 5.7 million houses in the past 15 years, but she had hopes that with Zuma's government, there would be another 5 million

built in the next 5 years. Everywhere you look there is construction... roads, buildings in Johannesburg, rows of new houses (small, but neat). This is a country on the move. Our young driver said to us that she now had power- her vote and if the government wasn't working, the people would "kick them out". She was so enthusiastic about the future, but then I'd say 90% of the people we have talked to have been that way... recognizing that there have been problems in the "teething stage" but optimistic about Zuma and his government. As Louise said to us, "We experienced a miracle in this country". She too gives credit to Nelson Mandela and wishes that he were a decade younger to help the new South Africa.

We arrived at our hotel, The Michelangelo, is in the business district to the north of the city center. The hotel is on Nelson Mandela Square, with lots of restaurants and shops. It is a safe place for people to roam freely at night. Not all of Johannesburg is, (although up to now, people along our Cape drive have assured us that the smaller towns that we were staying in were safe). We have walked, when possible, to and from restaurants at night in both Mossel Bay and Oudtshoorn. But, we have been told that caution is still the watchword in Johannesburg. This is an expensive hotel, but when I asked Louise about a cheaper alternative, she told me that yes, there were many, but that if we wanted to go out at night, we would need an armed escort. So we opted for the safety and security of our little cocoon here. I actually don't believe that it is that bad, but as a tourist, you never know and so better safe than sorry. Plus, Louise is here in South Africa and so far, the tour that she has arranged for us has been wonderful so we do trust her judgment.

We had dinner on the square last night, and it was hopping! Lots of people eating, both white and black. Perry commented that it was refreshing to see obviously well dressed and successful black people dining. Up to this point, the black people we have seen have been servers, kitchen staff, cleaners, or sales people in the stores and not the people who were in charge or owners. People tell us that Johannesburg is where the money and the power are. At any rate, there were a lot of people on the square, which is dominated by a huge statue of Nelson Mandela. Many, many people lined up to get their picture taken at his feet (he must be 30 feet (10 meters) tall).

We had mostly seafood (delicious), and headed off to bed as our tour starts early. As we snuggled under the covers, there was a huge thunderstorm with lightning and loud crashes of thunder...and copious amounts of rain. We will see what the morning has to offer.

November 14, 2009

South Africa has not yet been conquered by McDonalds! We have seen a few of them, but guess which fast food outlet seems to have better penetration into the country? Kentucky Fried Chicken!!!

Today, after a wonderful breakfast (most of the places we have stayed in have had "world-wide" breakfasts and by that, I mean that they have huge buffets offering something for everyone. Different people from different parts of the world expect different things at breakfast... anyone from Scandinavia will want meats, cheeses, breads etc. People from the East prefer fruit, steamed breads, and fish, like salmon or other fish, British of course, like their eggs with mushrooms, cooked tomato and sausages. North Americans will go for pancakes, eggs and cereals. And most places have it all, in addition to copious amounts of very good coffee. I, of course, am interested

FIRST AND FOREMOST, in the coffee. However, I will have to say that the fruit we have eaten has been the best that I have encountered in a long, long time. It has obviously ripened on the tree, vine, etc. The flavours are wonderful. The breads have been all home baked and there has been a great variety of them.

We were picked at our hotel by our guide for Johannesburg at 8:30 am and set off for a long day of touring. The first part of the tour was the different sections of the city itself. We started out with one of the "nicer" sections of the city. Huge mansions, very beautiful when you could catch a glimpse of them, as all of them were behind high walls topped with coiled razor wire, or electric wire. If they weren't enclosed that way, they had very high wrought iron fences. The ends of the wrought iron have been sharpened to points, sometime looking more like arrows and other times, like two barbs. They all look very intimidating. There are manned gates, and signs posted all over the place that there will be an armed response to any intrusion. (This is not new... we have seen security before. I think that running a security company in South Africa would be quite a profitable business. But certainly this is FAR more fortress-like than what we have seen before; the walls are higher, this is the first time we have seen the really sharp stuff used on residences). The neighbourhood could be gorgeous, but unfortunately, there isn't much to see. Luckily, the streets are lined with jacaranda trees, still in the last stages of their spring bloom. They are really beautiful... purple blossoms with wispy green leaves. They are not native to South Africa but they certainly thrive here.

After that first neighbourhood, we went on to another, which our guide told us was quite a dangerous neighbourhood, filled with prostitution, drugs, highly populated with HIV/AIDS people. Most, he said were illegal immigrants from Nigeria and other places who come to try to escape even worse conditions in their homelands. If they are caught, they are deported, but most just come back again. You can't blame them as their homelands are in hopeless condition at the moment, but my, this area of the city was UGLY. Dirty, with waste paper and garbage everywhere (and South Africa is one of the cleanest countries I have ever been to), dreadful looking accommodation, and people standing out on the streets with nothing to do. They can not be legally employed, but some of them find work. Others sell things. Some deal in drugs or become prostitutes. All look in rough shape. Not much would be appealing about life in this area, except, perhaps, it is less dangerous than where they came from.

We headed for downtown Johannesburg, and saw some of the government buildings, the Mandela Bridge, and a number of shops on some of the streets. Almost all of the bigger businesses have deserted downtown Jo-burg for the suburb of Sandton, to the north. That is the new business area, and along with it, of course, there are numerous good quality hotels and restaurants. The downtown struck me as being a little like the back streets of Hong Kong, or Istanbul. Market after market. Little shop after little shop. (However, in Hong Kong, they would all be the same sort of shop on one street", so if you wanted, say, business cards, you would go to the street where they were printed, choose your shop out of dozens available, and get the work done) Here, each of the shops was unique.

We stopped to visit one shop selling "medicines" for African tribal doctors to use. It reminded me very much of the same sort of store in Hong Kong or China, except that there were drums, some masks, and a few other articles that were of strictly African origin. But there were also shelves of roots, hooves, animal parts, herbs, bark, well, you get the picture, and the shop had an odor that both Frank and I immediately recognized.

Almost like coming "home" to Hong Kong.

After our stop in the city center, we headed out to SOWETO (which stands for South Western Townships) where the blacks were all relocated, Our driver, who grew up in SOWETO himself and who still lives there, but in a much more upscale area) bought bananas for the children; bags of them. We headed off. The first area we visited was actually quite nice. There were some guesthouses (B & B's) located there, and while most of the homes were not mansions, all would have been more than acceptable housing in Canada or the US. Then we went on to see some of the old barracks that used to house black males. Only men were allowed to live there as the government wanted them to leave their families behind them in villages, and NOT feel that the city was a permanent home to them). Now, they have been renovated in to family housing. They still do not have indoor plumbing or electricity however. There are outhouses at the back of the rows of houses, and there is a common water tap (cold water only) located in a couple of spots. Then there were the houses built right after apartheid ended... they were all alike at the beginning, two rooms, no plumbing and no electricity, but many of the people have saved a little money and added a little extension or planted a garden and are making improvements to their own little place in the world.

There were also new houses that were recently built by the government. These are small places, but each has electricity and running water. The government gives the house to the family, but they do have to pay for the services (electricity and water) in these newer homes.

Then we went to the poorest of the poor - the squatter's shacks. These places are built of whatever the people can find... discarded wood, cardboard, tin, stone, and all very, very, very small. Life is hard here. No sooner than our van stopped we were mobbed with children as they recognized the driver. He passed out the bananas, making sure that each of the children got one (and only one). They knew that there was one per child, but one little scamp hid his under his shirt and tried for a second one. He was gently removed from the group.... The kids ranged in age from babies (two years old) to perhaps 8 or 9 (and then they brought their brothers and sisters). They were mostly Zulu speakers. We handed out all of our bananas and headed off. These kids do go to school as it is now the law that they all have to be educated, but life is so hard for many of them that they don't make it through. The government has housed over 13 million of these people since the end of apartheid, but there is still much more to be done. But, frankly, it is hard to be pessimistic about this country, even when you see poverty like this. The South Africans are not pessimistic people. They are proud of what they have done and want to show off the progress that they have made. Yes, there is more needed, but the amount of change is remarkable. And, frankly, the poverty that we have seen here and on our drives through the countryside doesn't even begin to equal that of India. I saw no one living in sewers, like I did in the suburbs just surrounding the Taj Mahal. I saw no people sleeping on the streets, and so far, we have not seen many beggars either.

Next on the agenda was the Apartheid Museum, which was a bit unsettling as you wandered through it, getting bombarded by poster, huge photographs, TV reports from "those days", many, many accounts of the day that the secondary school students revolted and marching against the edict that schooling should, henceforth, be carried on in Afrikaans, a language that none of them knew. There is a short history of racial segregation in South Africa, but the majority of the museum dates from the day that the soldiers opened fire on the children who were marching. The first to die was a 13 year

old boy named Hector Peterson, whose name now figures prominently in apartheid history. Many of the exhibits are newspapers or TV reports about that, and subsequent days. Black political leaders of the time are also featured, not only in pictures, but also in interviews which have been taped and are shown on TV throughout the museum. The museum doesn't ignore, however, the efforts and contributions of the white leaders who supported the anti-apartheid movement, and gives credit to the embargo by many countries in the world as "helping the movement along".

But, the afternoon eventually raised our spirits again, as we went to Maropeng which is located in a valley called the Cradle of Civilization. It is located about an hour's drive from Jo-burg, really out in the middle of nowhere. An area in this valley called the Sterkfontein caves was populated with modern day man's ancestors when Toronto was still under icecaps. It first became famous in 1947 when Dr. Robert Bloom discovered "Mrs. Ples". Mrs. Ples was the first known adult cranium ever found (dating back 2.5 million years ago). The valley (now a World Heritage Site) continues to provide many, many discoveries, including "Little Foot" a complete skull and skeleton found in 1997. Scientists (in 2003) dated Little Foot at 4.17 million years old, which was a million years older than they had believed it to be. Maropeng is a newly constructed "museum/ theme park) designed for the sole purpose of bringing the story of human evolution to life. (This, as you can imagine, might well be a distressing place to be, if you believed only in the creationist theory.) The exhibit starts a big like a ride on a theme park, with a ride through the "universe" and the early creation of the planet. Then you enter a huge exhibition hall where some of the "finds", both fossils and skeletons are on exhibit, right along with Darwin's note on the theory of evolution. One side of the museum is heavily slanted to ecology and self-sustainability, and is introduced by a concept that was new to me... the idea of 6 extinctions. Evidently, there have been 5 previous extinctions, the last of which wiped out the dinosaurs. Some scientists believe that we are headed towards a sixth extinction... and cite such evidence as climate change, the fact that our lifestyle is not ecologically sustainable. It was noted that although 95% of the animals who once existed on earth are now extinct, the animals that are facing extinction today do so because of mankind rather than a natural disaster. This is the first time this has happened in the history of the world.

They had models of what precursors to humans looked like, some examples of the first members of the "homo" species and very, very thorough explanations why scientists believe that the changes took place. For example, if man had not become an omnivore, he may not have existed today- or at least in the form that he now does. Evidently, and I know nothing of archeology- two branches of our "family tree" existed with the potential to develop further. Only one did.

We ended up staying at the museum for several hours and then piling back into the van for the hour's trip back to our hotel. We were all pretty "vanned" out by the time we got back, but agreed that we had learned a lot.

We went out to dinner at one of the restaurants (Trump) on the Nelson Mandela Square and had a good, but not terribly memorable meal. I was exhausted so Frank and I went off to bed early, but Mary and Perry stayed up for a little while to watch the launching of the new Masseroti (sp). There was a large group of VIP's who attended, including a former Miss Universe, Miss South Africa, a well-known South Africa singer, clothing designers etc., etc. Quite the do, I guess. All of the beautiful people....

Tomorrow, we leave for Mala Mala. Get ready, animals. Here comes Sara with her camera!

November 15, 2009

Up and at 'em... that was the watchword. We flew from Johannesburg to Mala Mala this morning, which meant a pick up at 9:00 am, an hour's flight directly to Mala Mala and then....well, unbelievable.

First, our pick-up was a little late, which caused us a bit of worry as they had forgotten us yesterday. However, the reason this time was that there was a huge bicycle race in Johannesburg and most of the routes around the hotel were closed, making it difficult for the van to get to us. They arrived about 15 minutes late, which really wasn't a problem, because it was Sunday and there wasn't much traffic on the highways. We made it to the airport with time to spare, went through security (which isn't a big deal outside of North America) and got on our flight.

There were six of us on the plane! One hour's flight time and we heard the standard instructions "Please leave your seat belts buckled until the aircraft has reach the terminal building" and we were there! Of course, if we had waited for a terminal building, we'd still be sitting there, as we landed on an airstrip in the absolute middle of nowhere. There were about 8 people waiting for us; four who were leaving and the rest, staff to welcome us, plus a Land Rover and a trailer for the luggage.

Flanking the western section of Kruger Park and covering over 155.000 hectares, are many of South Africa's private game reserves. They used to be fenced off from Kruger, but the fences have been taken down and now the animals roam freely throughout the national park and the private areas. Mala Mala is located in an area called Sabi Sands. We chose Mala Mala for our first safari experience. It is one of the oldest reserves and the largest, covering over 11.000 hectares. I also admired the work that the Rattray's had done in changing Mala Mala from hunting reserve to a game preserve.

We landed at the reserve's private airstrip, built and maintained by Mala Mala when the nearest airstrip in Kruger was damaged a few years ago. There is a regularly scheduled flight by South African Airlink to the airstrip, once a day, arriving at noon. In addition, other private charters fly in as well.

Our suitcases were loaded on the Land Rover and off we went for about a 10 minute drive to the camp. On the way we saw impalas, warthogs, and some sort of antelope which I am not sure of... and that was in the first 5 minutes driving from the airstrip. Normally, we would have flown into another air strip in Kruger National Park and had about an hour's drive to get to Mala Mala. However, that airstrip was damaged in a couple of years ago and it has not been sufficiently repaired to accept flights, so because Mala Mala had a private airstrip, South African airlines agreed to land here for the time being.... lucky for us, as it is so close. The camp sends people out to make sure that there are no animals on the airstrip before the planes land. There is one flight a day.

So the six of us got on our Land Rover, and headed into camp. We discovered that for some unknown reason, we had been upgraded in facilities, and we find ourselves in quite luxurious accommodations in what is known as Sable Camp; two lovely bedrooms, with a living area between them, which is fantastic. From our back patio, we watched

impala while we unpacked.

Lunch was at 1:30 pm and that's when we discovered that we were the only four people in Sable Camp, which is an upgrade to the Main Camp where we were supposed to be. This means that we have Anthony as our private ranger, we are only four in the Land Rover, and we have a whole staff that caters to us. Four delightful ladies serve the meals, we have a bar and bartender to ourselves. We have a lounge and swimming pool all to ourselves. It would be lonely, if it weren't so much fun. Our ranger, Antony, is a great guy. He has worked here for 8 years and is the head ranger for the complex.

At 3:30 pm (because it was cool and overcast we went a little early. Normally it is 4:00 pm for a game drive) we met for our first game drive. Antony loaded his rifle, put it on the carrier right on the hood of the vehicle in front of him and off we went. We saw sooooo many animals that it was hard to believe. We saw rhinos, hippos, a leopard, zebras, a lion and lioness, impala, African Cape buffalo, and numerous other small animals and birds, a black ibis and an eagle among them.

Antony pointed out quite a number of interesting trees too. One was called the Lead tree. It has such dense wood that when you put it in water, it sinks immediately. They can live up to 1,000 years. Even after it dies, the trunk and branches can still remain standing up to 500 years. It is good for carving and making furniture.

The lions were incredible. It was the end of the female's estrus cycle and they were together to mate (which, I gather, during the four days or so of the cycle, they do mate incessantly.) Usually, however, it is not something that is seen by visitors to Mala Mala. Well, we caught them in the act, so to speak, and not only that, after they had mated (twice for about 10 seconds each time) they both roared. The lion would roar and the lioness answered him, something that Antony said was quite rare. This went on for about 5 minutes and was a beautiful serenade. I like to think of it as the song of Africa! Then, of course, they both settled in for a nap!

The leopard was also quite unusual. He was a young leopard still in the care of his mother, but not with her. She had made a kill (impala) and put it high in a tree. By the time we got there, it was mostly gone (just one leg, kind of dangling from an upper limb in the tree) and the young cat was lazing around on a rock, sleep and content. It was almost as if he was posing for us.

The white rhinos that we saw were a group... two males, one baby and one female. They let us get pretty close to them before ambling off. Antony told us that rhinos are prehistoric lawn mowers, as they eat only grass, but must eat almost their weight in grass daily. So they feed ALL of the time.

The African buffalo were in a herd of 40 to 50 animals. We drove among them. If we got too close, they would move away, but they were not skittish about the presence of the vehicle. We were warned however, not to stand up in the Land Rover, and not to talk loudly. There were mostly females, young and some young males in the herd, with the older mature males in the lead. They gave us a good stare and a good sniff, and then concluded that we were not a danger to them and went about their business.

The two hippos were harder to see. They were in the water near some reeds and much harder to spot, let alone photograph. But I managed to get one good photo of them.

They spend a lot of time in the water, and only come out to feed (usually at night).

We stopped for a "sundowner" (a drink at sunset) even though there was no sunset and moved on. It was getting dark by this time, but Antony had a spot light and used it expertly to spot animals. The impala were particularly easy to spot as their eyes reflected the light and lit up like little fireflies. Anthony joked that the impala have three black stripes on their hind quarters which look like an "m". The rangers call them the McDonalds because they are on every corner and everyone eats them!!!

At the end of 4 hours, it was beginning to rain and was pitch dark and quite cool, so we called it a day. Tomorrow, Antony will wake us at 5:30 am and we will be on the Land Rover by 6:00 am for our morning safari, rain or shine. (And, unfortunately, it may be rainy, like it was tonight). However, the weather is supposed to clear although it will remain cool. Since yesterday, it was 39 C here, three of the four of our party were happy to hear that. I am the only one who was a tad disappointed (although, thanks to layers, I wasn't cold on the drive today... just a tad damp by the end of it.)

We had a delightful meal again tonight. The ladies played the drums to call us to dinner (beats a dinner bell!) and we (the five of us) ate dinner with as many people serving us as were dining. . The main camp must have been full, I guess, and so we were the lucky ones to be upgraded. Since we are the leading edge of the tourist season, the camp is not full, so that is good luck.

Off to bed, I am. Five thirty in the morning will come all too soon.

LOVING AFRICA!

November 16, 2009

Five thirty in the morning and the phone rang. It was Antony with our wake up call, giving us 30 minutes to get dressed and meet him at the recreation hall for our morning game drive. No time for a shower, just dress, put on mosquito repellent and head out the door. Fortunately for me, there is also coffee and a few things like muffins or rusks to eat before we head out. Two cups of coffee later and I'm feeling much more like myself!

We head out again and again had a very successful morning. We have seen a nyala, pied kingfisher, steppe eagle, bateleur eagle, waterbucks, Egyptian geese, swifts, a lion and a sub adult female (there is a long story to that one), a pack of wild dogs, a mother impala with a day-old baby, 2 leopards; one female and one male, and some male nyalas.

The sightings were "ordinary" (i.e. expected ones) until all of a sudden, Antony got a call. It seems that the lion we saw last night was chasing one of the sub-adult cubs (about 1 year old.) If the cub is not his (and it wasn't), he will kill it to get rid of it. If a lioness's cub is killed, she will come into estrus again within a month, the now-dominant male will mate with her and ensure that his offspring are born. The female doesn't want this to happen. So when the two new dominant, and very aggressive males conquered this territory, the four females with cubs separated themselves from the pride to protect their cubs. The females without cubs (like the one we saw the previous night) remain with the male. However, in this case, there were seven cubs with their mothers, very much dependant upon them for at least six more months.

When we caught up to the lion and the cub, the cub was worn out. The lion had been chasing her (the sub-adult cub was a female) for quite a while. She lay down in the grass and accepted her fate. She lay there in a submissive position and the lion did not even glance at her for a while. Then he started watching her. He did not attack right away and I was so hoping that he'd turn away, but that is not the law of nature. After more than 5 minutes with the cub lying there watching the lion and the lion watching her, the lion attacked.

All I can say was that it was over in an instant. The whole incident was both horrifying and fascinating at the same time. The male grabbed the little female by the neck and strangled her quickly. No bloodshed, no cries; she didn't even struggle. The male dropped her and backed off for a few minutes, then came back again and bit her and pulled at her leg. Antony said that it was to make sure that she was dead. As he pulled and bit at the leg, you could hear the bone break quite clearly. When the lion was satisfied that the cub was dead, he left the area and headed back to two lionesses; the one he was with last night and another one, who was the mother of the cub that the lion had killed. She was upset, but not overly so, or so it seemed to me. Anthony said that both the lioness and the lion were quite tense, and so the other lioness "teased" the male, trying to get him more relaxed. She had no intention to mate with him, as her estrus period (4 days) was over, so she would no longer mate with the male. The lioness, who had lost her cub, still has one more cub to protect and that cub was somewhere, hiding in the bush, but would have to come back to his/her mother at some point. Antony said that it was unlikely that any of the cubs would survive as six months was a long time for them to elude the male.

Evidently, these two new male lions have already killed over 40 other lions in establishing their dominance in this territory. It made me sad to see what happened to the cub, but there was no preventing it. Antony said that this was a well documented phenomenon, but that in his 8 years as a ranger, he had never seen it. He had seen lionesses kill impala, or other things, but he had never seen a lion kill a cub before. I guess we were just special as what we saw, however gruesome, is really rare. There was another Land Rover with a guide there and that ranger videoed the whole thing as they had seen nothing like that before.

Well, a little shaken, we all moved on. The next thing we knew, Antony was creeping up on a pack of wild dogs. Again a very rare sighting as there are only around 2,000 of them still left in Africa (actually, the world). The pack was made up of 7 dogs; a dominant male, a dominant female (who are the only ones who will mate) and 5 young dogs, one of whom had an injured leg. The leg had been injured recently, which puts her survival in jeopardy. Just when I was feeling sorry for her, Antony mentioned that wild dogs will sometimes eat their kill before it was dead. They all rush in a grab a bit, and literally tear it apart. He said that it was a "fairly gruesome" death!! I guess so! However, when we saw them, the young ones were playing and chasing one another in the bush. You could see that they were having fun, but you could also see that they were practicing hunting moves as well. The two older dogs did not join in on the play, but rather kept watch for dangers. They had made a kill fairly recently because one of the youngsters was still gnawing at a bone of some animal.

We saw lots of other animals too (named above) and some birds whose names I can't recall, but boy, I don't think I will ever forget the lion and the cub! Around 9:30 am we

headed home for breakfast. We were all a little wet as it was drizzling (raining) off and on all morning.

After breakfast, we headed out for a walk. Anthony walked ahead of us with the gun, and another ranger came behind us in a Land Rover. Only Perry, Frank and I went on the walk. We walked for about 45 minutes and Anthony pointed out different animal tracks, trees, nuts, etc. There was one tree, the magic quarry tree that could be used to make an African toothbrush. Another tree gave a "fruit" which, when lit, burned lit a candle. That fruit would only germinate if it had been eaten by an elephant or rhino and had passed through its digestive system. Otherwise, it would just lie useless on the ground. It was a pretty gentle walk, but interesting at the same time. I wish that we didn't have to deal with the drizzle, but it doesn't seem to be hampering the viewing of the animals one bit.

We came in for lunch and a rest this afternoon, and then, despite the threatening weather, headed out again, dressed in wet suits. Yesterday, we had nothing but mizzle (mist and drizzle) but today, we had periods of out and out rain. Anthony was determined however, and a few minutes later, we saw a whole herd of elephant, which completed our big 5 sightings. (By the way, the term big 5 is derived from the five animals that were the most difficult to kill back in the time when going on a safari meant killing something and coming home with the antlers or hide. They include the elephant, the lion, the leopard, the Cape buffalo and the rhinoceros.) Elephants really dislike the weather we have been having and tend to stay in the heavy bush for protection. However, a herd of elephants had been down to the river to drink and they were returning to the bush by the path of least resistance, the road. All of a sudden, Antony said, "Elephant!" and the next thing I knew, the leader of the herd, the matriarch, was heading right for the Land Rover, She veered off into the brush, but they went by not 10 yards from us. Then the whole herd, perhaps 20 elephants, right down to baby calves, walked by. Antony started to follow the herd, but the matriarch, who was irritated by the behaviour of one of the young male elephants, turned around and trumpeted, chasing him from the herd. At that point, Antony said that we would NOT be following the herd as one of them was bigger than his Land Rover! You don't irritate something that is bigger than your Land Rover!

Another unusual sight that we saw this afternoon was a dung beetle. The male was rolling a ball of dung and the female was riding on the ball of dung. In fact, the male was rolling this huge ball of dung (about the weight of a billiard ball and a little bigger) all by himself until he got it to a safe spot. He actually was rolling it up a hill which is, if you think about it, an amazing feat. Once he got the ball of dung to the chosen spot, the male and the female would bury the dung, burrow inside and lay their eggs. When the young hatched, they would eat the dung as food and eventually tunnel out when they were ready.

We also saw a frog's "nest". It was a white bag-like structure, which was hanging from a bush over a pond. The eggs would hatch in the bag, grow into tadpoles in relative safety, and then, when the tadpoles were big enough, they would break through the bag and fall into the water. Amazing, really, how different animals handle the challenges of birth and living long enough to at least have a chance of becoming an adult.

Although the weather was not nice at all, we had another very successful afternoon of animal viewing. Antony gave us all wet suits to wear and that kept us relatively dry. Taking pictures was a challenge however, as the lens would get rain spotted quickly. I

kept the camera under my rain jacket, so it stayed dry unless I was actually using it, but after a while, it was warm from my body heat, and when I took it out into the cool (cold) night air, the lens fogged over. It was not the most comfortable night to be out and we ended up coming in about an hour early. On our way back to the lodge, we saw a whole herd of wildebeest. We also saw a white tailed mongoose, some more zebra, some gorgeous storks, a couple if different kinds of eagles (all on the drive back to camp!), Just as we were in sight of the camp, all of a sudden, Antony pulled up next to a tree and plucked off what I thought was a leaf. It wasn't a leaf, it was a chameleon, which hissed at Antony and promptly turned from leaf green to dark green to show that he was not happy at being plucked from his perch. He was smaller than Anthony's hand and very cute.

Thoroughly chilled, I headed for a warm shower. Off to the bar for a nice glass of wine and then to dinner. Antony is one of the few rangers who is married and his wife also works in Mala Mala, in one of the offices. (Over 140 people work here, full time). We invited her to join us for dinner, as they never get to eat together. Kalinda did and turned out to be a lovely young lady.

Our last morning will be tomorrow and we will be on the plane at noon, headed back to Johannesburg for one evening. This has been an unforgettable experience- so worth it! What we have seen in the last few days was both "expected" (everyone expects to see animals in Africa) and surprising... how unpredictable they are, what a thrill it is to actually watch them in the wild, how close you could get to them (not because they are tame, by any means, but because they don't regard the Land Rovers as a threat as not one of them has ever been harmed by these strange looking creatures who stop by every now and then. They recognize the shape and the smell and as long as that doesn't change, all is well. Anthony told us that one of his scariest moments was when a guest stood up in the Land Rover (which is absolutely forbidden) and a lion, noticing the change, charged the Land Rover. Fortunately, the lion stopped, but Anthony had his rifle out and was prepared to take action.) These are gorgeous animals...all quite healthy looking, particularly now, since the summer rains have started and there is plenty of water everywhere and lots of new green growth on the trees and plains.

Mala Mala tries very hard to keep the animals healthy. For example, the body of the dead lion cub was gathered up and samples of blood and muscle tissue would be sent to the vet for analysis. Rabies is spread among the carnivores by eating other animals that are rabid, so they check regularly to make sure that this is not happening, and on occasion have inoculated animals using darts. They also work hard to protect the grazing lands from fire. They do controlled burns, as that is the natural way that nature renews itself, but they have also dug fire breaks throughout the property in order to control fires that are started by lightning.

All in all, a very impressive place, a hugely competent staff and a wonderful time here. It's ending too soon... tomorrow at noon. I must stop now and go to bed as that 5:30 am wake up call will come all too soon.

November 17, 2009

Our last morning at Mala Mala. We hopped out of bed (well, perhaps not "hopped") and dressed warmly as it is still overcast and quite cool. Layers are the answer, for sure. But it was not raining, which is a good thing when you are out in the open for several hours

at a time.

Antony headed off and we went driving along a river bed, which is not yet flowing, but will be by summer's end. However, some of the deep spots are full of water and it was here that we discovered a herd of hippos. We had seen two already, but from a very long distance away. These, a herd of 10, including two males, two young ones and six females, were lounging in the water. Evidently, a hippo can not regulate its body temperature very easily and so uses the temperature of the water to cool off, but also to help maintain a constant body temperature. They stay in the water all day, and only come out at night to feed on grass. Their ears, eyes and nostrils are all located at the top of their head in order to make keeping as much of their body in the water as easy as possible. However, they can stay completely submerged for up to six minutes at a time.

So we stayed there, watching the hippos "bob" up and down, listening to their snorts, and watching their huge yawns. All was quite tranquil. It was difficult to imagine how such huge animals could maneuver on land, but Antony said that they do quite well and walk long distances foraging for food.

We moved on, seeing several new birds. I have trouble remembering the names of all the birds as they are so unfamiliar to me, but if you were a birder, you would be in paradise in Africa. So many new species and such pretty colours! Antony knew them all and could identify them by sight or by their calls.

We discovered a whole herd of wildebeest, which was lucky, as my pictures taken the evening before in the rain and with the foggy lens problem had not turned out very well. I was able to take more, which, I hope will be much better. We watched the herd, and then, since we had to return to camp a bit early, Antony said, "Well, we should go see our last new animal... he had sent out another ranger to cruise the area and that ranger had found the one animal who had remained elusive - the giraffe. We only saw one, because they do not like the colder, rainier temperatures, but we did see that one up REALLY close. It was a male and had a number of scars on its neck from fighting. I couldn't believe how huge he was. Taller than the trees surrounding him, for sure! Then he came out into the open and "posed" for us, standing quite near the vehicle. He didn't seem bothered by our presence at all, but ambled off just as we had taken just about all of the pictures one could possibly take of a giraffe. (I operate on the principle that I get one shot that is in focus and OK, but then I take as many others as I possibly can, from all angles, using different settings, the telephoto lens, etc, to try to get that really memorable shot. I don't know how many memorable shots that an amateur photographer like me can take, but I think I have some good ones, both of the scenery and the animals.)

On our way back to the lodge for breakfast, we stumbled on to a bush buck, which again, we had seen before, but which I had not gotten terribly good pictures of. So, stop for a few more. I have taken well over 2000 pictures already on this trip, and have deleted the really out of focus ones, but I shall have a challenging editing job when I return home!

After breakfast, we headed back to our lodge to pack for the return trip to Johannesburg. The staff from Mala Mala took us out to the "airport", which was really quite amusing. Evidently, security regulations have to be followed even in the bush! So we had to each identify our luggage ("That one") and stood there watching as it was put on the small

plane. Then we each had to "clear security", which meant that one of the staff from Mala Mala went over each of us with a wand, checking for??? Then we all walked out to the plane and got on. There were ten of us on this return flight. However, the funniest part of the whole thing was that there was a staff member from Mala Mala (I think he was the bartender) with an official "AIRLINK" vest on, standing by the plane with a fire extinguisher! In addition, another of the staff members was sitting on what looked to be an antique fire truck that was off the runway in the bush at the side. Fortunately, there was no fire as that would have been no laughing matter.

Once back in Johannesburg, we dropped our luggage off at the hotel where we had stayed before and rejoined our driver to go out to the Lesedi Cultural Village, which, actually, we didn't know much about. I was a little afraid that it would be a tourist trap, which, I suppose it was in a way, because anything that is set up for tourists isn't "real", but they tried their best. First we met the representatives of the cultures. I have mentioned that there are 11 official languages, obviously each with its own culture.

They had chosen 5 of the major cultures to highlight, Zulu, Xhosa, Basotho, Ndelbele and Pedi. We were invited to enter a large auditorium where we were shown a 20 minute film about these cultures, which talked about a bit of their history. Then we were divided into groups and taken on a short tour of five "villages" which consisted of one or two houses, and were manned by people dressed in the traditional costumes of their tribes. They explained a little about the way that they lived, taught us a few words of the language and then we moved on to the next one. It was undoubtedly superficial, but in four hours, how much in depth can one go? We learned some interesting facts about each of the tribes - for example; Zulu custom dictates that when going on a journey, the traveler must spit on a stone and throw it on the "Isivivane" (a large pile of rocks) so as to propitiate the spirits and bring good fortune on the journey, the Basotho people are from the mountain kingdom of Lesotho and wear conical hats and colorful blankets; the Xhosa are from the Eastern Cape and are the tribe of Nelson Mandela. Since they have a lot of wind, the Xhosa build a fire in a fireplace which is in the shape of a cross. That way, there is always one spot that a fire can burn nicely and be well protected from the winds. The Pedi people are from the north and wear kilts and blow whistles. The floors of their homes are decorated and waterproofed with cow dung.

Next came the dancing and singing, which was highly enjoyable because, again, they explained all of the songs that were sung and all of the dances. What was even better is that the people who were singing and dancing were obviously enjoying themselves. It wasn't staged... they were teasing each other. The costumes were beautiful, the dancing very well done. I love African music with the chanting sort of songs and the drumming that accompanies them. The people had very good voices and even though we couldn't understand what was said, we loved listening to it.

After the singing and the dancing performance, we were invited to partake of a buffet meal made up of traditional African food. A lot of the things we had tried before, but they ARE good and so we enjoyed having them again. The venison was springbuck, there was lamb (which is eaten frequently in South Africa), beef, and even crocodile (which I didn't try) There were lots of delicious vegetables (although the variety of vegetables is not what we would find in Canada or the US.) They do absolutely wonderful things with spinach, though and with cabbage. I loved both of those dishes. There are always lots of salads, and potatoes, but we have never been offered anything like green beans, peas, asparagus etc. Corn is available (called maize) and is used lots in corn soups, corn

bread etc, but not corn on the cob. There are always desserts, the most frequently seen is Cape Malva pudding with a lovely creme anglais sauce on the top, plus fruit salad, and ice cream. At any rate, the food was quite good.

Our driver, who had picked us up at the airport and had also joined us for the dinner, was a Zulu. We invited him to join us at our table and found him quite willing to talk about his life. I asked him if what he had seen was a demonstration of the past or were there still people who lived in villages like what we had seen. He said that in Kwa-Zulu Natal, his home area, about 40% of the people still live in villages. He had grown up in one, and said that the culture of singing and dancing was very much alive in these areas. He described how he had to learn to eat with a fork and a knife after he left his village as most of the food is served on communal trays and people eat with their hands, unless it is something like soup, when they would use a wooden spoon. He apologized for only speaking 5 languages...Zulu, of course, very good English plus three others. Here I go on my hobby horse again, but why can't people in North America appreciate the importance of speaking other languages?? We don't even deal with two very well, and here is this country with people who handle 11 without problems. (Even the bank machines have all eleven programmed in!) I know that we are in the enviable position that English is the one language that people want to learn to speak, but that doesn't excuse us from learning others. Our guide in Mala Mala summed it all up... he had been educated in English, learned Afrikaans and Zulu and was busy learning Shangaan as many of the staff were Shangaan speakers. He said simply, "It's a matter of respect for their culture." Oh, well, I'll get off my soapbox now.....

After dinner, we headed back to the hotel... we have a 7:15 am pick-up for our flight to Victoria Falls, so we will have to be up early again. Since I had started my day by waking up at 5:00 am, I was pretty tired and when we went back to the hotel, I headed straight for bed.

It is uncommonly cold here in Johannesburg and cloudy as well. It is perhaps even colder than it was in Mala Mala and no one can seem to understand why as it is their summer. I wonder if they are going to end up with the sort of summer that we just had in London. The high in Johannesburg was only going to be about 13, which is REALLY chilly. The whole country of South Africa is covered with clouds and is quite cool... except for Cape Town. They don't expect this front to move on for a few more days, so I am happy to be heading to Zimbabwe and Zambia, which are much nearer the equator and therefore, should be warmer! I'm awfully happy that I brought layers as I have certainly worn them, including the gloves! Of course, Frank, with antifreeze as blood, has worn his jacket some of the time, but often hasn't bothered to zip it closed.

November 18, 2009

EARLY to rise, speedy showers, and down to breakfast by 6:30 am. We hadn't even bothered to unpack, except for the items that were necessary for the overnight, so repacking didn't take much time. Because we are flying internationally this time, we got to see the shops at the Johannesburg airport, which are amazing. Soooo many and such variety. It would rival any mall that I have ever been in and surpass most of the big airport shopping areas in other countries that I have visited. I am hoping to get some time there when we come back, but since we fly out quite late in the evening (45 minutes past midnight) so the shops will be closed. I just need to find out how I can access them when we fly in! I don't know if that's possible, but I am hopeful. For one thing, they are

not paranoid about security.... yes, everyone is screened, as are all suitcases and carry-ons, but the attitude is just different. You don't have to remove shoes, belts, etc. If you have nothing in your pockets, you don't have to take off the jacket. I needed to put my computer through separately, but I didn't have to open it or turn it on. There are also no long line ups at security, or at passport control. They process large planeloads of people quickly and efficiently. As a matter of fact, they have a board up which tells you what the rate of processing is. This morning they were clearing passengers at a rate of about 9 per minute.

Our flight was delayed as some passengers didn't show up on the flight, so their luggage had to be off-loaded, which put all of us well behind schedule. But finally we took off, and guess what, we were served lunch (on a flight of 1 hour 40 minutes)! I asked for the vegetarian option and was served a sandwich (tomato and cheese) with crackers, and a small lemon cheesecake. There was, unhappily, a small chocolate bar too, which I ate. Why can South African Airlink (not even Airlines) serve lunch and no airline on a 1 1/2 hour flight in North America CAN manage anything????

At the moment, I am in Zimbabwe. It is sunny and, I'd say 25C (80). I am sitting in the bar of the hotel, which is outside and opens on to the watering hole and the swimming pool. I have a glass of white wine at my side, my computer (operating wirelessly) in front of me. I am looking out over a watering hole and in the last five minutes, I have taken pictures of a mommy and a daddy and baby warthogs, a beautiful crane of some sort (or perhaps a stork). I am no birder. Our friends, Mary and Perry are swimming in a small pool which has two levels separated by a waterfall and chatting with some other guests, but I chose the bar (don't want to be out in the sun- ha, ha, ha!) As far as I can see, there is bush - fairly green at the moment as the summer has started, bringing the rains. I am very happy!

I am well aware that we are not experiencing the real Zimbabwe, but tomorrow afternoon, I think we will hire a taxi and head out into the countryside to see a village and meet some of the people. We have a free afternoon, for the first time in a while and that seems like a reasonable thing to do. Actually, it is quite nice to just have some downtime as we have been very active up until this point and I have not had too much free time. But we had several hours this afternoon, just to relax and do what we want, which was a nice break.

Late this afternoon, we took a cruise along the Zambezi River, which is the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia. It was a nice cruise, and very nice to be warm and out on the water, but we didn't see much.... a hippo in the river too far away, birds, a crocodile, and an elephant. Of course, this is not a game preserve either. But it was just nice to chug along on the river and watch the scenery go by. We stayed out until after sunset, so I got a few nice pictures of an African sunset. After our cool rainy days in Mala Mala, I was quite happy to be warm again.

When we got back to the hotel, we had dinner. The restaurant is also on a balcony overlooking the pool and the watering hole. The hotel illuminates the brush at night. I'm not sure what for, as animals will avoid the light, but still, the view is beautiful, with or without animals. We had a very good meal. Perry had warthog, which he said was delicious, but I was in a pasta mood, so I had a pasta dish done with roasted tomatoes, basil and cheese. It was quite nice and satisfied my pasta craving completely. Frank had breen, which is a nice fish and Mary had lamb.

But it's time for bed now... We almost feel guilty being in Zimbabwe, as we feel almost like we are supporting Mugabe, but I suppose, what we are really supporting is all of the people who work in the hotel, run the transfer companies, do the river cruises and are happy to be making money. I certainly don't feel like Zimbabwe has the positive atmosphere that South Africa does (but this is just a quick first impression and may change). But it does strike me that, for example, paying \$75 dollars for a visa at the border is a real rip off. If I had travelled on my US passport, it would have been \$30. I'm not quite sure why there was such a difference. We were told that it would be \$50, but the government decided to change it fairly recently. At any rate, we paid up in US dollars. Having come this far, we weren't going to haggle over \$25. But it isn't the first time we have found that Canadians are charged more. In Turkey, it was the same thing. I suppose that Canada as a nation doesn't have the clout that the US does, or that countries which belong to the EEC do. But we had the cash with us and were ready for it not being as advertised, so we were fine, just a bit frustrated.

November 19, 2009

It's hard to believe that we have only a few days more here. Today was another quite unique day... and that is a unique day in a series of unique days in my lifetime.

We had breakfast in the hotel- not the best breakfast we have had, but only because I am being really picky! Not as great a variety of fresh fruits as I would have liked and the bread wasn't quite to my taste... Talk about useless complaints! I will already have to diet when I get back home so I should have no complaints about the food!

After breakfast, we went to Victoria Falls. Victoria Falls lies at about the halfway point on the Zambezi River, which is 2700 KM long and runs from the Nile to the Indian Ocean. The actual falls is located in the Victoria Falls National Park (itself 5.700 acres). You can view the falls from both Zimbabwe and Zambia, but at this time of year, the Zimbabwe side is preferred. Our guide took us from the far end of the path that runs along the river and we worked our way back. It was a good thing to do as we walked from small falls (at this time of the year) to huge falls. The sky was overcast this morning, but even so, there is quite a bit of mist from the falls which doesn't help when trying to take good pictures.

We started at the bridge between Zambia and Zimbabwe. We didn't walk across the bridge as we didn't want to have to pay the visa entry for Zambia. However, in the middle of the bridge, there were people who were bungee jumping (it is a 360 foot drop into the Bakota Gorge). We stopped and watched as a young man jumped from the bridge. I might (maybe) have tried that when I was young, but now, there is no way. I wouldn't stretch that much... I'd just leave body parts at the bottom of the gorge. Our guide said that they leave a 15 meter clearance from the rocks below. I don't know if they weigh you or not (as that determines the stretch of the cable that they use) but I do know that this would be one time you WOULDN'T want to lie about your weight! The young man bounced up and down about 7 or 8 times before the fellow that they lowered to reel him in got there.

Then we started to walk the path that follows the Zambezi River. In some spots, there are no fences whatsoever, and our guide told us that one or two people die each year, either suicide or trying for the "perfect photo" of the falls. Needless to say we didn't venture right to the edge. There is a lot of mist at the falls and often the rocks are

slippery. As we neared the main part of the falls the amount of water increased, but so did the mist. Our guide told us that the amount of water going over the falls in one minute could supply New York City with power for a day. It really was beautiful and we took several hours to walk the two miles from the start to the finish, taking lots of photos along the way

Not only were there beautiful pictures of the falls, but there were animals as well... monkeys, warthogs and baboons for the most part, plus of course, the never ending variety of beautiful African birds that we had never seen before. There are all sorts of activities you can do here... helicopter rides, canoeing, rafting, swimming, riding elephants, flying ultralight planes... but we opted NOT to do any of them but the viewing of the falls and the nice walk through the park.

We came back to our hotel for lunch and then, since we had a free afternoon, we hired a driver and went out into the countryside. We had the name of a driver from our friends who had been here, so we had the hotel call him. He came about 1:00 pm and took us on a tour of the surrounding countryside. First we drove out to a rural home (his relatives) who were living in the traditional style, in mud huts. They had a bit of land, which they farmed for food, and a few chickens, goats, one donkey and 2 cows. They plowed the land with an old fashioned plow, pulled by animals. There were about 5 houses on the land, but each was like a separate room. One house was the kitchen, where there was an open fire in the center of the mud hut. This is where the women prepared the meals. One hut was a sort of a living area, where the man carved things to sell at the market, the grandmother wove mats and looked after the baby. There were two huts which served as sleeping huts and one where maize was stored. No electricity, no running water. I'm not sure how many family members lived here. One grandmother for sure... two young women, one man, one little girl of six and a baby of 9 months- these were the people we saw. However, I'm sure that there were others in the family who just weren't there at the time we stopped. They were very nice and allowed us to take pictures. The little 6 year old girl "adopted" me and stayed with me the whole time we were there. I could have easily just put her in the car and brought her home with me; she was sooooo cute.

After the family, we went to the school. I was quite interested in the school. It was a primary school. They had about 2,000 children with classrooms for perhaps 500 or 600. They operated on a split schedule with the morning session starting at 7:00 am and ending about 11:30 am with a similar afternoon session. There were 36 teachers and each one of them looked after 50 or more children who sat at long tables with benches. Each of them wore a school uniform. We went to a grade two classroom and the teacher had the children sing for us.... they sang "Jesus Loves Me" in English, which I found to be a bit of a strange choice of song. We peeked in on a grade 4 classroom as well, but the older children were writing exams so we didn't visit them. The little ones are taught in their first language (up to grade three). After that, classes are offered in English. I'm not certain if it is all subjects or not, but certainly at least half of them. The class rooms were pretty bare, and the head master's office was pretty sparse. They are building some new classrooms with the help of Rotary clubs and one family from California who visited and were moved by their lack of learning materials. I had bought some pens in Canada and gave them to the school for their use. We also gave them some money, but frankly, the supplies are not readily available to buy. I should have brought more. They need paper desperately, so that the children can do their lessons, but really, they need everything.

We talked to the headmaster and he told us that there were about 300 orphans at the school because their parents had died from AIDS and that the school covered the cost of these children's education through donations. Education is not free in Zimbabwe, but the lower primary education is cheap enough that it is available to most students. However, secondary education is more difficult. There aren't secondary schools in all towns, so the cost of sending the children to secondary school means that a lot of families can't afford it.

Our driver was certainly open in his opinion of Mugabe... he said that only seven people voted for him in the last "election" (his family) but that he managed to win anyway. "We have a very clever president at rigging elections!" was his comment. Zimbabwe uses the US dollar as its currency at the moment. There was such rampant inflation in the past that we saw a bill of 1 billion dollars. When I asked our driver what that would buy, he said that in the beginning, a day's food, but by the end, a loaf of bread, maybe. Prices were going up several times a day until finally, the people would not take their own money. So a decision was made to use the US dollar. They will also take South African rand as a second choice, with Botswanian pula being a distant third.

Then the driver took us to his house to meet his wife. They had been married three years and lived in a "suburb" of Victoria Falls (the town of). They rented three rooms, bedroom, kitchen and living room. He was trying to build a house for them, but earning the money was hard. He didn't have any children as yet. No personal car either. He said that he hoped to have one someday. His wife was very nice, but I don't think that she spoke too much English.

After that, we went to "The Big Tree" which is an ancient baobab tree, located in a sort of a game preserve. It was huge and I was thrilled to see it. When I was teaching, I used to teach "Le Petit Prince" to my OAC students. It is probably my favorite book and of course, plucking out the shoots of the baobab tree is a large part of the prince's chores every day. I wished that I had been able to show my students the picture of that huge baobab tree (said to be over 1,000 year old).

West, our driver, wanted to take us to the market, but we declined, reluctantly. If we had gone to the market, we would have had to buy something. Cash is the only thing we could have used, and we happened to be short of US cash at the moment. We had brought what we thought was enough, but we were told visas were \$30 dollars. When we arrived at the border, they were \$75 per person, which has left us a tad low on US cash. Since it is almost the end of our trip, we also are low on rand. So it was best not to go. (Besides, we have bought quite a bit already. I'm not sure how we will get it all back home!) But I would have liked to help out by buying some of the things that were available.

However, for me, the surprise was how well the poor people were doing. Not well by our standards, but because they grow a lot of their own food, they are together in fairly stable families (divorce is almost unknown as no one has the cows to pay another bride price!). Most people are not able to grow enough food or keep enough animals to sell, but rather just enough to feed themselves. Now, Victoria Falls is a big tourist area, so many people are employed in the tourist area, and even more, in making souvenirs to sell. But the unemployment rate is about 40%. Life in the real rural area may well be much worse as I am sure that the tourist industry contributes a good many dollars to the economy. But judging by what I have seen, I think that the people who are living in the

squatter shacks in South Africa have a much harder life than the rural people of Zimbabwe. Neither has much (nothing by our standards), but the rural homes in Zimbabwe were much better than the shacks in South Africa. I will say though, that the people of Zimbabwe do not appear to be as happy as those in South Africa. Everywhere we went in South Africa there was an air of optimism. People could see progress and even if there was lots more to be done, they believed that the future was going to be better than the past. In Zimbabwe, I didn't get that feeling at all. Perhaps because, until Mugabe stops stealing everything from his people, they really are powerless to do anything but eke out an existence.

End of the day... dinner and bed. Tomorrow we say good-bye to Zimbabwe and head for Botswana.

November 20, 2009

Today was largely a travel day. We left the hotel at around 11:30 am and went by bus to the border between Zimbabwe and Botswana. There we stopped - first at a check point going out of Zimbabwe in order to have our visa stamped as having exited the country. We had to take our luggage and literally wheel it around to another bus that was waiting for us. We drove a short distance more and then had to get out again, to wipe the soles of our shoes on a disinfectant mat while the bus had to drive through a pool of disinfectant solution. Botswana fights hoof and mouth disease that way. Back aboard the bus, we headed off to Kasane Airport, which was where the jeep from the safari camp was waiting for us.

The camp, named Muchenje Safari Lodge, was located on the edge of Chobe National Park, about an hour's drive from Kasane Airport. It sits, overlooking a delta where in the early morning and late afternoon, animals can come to drink water. (And they do, in the dry season, as it is one of the only sources of water. However, this is the beginning of summer, so there have been some rain storms and there is more water available in the bush- hence, fewer animals to view.

When we arrived we were offered lunch and then taken to our cabins overlooking a small river (small now, but after the rainy season begins in earnest, it will flood). They had already had one heavy rain, and you could just see the countryside springing back to life. Unfortunately, so were the bugs! I have never seen such a variety of insects, all shapes and sizes, walking, crawling, flying, buzzing- all seemingly aiming at us!! Kathy, the manager, explained how to get into our room without attracting too many bugs. First you only use a small flashlight to illuminate the lock on the room door, then you step quickly inside and slide the door shut. Then, you pull the curtains shut everywhere, BEFORE turning on the lights. This was the first time we had encountered this kind of insect life. In addition, they had screens in all of the windows, which was the first time we had had them in any of the places we stayed. However, if you followed procedures, you were virtually bug free inside of the cabin. (Plus, of course, every one supplies bug killer (called DOOM) and mosquito repellent (called SWEET DREAMS) It smelled quite nice actually.

The major problem was trying to walk from the room to the dining room without getting a number of bugs down your shirt! The lodge, where the dining room was, was open and bugs were definitely a problem there. They turned out all of the lights and we ate by candlelight, to help keep the bugs down. They left the lights on in the woods to attract

the bugs away from the lodge. I'm pretty sure that some of the crunchy items in my food were not put there by the chef! (no matter- this is an adventure!)

I must admit, that by this point, I was worried that we had made a very poor choice of a place for a safari. It was quite a bit cheaper than Mala Mala, but often, you get exactly what you pay for. The lodge, which I didn't realize, used Chobe National Park for its game drives. Now there are lots and lots of animals in Chobe, but, just like Kruger, you are not allowed to drive off the roads. In a private game reserve, if the animal wanders into the bush, they can follow so that you can get up close. Here, however, if the animal was not right by the side of the road, there was nothing that could be done about getting closer. So, when we went off on the first of our game drives, although we saw a few animals, it was difficult to take any pictures or to really see them closely. Our guide (LIPS) explained that usually, in the dry season, the animals stay close to the river delta as it is a sure source of water and can be seen fairly easily, now, they had had some rain, some of the watering holes back in the bush would have water and the animals would be much harder to see (even more discouraging). We did see some animals but nothing that we hadn't seen a lot of in Mala Mala (except birds). But the birds of Africa are quite beautiful and interesting to watch- just very difficult to get a picture of from a distance.

I think we all came back discouraged from that first game drive and the night drive that Frank and I took didn't help lift our spirits. Again, while we saw a bush baby, for example, it moved quickly out of sight. While the animals at Mala Mala are wild, they are somewhat accustomed to seeing the Safari vehicles. Mala Mala has strict policies for their rangers on approaching animals. They don't ever scare the babies, because then, the animal will remain frightened and run for the rest of its life. They don't have more than two vehicles at a sighting at once and they never, ever surround an animal. They always leave him a clear avenue of escape. The result is that while the animals are wary, they don't panic and run when they see a vehicle.

However, in a National Park, while the animals are protected, all sorts of people drive through, some with a guide who knows the wildlife and can tell you about them and their habits (very interesting), but some on their own. "They rent self-drive vehicles, and drive the roads (and off road sometimes obviously as you could see the tracks). There are some who actually camp at night in the park, although they can not move about at night. All in all, what I am saying is that the animals, while safe from being killed, are subjected to all sorts of different sorts of behaviours and are much more skittish where vehicles and humans are concerned. Up until recently, there was a huge problem with poachers, but now, the Park is closed from 6:00 am to 7:00 pm and at night, there are park rangers who patrol. That has drastically reduced the amount of poaching and increased the number of animals that are actually living in the park.

So, we were convinced that we had made a mistake in coming to this lodge. (We came because it was a lot less expensive. The facilities were just fine as was the food, but I only realized that the private safari's major expense is the rangers, the Land Rovers, the top notch intercoms so that the rangers stay in touch with one another, the ability to follow an animal (which requires that the safari company OWN the lands) and even the care of the animals. While they don't feed the animals at all, they do watch out for their health and if disease threatens, they will do what they can to keep the animals safe.)

My advice would always be to choose the best private safari that you can afford, one

that owns their own land. Don't concern yourself with the level of accommodation as the animal viewing is exactly the same for everyone, no matter if they are staying in the top or the bottom levels of accommodation.

Off we went to bed, hoping for better things in the am.

November 21, 2009

Our day started pretty early with a knock at the door at 5:00 am. We were to leave at 5:30 am, so no showers were in order. Just throw on your clothes and go! The lodges always provide juices, coffee and tea, plus some rolls or toast or something to put on your stomach, but I was only interested in the coffee. I usually had time to drink at least two cups, which was enough to stave off a caffeine-withdrawal headache!

Mary, Perry, Frank and I piled into our Land Rover with Lips and off we went. It was a gorgeous morning, with beautiful blue skies and fresh air. Fortunately, for me, the Land Rover has a canvas cover over it. (They didn't at Mala Mala-o which wasn't a problem as we never saw the sun!). Here, however, the sun shone down on us and it was already quite warm, even at 6:00 in the morning, so I was happy for the protection.

But we were even more thrilled by the elephants! On the way to Chobe - actually in the driveway of the lodge itself - we encountered a breeding herd of elephants, about 8 in total. There was one new baby and what had to be a teen-ager, a couple of females without young and a male. It was quite thrilling as they were just, AND I DO MEAN JUST, in front of the Land Rover. The matriarch of the herd was quite suspicious of us and started to come towards the Land Rover, but then changed her mind and just stopped, stared at us, pawed the ground and then turned away and went off into the bush. But then, the teen-ager decided that he needed to put his two cents in and also came to the path. He kind of reared a little bit, pawed at the dirt and trumpeted. All the while, our guide was repeating, just stay quiet and still. The teen-ager, having protested our presence, also decided to move on, so the entire herd ambled along off into the bush, where, believe me, they can disappear in no time at all! One second you are looking at a several ton elephant and the next, that same elephant is gone! (That's the way it is with all animals... they really do blend in)

So that was a thrilling start to the day! Then went we got into Chobe, things quieted down a little bit. It isn't that we didn't see animals (lots of impala, bush buck, warthogs, but these are petty common animals and roam pretty well anywhere.) Then we came around the corner and there were a mother and a baby giraffe! For some reason, we did not have our normal guide for this morning's drive, and when we asked the one who was driving to stop, he replied, "The sun is bad for pictures" and just continued to drive. I don't know if he misunderstood us or not, but we just wanted to watch the mama and little one. As it is, they took one look at the moving vehicle and ran for cover. We were all rather irritated, to say the least. We did see one new animal, the Sable antelope. (Joke of the day- What do you call an injured sable antelope? Disabled!) OHHHHHHH (I can hear the groans now!

We headed back to the lodge about 8:00 am and had breakfast. Then Frank and I drove down with one of the guides to a local village family. It was a bit of a set up, in that the lodge had made arrangements for that family to receive guests who wanted to see how they lived and to ask questions. In return, the lodge helped them out with food and

money. There were two women there - the grandmother, who was the head of the family, her daughter, and her daughter's two little sons, Jim, 5 and Emmanuel, 2. They were so cute! It wasn't that much different from the family we saw in Zimbabwe, except that they were better off. They had the traditional thatched roof mud hut, but now, they had also been able to build a cinder block 3 room house- two bedrooms and a sitting room. They were very proud of it. They had glass in the windows and curtains up at the windows. They too owned animals- chickens, goats, and they farmed the land (maize, sorghum). Maize is a staple of the diet here and in Zimbabwe - South Africa as well for that matter.

They also had progressed to having bought blue pipe, which they were planning to use to construct a line to bring water from the nearest source to the house so that they wouldn't have to walk so far for water. The little boy, Jim, was going to start school and would be walking 6 (that's right, SIX) kilometers to school and back each day, most likely by himself.

You see people walking everywhere in Africa. Most don't have cars or have the money for whatever public transportation exists. They walk along the roads, and quite frequently, people who do have vehicles, will offer a ride. But they are not hitch-hiking. This is how they get from place to place -or they don't go!

Botswana, while not a rich country, is a stable one and its population shows it. The country has never been occupied or conquered, and they have a democratic elections process. Corruption does not seem to be a problem here- not like its neighbours. Our host at the lodge said to me that, if they could, he thought that Botswana would build a "Berlin" wall between the two countries at the border! An exaggeration, but Botswana prides itself on its stability and doesn't want to be influenced by its rotten to the core neighbour. There is free education and free medical care for all of its citizens. In addition, the government has pledged to make electricity and running water to everyone a priority in the future. Not bad, considering what we have seen in other places.

After coming back from the village, Mary, Perry, Frank and I embarked on what the lodge called its all day safari experience. We left mid-morning, and drove a little distance to the Chobe River where there was a small flat bottomed boat waiting for us. Our guide was with us and the Lodge had sent a picnic lunch with him for us to eat. We started off and cruised slowly down the river, admiring the beautiful channel. Our guide pointed to some elephants that had come down to the river for water (it hadn't rained in two days, so that the water holes were dry again. The soil in this area at least is poor... either sandy, or clay, depending on where you are.

We cruised silently up to the elephants. It was a large herd, with females, adolescents and two fairly new babies, who were still not quite steady on their feet and so the entire herd made sure that they stayed in the middle, didn't get too far into the water and in general, kept them safe. As we sat there, entranced, the elephants drank their fill of water and sprayed it on their backs. Then the teenagers began to play. They got into the water and literally, played like human children would, pushing each other into the water, ducking each other under the water (although the interesting part of that is that the elephant being "dunked" simply raises his trunk, just like he was snorkeling and still continues to breathe easily. More and more of the younger elephants came into the water and soon, the water was churning with elephants having fun.

It was wonderful to see. and we watched them quite a while, until the matriarch of the herd decided to return to the bush to feed. She started off and the rest of the elephants began to fall into place... but some of the teen-agers didn't get out of the water. She turned around, bellowed at them, (you could almost hear her saying "GET MOVING!") and they did! Soon they were up the long sloping bank and off in the brush. WOW!

We started down river again and the very next thing we came upon was a "pod" of hippos (the correct term for a group of these animals. It was a large pod of 12-15 hippos, (hard to count as a number of them were bobbing up and down in the water. Some, however, had come in to the shallow waters and were asleep there, with their heads resting on the sand and their bodies in the water. They all snuggled up together... those behind put their heads on the backs of the ones who were in front of them. (These were the adults... the "kids" were a little more active and were moving about in the deeper shallow water, if that makes sense. Hippos like to walk on the bottom of the river and come up when they need more air.)

At any rate, we must have spent 20 or 30 minutes there, just watching them (and the little crocodile on the bank) and the birds who were with them. Finally we were getting quite hungry, so we started up the motor and continued on down the river, until we found a nice spot to put the boat into shore for our lunch. We did not get out of the boat, but rather, Lips unpacked a nice buffet lunch for us...salad, fried chicken, tuna, rice, fresh fruit and stuff that he called pizza, but which was a nice vegetable quiche, I believe, and cold cooked pumpkin, which was absolutely delicious. I am going to try to make it when I get home although finding the smaller pumpkins to cook with may well be a bit of a problem.

After a nice relaxing lunch, with a glass of white wine for Mary and I and beers for Frank and Perry, we continued on. The next amazing sight that we saw was more hippos, but these were out of the water! We had been told at Mala Mala that hippos graze at night as it is safer for them, but our guide said that, while that was true in general, on the delta in Chobe was the one place that you could see them out of the water. Hippos have very, very good hearing, so we had to be quite quiet. It was so quiet, in fact, that you could hear the sound of the hippos teeth (which are huge) chomping at the grass. You could hear their snorts too. Then one of the hippos caught our scent, sniffed several times and sounded the alarm. Very, very quickly, the pod was in the water, moving rapidly away from us.

We saw several pods of hippos that afternoon, and loved watching each and every one of them. In addition, the birds were just incredible. Our guide knew all of the names. and we dutifully kept a list of what we saw, but I'll have to admit, that all were unfamiliar names and birds, so I have a hard time remembering them I got several good pictures of some of them, so I guess what I will have to do is google the names until I find the right bird in order to label my photos!

We also crossed the river to the other side. Perry wanted to set foot on Namibia's soil, so that he could officially say that he had been in Namibia! Our guides went along with us, and nosed the boat up to shore. Perry climbed out, we took his picture and Namibia had another illegal alien on their soil. (momentarily, anyway)

It was such a relaxing day. We saw lots but at a leisurely pace and in a completely different environment. We all agreed that it had been a delightful afternoon on the Chobe

River.

Change of gears.... back into the Land Rover and off again around Chobe. We were hunting for more giraffe as we have only seen three of them, but unfortunately, this was not to be. We found a dead impala with a broken leg...not just broken, but literally in two. There were a few "chew" marks on the body, but otherwise, it was untouched. (It would NOT remain that way overnight, of that we were sure. I asked the guide what had happened to the impala, and he replied that he wasn't sure. If it had been a leopard kill, he thought that there would have been more damage, but he couldn't explain the leg that was in two pieces. Poor impala...it would be dinner tonight for someone.

We stopped for a "sundowner" and to watch the beginnings of the sunset. As we stood there, a whole troupe of baboons came out of the brush and went out on the plain and sat down! It was hard not to believe that they were not watching the beauty of the clouds. They all just sat there, not together, but a many different places in the open area, but they were all pointed the same direction.

Oh, the sunset! It was undoubtedly the most beautiful one that I had ever seen in my entire life. There were clouds, frequent enough to reflect the glow of the sun. Red sky, blue clouds, yellow, purples... It sounds like I am describing a rainbow, but it was amazing. It was very vivid to the west, but even in the opposite direction, the reflection off the clouds was as pretty as most sunsets are. Because the park closed at 7:00 pm and we had to be out, we piled back into the Land Rover and headed for the gate, stopping frequently to take pictures. We couldn't get enough of it. I must have taken a hundred pictures of the sunset... and when we got back to the lodge, we all raced for the balcony to snap some more. By this time, it was waning, but the sky was still incredibly beautiful. We sat there, not even talking, watching the sunset until there was nothing left. It was an incredible sight. I wish that we had been in one place to watch it... either on the delta or on the balcony, because racing back to the lodge deprived us of what the baboons had... the peace and quiet in which to contemplate the sheer beauty of nature.

But what a day! Only one new animal, some mongoose, but many, many new birds and new experiences with the ones that we had seen.

By the way, I learned the following collectives today: dazzle of zebra, a parliament of mongeese, sounder of warthogs, troupe of baboons. And, by the way, the animal's name in Africa is zeh bruh not zee bruh.

Other wonderful expressions... instead of "see you later, or see you in a little while" it is "see you just now" Cute!

November 22 and 23, 2009

A travel day and our last in Africa. We started the long journey home with a hot breakfast at the lodge, but by 8:00 am, we were in the jeep and on our way to Kasane Airport, which is roughly 45-50 minutes away. At Kasane, there was a representative from our transfer company there to greet us in a big open-air Land Rover. We loaded the suitcases into the Land Rover and set out for the Zambezi River, just at the point where it joins the Chobe River.

This is the one point in the world where four countries meet: Zimbabwe, Botswana,

Namibia, and Zambia. Waiting for us was a small flat-bottomed boat. Our suitcases were loaded in and off we went, across the Zambezi. On the other side of the river, in Zambia, another representative of the same company was waiting for us and took us to the van to fill out applications for entry visas to Zambia. (read donate \$50 US each to the government, as we were really in transit and never saw much of Zambia at all!). At least, there was only one fee scale for everyone and we didn't have to pay more as Canadians. The current theory is that because Canada is associated with the British, the British, having been occupiers of these countries for so many years, are NOT very popular. They told us that the Zambian government adopted one visa fee only recently. Before that, Brits and Canadians paid more. At any rate, visas in hand and wallets empty of US cash, we got back on the bus for the hour long drive to Livingstone airport, where we caught our flight to Johannesburg. It seemed kind of fitting that we left Africa like that...jeep, Land Rover, boat, and bus!

Actually, it was all incredibly efficient! However, there were a huge number of semis and trucks waiting at the border. They were lined up for miles both on the Botswana side and on the Zambian side. When we asked about it, we were told that the trucks needed a ferry to transport them and there was only one ferry operating. That ferry could handle one semi at a time. It went back and forth. There were a couple of other ferries, but they were not operating. At any rate, truck drivers wait for days... sometimes up to a week to go across the river on the ferry. I couldn't believe it, but the truckers were out of their trucks, eating lunch by the side of the road under the trees, talking in groups and generally seemingly enduring the wait with good humour

Once at Livingstone, which is a VERY small airport, we caught our South Africa airlines flight to Johannesburg. I have been very impressed with them. All of the flights that we have taken have left and arrived on time, there has been reasonable food on each of them, even the short ones, and we have never waited for our luggage....and, most important, we have never lost any luggage either. The same happened with our flight from Livingstone to Johannesburg.

After we arrived we went to our hotel, the Airport Grand hotel, where we had reserved two rooms for rest and clean up. Frank slept a little but I did not, as I knew that, if I did, I would have trouble sleeping on the flight. I did take a shower however, and changed to fresh clothing, which was very nice. In retrospect, though, the rooms were not really necessary, or perhaps I should say that both of us having a room was not necessary. We are good enough friends that we could have used one room for the few hours that we were there. We had dinner at the hotel...our second bad meal of the trip - and headed back to the airport earlier than we really had to because Mary and I wanted to shop in the duty free shops at the airport.

That meant that we were at the airport about an hour and a half earlier than we really needed to be but that was OK. When the shops closed at 10:00 pm, we played bridge until it was time to board again.. I must admit, that by the time we got on to the plane, I was sleepy. For the first time that I can remember, I slept a solid 5 hours after the flight took off, And of course, we ate. KLM certainly does feed you regularly, and, to their credit, they have nice enough food. They don't forget the water either and came around regularly with things to drink.

The flight to Amsterdam left on time and arrived on time. We only had about 2 hours to kill and we did that easily by walking around, browsing in the book stores and the other

shops. I noticed all sorts of amenities at the airport, including a "transit" hotel, where you can rent a room for a few hours only. They had that in Johannesburg too. I think that would have been a better idea than leaving the airport, dragging our luggage to a shuttle bus and then returning. The airport in Amsterdam also has massages, an internet center, and many other facilities to make travel easier should you so choose- even a hairdresser.

The two hours that we had went very quickly and once again, we were back on a plane. I actually slept a lot on this flight too. which means that I have not read or knitted as much as I thought I would, In fact, there was no use bringing the knitting along, as it is too difficult to knit on a plane in economy class. There just isn't enough room.

The flight was on time once again to Toronto. We had arranged for a limo to pick us up at the airport. I had to laugh when a stretch limo pulled up - that completed the list of modes of transportation. Jeep, open Land Rover, small boat, van, large bus, plane and finally limousine! We are at home now (just) after travelling for 42 hours.

I can honestly say that this was one of the best trips that I have ever taken and I'd recommend it to anyone!