



South Africa – Sawubona Umlungu!

Jo-burg, Cape Town, Garden Route, Drakensburg, Safari

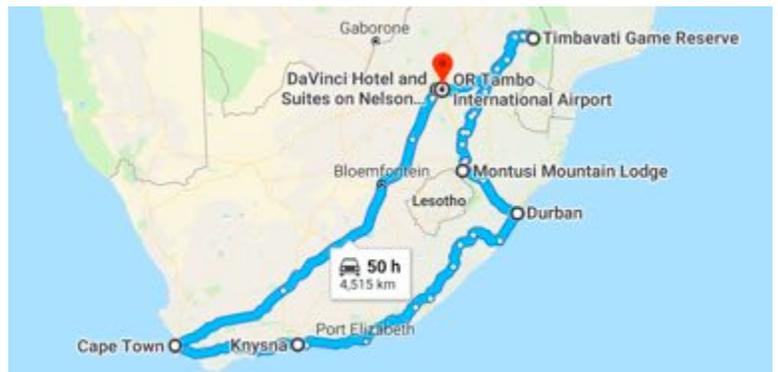


Left to Right: (top) Apartheid Museum, Hector Pieterse Museum/Soweto, Sterkfontein cave guide, Kirstenbosch Gardens; (middle) Cape of Good Hope, Apostles/Camps Bay, Table/Cape from Robben Island, Garden Route hiking & yellowwood, Zulu village healer; (bottom) Drakensberg Amphitheater, leopard, symbiosis, lion and kudu kill

“Let’s not be divided. Divided people are easier to rule.” Trevor Noah (New York Times op ed, December 2016)

Introduction

Historically, my interest in Africa derives from two places: being a college student during the height of the international anti-apartheid movement, and being a graduate student in an HIV/AIDS lab with collaborators in Nairobi, Kenya. For the last 10 years, I have seriously considered going to Africa – testing out whether I could handle anti-malarial drugs (via a trip to SE Asia in 2009), going back and forth on whether I wanted to climb Kilimanjaro, and wondering which country to visit (Botswana and Namibia being the most serious contenders early on). In the end, though, my great respect for Nelson Mandela and Trevor Noah, my love of weird wildflowers (in this case – protea/fynbos), and my interest in hiking (in this case - the Drakensberg) made me choose South Africa. But the actual trigger that caused me to sign up was Trump calling African countries shitholes – in conjunction with the deep divisions in the United States, all reminiscent of the political atmosphere leading up to apartheid. For me, just doing safari or hiking was not an honest trip to Africa. I needed to see as much of the spectrum as I could handle – which was a moving target given the heavy-duty State Department warnings about violent crime and civil unrest (notably enhanced the week before I left), and the magnitude of South African news crime reporting, which I followed daily for Johannesburg (Jo-burg) and Cape Town during the month leading up to my trip. In addition to traveling with hired guides/drivers at nearly all times (facilitated by Wilderness Travel, the tour operator for the main group trip), the other safety measure I took with this trip was to formally register with the STEP (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program), detailing my every move with the State Department (and likewise sharing my itinerary with friends/family, including a daily report to the inner circle). Given last year’s unanticipated germ-fest on the plague-ship to South Georgia/Antarctica, I was – needless to say - concerned as well about disease (even though South Africa is one of the safer sub-Saharan countries from a communicable disease perspective). I took EVERY



...and I took EVERY

precaution on this trip, visiting my infectious disease/travel medicine DR in Corvallis, boosting multiple vaccines (hep B, typhoid fever, MMR, and influenza), carrying broad spectrum antibiotics, taking anti-malarial malarone on the safari section (the only region with endemic malaria), and using extensive physical/chemical insect barriers given other untreatable insect-borne diseases – like African tick fever. Like I said to one of my safari guides: if I fail on this trip and catch malaria (or worse), I shouldn't call myself a microbiologist. Having not gotten sick at all on this trip, I am pleased to say that I can definitely call myself a microbiologist.

September 16-19, 2018: Will I Even Make It to Jo-burg?

Less than a week before this trip, several exciting things happened – most notably: the State Department added “civil unrest” to the long list of South Africa warnings following Soweto rioting (the country formally entered a recession the month before, and – of course – there was the unproductive Trump/Fox tweeting), and hurricane Florence threatened my flight between Atlanta and Jo-burg. Although I had a couple back-up plans with respect to the second problem (including crashing with CDC Cara, who provided me with lots of advice about South Africa from her many visits there over the years), all my flights (PDX to Atlanta, Atlanta to Tambo Airport/Jo-burg) were early. Of course, one of the other choices I made for this trip was to fly first class, which meant – for the most part – I looked forward to comfortable flights. That said, I got stuck with a full-sized emotional support dog taking up the bulkhead row floor between PDX and Atlanta. Landing in Atlanta around 4, I decided to walk the length of the airport (which I'd never flown through before) using the underground/train corridor (lots of nice art and history installations). It took me a solid 25 minutes to get from domestic A to international F. As I came into the F terminal, I found a target money exchange cubicle and took out \$300 equivalent Rand (at the time, the Rand was running 16:1 USD – having depreciated post-recession from 10:1) – before escaping into the bubble of the Delta lounge... which was surprisingly crowded and loud. The money issue (namely – when/where to take it out) had generated a lot of discussion; in the end, I knew I needed cash in hand when I landed (for tipping my driver) and I'd been warned to watch out for dubious cash machines in Tambo. Normally, I NEVER carry much money on me when I travel – but, given the ATM issue, I decided to take out most of what I thought I'd need for tipping in advance. Following some interesting on-line advice, I hid \$200 outside my main wallet in case anyone tried to rip me off in transit (I won't say where). This was also the first time I've used hotel safes in my traveling history – for my extra cash, passport, computer/electronics, and Rx med's; concerned that not all hotel safes would be large enough, I also bought/carried a portable PacSafe (look it up)... but, in the end, never had to use it because all the city hotels had monster safes. This was also the first time I bought and used a TSA-approved luggage lock – secured in transit and in the hotel during the day.

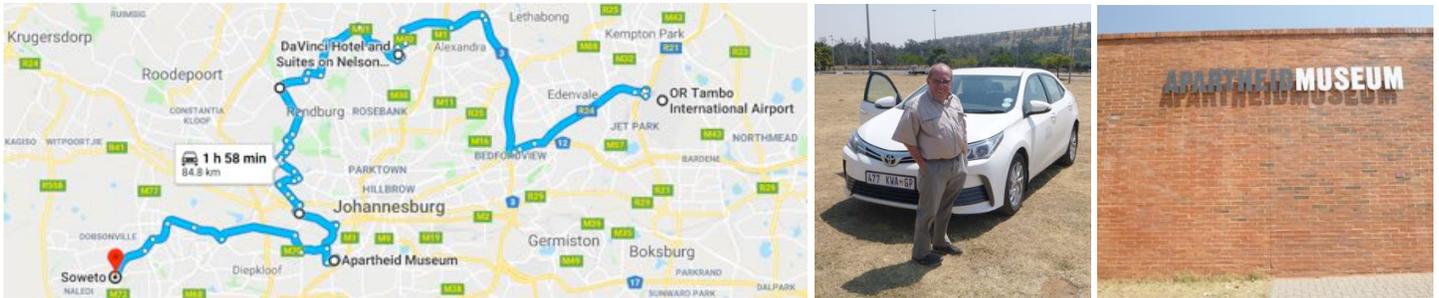


Left to Right: Delta One bed-cubby, relaxing with Pinot and Fred, that's a LONG way from home, POSH Jo-burg hotel

But I digress: I boarded the full and old 777 bound for Jo-burg around 7, with take-off just after 8. Although first class was nice, I think the newer bed-seats on, say, the 787's, are a better design. Also, the plane rattled/shook so much during take-off that I wasn't sure we'd make it across the Atlantic (particularly because a couple lesser storms were lined up behind Florence). A 3-course meal service began promptly; although I was tempted to watch all sorts of exciting movies, I could not afford to get stirred up (as I had on my flight to Europe this summer when I watched “Shape of Water”) – so I watched the new documentary about Mr. Rogers and then went to bed. Given that our flight was 14.5 hours long and the flight crew never woke people up for additional meals (although snacks, a mini-breakfast, and a mini-lunch were available near the end), there was easily 11 hours of sleep-able time. Because I was nervous and/or excited about all the new variables on this trip, I managed to sleep about 7 hours, but not continuously (I did a 2X2+3 schedule). The seat-bed did lie flat and the bedding was great – but there was no confusing that space with a bed. Also, mid-way through the flight, I woke up and couldn't find my glasses at all... they had actually slipped out of my pocket and were way down in the weird crevices of the seat mechanics (perfect for crushing were one to hit any of the adjustment toggles). Given that I had not brought my spares on this trip, I definitely spent a solid 5 minutes highly concerned about how I would see if the glasses were gone or destroyed.

After requesting a mini-breakfast (fruit, yogurt, croissant), I began mentally preparing for landing – having spent considerable time/effort focused on avoiding problems between the plane and the hotel. That's because there were SO many warnings (including the official Tambo website!) about baggage theft, fraudulent ATMs, conflicts between aggressive taxi and uber drivers, and airport staff spotters who alert carjacking teams to follow rich-looking travelers to their home/hotels and then rip them off (hopefully not killing them in the process). Needless to say, I willfully looked like a hobo (Allison's choice of words) on this trip (although I don't own jewelry and my clothing and overall appearance is always very plain). Landing a little after 5 (15 minutes early), I did a quick run through customs (where my only trouble was understanding the thick South African accent of the fast-speaking white agent) and found my luggage untouched. Given that I had studied YouTube videos of the arrival hall, I knew what to expect when I exited – and, thankfully, it wasn't as crazy as, say, my first and very harried recollections of Buenos Aires (1997) or Kathmandu (1998). That said, however, I could NOT find the driver with my name-sign. After walking back and forth past the wall of sign-holders, I started towards the information desk but was stopped by this little old black man in a green airport vest (probably because he could tell the white lady traveling alone needed help). My airport angel knew one of the other sign-holders worked for the same company I was using – and, within 5 minutes, we had my driver. My driver was young, black, and very quiet; we walked about 5 minutes to the vast parking garage and headed out in a super-clean white unmarked Toyota. The sun was about to set, which meant I had a little light during the 40-minute drive to my Sandton hotel (probably the richest part of Jo-burg). For most of the drive, we were on very modern highways that rivaled road quality in the United States and Europe. The landscape was dry, brown, rolling hills – lots of commercial or industrial buildings. After passing

what looked like a big field or park, we passed an exit sign for Alexandra (20 minutes east from my hotel on the map below) – a legendary township that many websites warned you about (i.e. some navigation systems directed you leave the highway here en route to Sandton – a dangerous error, especially at night). Shortly thereafter, we left the highway and started driving extremely busy city streets: congested with traffic, frequently blocked by construction (which seemed to be everywhere), and streaming with so many people (virtually all black) who flowed into the streets any time cars were slow or stopped at traffic lights. The latter definitely captured my attention given all the warnings about smash-grab crime and carjacking (which, according to national crime statistics, happens 20-30 times per day in Jo-burg). Within 10 minutes, we arrived at the DaVinci hotel (located 5 minutes from the US Embassy) and multiple door-men (notably wearing these weirdly flamboyant suits with top hats that made my “colonial/plantation” radar cringe) whisked me and my luggage from street-level to the 4th floor lobby where my hobo-appearance did not seem to impress anyone. Given South Africa’s recession, I tipped my driver and the doormen double the recommended amount; in general, I bought very little on this trip (mostly because of luggage weight limits for the safari segment) but I tipped very high (because the Rand value had fallen so much just prior to this trip). Although I appreciated the luxury/comforts of the DaVinci, it was WAY too richy-rich for my tastes. Checking in, I was told I had been upgraded to an apartment on the 11th floor; indeed, I had a kitchen, a living room, a separate bedroom, and a huge bathroom. Given that I’d packed emergency oatmeal for just such an occasion, I ate a double-bag bowl after washing up – and did my best to get some real sleep. The latter plans were foiled around 1 a.m. by a very audible street altercation below – thankfully gun-free.



Left to Right: Jo-burg map showing airport, hotel, day one (Apartheid Museum/Soweto), Robbie, Apartheid Museum

The next morning, I was up around 7:30 – VERY hungry, and anxious/excited about the planned day ahead (visiting Soweto and Apartheid Museum) given first and overnight impressions of the supposedly “safest” part of the city. Heading down to the big restaurant (one floor down from the lobby), I was the only single woman (and one of only a few obviously vacationing tourists NOT wearing fancy business suits)... this was true morning 2 as well. The clientele was a 50:50 mix of black and white. As with the customs agent, I stumbled understanding the thick accent of the waiter when asked about hot drink options. My favorite thing about the DaVinci breakfast was the halved passion fruit – something that reminded me of Vietnam, where I first enjoyed whole passion fruit. Additionally, there was great bread, pastries, hot items (eggs, bacon, beans, potatoes), and a European style coldcut/cheese selection. After returning to my room to brush teeth/get organized, I proceeded to the 4th floor lobby just before 9. At the time, I was uncertain whether my guide/driver was to meet me here or on the street-level – but the desk staff assured me that this was the place. After 10 minutes, though, I saw this guide-looking man quickly walk by and knew I was in the wrong place. Sure enough, that was Robbie – all 5 feet of him. So – I’m not going to lie: I had some mixed feelings about getting a white South African guide for Soweto and Apartheid Museum because I’d read some amazing reviews about a couple vibrant Sowetan native guides. Plus, Robbie was a small man – could he protect me? That said, it was my first day in a part of town that was known for being sketchy – so maybe the company figured the nervous white lady would be more comfortable with this situation. In the end, Robbie was an excellent guide and was something of a Tasmanian devil of energy – with many regulars in Soweto quite familiar with him. I suspect my experience would have been different with a black Sowetan guide – but I have fond and calm memories of my day with Robbie.



Left to Right: Apartheid Museum – sorting entrance, inner grounds from garden/walk, view to Gold Reef City/downtown, art exhibits

From the hotel, we took a more leisurely route first to the Apartheid Museum, and then to Soweto. Most of this route was suburban and could have been anywhere in the United States. At some point, we got on a highway section that ran adjacent to downtown Jo-burg’s central business district and Robbie talked about how gritty and crime-ridden that part of town was (consistent with other sources). Shortly thereafter, we left the highway and I was surprised to see roller coasters and other rides rising from a walled compound: Gold Reef City, Jo-burg’s only theme park (built around an historic mining site and apparently featuring cheesy living history/activities loosely connected to mining). Thankfully, the park was closed for maintenance. In what seemed a totally weird choice, the Apartheid Museum was located right next to Gold Reef City. As with most things South African, the Apartheid Museum (which opened in 2001) was also surrounded by a big compound wall – with access tightly controlled via a drive-through security gate. Once inside, I was pleased to see a couple buses and several private vehicles – and a longish line of black high school-aged young adults all wearing uniforms. As stated by both Jo-burg guides, all school children in South Africa are required to wear assigned uniforms to equalize appearance/status. Over the next few days, I would see SO many school groups – with many different levels of complexity or

cost (some wore simple slacks and T-shirts, others were full-on suits). After passing through another security line, Robbie took me through a guide door to skip another line at the formal museum entrance (the famous area where people were classified based on government-defined racial groups - white, black, colored/mixed). In retrospect, I regret missing this experience – and I could tell that tomorrow’s guide (a colored South African) would not have had me to jump ahead. Once inside, we did a quick overview of the interior complex: there were 2 buildings – one devoted to apartheid history, and one devoted to Mandela history. Inside the first building, Robbie gave me a 5-minute overview and then turned me loose to walk through the apartheid history section on my own. As I quickly learned from the first group of high school students, photography was not allowed in any of the buildings... and so you’ll just get my general impressions. The Apartheid Museum uses mostly photographs with long text explanations presented in a linear order to convey the history of apartheid and its demise. While there were some alternative displays/items (e.g. a military vehicle used to suppress demonstrations, personal belongings, video), the layout was not as willfully immersive as, say, the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC (e.g. walking through the room filled with nothing but shoes). Going into this trip, I had read about half of Mandela’s autobiography and so I was more familiar with early history; but I knew much less about events in the 1970-1980’s. In addition to the school group, I chatted with a couple groups from Atlanta (a black family, and two very fashionable black female friends – I’d run into them later in Soweto too) and I overheard a few European groups (German and French) with private guides. The final rooms contained the flag-rubble exhibit and the “diversity, respect, reconciliation” quote. Unable to find Robbie on the designated bench outside, I made my way down to the gift shop – worried I would find LOTS of interesting things (which I couldn’t buy because of the luggage weight restrictions). The only thing I should have bought was this in-color reproduction of the original ballot used for Mandela’s election – a long column of paper (18X6”) with dozens of candidate pictures, party insignia – each with a check box. I briefly took a walk in the bone-dry garden areas; unfortunately, Jo-burg seemed to be in more of a dire drought than Cape Town; the air/quality was also very poor, with surrounding grasslands all being burnt to promote renewal. I eventually found Robbie and we went through the Mandela building. Nearly all of this was familiar and seemed busier with tourists; this section used a lot more mixed presentations to convey Mandela’s history, including lots of art and videos. Outside the building is the famous wire art piece that, when viewed from a certain angle, produces a portrait of Mandela; there are at least a few of these located around the city/country.



Left to Right: (top) Hector Pieterse Museum, Mandela home – fire-bombing detail near entrance; (bottom) mine-tailing buttes all around the city, Soweto streets/distant cooling towers, Hector Pieterse Museum

From the Apartheid Museum, we continued to Soweto by way of the 2010 FNB stadium (no pictures), meant to resemble a calabash. Stopping in the empty parking lot, it felt like we were surrounded by these towering golden buttes – ALL of which were mine tailings that had just been piled everywhere during Jo-burg’s gold rush. Robbie said that there were lots of heavy metals (including uranium) in there still – with no sign of meaningful clean-up. From the stadium, we continued to Soweto – which seemed to be just beyond this pass between a couple towering mine-tailing buttes. En route, Robbie asked me what I thought Soweto would look like (I assume because he thought I believed it was all shanty-town). I said – well, I have seen enough pictures to know that it’s large, sprawling, and pretty well developed at this point... so I’m not expecting, like, a lot of mud-floor/tin-roof shacks. Although I never took a particularly good or comprehensive photo of Soweto, that statement is true. Soweto is South Africa’s largest and oldest township; founded in the 1930’s, it is about 80 square miles and home to 1.3 million people (nearly all black or colored). Unlike Alexandra (which is locked into a small area of Jo-burg proper), Soweto (which stands for SouthWest Township) is outside the city and has spread out a lot as it has grown, developed, and improved. Most townships began with assigned plots of land and 1-2 room/cinderblock houses built by the government (toilets outside); the majority of homes we passed in Soweto looked like this – but most had been built out/improved (e.g. adding more rooms, embellishing the fence/wall/gates... most homes had satellite dishes, and many had these solar-powered water heaters). Some people assume that visiting a township is “poverty pornography” (i.e. touring poor people’s homes/lives) but that was never the goal here; like most people who visit Soweto, the goal is to visit one of Mandela’s important homes and our first stop – the Hector Pieterse Museum (HPM). Indeed, after Mandela was imprisoned, one of the key events that reignited the fight against apartheid was the youth uprising in Soweto in 1976, largely in response to language mandates and education reduction. Hector Pieterse (age 12 at the time) was one of the first (of nearly 570 students) ultimately killed by police during these efforts; to this day, South Africa honors all youth killed during these events on June 16 – Youth Day.

As with the Apartheid Museum, Robbie gave me a short overview and then I was turned loose. HPM was smaller, used similar media/explanations, but - as Robbie warned me - several video/monitors weren't working anymore because, in his words, people had stolen equipment from this smaller facility. Outside the museum, multiple school groups were getting organized and Hector's sister (shown in the picture above) was on-site to welcome them. Although there were MANY street vendors selling very tempting things up and down the block around the museum, Robbie moved me quickly a few blocks away to the Mandela House Museum (near Desmond Tutu's house, which was not open). Mandela tours are given by local guides (Robbie said they were typically college students) and so I entered the small gated grounds and join a family of Australians led by a black Sowetan student. Amusingly, our guide asked us where we were from and when I said Oregon/United States, he said - ah, you have legalized... (and then he did an impression of a bong, complete with sound effects)... to which I said: yes, we are one of several states, and not the first. I learned later that Cape Town had just legalized pot, meaning there was going to be a national debate on the subject. Anyway - we were given a 15-minute tour, after which we could re-walk and photograph anything. Although this was an important home of Mandela, it was not his first in the Jo-burg area, and it was definitely not his last. The house bore evidence of fires/fire-bombing. Inside, there were four main rooms; the office contained a favorite leather chair and TONS of fascinating gifts from world leaders (you'd think this stuff would be in, like, a real museum!). The bedroom was furnished as well - but mostly with items belonging to the children.



Left to Right: Mandela's office/chair, bedroom, tourgroup, Sakhumzi main course buffet selections and dessert (pretty much all options)

After the tour, we headed half a block down the street to the bustling Sakhumzi buffet/restaurant (where we ran into several tourists from earlier in the day). Sakhumzi was buffet style. They had a great fresh salad area, a hot vegetable and starch area (starches included a polenta-like mealie/corn, and a slightly acrid sorghum), a hot meat area (lamb, poultry, beef... and a whole tray of braised chicken feet - which I did not try), and a dessert area (I tried nearly all selections - vanilla pudding, a British-y date pudding, ice cream and lime jell-o). I also had some kind of Sowetan beer, being that it was a hot day. On the street (as with many meals over the next several days), a variety of street performers (in this case - Zulu dancers wearing loin-clothes and furry gauntlets, and a men's choir) visited during lunch. Alas, I am TERRIBLE at taking pictures of people - so I do not have any good pictures of that. I should add here that I had no GI issues on this trip whatsoever; I did not hold back on eating buffet food, interesting meats (including game and biltong/air-dried beef), or uncooked fruit/salads - and I drank all tap water. Unfortunately, the same could NOT be said for 2 women on the pending guided trip... both sampled raw oysters in Cape Town and, not surprisingly, got sick. I should add that ALL toilets - and I mean ALL of them (airport, hotel, Soweto, everything) - were also clean, with plentiful TP (the same CANNOT be said of many places in Europe). After lunch, we returned to Sandton via a long driving route straight down the middle of Soweto, passing a number of noteworthy sites including: the Orlando Towers (alas, they have been repainted with advertising!), KFC (the most popular American fast food chain in South Africa), this HUGE Nike sports training facility, another HUGE mall, and the largest hospital in the world (with adjacent nursing apartments that were not inviting looking in the least). A few times, we did pass field-like shallows - and there were large clusters of basic plywood huts with tin roofs, and dirt floors - significant trash everywhere; Robbie said these were more recent settlements by refugees from Mozambique that were set up on the periphery of the original grid. But most of what we saw, honestly, were thriving neighborhoods and businesses. In addition to obvious restaurants and stores, there were also a lot of signs for home industries; indeed, when I asked Robbie about the 27% unemployment rate in South Africa, he countered strongly - claiming that 80% of said "unemployment" were under-the-tax-radar home businesses (e.g. the neighborhood handy-man, plumber, or hairdresser... or the family with the car who bought bulk groceries and sold them out of their house). Although I could believe some of these claims based on what I saw in Soweto, other townships did not seem as developed - with many (especially along the southern coast) dominated by plywood/tin roof/dirt floor shanty huts. Within the hour (at around 3:45), I was back at my hotel, cleaned up, and ready for a short nap in my now-too-hot room (the AC would NOT stay on and I was too sleepy to fuss with it). Later, I enjoyed skype-ing with the family and decided to do dine-in Indian food/butter chicken (TERRIBLE - despite being called a hotel special). As with my usual jetlag issues, my second night was worse than my first because I fell asleep fast early but then woke up around 1 and stupidly did not take any sleep aids - instead tossing and turning for probably 5 hours.

The next morning, I had to be all packed up because I was flying to Cape Town around 5 p.m. Unfortunately, today's "cradle of humankind" tour had been a moving target because I had been given changing information from Wilderness Travel (the rep for this trip changed 3 times after I signed up) about what to expect. Initially, I was told I'd be on a bus with a bigger group and the hotel would store my stuff while I was out. In the end, it was just me and a Kwathlano guide/driver and my luggage was locked in the car all day. Today, my guide/driver was a colored (South Africa's term for mixed) man named Herby and he was great - but it was no-doubt a different perspective than Robbie and I definitely heard more serious stories about government corruption (many of which reminded me of troubling issues at home - particularly efforts to privatize and business-infuse education and vocational training). Anyway - after loading up my luggage, we headed about 70 minutes northeast - aiming for Sterkfontein Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage site where some of the most important hominid artifacts (e.g. "little foot" and "Mrs. Ples") in the world were (and are still being) discovered - although "rediscovered" is more like it given that a fair number of artifacts were initially ignored or misclassified. Given aforementioned information gaps, I was initially under the impression we were only going to Maropeng (a nearby science center) and unclear whether we would physically enter/tour any actual caves. But thank god we started at Sterkfontein because they were, by far, the better attraction. Arriving at the caves around 11, I can't say I was too impressed at first glance. The facilities were very basic - a rectangular

metal/glass box with restrooms, a simple cafeteria, and a waiting area... with, of course, multiple school groups (at least two groups today were Muslim-Indian – one young/elementary-aged with no head-gear, and one older/middle-highschool with hijab or white caps; instructor garb was mixed – with one teacher wearing a full niqab/burka with all but her eyes covered).



Left to Right: Sterkfontein Visitor Center, Herby & I in hairnets/hardhats, high tech pre-cave museum, walk to entrance – sundial clock

After 20 minutes of waiting for a school group to clear the cave, our group of about 15 adult tourists were called forward, having been provided with disposable hairnets and reused hardhats for the 90 minute excursion. Our group (notably all white except for the guides) consisted of 12 Australian or French people (one subgroup appeared to contain several people with serious anthropology connections), and 3 Americans. We were initially taken into a large exhibition room that traced earth/life history through a series of see-through panels that you weaved around – progressing to the present. Here, we were given 20 minutes to take this in on our own... before our cave guide showed up and took over. Our guide – PRAISE JEBUS – was a FEMALE black woman who was GREAT. She knew all her science and readily and correctly used vocabulary about caves, geology, microbiology, and biochemistry during her presentations. Leaving the building, we headed out into the approaching 100° heat and made our way up the dry brushy hill behind the visitor center, stopping at various plaques (some about flora/fauna, some about cave discoveries, and one showing a sundial clock) for presentations or demonstrations (the clock worked!). We then arrived at the cave entrance and were warned it was going to be about 60° in the cave, and that we would be descending a couple hundred feet (and then climbing again to get out). The lighting in the cave was, IMO, VERY low and most people would probably benefit from having a headlamp because the stairs and footing are uneven and irregular. Although the first section down (and last up) are upright on fairly civil steps, the middle sections have some wild crawling, limbo-ing, and super-narrow ladder-climbing where you NEED your hard-hat because you are all over the place relative to the rock. We lost at least 3 people just on the descent (i.e. they understood instantly this trip was over their head and retreated); we almost lost 3 others in the middle of the trip because they were so physically shaky with the demands of the trip. Most folks with problems were significantly older and had poor balance and inappropriate footwear.



Left to Right: near entrance, low entry, dark passage, near exit, final staircase

We stopped for presentations at about 6 different cave locations en route. Being that I was carrying my lowest end camera (and suck at low-light photography, in general), I could not take anything decent in the caves. Although there were many impressive rooms, the majority of stalactites and –mites had been chipped off by European miners who removed them for their calcium (which was used in the gold-purification process at the Jo-burg mines). That said, one room had a big gray hanging formation that looked like an elephant trunk, another had a big lake filled with cyanobacteria (lord knows how they carry out photosynthesis – possibly using just PSI?), and several areas were active excavation sites with grids indicating work in progress. There were also many big shafts in the ceiling that lead to open holes in the ground above; some of these were places where animals or humans had fallen into the cave in the first place, becoming one of thousands of artifacts. In total, we spent about 70 minutes in the cave – although less than half of that involved moving. At the exit (a different spot than the entrance), we took some time to discuss and take pictures with the statue of Dr. Broom and Mrs. Ples (who is actually a young male). Our guide then gave us the option of following her directly back to the visitor center, or taking a self-guided longer walk around some above-ground excavation areas and viewpoints. Herby and I did the latter, even though – like I said – it was now about 100° out and there were a number of prominent snake warning signs (key examples throughout South Africa being cobras, black and green mambas). We also had some views out over the surrounding valley where you could actively see fields being burned to foster replenishment/growth (but resulting in the shitty air quality).

Back at the visitor center, we returned our hats, used the bustling restrooms (there were even more school groups now), and then drove about 15 minutes to Maropang. As stated, I remain unimpressed with this site and – in retrospect – wish I'd had the option to skip it and take an earlier flight to Cape Town. Being after 1, it was lunch time and so we ate at this very simple grill (I had a grilled chicken salad – ALL chicken in South Africa was delicious, for the record!) – watching what were 10 TIMES the number of school groups socializing intensely in the square. Like I said before, some groups looked less affluent (their uniforms were simple T shirts with slacks) and some looked more affluent (with fancy suit-like uniforms). After lunch, we headed to Maropang proper – a strange rounded pyramid structure covered with grass. After a few redirects, we found the official entrance down a long dark hallway; at the end,

several high-school students seemed to be screaming a lot. At first, I couldn't figure out why... but then it was clear: you entered the museum/activity area via water-ride. Basically, four people got into a round bumper-raft and were sent down this tube of sensory-based interpretations of earth history (indeed, there were prominent signs suggesting people with epilepsy or other brain/sensory disorders NOT to go on this ride). Basically, we floated through some kind of real-ice tunnel, then we were in some fake lava room (the order of these events did not seem logical); after disembarking, there was also a weird bridge through a rotating tube of star-like lights (seems like that should have been first). After that, there was a movie about the big bang and continent formation – followed by this gymnasium-sized room of manipulatives-based exhibits, most revolving around human evolution. Although there were clearly dozens of students socializing out in the food court square, there was only ONE group of 4 girls (probably the screamers) doing any science indoors, causing me to question how valuable this excursion was and what the students were taking away from the experience. I suspect Herby was a little disappointed in my lack of interest – but, as I told him, I was familiar with everything they were trying to convey. Plus, I was tired and I was sort of ready to be on my way to Cape Town.



Left to Right: best sign ever, longer walk/Sterkfontein excavation, Maropeng, weird/silly water-ride entrance

Indeed, by this point, it was after 2 and my flight was to take off at 5 – so it seemed like we needed to hit the road. In the end, we arrived at the airport at 4; I was feeling very stressed. When I asked Herby if there was anything I should know about finding South Africa Airway's ticket counter, he said no - it was obvious. Alas, I disagree with that statement because he neglected to tell me he'd dropped me off at the international area and I needed to go upstairs to the domestic area (and so I lost 10 minutes running around like a crazy person). By now, I felt SUPER-stressed but made it to the giant clusterfuck waiting area (which most domestic areas seem to be). But thankfully, I only had to wait 15 minutes before being loaded onto a bus, transported WAY out onto the tarmac, and boarding the plane. VERY thankfully (because I had no plan for dinner yet), business class served an amazing chicken dinner (did I mention how great the chicken was in South Africa?) – which I consumed heartily. My seat-mate, a Cape Town hospital administrator, was really interesting and made sure I found the right baggage area and my waiting guide/driver for this segment (Reza from Roots in Africa). Indeed, Cape Town – as I had learned a month prior – SURPASSED Jo-burg this year in terms of its overall murder and crime rate, with gang violence much more pronounced. That said, the scariest thing experienced in Cape Town that night was the fact that as we landed, someone on the ground north of the airport pointed a large green laser at the plane multiple times. On a map, the route between the airport (which sees its share of theft, gun violence, and gang activity) and my hotel passed by some sketchy areas - but it was all on a fast, mostly elevated highway and never felt particularly scary. My correct hotel (which we discovered after going to the wrong place first – a mixup on the Wilderness Travel paperwork) was near the swanky waterfront; I cannot say that anything impressed me that night because it was dark and I was tired. The Commodore hotel room was smaller and older than the place in Jo-burg (both are owned by the same parent company), the walls thin to the point I heard my neighbor coughing a LOT the first night (prior to putting earplugs in). Try as I might to reverse my jetlag, though, I was up around 2 and NEVER fully fell back to sleep.

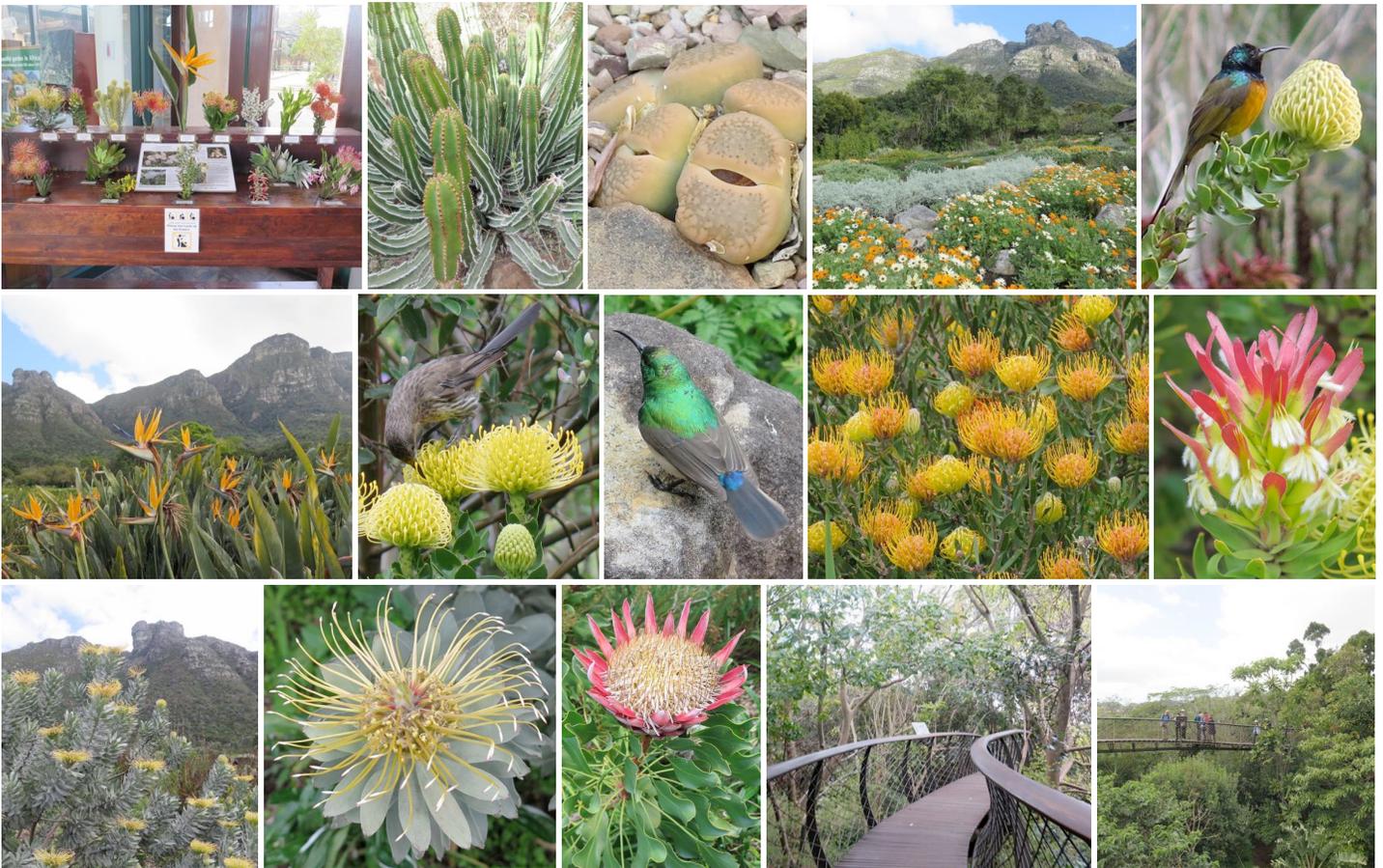


Left to Right: Cape Town map showing activities, Reza at Langa community center, hotel room, hotel view (holy shit!) next day!

September 20-21, 2018: Great But Whirlwind Cape Town Area Tour

The next morning, I was NOT in a functional mood... but then I opened my balcony curtains up and saw Table Mountain! Heading down to breakfast, I was SHOCKED to find a LINE just to be seated at 7:45. In the end, I got seated promptly because I agreed to sit with a big, mixed 8-person table (table-mates included a friendly pair of Irishmen on a soccer tour). Breakfasts at the Commodore were INSANE all 3 mornings I ate there - but the food options were quite good (although the tropical fruits were not as good as in Jo-burg). I enjoyed eggs, potatoes, canned peaches, and pastries – plus, a HEAVY couple of cups of very black tea this morning. Reza picked me up at 9 and I warned him I was a total zombie and wasn't sure I was up for a full day. For better or worse, Reza (a Cape Townian with Malay heritage) pretty much ignored me – hauling me out for a FULL day that even ran an hour late. But I wasn't going to argue because the weather and opportunity to be outside and walking were not to be missed – and finally got me back on a normal sleeping schedule. That said, we wasted 45 minutes right off the bat because he REALLY wanted to take the gondola up Table Mountain (20 minutes away by car); when we got there, the line was HUGE and we agreed that we would waste 2 more hours trying to do this and should instead attempt this earlier tomorrow. Instead, we headed to Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens (located below an extension of Table Mountain – the flanks visible in the background), the oldest and arguably finest gardens on the African continent. As

someone who has been to a lot of botanical gardens in interesting places all over the world, I have to say that Kirstenbosch was the BEST garden I've ever been to – and I wish I'd planned a whole day here. In the end, we blew 30 minutes at the start trying to join a guided walk. But that turned out to be a bust (the volunteer guide was too basic, too slow, and rude to Reza) and we walked away in the middle of her WAY-too-long desert hothouse presentation (most of which was just standing, reviewing photosynthesis). Despite my jetlag, Reza could tell I was going to outwalk him – so he rightfully gave me 90 minutes to zoom all over as many trails as I could – which, for me, meant focusing on the fynbos, protea, and boomslang tree bridge areas (all – UP the hill). I think I will just let the following montage speak for itself – sufficed to say it was gorgeous and there were a shocking number of pretty birds.



Kirstenbosch – emphasizing a few desert plants, main grounds, fynbos, proteo, and tree-bridge... with birds

After a fast trip to the bookstore – where I mostly took pictures of books and then found them later on amazon – I found Reza at the entrance and he announced we'd be doing the BIG Cape of Good Hope driving loop. In retrospect, this drive deserves more like 2 days minimum... but we did it. From Kirstenbosch, we headed more or less south to the Indian Ocean (I want to say we came out at Fish Hoek). We then drove just above the ocean through Simon's Town (where we would return around 3 for a very late lunch) and then stopped at Boulders Beach, home to a colony of African penguins (which resemble the burrowing Magellanic penguins found in Punta Arenas, Chile). Although the entrance to the beach was sort of in a neighborhood, there was a full-on visitor center/pay-booth... not to mention: impromptu gift shop and musical performers in the parking area (a block away). I spent MAYBE 20 minutes walking the short boardwalk – mostly because there was lots of people and you had to wait your turn in spots to get to the front for photos. The beach itself looked like something out of the Seychelles (really blue water, white sand, and HUGE granite boulders).



Left to Right: boardwalk to main beach, penguin & fynbos, main beach with homes above, cute penguins

After our short stop at Boulders Beach, we drove up onto the dramatic high plateau representing the main body of the Cape. Alas, though, there was no opportunity to stop and take pictures (well – there was... but I didn't want to interrupt Reza because I could tell we were going to run out of time if I asked to photograph everything I wanted to). The two things that were super dramatic up there were: First, the stark, horn-like land formations and crazy geology were JUST like the Falklands, which I had learned (during last year's

Falklands trip) broke off the African continent right here... no shit, that is obvious! Second, the profusion of fynbos/native yellow protea trees/shrubs – all in bloom – were AMAZING! But, alas, there are NO PICTURES (SAD FACE). We were on a mission to get to the upper lighthouse parking lot/trailhead. Thankfully, that involved a nice uphill climb through lots of weird succulent-y plants and grasses – which, in conjunction with the earlier walk at Kirstenbosch, cinched the end of my jetlag. Of course, there were also the legendary baboons that definitely will jump on/attack you if you are carrying ANY food (thankfully, Reza made sure we had nothing); we saw at least 3 full-on jump/lunge/attacks as we descended – and all the people attacked were carrying bags of food.



Left to Right: (top) looking back at horny cape from upper lighthouse parking lot, cool beach, baboons grazing; (bottom) fearless baboon, Cape of Good Hope, looking back down trail, looking back down at parking area – with grazing baboon

After hiking the upper trail (which can, for the record, be bypassed with some money for a funicular ride), we drove 20 minutes (including construction wait time... SOOOO many potholes being repaired!) to a lower viewpoint along the ocean. Near the parking lot, we spied some ostrich and large ungulates (I do not recall which kind). Although I'd read there were baboons down here too, we didn't see any... just shitloads of people lining up to take photos by the big sign. For me, though, the most impressive thing was the MASSIVE surf – something that would continue to impress me along the Indian Ocean side even more. Incidentally – the Cape of Good Hope is NOT the southernmost tip of Africa... it is the southwesternmost; that means that it is surrounded by the Atlantic (it does not split the Atlantic and Indian). The southernmost tip of Africa is farther to the east at Cape Agulhas (which we never visited). Given that we were now SUPER-hungry and it was already after 2, we made a fairly direct drive back to Simon's Town, where Reza did his best to speed up a lazy waterfront restaurant. Fortunately, the burgers were excellent (in general, South African burgers were the closest to American style I've had while traveling) and there was a very entertaining group of 3 singers (one with a shaker bottle doing percussion) doing a variety of American pop on the promenade. From Simon's Town, we took a different route back to Cape Town – this time approaching from Noordhoek and the Hout Bay side, which requires a toll-based (but VERY impressive) cliff-side drive called Chapman's Peak... under the 12 Apostles massif – which becomes Table Mountain. Although there were lots of pull-outs, we didn't stop for any of what would have been AMAZING photographs – the whole area reminiscent of a less developed Amalfi Coast. Near the final "pass" into Cape Town, we FINALLY pulled off at this overlook above Camps Bay, one of the most affluent and "beautiful people" areas... a GORGEOUS beach under the entirety of the 12 Apostles and Table Mountain's impressive south side. Unfortunately, we got stopped by a young man selling what he claimed were original paintings; he insisted on laying all his work out, one by one, on the ground for consideration. I kept saying no (because I'd seen other people selling identical stuff elsewhere – plus, I had no luggage space or interest) and finally just had to walk away uncomfortably. That said, this was – I think – the only time in South Africa where anyone felt remotely aggressive with salesmanship. Given the very late HUGE burger lunch and the fact that we didn't get back to the hotel until a little after 6, I polished off all my emergency oatmeal and snack bars and was FAST asleep by 9.



Left to Right: Cape of Good Hope – lower viewpoint, Simon's Town pier looking back on waterfront, Chapman's Peak road, Camps Bay

The next morning, I was down at breakfast by 7:15 (no lines – but still busy given the arrival of several large American tour groups) in preparation for my earlier meeting Reza at 8. Although I finally slept well and the Table Mountain gondola line was not insane, we didn't see much because the summit was enveloped in the famous "tablecloth" fog (which, of course, burned off fully by around 10, after

we left). There are actually 2 gondolas serving the summit – both are round and rotate as you go up the cable. At the summit, Reza gave me 45 minutes to take a brisk (and, by brisk, I mean cold and fast) walk across the fascinating terrain: super-old, weird rocks, lots of fynbos (protea and erica), and little groups of hyrax – some kind of rodent that has been shown to be highly related to elephants. Were I to visit Cape Town again, I would definitely want to hike one of the many trail options to the summit; routes include fairly straightforward tourists trails, a full-on scramble (visible from the gondola), and a long and adventurous route from Kirstenbosch up Skeleton Gorge (probably the most interesting to me, having seen parts of this whole area).



Left to Right: (top) gondola, foggy station, Camps Bay, summit, erica; (bottom) protea, fynbos, hyrax, aloe, parking area view

At 10, we headed back down. We had to be back at the waterfront by noon for our trip to Robben Island. Although an earlier itinerary had us doing a full school visit at the nearby Langa township, everything was downgraded to a superficial driving tour that emphasized the central downtown area (with drive-by's of the Castle of Good Hope, Company Gardens, Parliament and City Hall – which just unveiled a new statue of Mandela where he first spoke after coming out of prison in 1990), the Bo Kaap area (this is the colorful Muslim area - where Reza spent part of his life growing up), District 6 (a weird area that the government seized from non-whites, partly bulldozed, and then hasn't fully rebuilt post-apartheid). Throughout District 6 were weird meadows of flowers in the middle of just destruction. Reza showed me one such area and said that this is where he was born - but then the government moved his family and bulldozed the complex. We then drove to the Langa township (10 minutes down the highway towards the airport), founded in the 1920's and home to ~30,000 people (many displaced from District 6). Langa was – overall - more run-down than Soweto (at least the parts I was taken to). Nonetheless, there were HUGE tour-buses – each split into smaller groups of people (10-15) walking with local guides. In anticipation, many residents had their wares and HUGE BBQ set-ups out. Reza and I only visited a community center where kids are taught arts/crafts/dance and given opportunities to sell things; I bought a diorama picture, a “garbage-to-art” piece showing various township buildings and emphasizing the pre-school. Reza openly said he wouldn't walk here with just me without a local guide – and so we did a short driving tour, definitely passing through some of the more sketchy areas (indeed, Reza turned around at a few spots and said that was as far as he was comfortable with). While there were some large, well-constructed government apartment buildings, there were also many Soweto-like cinder-block homes... but there were also some really poor buildings basically made of random wood and metal scraps.



Left to Right: Bo Kaap, new Mandela statue at City Hall, Reza's razed birthplace in District 6, waterfront music and DELISH pad thai

We headed down to the Victor & Alfred waterfront area, an embarrassment of excessive wealth (IMO). Although I heard there were some good public art museums, most things felt like a big mall/food-court with a strong emphasis on international franchises. While we ate excellent take-out Thai, the LONGEST lines were at KFC (like I said before: the most popular American food import in South Africa). After lunch, we made our way 5 minutes to the Robben Island ferry/tour facility. It should be no surprise that I had high hopes for Robben Island. But I am going to say upfront that the company managing the tour process did not do a good job. First, we were put through long cattle-lines prior to getting on the ferry (i.e. at times, we waited forever with no clear indication of what was going on). The ferry was great but the sea was shockingly huge (10 foot swells minimum - all perpendicular to the ship) to the point that all later ferries were canceled (i.e. we were the last ship across for the day). There were two ferries and we got on the insanely fast one both times;

even Reza remarked that the ride over usually took 40 minutes – but our driver managed 20 minutes flat. On the other side, they split the two boats into 5 buses. Initially, we accidentally boarded the “French” bus – but solved that pretty quickly and then wound up on the “African” bus (70% black Africans representing 6 different countries; I was the only person from the US).



Left to Right: (top) Robben ferry, leper cemetery, prison quarry stone pile; (bottom) snack/rest stop with penguins, flowers, prison

Our bus guide, who narrated our one-hour tour using a microphone, was super-personable... but the bus was crammed full and it was hard to take any photos. I did learn that the island used to be a leper colony before becoming a general prison, and then a political prison. We took a 15-minute stop at a rest/snack shack. Here, there were more penguins, flowers, and a great view of the city. When we came to the prison area, we were supposed to get an original prisoner as our final guide (i.e. one prisoner guide per busload)... but then another bus dumped and they were out of guides - so we got combined into this GIANT clusterfuck. Making matters worse, the prisoner guide seemed tired and uninspiring – although I’m sure it didn’t help that it was the end of the day and he got clusterfucked. We were taken through at least four building complexes before we came to the solitary cell section where Mandela spent most of sentence. Had Reza not been with me, I would have had zero idea where Mandela’s cell was because the prisoner guide was making no effort to lead and the group was completely spread out. Many of the buildings had interesting history stuff to read but we were given no time to read anything. Ultimately, this experience is SUCH a disservice to Mandela and the people who have one shot to visit this place. Like I said, our bus represented people from all over Africa – many dressed in what looked like their Sunday best for this big occasion. It was an honor to be with them – but it was sad that the tour didn’t respect the significance of what this place means. I DID appreciate that the prisoner guide made one final effort to stand by the exit and shake everyone’s hand as he/she left the prison complex for the dock. As he shook my hand, he asked where I came from and I said the US – to which he smiled heartily and said: Obama-land... it will always be Obama-land to me. The ferry ride back was even more insane. We had waves that went over the entire front of the boat. I remarked to Reza: the thing about Robben Island that I will remember the most is the crazy ferry ride.



Left to Right: former prison guide, group cells, Mandela/solitary block and cell

Having set out an hour earlier this morning, we hoped to be back by 4... but arrived late again (5:30); needless to say, Reza earned a great big tip given his dedication level. Since last night’s good sleep followed more exercise yesterday, I made a valiant effort to get in a good workout at the hotel fitness center before ordering AMAZING room service (little quiches, salad and a panna cotta with great fruit... way better than the Jo-burg Indian dinner!). I also FINALLY had a moment to do some laundry in the sink – before packing up in earnest... because tomorrow was finally the start of the group trip!

September 22-24, 2018: The Garden Route - Not as Knysna as It Sounds... OR Am I in the Bizarro Netherlands?

Given an 8:30 group meeting time, I was up at 7:15 (no line for breakfast), having mostly packed the night before. Within 10 minutes, I met another couple from our group, followed by our guide (a white South African). Four more group members were out in the mini-van. Hitting the road around 9 (the guide also driving), the stated itinerary was to drive 5 hours to Knysna (pronounced Niz-na, long i and silent k), lunching en route at a Dutch/Boer farm, and taking a 1-2 hour hike by the bay near the hotel (the latter never happened). I had moderately high expectations for the Garden Route, which is the ocean-side region starting at Mossel Bay and ending at Storms River

(all of which we drove). Having now seen it, I am less enthusiastic about recommending it to others. I had HOPED it would offer more dayhiking but, based on my experience and research (travel guides and on-line sources), my impression is that the route is more about driving touring/views, and there are few substantial dayhikes. That said, there are a few challenging multi-day coastal hikes IF you are lucky enough to get a permit (which our guide suggested was HARD). Although the Indian Ocean was beautiful and I did enjoy the short hikes we did, I can't say – overall – that this trip segment was terrifically special against other international experiences.



Left to Right: mountains near Cape Town, Houw Hoek Pass farm store – fynbos bouquets, dried fruit, typical farm, farm, farm view

Anyway – we set off in a sort of cramped mini-van, the same style used by some Africans for informal transport because there are limited buses or cab services connecting many parts of South Africa, particularly into the townships. Consequently, wherever we went, locals walking along the highways stopped and waved money at us – hoping we would pick them up and drive them somewhere. I personally found this constant occurrence very sad because it reflected such an obvious inequity in opportunity. After driving for an hour, we enjoyed a coffee/bathroom break at Houw Hoek Pass (specifically – at this farm store). After driving another 2 hours (virtually all rolling farmlands – some with big modern windmills or yellow rapeseed), we did a slow stop/drive through super-Dutch Swellendam (admiring the old, thatched-roof Cape Dutch buildings) while our guide called in lunch orders. About 30 minutes later, we left the highway, headed down a series of dirt roads, and arrived at our lunch spot: a guest farm that was owned by a family with Dutch/Boer heritage. Historically crop- or ostrich-based, the owners said most of their revenue these days came from the guest/B&B side of things. Although the farm was beautiful and seemed tranquil, I could not help but ponder all the ugly stories about South Africa's farm murder rate, land redistribution, and Trump/Fox news' summer pot-stirring as I sat in the sun sipping my Pinotage and surveying the endless landscape. And it didn't help that a racist art piece in the dining area was a woodcarving of a black servant presenting a tray (notably, where our kale salads were placed). But the meal was delicious – I chose chicken pot pie, potatoes, and ice cream. Others tried the local curry called bobotie, and ostrich steaks, or burgers. I did sample a bite of ostrich steak and it was GREAT.



Left to Right: (top) Swellendam, rapeseed & mountains, Dutch farm/B&B; (bottom) plantation art, lunch, BBQ, farm view

As should be obvious from the map, most of the drive to Knysna was inland but we hit the coast around 4 at Mossel Bay (apparently, the only place where natural gas has been discovered in South Africa) - and then it was just one coastal town after another (shanty townships always on the outskirts), all interspersed with thick native plant jungle/forest. From Mossel, there was still over an hour to go

to Knysna. About 20 minutes before our hotel, the guide pointed to a spot across a large estuary, indicating that that was the former hotel (it burnt to the ground last year in one of MANY local forest fires). Sadly, we saw HUGE evidence of fires and – at this writing (November 2018), MASSIVE areas around Mossel/George are on fire. Officially, our hotel (St. James of Knysna) was 10 minutes from the west end of Knysna (when we stayed there, it seemed to be changing hands/just sold). Surrounded by high, thick compound walls, the hotel felt old-school plantation – the rooms huge (bedroom, living room, bathroom, patio), but the furnishings dated/old. Unlike everyone else in my group, my room was on the ground floor and there were substantial bars on all the windows – which I found disconcerting. Also as you came through the compound gate, there was a big sign that warned that the alarm would trigger an armed response (indeed, we were passed by an ADT truck labeled “armed responders” at some point). As I was checking in, I also noticed the main office ran, like, 20 different security cameras that monitored spots all over the grounds.



Left to Right: Mossel Bay road, St. James/Knysna hotel and dock/bay, scary security stuff at hotel, my sitting room

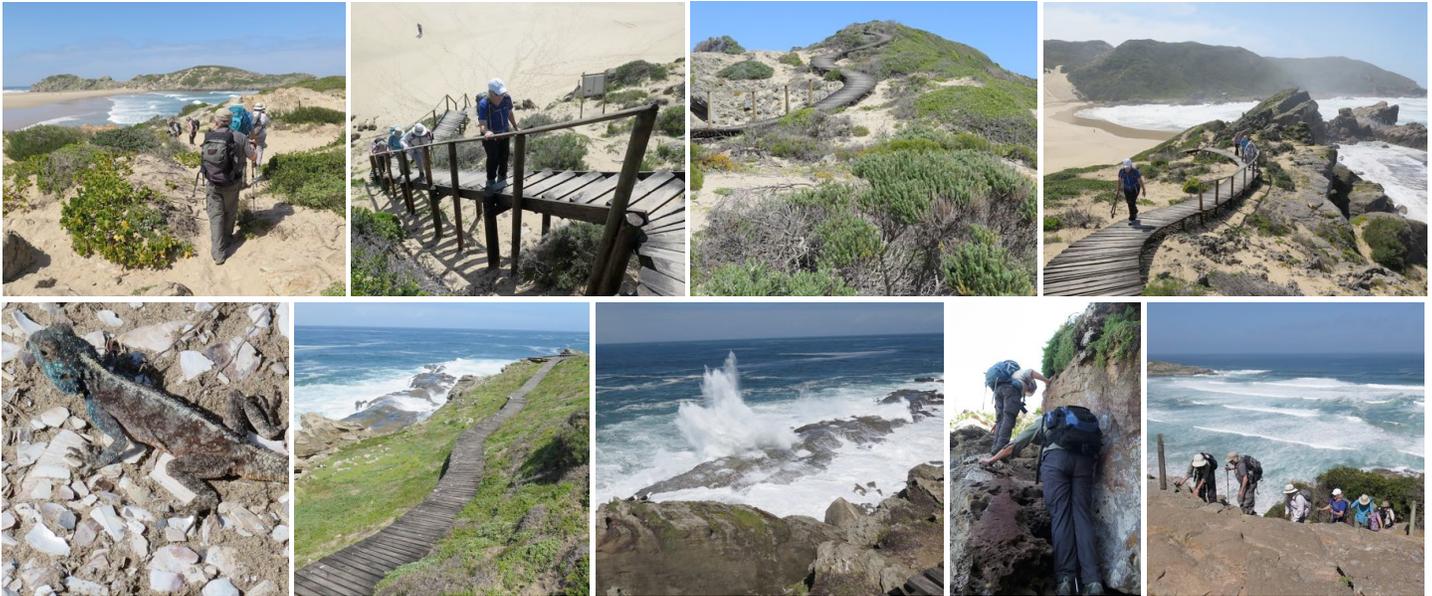
It was already 6:30 when we arrived so there was no time for the planned hike. Making matters worse, the hotel recently ended its dining service, meaning we had to drive into town for dinner. Twenty minutes of silly pre-dinner drinks set dinner back even later. In the end, we drove 15 minutes to a smallish main street that looked like any US suburb. While the food was good (I did a veggie platter with falafel), there was some LOUD night-club upstairs... and, of course, we didn't get back until after 10. Adding to my disquietude, my safe didn't work when I returned (I had locked my things inside before leaving only to find everything off when I came back). The hotel owner thought the battery was dead and said he'd send someone tomorrow to look into it. The next morning, we were up for an 8 a.m. buffet breakfast (the earliest they served it, which frustrated some group members because it contributed to unnecessarily LONG days). But the breakfast was good – particularly the cinnamon crepes. Given no operational safe, I packed all my valuables into my large purse and handed that over to the front desk while I was out. We then headed an hour east to Plettenburg Bay (another suburban coastal town) and wound up at Robberg Nature Reserve and Marine Protected Area. The trailhead/parking area was a madhouse (nearly all white people/tourists – most, ironically, driving white cars). Our guide selected the medium option, which was about 3 hours of hiking a double-loop on the peninsula shown below. The first part of the hike was along the north side of the peninsula (side-hill/descending through brushy fynbos) to this rocky pinch-off point pass; from there, the trail ran along the south side of the peninsula much closer to the ocean and was sometimes scrambly – as in: stepping up and over rough and uneven rocks. This trip was a level 2+ trip (the easiest level I've ever done) but some party members felt this hike (and others) was harder than their abilities/expectations.



Left to Right: (top) Robberg map (our route in pink), local marine conservation poster, hyrax, amazing waves, erica (another unique fynbos); (bottom) parking lot cliff view, Plettenburg Bay, north side peninsula/pinch-off point, scrambling south side of peninsula

After scrambling the rocky coastline, we arrived at a big sandy beach (the sub-peninsula on the map) and then did a little boardwalk loop around that. Unfortunately, a few party members balked at the stair-climb up to the boardwalked peninsula. It eventually came out that TWO party members (both ate raw oysters in Cape Town 48 hours before) were sick - one vomited and had to back off the afternoon hike, and the other completed both hikes but shut down during dinner. From the smaller peninsula, the rocks and waves were amazing. On the return hike, we backtracked to the pinch-off point and then took this super-scrambly (like full-on climbing up a few blocky sections) route along the south side back to the parking lot. If some folks were a little unhappy with the low-rock scrambling,

this blocky climb was not satisfactory in the least – and probably caused a few people to lose confidence with future hikes. It was fine for me – but I would say we were above a level 2 hike (as per what I knew about other Wilderness Travel trips).



Left to Right: (top) beach, stairs up small peninsula, boardwalk; (bottom) lizard, boardwalk, views, scrambling south to parking lot

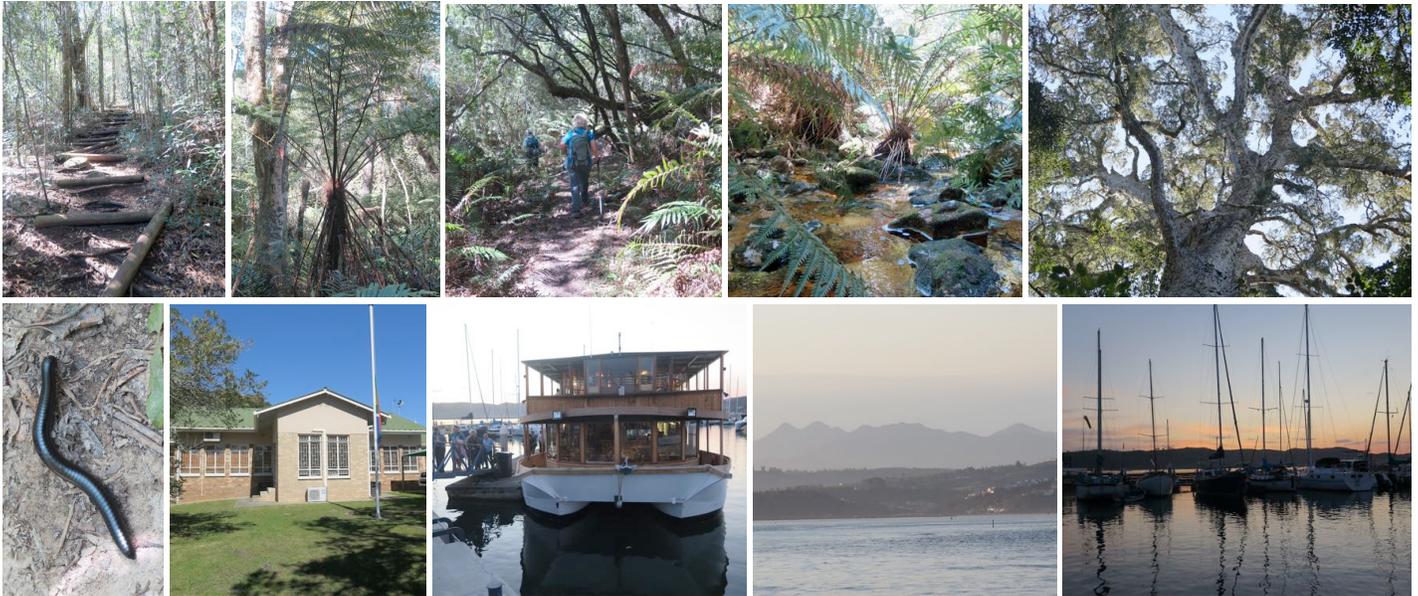
After this hike, we agreed to save time via a grocery store lunch at Woolworths (hard to believe these exist!). The store reminded me of Holland's Albert Hygiene, but their "fast food" options seemed more limited and less healthy. I went with a hot pastry-wrapped sausage, chutney puffed corn snacks, and a mango-passion smoothie. Alas, we ate in a parking lot, sitting on the curb (admittedly – a good looking KFC called to me across the way... it looked more delicious than my crazy sausage). So - the afternoon hike was sort of weird. We drove another hour to this rocky beach near the mouth of Storms River in Tsitsikamma National Park (another madhouse). From the parking area, we hiked 40 minutes to the mouth of the Storms River/gorge – nearly all via boardwalk in the thick forest along the coast. At the mouth, they have built three long suspension bridges: over the mouth/gorge, and then along this spectacular rocky edge with huge waves coming in. Although it was interesting, I preferred the morning hike and I thought this one seemed less natural. And speaking of less natural: on the way by to Knysna, we stopped at the world's tallest bungee into Tsitsikamma Gorge, watching 3 people jump. I was not impressed. Tonight's dinner was worse than Knysna night one for several reasons: we had less time to get ready, we drove farther to the downtown marina, the restaurant was too LOUD and CROWDED, the food was mediocre, and the service was TERRIBLE. We were down two thanks to the Cape Town oyster incident... which reminds me: at no point did we do the itinerary-stated oyster-tasting trip in Knysna (either today or tomorrow).



Left to Right: Woolworths grocery, Storms River mouth/gorge with main bridge; two suspension bridges along side of mouth

The next day, we drove 45 minutes up/inland from Knysna – turning left off the highway through the township (which looked more like Langa) – the pavement ending, and turning into bumpy dirt road. After driving through a LOT of tree plantations (non-native pines, the biggest industry in the area), we arrived in native "Afromountain forest" (1600 feet up). I am not sure if where we visited (Diepwallle) was a national park or a national forest – but there was a surprising amount of bureaucracy to get in. We then hiked 3.5 VERY HOT hours in thick forest - about 5 miles (the so-called "Elephant Trail"). Key scenery included tree ferns, some of the largest remaining yellowwood, a tannin-rich creek, and a giant millipede. There may be elephants up there (hence the trail name), and a tree-snake called a boomslang... but we didn't see either. There were also lots of bird sounds - but no good sightings. We lost a couple people at the yellowwood (which was close to a dirt road, but still 30 minutes from the parking area); they had enough hiking and waited for the rest of us to hike back to the van (half on trail, half on road) and pick them up. Since we didn't regroup until 1:30, we ate at the sad park grill: really basic grilled cheese/ham sandwiches and undercooked French fries. We returned to the hotel around 3, giving us an hour to clean up and start packing... because we had a 4:30 sunset cruise around the big lagoon before dinner. Alas, the sunset cruise was one of my least favorite activities on this whole trip: 200 people packed onto a double-decker ship, most seating inside – where, of course, the thing that was being pushed was drinks, drinks, drinks. And you could not avoid the guy with the microphone. I cannot say that there were any excellent or interesting views because everything was fully developed with housing or hotels, and we didn't sail very far. After the cruise, we headed a short distance to an island that felt like a strip-mall. Here, our restaurant was quieter, faster, and

offered better food (I devoured a delicious salad, a bowl of spaghetti with meaty red sauce, and a fantastic pannacotta dessert). That we were back at the hotel 30 minutes earlier than last night was a big relief given tomorrow's long and stressful transition day.



Left to Right: (top) Elephant Walk trail, tree fern, more trail, tannin-filled creek, yellowwood/big tree; (bottom) our only good animal sighting, park building, sunset cruise bar ship, mountains behind Kynsna, harbor sunset

September 25-27, 2018: Garden Route to Northern Drakensberg via Durban

Following another 8 a.m. breakfast, we retraced our steps back one hour to George – the closest town with an airport. Thankfully too, I had the sense to drink a smoothie during our hour wait before take-off because we never had real lunch. During the 2-hour flight to Durban (in the heart of Zulu-land – KwaZulu-Natal province), we were given a small airplane sandwich (cheese or ham with butter). In Durban, we loaded onto a new mini-van with a local white driver who quickly became known as Nascar because he was insane. For the next 4 hours, we were subjected to multiple kinds of unsafe driving: too fast, following too closely, dangerous passing, and half a dozen times manipulating his cell phone (even after group members called him out and asked him to stop). Thankfully, people reported the situation to Wilderness Travel and we didn't see Nascar again (i.e. a different/safer driver picked us up after our 3 days in the Drakensberg). En route, we passed the place along the highway where Nelson Mandela was arrested while driving between Durban and Jo-burg – resulting in his longest imprisonment on Robben Island. Our only stop during our 4-hour ride from hell was around 3 p.m. at a gas station/bakery. Alas, there is no easy way into the Drakensberg.



Left to Right: puddle-jumper at George, individual thatch-roof cabin, sitting room/fireplace, sunset over Drakensberg/Lesotho

Our Drakensberg trip was entirely focused on the northern region encompassing Royal Natal National Park (a.k.a. uKhahlamba, the Zulu name for the Drakensberg: translating to "barrier of spears pointing up"). From our hotel (Montusi Mountain Lodge), we could see the Lesotho border on the rugged skyline escarpment to the west – less than 20 miles away. The main feature of this area is the Amphitheatre, which we hiked on our last day here. It is my understanding that there are at least 2 other ways into the Drakensberg: the southern and the central (both to the south). Both offer comparable lodges, great hiking, the opportunity to visit Zulu villages (some with traditional dance), and driving routes high into Lesotho on the top of the plateau (which we didn't do/have). We arrived – many of us stressed and cranky - at the lodge around 5. The sight of our individual cabins and the full view of the sunset over the Drakensberg largely erased negative feelings about the previous 5 hours. It finally felt like we were looking at a natural view of the magnificent African landscape in a more pristine and primordial state. All we needed was a big storm and it would have time to turn on Toto or Enya. Thankfully, dinner was on-site, on time, and wrapped up earlier. The hotel employed a high-end chef and all meals were excellent – with us selecting one option from three dinner courses, each with three options.

The next morning, after an outstanding breakfast, the morning hike began with some confusion/delays... but eventually we met Ndu, a local guide from the Zulu village we visited later in the day. He was a quiet but excellent guide - although he did ask what we thought of Trump and whether/when American were going to vote him out. Everyone hiked about a mile/200 feet up to this grotto/overhang with San bushman cave art (the San were driven out of South Africa by the Zulu and now only reside in Botswana). Ndu pulled out tea and granola cakes for us, which was nice but excessive. Our main guide gave us the choice of continuing up another 600 feet to the

summit of this grassy butte called Mt. Montusi but only 3 of us were interested (including me), with Ndu taking us up. Although it was hot, the winds were Patagonia-like and the pace was good. We made it up in 40 minutes - although one person stopped 10 minutes from the top because of a couple blocky areas that required hands-on scrambling/balance in the wind. I didn't include any climbing shots because it was not the most earth-shattering hike/summit – other than to say it was in the foothills of the Drakensberg. We got down by 11 - an hour before the others finished some long flat walk around the vast hotel grounds. So I got in a good shower, edited pictures, and did laundry. I can't say lunch at the lodge was as satisfying as other meals – although I ordered/finished a biltong salad (biltong being the local air-dried beef jerky) that had a lot of greenery (I wasn't wowed by the meat – I found it rather bland).



Left to Right: (top) bottlebrush, morning views, Ndu, climbing, antelope; (bottom) grotto, San art – animals and hikers, Mt. Montusi

After lunch, we headed out in a local mini-bus (NO AC – easily upper 80's) to visit the nearest Zulu village (the closest on Googlemap that I could find was Mazizini, but I swear they called it Amazizi) with a local female Zulu guide (who also worked as a waitress at the lodge). Setting out, activities were to include visiting a local arts/crafts place, a school, an artist, and the guide's home where her mother (Beauty) was a traditional healer. The village was a 20-minute drive away. In general, the village (which is not, politically, a township - but still poor... and lots of free-roaming livestock), seemed more pleasant. The space/plots of land were bigger and there were more cinderblock homes with real roofs. We stopped first at the arts/crafts place and I bought some woven trays (that seems to be the thing here, hand-made using local sweetgrass). Just after I sat down in the van (a few others still returning), I - and others in the van - heard this bloodcurdling screaming. Many of us instantly assumed there must be a mamba or cobra out there. What we soon figured out, however, was that one of our group members got her hand slammed in the door while grabbing the car frame to hoist herself up (i.e. the main guide shut his door on her hand, not noticing she was holding on). After a lot of drama and an aborted trip to the tiny village clinic, we returned to the lodge – under the impression the main guide was going to take her to a bigger clinic in the closest real town (Bergville – 40 minutes away). Four of us then returned to the village with the local guide, most of us assuming this would be a trip-ending injury given everything witnessed thus far.

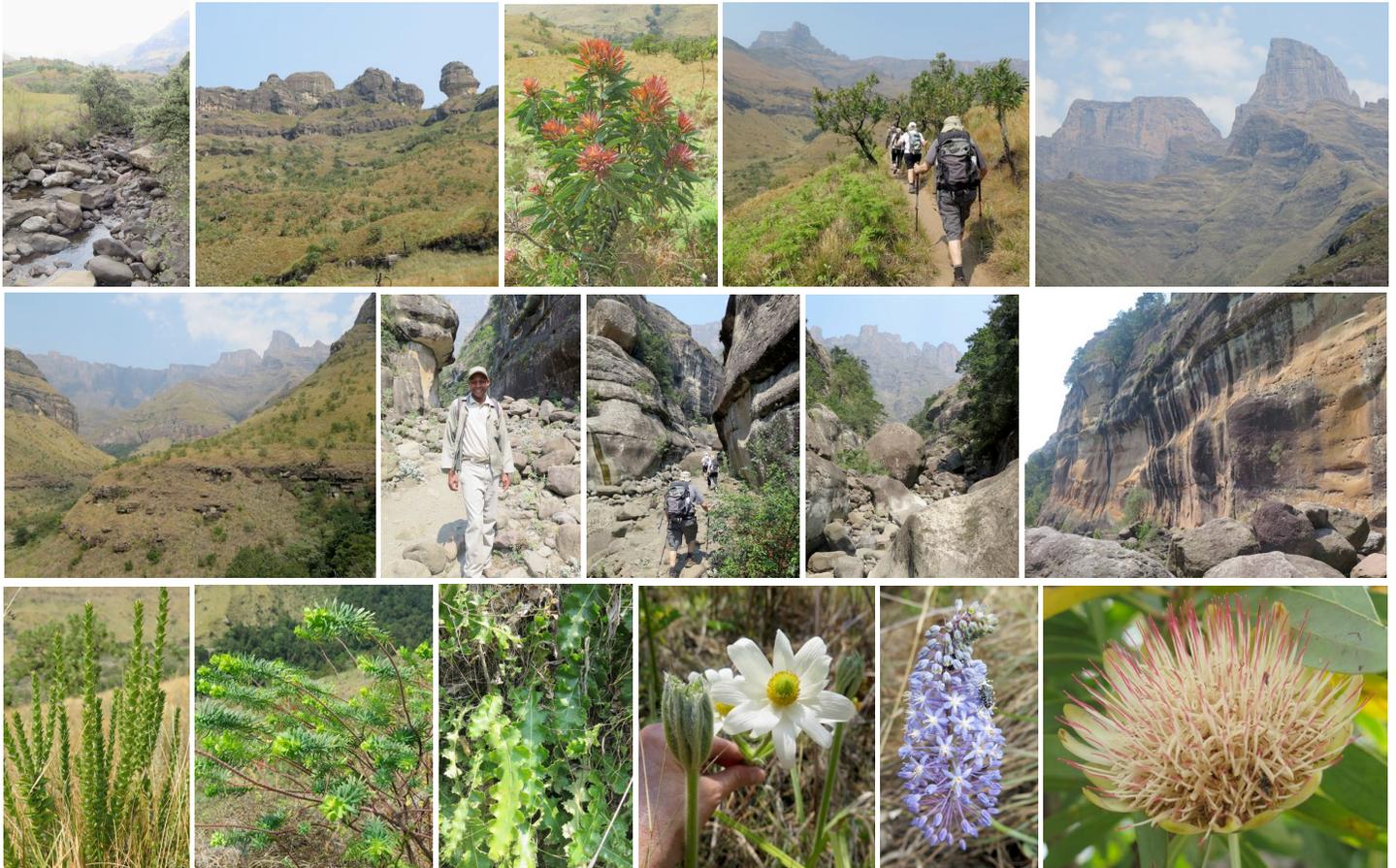


Left to Right: Zulu Village/Amphitheatre in back, fish helicopter, healer/Beauty, white ladies & family compound/round ancestor hut

Given the time lost, we did miss the opportunity to visit the school – which was disappointing. The artist (Sibusiso Mbhele) turned out to be this eccentric man building an airplane-inspired house using scrap metal (later, I learned he calls it a “fish helicopter” – ah, the things that are lost in translation!). If you Google his name, you will find interesting books about him. We did climb up a rickety ladder into the fish helicopter... it was a hoarding paradise, and scary because it felt like the floor could break through at any moment. A few blocks away, the local guide's family lived on a big plot of land with at least 8 buildings that 14 people shared. There were also animal pens for cows and goats. The healer (mother/Beauty) was located in the family's round hut (usually, round huts in Zulu villages are built to honor ancestors). After we gathered around (being all women, we had to sit on the left side of the hut), she did a short ceremony with some singing and dancing. She tried to get the white ladies involved but probably wasn't impressed with us - particularly because, by this point, the whole family knew about the wailing white lady with the van-smashed hand. Not a good day for white ladies. Even so, wherever we drove in the village, kids chased up to the mini-van yelling happily (sawubona umlungu); we asked the local guide what they were saying – and she said, amusingly matter-of-factly, “hello white people.” Back at the lodge, we were surprised to find everyone

there (i.e. no effort had been made to visit the clinic); it seemed (or it was decided by tourist doctors on site) that the big accident was merely a superficial skin wound. Hmmmm. Later that night, I enjoyed a memorably good dinner that included kudu bobotie in a mealie bowl (mealie = corn – in this case, light cornmeal dough shaped into a shallow bowl and fried). My impression of bobotie is that it is a British hybrid that seems a little like shepherd's pie but the ground meat is in a light curry sauce, covered with a custardy layer on top.

The next day, we did our biggest hike of the trip - the Tugela Gorge to Drakensburg Amphitheater (9 miles, 1500 feet up/down). Of course, there had been some question about whether we had enough guide-power and/or able-bodied clients to do it. Consequently, I did inquire about hiring my own private guide via the lodge (mostly because the lodge had lots of flashy brochures about this activity). In the end, our main guide hired another local Zulu guide (Sizwe) to manage the faster people (there were 4 of us) so we could do the full hike. While we were out, he guided 2 other clients on a shorter hike only part-way up towards the Amphitheatre (alas - 1 person stayed at the lodge, glued to the Kavanaugh hearings). From the lodge, we boarded the same mini-bus as yesterday and drove back to the village – but then continued about 20 minutes beyond to the Royal Natal National Park/uKhahlamba visitor center. Here, we picked up Sizwe, and then continued 10 minutes to the trailhead. It was hard to know what to expect in terms of park/trail busy-ness given that it was a nice but warm day; when we arrived, there were less than 5 cars at the trailhead - and we saw MAYBE 20 people total. In general, it seemed like this was not the most popular time to hike this route – perhaps because Tugela Falls (the source for the river we followed up) was dry, and perhaps because the more sexy thing people did was some scary ladder climb to the top of the Amphitheatre near the falls... but the trailhead for that was, like, 3 hours away and driving/hiking that thing would have taken 12+ hours to/from our lodge. Overall, I was satisfied with today's hike because it reminded me of a combination of the northern Grand Canyon, Utah, Patagonia (specifically – the hike into Cerro Torre), and the Tetons - with ALL these weird plants all the way.



Left to Right: (top) Tugela River, ridgeline of weird rocks, protea, first shelf, big toothy peaks; (middle) shelf-y trail, Sizwe and gorge, tiger wall near lunch; (bottom) weird plants – including euphorbia, GINORMOUS anemone, purple enema flower, local protea.

From the trailhead, Sizwe and the fast 4 headed up – the goal being to hike for just over 2 hours to the gorge, enjoy lunch, and return. The first part of the trail was in deciduous forest, the path rocky and undulating because it was along the almost dry Tugela River. We then crossed a bridge over the river and climbed up through golden meadows to reach what was a shelf a few hundred feet above the river/valley below. We then meandered in and out of draws along this shelf – always towards the Amphitheatre. Sometimes (especially in the draws), we entered these thick, deciduous forest sections that provided great relief from the sun/heat; sometimes, the trail undulated... but mostly it was surprisingly level. As we headed towards the Amphitheatre, we became level with the river/valley (because we were flat, and the river/valley was inclined up). At the Tugela Gorge, everything turned into Utah/Grand Canyon: HUGE, sometimes colorful walls and MASSIVE granite boulders. We did some mild boulder/rock-hopping for about 15 minutes; at some point, a weird ladder-y trail headed up the right side but the guide said that was too dangerous and it was time to turn around (of course, this older Swedish couple, the only people we saw on the way up, were clambering up there as we stopped). Given that it was only noon, I'm not going to lie and say I didn't want to go up there a little. But the bouldering/rock-hopping was tricky for some and I was fundamentally more interested in getting back early, relaxing, and packing up for tomorrow's haul to Greater Kruger. Although I have tried to find information/images of the "real end" of this hike (i.e. what lay beyond), I have come up empty. We then found a shady spot

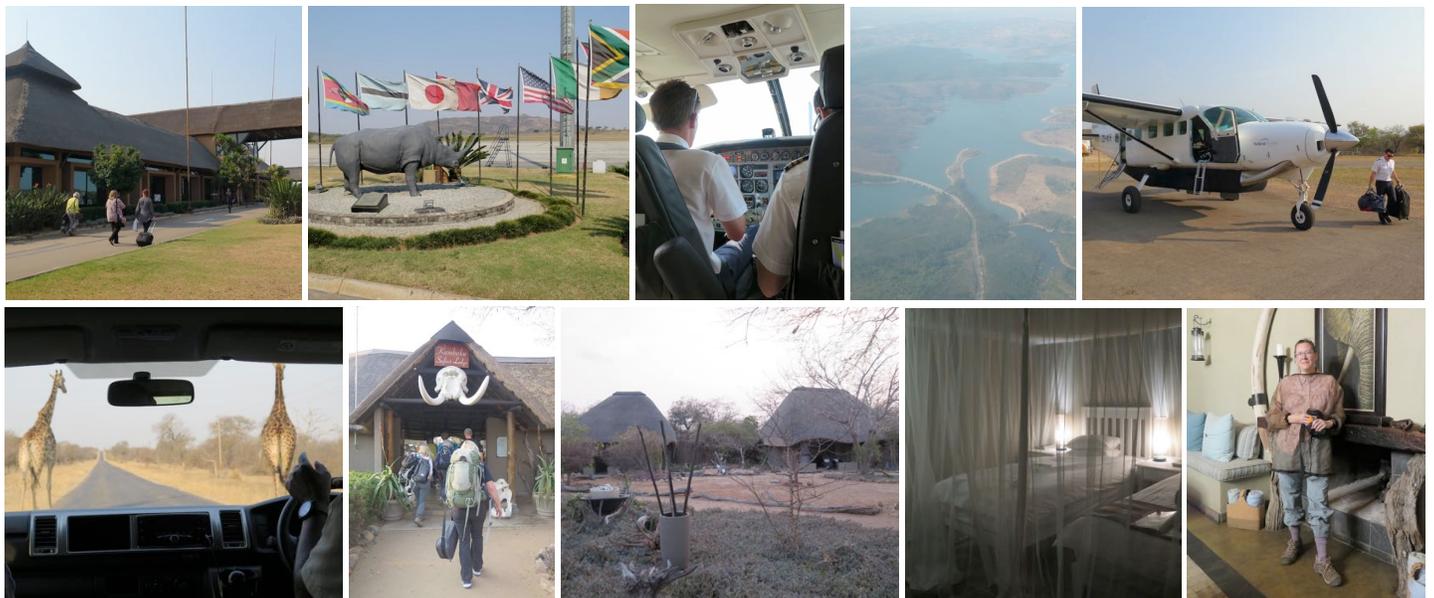
and enjoyed a lovely hotel-provided lunch of sandwiches, cookies, and fruit. The hike out took us 15 minutes less time. En route, I was more careful to photograph the many weird plants I had tried to memorize while hiking up. My greatest find (for Bryan) was the endangered giant anemone (I found 2 colonies of them – one lively, and one drying out). Sizwe said that the Zulu's fed them to strengthen mothers (humans and cows) after giving birth – hence, the endangered part. Sizwe showed us several other medicinally valuable plants – the most memorable of which were the purple lily-looking things... the roots were ground up and used in enemas. The local protea were OK but it was hard to find the flowers – and they were not as lovely as the varieties in Cape Town. Thankfully, it didn't feel much hotter hiking out – mostly because these large clouds (some very dark) had formed above the Amphitheatre and were breaking off and covering the sun's direct beams upon us. Indeed, there was audible thunder the last 30 minutes and we even got a light sprinkle at the trailhead (we had to wait 30 minutes for the bus; they returned the short hikers to the lodge and were en route back when we called). I am pleased to say we did the hike in 5 hours and 10 minutes, including 25 minutes for lunch. After returning to the lodge around 3:30, we had plenty of time to clean and pack up in preparation for tomorrow's big travel day to Greater Kruger.



Left to Right: on the hike out – bottlebrush and river/valley, protea & helmet ridge from middle shelf, last shelf views – thunderheads!

September 28-30, 2018: Drakensberg back to Durban to Greater Kruger/Timbavati Reserve

The next morning, we were up and eating by 8 – hitting the road shortly thereafter. Thankfully, our driver was safe and friendly, most of the drive easy and smooth. Only the final 5 miles (corresponding to 11:30-ish) were snarled with a seriously bad traffic jam. Arriving at the impressive King Shaka Zulu airport around 12:15 (our flight scheduled to board at 1:45), we quickly checked in. After our last big travel/flight day (George to Durban), several of us were concerned about the lunch situation and insisted we get a real meal prior to take-off. This caused a somewhat uncomfortable situation – with our group causing a few other orders to be delayed - followed by a rushed face-stuffing in a moderately crowded café. But thank god we insisted – because there was no food on the flight, there was no time in Hoodspruit, and there were no other opportunities for food until almost 7:30 that night at the safari lodge. But I digress: after our fast lunch, we were immediately whisked out onto the tarmac where we boarded our 40-seater jet – and took off for Hoodspruit, an hour away to the northeast (Jo-berg an hour away to the northwest).

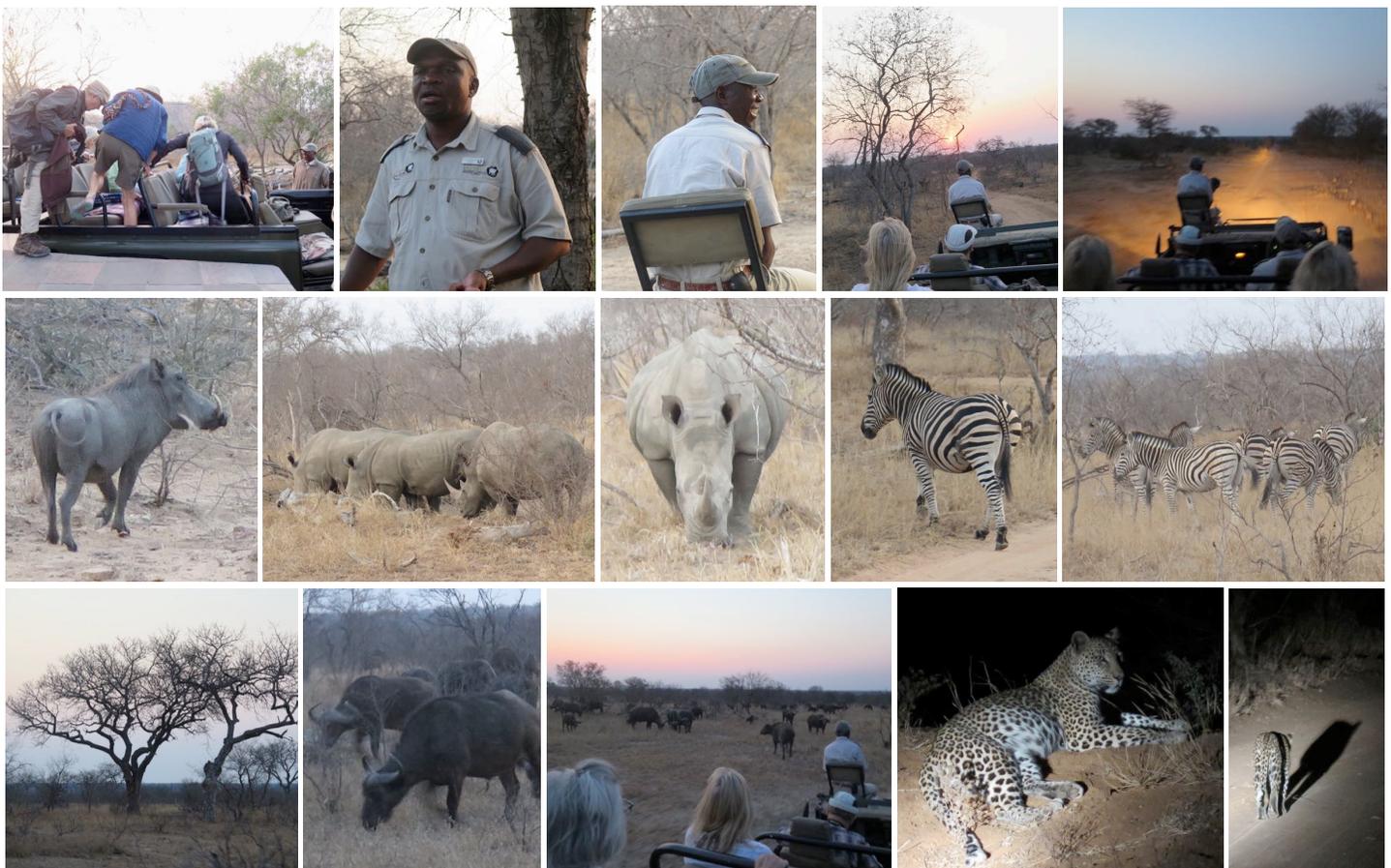


Left to Right: (top) Nelspruit Airport, charter flight pilots, views en route to Timbavati, charter flight at Hoodspruit landing strip; (bottom) on the road, entering safari lodge (those are fake tusks, BTW), safari huts, my bed area with netting, the bugsuit

We did not have much in the way of views during the flight – mostly because it was cloudy, the final 15 minutes spent in MASSIVE thunderheads with big winds and turbulence. The Nelspruit Airport was a fancy tropical Dutch-y facility with a thatched-roof. Although Nelspruit oozed a Kruger/safari vibe in all its exterior and interior decorations, information, and shops, I am not sure if this is THE gateway airport to Kruger. Within 20 minutes, we rechecked our bags and were heading out onto the tarmac to a private charter plane (a small 12-seater prop) – which we boarded and flew to Hoodspruit. I decided to sit directly behind the pilots, which was a little unnerving. I cannot say the views were amazing, mostly because the air quality/skies continued to be poor. We flew over some bulging rock formations, lots of farmland, a big reservoir-looking lake, and then a sprawling town. In the distance, we could see some bigger mountains rising up very abruptly. I am not sure if they were the northernmost Drakensberg or something else. The airstrip at which we landed was rudimentary. There was a great sign at the locked gate that read: “caution – all facilities used at pilot's own risk.”

There was no airport. The pilots removed our luggage, carrying it to just outside a gate where our new van/driver was waiting. And then we were off again. We drove an hour via the Enkhulu gate (at one point passing the dual military base/airport from which we would depart). Driving in, the road went from pavement to wide flat compact dirt/gravel, to basic narrow/bumpier dirt – and we passed signage suggesting at least 6 nearby safari camps. As noted in emails home, the entire area looked EXACTLY like the “Naked and Afraid XL South Africa” edition that wrapped up a few months before I left for this trip: stark, dry, lots of bare thorny bushes and trees. All we were missing were the naked people. My understanding of the Timbavati/Greater Kruger region was that it was all private, split into about 40 separate plots – each of which ran safari camps that shared the network of roads (i.e. when we went out on safari drives, we ran into up to 5 other company jeeps). Our camp was part of two-plot complex owned/run by a young family (they lived in an extensive compound 5 miles away, next to a larger safari lodge they also ran). In contrast, our safari lodge was more rustic and smaller. Our lodge was surrounded by an electric fence array (i.e. a couple wires at different heights); this kept out most large wildlife – but not smaller things. Thus, we were warned: DO NOT leave your cabin/hut after 10 when the path lighting went out. Even so, none of the cabin/hut doors locked (they consisted of a two-part sliding system – one screen, one glass/metal). Lying in bed, I often wondered whether things like monkeys were clever enough to tug open my doors. Some people may find the open living arrangements disconcerting because many buildings lacked walls or didn't have tight-sealing doors/windows. My bathroom featured small lizards crawling about and a busy ant parade. The beds were surrounded by a high-quality mosquito-net, which I used religiously. A few others were less serious and wound up with WEIRD bites overnight (hopefully not by the aforementioned African tick fever).

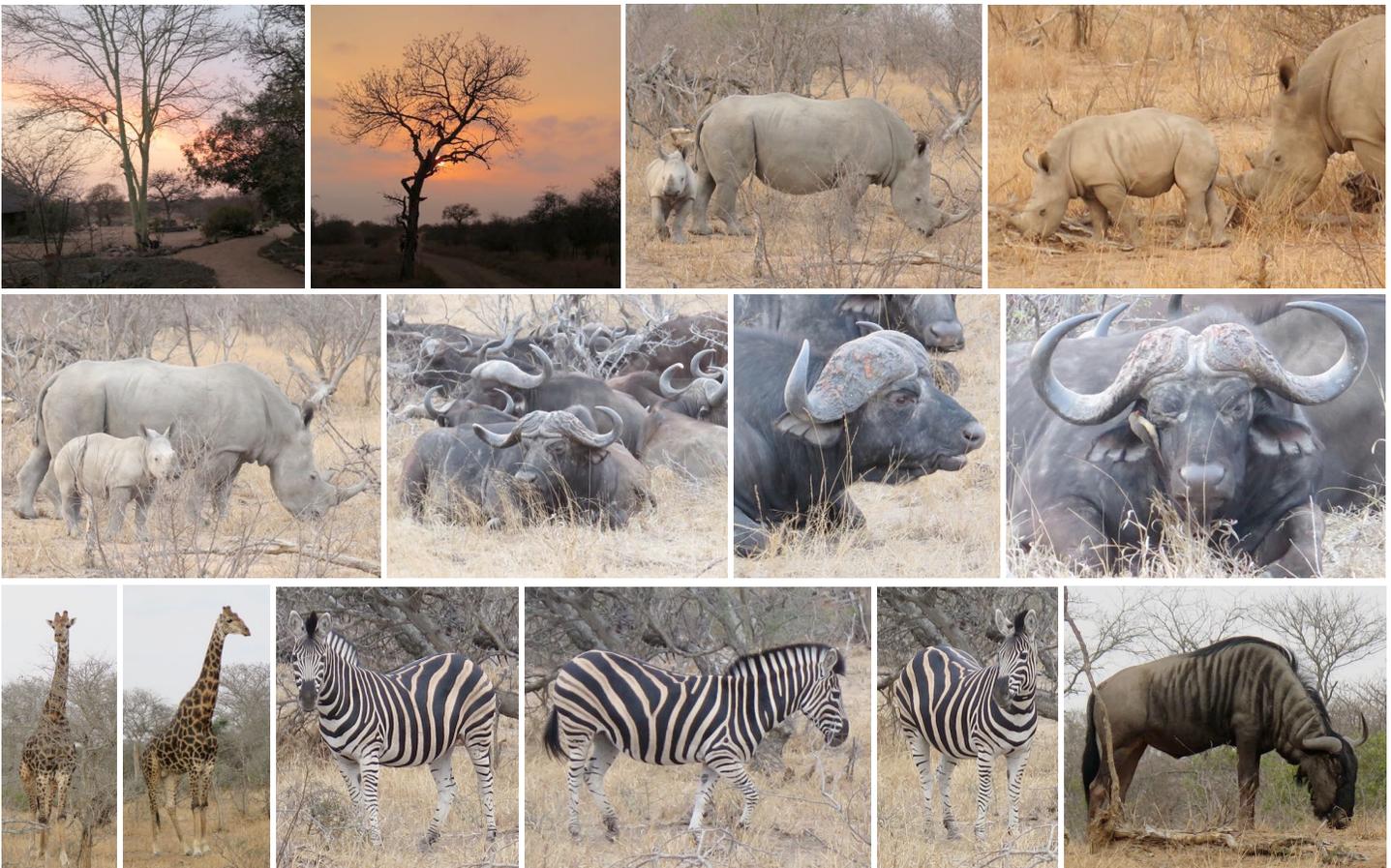
After arriving, I was taken aback that we were only given 20 minutes to prep for our night jeep drive. Malaria, as stated earlier, is endemic in this area – which meant (for me) the FULL bugsuit: long pants fully tucked into socks, a mosquito netting jacket with headnet, and DEET (I selected 40% cream, applying to my jawline, behind the ears, and on the tops of my hands). Having only 20 minutes to meticulously accomplish these tasks was not ideal, particularly because I didn't know how serious the threat was going to be (malaria mosquitoes come out at dusk to feed/bite – exactly when we were going to be out). The only good thing, though, was that the forecasted heat had been seriously downgraded – and there was a cool wind much of our time here, meaning few bugs. We then loaded up into the jeep – amusingly on this big stair system (that I found unnecessary). Our driver sat in the jeep and occasionally talked (which, alas, those of us in the back row could not hear well), while our tracker sat (no seatbelt) on this elevated chair bolted to the front of the car (jutting out over the road). The jeep had 3 tapered up seating rows behind the drivers' area. Our group sat 2, 2, and 3 – with me in the third/3-person back row (mostly because our one husband didn't do photography and offered to sit between his wife and I, managing their joint gear). I didn't mind the seating arrangement – other than the difficulty hearing commentary up front. BUT sometimes the guide and driver did not make as strong an effort to position/move the jeep such that those of us in the back also had an unobstructed view of something.



Left to Right: (top) jeep access stair tower, driver, tracker, sunset, night-spotting; (middle) warthog, black rhino, zebra; (bottom) acacia, Cape buffalo and sunset, leopard

Putting the safari experience into words is probably impossible – sufficed to say it was spectacular, especially that first night... at times relaxing, at times exciting. And, most shocking, we saw so many animals so quickly. Within 5 minutes of heading out, we saw our first

animal – a warthog - my favorite safari-associated animal (yes, because of Pumbaa). I didn't get the greatest shot – but it was amazing and I declared at the time that if I saw nothing else I'd be satisfied. Within the next 30 minutes, we saw zebras, rhinos (one of the big five), and a HUGE herd (a few hundred?) of Cape Buffalo (one of the big five). The latter reminded me of being in Yellowstone and watching the bison. At some point shortly thereafter, there was a small group of elephant (one of the big five) – but it was too dark to photograph or really see them (we would see more tomorrow and the last day). Indeed: by this point, the sun had gone down (all sunsets on jeep drives were amazing!) and our tracker pulled out the big handheld spotlight. I personally found this part of the safari quite mesmerizing – watching the light bounce back and forth, left to right and back again as we drove. That said, it was sort of unnatural and even though the safari team said they couldn't/shouldn't shine the light directly on animals long (and mostly they didn't), there were certainly times they seemed to – LIKE... within the next 15 minutes, we came upon a female leopard (one of the big five) who was all full from gorging on an impala kill (her belly was round, and she sat panting on this mound right by the road). We would return here tomorrow and she'd be here looking the same – her kill visible in a nearby tree. I was surprised how seemingly unphased the leopard was by us. I swear we sat there watching her for 15 minutes at close range (like – 20 feet). Eventually she did feel the need to amble on (making me wonder whether she really was unphased). We then went off-road (driving over grass, mounds, crunching a few logs, working through brush here and there) in an effort to follow the leopard to where she plopped down again. Within 30 minutes of wrapping up the leopard viewing, we returned to the lodge – meeting the second lodge jeep (2 couples traveling on their own). Although we were given 20 minutes to clean up before dinner, dinner was full-on outside - meaning continued bugsuit/protection – and no point in taking a shower yet. A couple staff poked me for wearing the bugsuit – leading to the aforementioned remark about how I couldn't call myself a microbiologist if I came home with malaria. But that stuff doesn't phase me and I don't give a shit what it may have conveyed (i.e. were the safari folks concerned the message it was sending to everyone about safety?). I have gotten into plenty of disagreements with guides about their interpretation of infectious disease risk (case in point – multiple trips where guides insisted one could drink unfiltered water). Oh well. By comparison with Montusi, our dinner tonight (and other evenings) was not as fancy or gourmet amazing – but it was filling, well-cooked, and more homestyle.



Left to Right: (top) sunrise at lodge, morning sun, rhino baby; (middle) Cape Buffalo – horn and symbiotic cleaner bird detail; (bottom) giraffes (surprisingly hard to photograph) zebra (surprisingly goofy looking), and our ONLY wildebeest (a.k.a. gnu)

Thankfully, lodge dinners were efficient and I was in my room by 8:30... which was good because wake-up was 4:45, with coffee and light pastries until 5:15 – and then morning jeep drive! Although the other jeep party was on time, our group had a few late-starters (grumble). As was the case both mornings, today began cold – and I wore 3 layers and used the provided wool blankets. As shown above, our morning began with the CUTE baby rhino, the Cape Buffalo herd (note the symbiotic cleaning “red-billed oxpecker,” often grossly focused on picking out eye-bugs), giraffe, zebra, and a solo wildebeest. After animal sightings grew thin, we returned to the female leopard from last night – this time seeing her kill (a steinbok) in an adjacent tree. Nearby, our tracker shockingly spotted a BIG male leopard stalking a warthog hole. Even though the leopard was in distant brush, the photographs even my small camera produced were impressive. Continuing 10 minutes to a sandy wash, we broke for coffee, tea, chocolate muffins, and fresh fruit. And we were allowed to walk on our own just up the wash to use a tree if need be (if you needed to go while driving, you could also ask the guide to stop at a safe place, jump out and go behind the vehicle). After our break (~7:30), we did more driving and searching than finding

animals. As shown below, we saw a small group of kudu (a game meat we ate at least once); perhaps not surprisingly, they were skittish. The most regular bird we saw was the squawking yellow-billed hornbill. We then came upon our most substantial herd of elephants yet, getting surprisingly close. By 9, we started heading back to the lodge for the big brunch.



Left to Right: (top) another jeep & the leopard show – same female, steinbok kill, warthog hole with stalking male leopard; (bottom) break, greater kudu, yellow-billed hornbill, elephants!

Although I enjoyed lodge brunches the most, I thought today's was the best: great egg casserole dishes, green salads, and exceptional cheese and fruit. From 11:30 until 3, there were no planned activities. While many people savored this inactivity, I could see this getting old. Thus, I took advantage of an offer made our first night: if we wanted to use the sister lodge's gym, we could get a ride over there (~20 minutes). What I didn't understand was that the driver would just sit and wait for you – which seemed awkward. But I did a 45-minute workout (the gym had 1 treadmill, 1 bike, 1 rower, and a weight station). After returning and cleaning up, I did enjoy a short power-nap. The schedule for the afternoon/evening drive was baffling; several of us thought light appetizers were put out at 3:30, followed by departure at 4. In fact, appetizers were at 3, the goal to depart at 3:30. So I stuffed my face with fried eggrolls and cake – and then we were off again. Although the pictures probably communicate something different, several of us (including me) began to feel our first tinge of "gee – we keep driving the same route, seeing the same animals." While it was true that we had driven these areas 2-3 times now, we did see a few new animals or behaviours... like the little green bee-eater birds and some impala that stood still long enough to take a picture. But the rhinos and the leopard (yes – the same female again... see montage at the end of this report) were repeats. Mostly, though, everyone was wondering if we'd see the apparently elusive lion.



Left to Right: (top) lodge, evening impala, little bee-eaters, rhinos; (bottom) dusk, more impala, beer/chips break, heading back – cold!

Dinner tonight was in the half-open lounge/bar. Where night one I felt poked at for the bugsuit/malaria, night two saw a discussion about how younger South Africans view Mandela, race issues, and Trevor Noah. I never asked whether my conversation partner felt he was representing both white and black points of views. In general, the northern Limpopo province where Kruger is located sees the least crime and has the lowest population density... so it is hard for me to process statements by such an unique group of people trying

to generalize about the whole country. That said, we did agree that both South Africa and the United States grapple with many of the same ideas about race, history, and political misdoings. Once again, I was in bed by 9 – ready for another repeat safari day.



Left to Right: morning rays, saddle-billed stork, Scops owl – side and front, baboon, lilac-breasted roller

After another straggling morning, we were on the road by 5:30. Perhaps sensing the crew was onto the route-repeating, our drive took us to a different area that was beyond the sister lodge where I'd exercised yesterday. Although we saw no lions, we enjoyed many interesting birds – including my favorite: this wood-like owl (once again – I could not believe the tracker spotted this). We actually all got out of the jeep, approaching the owl up to 10 feet... and it didn't move at all. Although the guides said the lilac-breasted roller (the really colorful one above) was quite common, seeing them was quite a thrill because they were so striking (we saw about 6 total throughout the day). At one point, we came upon some kind of fruit-bearing tree filled with a couple dozen baboons – but ALL of them ran down the tree and hid very quickly (i.e. my few photos suck).



Left to Right: break at the hippo pond... watching the necking male giraffes, and the one hippo (as much as we saw... sorry Karen)

For our break, we stopped by this large muddy-edged pond. To our left, a pair of male giraffes were impressively engaged in this funny necking (which I assume was either mutual itching or sparring). Every few minutes, the ears and eyelids of a hippo surfaced in the lake. We all hoped we'd see more of the hippo but the guides felt it was too cold for the animal to want to get out of the water much further. After our break, we continued on through more new terrain – seeing a few animals (warthogs, giraffes, zebras, impalas) but mostly just driving and searching for lions. At one point, I noticed these big white shells on the ground and asked if my eyes were deceiving me – but the guides said no... they were giant land-snail shells (something I should have known because of Parker's snail project). The driver stopped the car and picked one up so I could study it more. Given how dry everything was, we never saw any live snails... and I have no idea where they were hiding (probably with the hippo). Soon, we headed back for brunch – via the same herd of Cape Buffalo, now 10 minutes from the lodge. The second brunch was not as great as the first.



Left to Right: Big Sky, warthog, mother and baby giraffe, giant landsnail, nice Cape Buffalo horn-headpiece

Given that I did not want to repeat yesterday's awkward ride to the gym, I occupied myself with packing and fiddling with photographs until 3... this time on board with the appetizer/departure schedule. There was an unspoken understanding tonight that the whole goal was to find lions – and that meant we were going to wait it out until we found them. In the end, we headed down into the area we'd repeated 2-3X times during the first few outings. Our tracker looked for footprints in the sand along the main road and seemed highly confident there was a new set of lion tracks relative to the morning data. The tracker jumped out of the car (no weapons or protection in hand) and proceeded into a grassy roadless area with another jeep tracker. Our jeep stayed close, visiting nearby areas we'd seen before. Within 45 minutes, we got the call that they had lions (3 sisters) – and were directed off-road until we found them. When we arrived, there was one lion and a half-eaten kudu that the tracker said had been killed the previous night. Like the female leopard, this lion seemed full, lethargic, and panting. After 10 minutes, one of her other sisters showed up – but we never saw the third (or any male lions). We watched the two of them sitting side-by-side like cats doing catty things (licking themselves, yawning). They then dispersed

– with one circling back and returning to the kill. I'm sure some people will find the kill thing gross – but I was glad we got to see it. The lion tore at the skin (very loud!) and crunched on some bones (also very loud!) – before trying to pick the whole carcass up and drag it away. She didn't get very far... but I suspected she was nervous with all these people around (by now, there were at least 3 jeeps).



Left to Right: all – sister lions and their kudu kill

Given all the traffic, we moved on. I, for one, figured we were done for the night... but little did I know we had one more really great sighting. On the initial drive in to the lodge (after seeing the giraffes on the road), someone thought they saw a hyena – but our main guide (not one of the safari guides) said those were very rare. And so, when we came upon a lone hyena ambling up the road, I was surprised... also because he was ugly and scary looking. But even more surprising, we drove by this huge old anthill (that looked more like a big geyser feature at Yellowstone) and found three sister hyenas with all these puppies – and all were very cute, not to mention fearless (the mothers all readily approached the jeep and, had the driver not shooed them away, they definitely would have jumped in). We sat and watched the hyena show 20 minutes while the sun went down. It was hard to capture the activity and so most of my pictures have some blur to them – but they were a great near-end to the day. That said, the final sighting was – according to our driver – super-rare (but VERY hard for my camera to photograph): a little/lesser bushbaby in one of the acacia trees. Given that I was basically shooting blindly into the lit-up tree, I am shocked I got anything... but you can see the bushbaby below. We did make one last run by the lion/kill before heading back. There was only one sister and none of my pictures turned out. The most memorable moment, though, was having the lion get up and start heading towards us (the driver was concerned that my putting my foot up on the rim got her attention – and he ordered me to pull my feet totally into the jeep). The lion walked directly under my seat – 20 inches below – and then vanished into the complete blackness behind us. We sat silently for a minute or so – in my case, wondering if the lion was going to climb a tree and jump into the jeep in all that darkness. It was the only time on safari I was remotely nervous.



Left to Right: (top) lone male hyena – two shots, three-sister family, hyena puppy; (bottom) hyena puppy pile, giraffes/sky, bushbaby

We then returned to the lodge for a festive last dinner with excellent entertainment (i.e. lots of singing and dancing, mostly by the black staff-members). The meal was held fully outdoors by this back fire-pit area; it was done buffet style, with lots of grilled meats and

stewed vegetables – harkening back to the Sakhumzi restaurant Robbie took me to back in Soweto. We were still in bed early in preparation for what would be a LONG and sometimes frustrating travel/transition day tomorrow.



Left to Right: (top) last African sunrise, spraying leopard making terrain, “I’m tired of you” face, VERY male elephant (can you see why?), cute elephant face; (bottom) elephant feet, the mother and baby elephant series

The next morning, we were up again at 5 – and out for our final shortened drive by 5:30. When we signed up for this trip, we had all been told to schedule our departing flights from Jo-burg after 6 p.m. (US-bound flights departed around 8 and most Europe-bound flights departed around 7). I – and others – assumed that such a big window meant we would get to enjoy all the usual morning activities and be on our way around noon. Unfortunately, we learned at some point yesterday that our morning drive would be shortened by 2 hours, and that we would have a limited breakfast before leaving at 9 for a noon flight back to Jo-berg. As a result of this disappointing news, a few of us were not in great moods – particularly because we knew what this really translated to was landing in Jo-burg at 1 and then sitting for multiple hours in the pre-security/check-in area waiting for the Delta agents to show up (the time was not clear from any websites). Our final drive did involve some good sightings: a pretty female leopard (possibly the same one we visited daily) marking her territory (by basically spraying trees and rocks) while stalking, and a herd of elephants that included a cute mother-baby pair. Unfortunately, both sightings left a little sour taste in my mouth because, in both cases, I felt that the jeep had a negative impact on the animals. In the case of the leopard, at least 4 jeeps (including ours) incessantly followed her for a solid 30 minutes – and there was no way that she was going to catch food with all of us around. Her expressions, at times, suggested she was annoyed. In the case of the mother-baby elephant, I felt our jeep got dangerously close. At one point, the baby curiously stepped towards the jeep and the driver did intentionally made the engine louder in an effort to cause the baby to back away. As it did so, its ears fully flared (as shown in one of the shots) – suggesting it was scared/defensive. Based on my experience with mother-baby animal guidelines in the US, I don’t think one should mess around in any way with them. Plus, we were essentially surrounded on most sides by very close elephants – and so “purposely” startling a baby, in my mind, could have set off a chain reaction by upsetting the mother and surrounding elephants. We were back at the lodge by 7:30, the tracker having offered to lead an on-foot safari to a group of 4 or less. Actually, he had offered this almost daily – but kept having to cancel because the winds were great (dangerous because the tracker cannot hear things coming). I was not in the group who participated in that outing.



Left to Right: military base airport check-in, waiting area, plane/tarmac

The rest of the day went about like I expected: an hour to the military base, an hour waiting around the small, tropical-feeling airport, and hour back to Jo-berg. I hung out with my back-seat jeep couple companions between 1 and 3, enjoying a surprisingly good raspberry-cinnamon milkshake. At 3, the Delta agents showed up – allowing me to get through security and up to the lounge by 3:15. Although the food/beverage options were good, the crowdedness/noise level was high... and there was a French family who made no effort to control their hacking/sick and unruly kids. Nonetheless, I got lots of emails sorted out – not to mention more picture organizing and writing. The line-up for our 8 p.m. flight began at 6:30 (mostly because of the extra security required for US-bound flights). The flight itself was great and I enjoyed 10 hours of sleep (the flight = 15.5 hours!). Landing in Atlanta at 5 a.m. (with a 3 hour layover), I full-on showered in the Delta lounge spa area before a light breakfast. The flight back to Portland was on time and uneventful.

Closing Thoughts:

Although this trip was challenging (mostly in terms of scenarios of things that could go wrong), it was mostly what I expected – and, to that end, it was a great introduction to Africa. A week before the trip, I remarked to Allison that I felt the most challenging “known’s” were going to be the travel days because South Africa is such a HUGE country... and this was absolutely true. Every travel day was hard and pretty much it took the whole day to go between major destination segments (Jo-burg, Cape Town, Garden, Drakensberg, and Kruger)... and/or took longer than expected. Even though virtually all our flights were on time, driving distances were long and most took longer than expected. While it would have been nicer to spend, like, a whole week at each of the segment destinations, I went into this trip very nervous about safety and disease – and so, for me, it was very intentional to spend only 2 weeks total for this trip. Were I to do it again, I would plan at least 2 days of no activities upon landing to recover from jetlag – because that was exceptionally bad on this trip. That said, the jetlag time difference is no different than traveling to Europe... it’s the longer and more stressful flight pattern that makes a southern Africa trip harder. Although I’m glad I saw Jo-berg, it was not the prettiest city (especially with the poor air quality when we were there) and so I’m not sure I would intentionally go there again (sorry). I would definitely recommend and spend WAY more time in Cape Town. I would also entirely skip the Garden Route because I didn’t find any hikes or scenery particularly compelling. I would LOVE to see more of the Drakensberg, including visiting all major access areas, hiking more long trails, and driving to the high plateau/Lesotho. Although I was excited by the safari leg of the trip, I am not sure I could do more than 3 days of it.

As far as people/guides go, it was really interesting to meet/work with so many different and great guides on this trip. Our group, which I have chosen not to detail, was highly varied in terms of ability, background, and motivation – which is probably to be expected for an easy level 2 trip. That said, I remarked to a colleague upon returning home that it is hard to do mixed group trips in the Trump era – because, no matter what, politics come out in some way that impacts the party (in our case, having the Kavanaugh hearings start up during the trip was annoyingly intrusive). Also, I think “Africa” is an idea or destination that attracts and divides people in unexpected ways (e.g. some people only go there for safari/animals). In South Africa, though, it is hard to avoid social issues because the townships are an almost daily sight outside of the private safari reserve areas. As for me, I learned – and continue to learn – a lot and am grateful for the spectrum of experiences South Africa provided to me. While in South Africa, I finished Trevor Noah’s amazing Born a Crime (I cannot say enough good things about this book!). Since returning, I finished Mandela’s ginormous Long Walk to Freedom and started Good Morning Mr. President, an equally interesting book by his young, white Afrikaner personal secretary (Zelda LaGrange), which our main guide recommended highly (and I concur). I have 3 more books about South Africa sitting on my nightstand to-do list. There is no doubt I will return to Africa – but, given the intensity level that this trip was for me, it will be a MAYBE 3-year thing. Given my age, though, the hardest question to ponder is: now that I feel more comfortable with Africa logistics, do I put Kilimanjaro on the 3-year plan? Too early to say. But Tanzania, Botswana, and Namibia are definitely on the planning docket. Nonetheless, I am very glad South Africa was my first country on the continent because first loves are always the best... and the diversity of sights and experiences there is probably something I will never feel or find again with the same intensity.



There’s my girl... our favorite female leopard, our first safari love! She’s looking a little bored, thinking: Is it those same people again?