

CLASC Adventure in South Africa

September 2014

by Trip Leader Sue Travis

The hardest part about writing this article is figuring out where to start and how not to turn this into a book! The trip to South Africa was a lifetime adventure with so many “WOW” moments. So I’ll try to be brief while still giving you a good idea of our escapades, as they were truly escapades!

Nine fortunate CLASC members were part of the third TSC group of 47 to tour South Africa. There were times when it was good to be part of a bigger group and times when we were in a smaller group or able to go off on our own.



Six of us (Bob, Gina, Chris, Gary, Tor, and Sue) started our adventure in Zimbabwe, on the Pre-trip. We knew we were no longer in Houston when we looked out our tour bus and saw giraffe, elephant, and baboons along the road! Victoria Falls was a gem of a pre-trip excursion. A “Sundowner River cruise” down the Zambezi River welcomed us to the bush. Our boat driver pulled right up to a resting crocodile. Other wildlife came down to the water at dusk, including elephants and rhinos.

We stayed at The Kingdom Hotel, complete with a gorgeous pool and common areas. However, a word to the wise – as this was a lesson learned by one of our trip mates – never hang your swimsuit over your balcony rail to dry, as the monkeys will see it as a gift! We had to take a bus to the Victoria Falls hotel for dinner two nights....less than 100 yards down the street. This was for our own safety – from the animals!



Victoria Falls was beautiful! Yes, it really is more than twice as high and almost twice as wide as Niagara Falls – probably why it is one of the seven natural wonders of the world. Our guide indicated that the Falls were probably running at about 40% since it was winter. This turned out to be good because it allowed us to actually see the Falls and not just experience the mist.

We then went on a guided historical Victoria Falls Bridge Tour. Sounds interesting, maybe even a little boring, right? Not this bridge tour! We were put in harnesses complete with hooks and crossed under the surface on the catwalks that were used in the original construction in 1904! Just 420 feet up (or down, depending on how you want to look at it)!

Three of us opted for the Elephant Back Safari Tour during our “down” time. It’s hard to convey the memory of being on the back of an elephant in a 6,000 acre reserve walking past impala and kudu led by a walking guide with a rifle. These orphaned elephants each had a mind of their own as one of our CLASC members would attest to. While my teenaged elephant calmly leaned on the platform for me to climb on, I was told of another older and much larger elephant that started to get up from his knees before all were “onboard”, making for an exciting start!

Some of us opted for a helicopter ride which flew over Victoria Falls allowing us to see one of its famous rainbows, but it also gave one a whole new perspective of how the gorge zigzags back and forth for miles afterward. We then flew over the town and our hotel on the way to the Zambezi National Park where we circled and did our own figure eights while looking at game from the air! My "National Geographic" moment of the ride was flying back down the Zambezi River and seeing a pile of about 13 hippopotamus cooling off on a hot afternoon.



We had authentic "Boma" dinners which got us used to the idea of eating things other than what we find on our menus in the States.

And how could I forget, we all went on an early morning safari in Victoria Falls where a highlight was being very close to a herd of female buffalo and their young coming to a watering hole, followed by the herd of bachelor buffalo not far behind.

Cape Buffalo



Rhinos as big as our Land Rover!



Trip Leader Sue atop Thunder!



Victoria Falls Bridge Tour. Just 420 feet up (or down, depending on how you look at it!)



Chris and Gary shown hooked into harnesses on the catwalks that were used in the original construction of the bridge in 1904!



Victoria Falls in all its splendor!



The pre-trip participants returned to Johannesburg and met up with the rest of the main trip people, so we could begin the rest of our South Africa adventure. It was, however, an interesting evening I spent in the Johannesburg airport Police Station with the TL from Space City, filing a report and walking the airport looking for a lost/stolen passport. However, I think I would opt for this over the exciting cab ride two of our participants had back from their restaurant during which they were pulled over only to learn that their driver did not have a license! All turned out fine, thankfully!

The next morning we flew to Port Elizabeth – a beautiful little city on the Indian Ocean. We immediately traveled from there to our main destination for the next three days, the Kariega Private Game Reserve. They were able to check us in in time to immediately take us on a drive over a valley for a late sunset drink.

It was a wonderful way to kick off our trip. The guides helped us to reorient ourselves to the completely different stars in the sky including the Southern Cross. We continued the party at the common area bar where we met one of our tour guides who was also a trained opera singer. He sang “Old Man River” and Tor countered with...um...shall I say a very spunky Norwegian drinking song!

We were picked up for game drives at 7 am. Before we stopped for coffee our first day, we had already seen ostrich, various types of antelope, wildebeests, cape buffalo, giraffes, and a view down to a seaside town. We crossed a road through double gates into another section of the reserve.

After driving through the bush, we spotted four lions sleepily laying in the grass. Our Land Rovers were driven within 20 feet of 2 males, and we watched as they majestically lazed around after a night of hunting. Words cannot describe the experience of sitting there watching them lick each other’s heads, move around, and look at us! You truly got a sense of how powerful an animal they are and how we were in their domain.

We moved along and spotted our first rhino. I need to stop here to say that our group was on three different Land Rovers. We didn’t all have the same experiences, but we all had fabulous sightings and could share stories at meal times. We all saw giraffes, zebras, and a baby hippo that hung out right by the check-in area. And so much more.



We finished the first day having seen 4 out of 5 of the African big five game - the lion, elephant, Cape buffalo, and the white/black rhinoceros. The final is the leopard, which will usually only be seen at night. Plus we’ve seen so many more animals. We wonder how we can top our first day – and every day did continue to impress and amaze us!

We did two game drives a day at Kariega. We also took a pontoon boat ride down the Kariega river. Our days started early and ended late, but no one seemed tired. It was a sensory overload each day. The guide would stop the truck so we could watch young giraffes playing – which was really practice for when they need to become the dominant male.

The guides would explain how they were tracking the animals. They would answer all sorts of questions, including explaining why a termite hill could be 100 years old! We had our first “boma” dining experience – which is a starlit, candlelight, and torch dinner outside with all the food cooked over fire pits and authentic singing and drumming. Kariega was a one-stop game reserve experience!

We then moved on to the “Garden Route”, an area between the mountains and the Indian Ocean to Tsitsikamma. Chris, Gary, George, and I went on a mountain bike ride (that’s all I’ll say about that!); Gina and Bob went on a zip-line excursion; and Ken, Velma, and Tor went on a guided bus tour into the small town and went on an ocean walk where they saw whales!

The next day we took a ferry out to the Featherbed Nature Reserve where we took in gorgeous cliff views, steep rock steps, caves, and a lunch in the trees. From here we progressed along their famous Route 62 through the mountains to an ostrich farm, where one of our members was brave (or silly) enough to take a fleeting ride on an ostrich. Others opted for a live ostrich neck wrap!



We ended the day in the most beautiful country-side farm house cottage, with completely homemade food that Grandmother Rosie made sure was perfect! The family-run Innkeepers cooked all their food outside on the grills and used fresh produce from their gardens. Our opera singing guide, Frank, sang “If I were a Rich Man” followed by an old traditional Afrikaan song. Grandmother Rosie sang softly along, knowing every word. Owner and daughter Laura said Rosie’s husband used to sing that song to her, so it was a wonderful way for us to thank them for their hospitality. There was more than one set of teary eyes watching this impromptu evening unfold.



We left the next morning for a journey to Cape Town. Along the way, we stopped at the Cango Caves. To say the caves had vast halls and towering formations is an understatement. In addition to the subterranean natural wonder we explored, we were entertained once again by Frank who sang “Ava Maria” within one of the vast chambers. Another “wow” moment. Equally impressive was the cave tour guide who sang the African National anthem in a small chamber and then drummed a song on one of the translucent limestone stalagmite formations.

We had lunch along the way and finished the day by checking into the Winchester Mansion in Cape Town on the Atlantic Ocean where we’d spend the next three nights.

Cape Town and Surrounds was a whirlwind, whether you were part of the big group, a smaller group, or ventured out on your own – which we all did. Some of the activities included a trip to a Botanical Gardens, a ride to Simon’s Town with its colony of African penguins (yes, from lions to penguins in a day, is sensory overload!), a day of wineries, a visit to Table Mountain via the cableway lifts, and two group dinners.



We visited the Cape of Good Hope, where you could look out over the ocean and imagine where the Atlantic Ocean ends and the Indian Ocean begins. Another “wow” moment for me – or maybe it was the climb up the cliff that was more breathtaking!



Perhaps one of the more memorable points of interest was our ferry ride and subsequent visit to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and many others were held as political prisoners. Our tour of the facility was conducted by an actual ex-political prisoner.

Reality there was very harsh. Mandela’s cell was kept as it was when he was there with a cushion as his bed. The

former prisoner turned guide described how putting all the voices of political change together gave them the opportunity to plan and be prepared for democracy. It was just as sobering to hear opposite viewpoints and stories of what some of the locals went through in their pretty recent lifetimes. I think many of us were amazed and forced to really think through our ideals and consider that there are two sides to every story and there are extremists on each side.

Cape Town was probably the most cosmopolitan city we were in with waterfront restaurants and shopping and hotels along the beach. We ended the main portion of our trip with a vaudeville type show and dinner. Everyone had a few laughs and it was a nice way to wrap up our visit to Cape Town.



Just four of the CLASC contingent continued on to the post-trip portion of the trip, of which there were twelve total including the folks from Space City. The post-trip was titled “Kruger Extension Safari” and no matter how many times you read through the itinerary or looked into the trip, you could not imagine what we encountered “in the bush.”

Gina, Bob, Tor and myself truly enjoyed the Umkumbe Safari Lodge and were not ready to leave! Umkumbe is African for rhinoceros. Our rooms were along the Sand River. We could sit on our porch and watch the literal parade of wildlife come down the riverbed within yards of us. We were only separated by three electric lines on wooden fence posts. We watched more than one herd of elephants and a large herd of Cape Buffalo.



Our first night there, we went on a true nighttime (not dusk) safari in search of the last of the Big 5 – the leopard. We found two adults and two cubs. We were very fortunate, as it isn’t often that the mother lets anyone see the cubs. We were once again in Land Rovers without roofs or sides. I can say now that we were all amazed at watching a full grown leopard climb/jump into the tree and walk out a limb like it was the ground. But I would also venture to say that we all were a little nervous watching and being so close to them. No offense, but I was glad to be in the back row as our vehicle was pointed straight towards the tree only a few yards away

from the base while we watched that leopard jump back down and walk back towards the others...

The Umkumbe Lodge had an infinity pool overlooking the riverbed that some were brave enough to go in with wildlife so nearby. The drives were phenomenal, the food was great, the self-serve bar was well stocked, and the wildlife was all around us!

We came upon and followed a group of hyena one night returning to the lodge. And if you left your breakfast unattended while you got more coffee, one of the monkeys might have helped himself before your return.



The last sunrise safari at Umkumbe was highlighted by two things: first, our hot coffee/cocoa and amarula was enjoyed in an open area where some giraffe were in the foreground and a mother and estimated 3 day old baby rhino were in the background and second by not one, but two flat tires on the ride back in!

That's another story, for another day, but suffice it to say we all made it back in safe.



Our last stop in the 12 million acre Kruger National Park was the Shindzela Tented Safari Camp. We drove approximately 45 kilometers into "the bush" where the last stop on the dirt road was our camp.



You know you are not at the Holiday Inn when the sign on the inside of your door doesn't tell you where the fire exit is, but instead states rules such as:

1. Do not approach any animals, do not wander away from camp during the day.
2. If any member of the big 5 is seen, immediately alert your guide.
3. Elephants are dangerous and should not be approached.
4. Lions frequent the area and are often encountered close to camp. Be careful.
5. IF YOU NEED TO GO TO YOUR TENT AFTER DARK, ASK YOUR GUIDE OR TRACKER TO ESCORT YOU. DO NOT GO FROM TENT TO TENT OR OUT BY YOURSELF.
6. Canvas flaps on the tents can be opened but your door must be closed and latched at all times.
7. Do not leave footwear outside as these items are often eaten by hyenas.
8. If you have food in your tent, please keep doors latched so baboons don't come in and take food.
9. Should you need assistance of any nature – call or shout for help.
10. Do not walk around barefoot.
11. DO NOT INVESTIGATE ANY NOISES AT NIGHT – STAY IN YOUR TENT.

Needless to say, this whole trip was an adventure in many more ways than any of us thought possible. For those that have read this through, I hope my look back provided you with a small sense of some of the special moments that happened daily versus reciting an itinerary. It truly was a trip of a lifetime!

