

Trip of a Lifetime

By: Trena McNabb

The dream of going to South Africa came true for Tommy and me in June of 2005. We had the privilege of being on the first "Knifemakers Tour", the tour was organized and conducted by Celia van Wyk for Africa Knifemakers Supplies.

A few facts: South Africa has eleven official languages and everyone speaks at least 3 of them, English typically one of the three! The country is a bit larger than the state of Texas and slightly smaller than Alaska. Even though we arrived in June, it was actually winter, as the seasons are the opposite of those in the United States. Winter is dry with less vegetation making it an ideal season for spotting the animals.

The health department advised shots and pills even though we would be there during the dry season. We decided to err on the side of caution and did take the prescribed shots and pills. Subsequently, we did not see a single mosquito!

We departed on Wednesday, flying South African Airlines from New York arriving in Johannesburg on Thursday. There we changed planes for a quick flight to the historically famous Cape Town, where Celia's cousin, Joe Hannan (www.shapeofafrica.com), met us with a very comfortable van stocked with snacks and drinks.

Our accommodations at the posh waterfront Commodore Hotel exceeded our expectations. Breakfast convinced us that the food in Africa would be very good. There was a buffet spread with every imaginable food and two chefs making omelets and eggs to order. Just one more word about the food on the entire trip – Great! The water was fresh at each location, easing a common fear of all travelers.

Our tour started in Cape Town with a cable car ride to the top of Table Mountain affording a spectacular view of the town, ocean and harbor. The mountainous terrain here was stunning, with waves colliding into large white rocks on shore. Cape Point is the infamous place where the cold Indian Ocean meets the warm Atlantic creating rough turbulent waters thus making it very treacherous for early explorers who sailed around the "Point".

We followed the coastline to Hermanus. Here we were fortunate to see Southern Right Whales spouting, even though the big viewing season is in September. Lunch at the Savannah Café overlooking the bay energized us for more sightseeing.

Interestingly enough the breeding ground for the Great White Shark is known as False Bay. Unknowing sailors would sail into this bay thinking they had made it around the point, only to discover they were not there quite yet! Most of the special film and nature footage of the Great Whites are shot in this bay.

Returning to Cape Town, we toured Seal and Robben Islands by boat. Seal Island was covered with seals and sea birds while Robben Island's claim to fame is that it was the location of the prison where political prisoners were held during apartheid. We saw the cell where Nelson Mandela was held prisoner for 18 years and the cave in the salt mines where the South African constitution was written.

The shopping was varied and ranged from the very upscale shops and shopping centers to the bargaining street vendors. Malls over all of South Africa were almost indistinguishable from their American counterparts. Understandably, Cape Town is popular among the world's rich and famous with many having homes here.

Our next stop began with an airplane ride to Durban followed by a drive to Shakaland where we were transported to the culture center of the Zulus. A long drive down a very rough dirt road ended at the gates of this Protea Hotel (www.places.co.za/html/5505.html) built on the site of the movie "Shaka Zulu". We stayed in a traditional Zulu thatched roof, round beehive hut with en-suite bathroom equipped with electricity and hot water. The rooster woke us up in the morning – no need for alarm clocks.

An actual Zulu clan live on the property and take care of the hotel and its guests. They wear the traditional dress and keep the customs of the Zulu. Demonstrations were given of food preparation and weapon construction. Explanations were given as to why their weapons were able to defeat the British army in their most famous battle. To see this community was one of the best highlights of the tour - and of course another shopping opportunity!

The food again was just wonderful with the King's taster always sampling first to make sure it was suitable for the guests. After dinner, we were lead by the Zulu natives beating the drums and calling everyone to experience their energetic dance style accompanied by singing with clapping and whistling.

After leaving Shakaland we drove back to the airport in Durban and headed to Johannesburg. As we drove between locations we saw African people walking while carrying their bags, firewood or baskets on their heads and some even with babies on their backs. Even with these loads the friendly African people would stop and wave.

It was wintertime, so the grass and hillsides were dry. Most every day we saw 4 or 5 fires burning on these areas of rolling hills. The smell of Africa was like a wood fire and towards the end of the day, potatoes cooking. The sunrises and sunsets were indescribable.

We drove to our Safari location in the Timbavati Game Preserve and a private game camp called Jaydee Camp. With some misgivings we heard that there was NO electricity at this camp, it was to be a true camp experience. Therefore we were surprised to find hot and cold running water and beautiful lodges with the African thatched roofs. This gorgeous style of architecture is found everywhere. Even one of the airports was built this way. Each evening the fabulous cooks created a "Braai" which is an African style Bar-B-Que.

The entire camp is surrounded by a solar powered electric fence to keep out the elephants. You know how they can tear up things! At night our own private ranger surrounded us with lit lanterns and candles inside and out.

Next morning he knocked on our door at 5:45. We were to be up and out - no time for dressing up just put on a warm jacket for our first drive of the day into the "bush". Our Land Rover was loaded with cameras, blankets, food baskets. Mid morning we stopped for a "Bush Tea", consisting of coffee, tea, cold drinks, hot chocolate along with fruit, cookies and breads served on a table complete with a

tablecloth. After our drive we would return to camp for a big breakfast, nap, rest period or shower till the next drive starting at 3:30 lasting till long after a spectacular sunset.

For the drives themselves we were in an open truck that had no roof, doors or windows with our ranger equipped with rifle and tracker. We traveled over dirt roads through the bush looking for animals, and we found them! Giraffes, rhinos, wart hogs, impala, waterbuck, baboons, monkeys to name a few. Not to mention the birds and the flowers! One unique feature of the drives is "bundubashing" –leaving the road behind, driving over bushes and small trees to follow the game and to experience the wildlife close up.

And close up we were, as the ranger maneuvered the Land Rover to within 10 feet of the animals. The animals were indifferent to us as long as we were able to contain ourselves and stay calmly seated without putting as much as a toe on the ground. It seems the animals are accustomed to the particular shape of the Land Rover and register that we mean no harm.

In our close encounters we came upon 60 elephants enjoying breakfast in a dried up riverbed. Next we found a mother leopard nursing her kit. It was difficult to remember this frolicky kit was not a household pet! The visuals tumbled one after another as we then encountered approximately 200 Cape Buffalo at the Makulu Dam. But what amazed us was the timeliness of our visit as we witnessed the birth of a newborn buffalo. Immediately the struggle for independence began as it struggled to its feet only to fall after taking a miniature step. Over and over again we witnessed the newborn buffalo attempting to take its first steps.

Surely we had experienced plenty for one day's drive, but not hardly – we had yet to see the lions. It was dark by this time, so the tracker used a red spotlight, as this did not disturb the pride. The pride was made up of one alpha male, a smaller male, three females and a young lion. One of the females was attempting a kill. Drawn into the drama our ranger drove into the middle of the pride and turned off the engine. The African moon and our spotlight were the only illumination. It was time to return to camp, but as the ranger turned the key in the Rover – nothing! We were dead in the middle of a pride of lions. Our battery had crashed from overuse of the spotlight, plus the radio was dead! It was dark and all the other tours had left. What to do? The ranger banged on the side of the vehicle, yelled at the lions, which got up lazily and moved about 10 feet away, stayed standing up looking at us. He then asked the tracker to get down on one side and one of the men in our group to slide out and push on the other side. The engine started, they jumped back on and we went to our outdoor "Braai" dinner with some great stories to tell.

On our drive the next morning, only the large male had blood on his mouth thus the speculation that they didn't catch much that night. We sure hoped it wasn't "our" baby buffalo!

Seeing the "Big Five": rhino, elephant, lion, leopard and buffalo are the main goal of the bush. We saw them all. These were the highlights of our three days in the bush, we were constantly told that sometimes you do not see anything, that we were very lucky to have seen any one of the things we saw. I want to be back there right now!

After our last game drive and breakfast in the bush the next morning, we sorrowfully left the game camp for the Kapama Research and Breeding Center for Endangered Species in Hoedspruit. Here we saw the really endangered species, the breeding program for cheetah and conservation of other African

species for reintroduction into the wild. One of the most unique sights there was the vulture restaurant where old bones and other carcasses are left to decay in an open area for the vacuum cleaners of the environment. Here we saw huge birds that are ever more endangered as their habitat is eroded by humans.

Next on the agenda was a visit to one of the most famous game park in all of Africa – Kruger National Park. This park is so large it is nearly the size of the state of Massachusetts at 7,523 square miles. The park is 55 miles wide at its widest point and 220 miles long. It had been totally fenced until fairly recently, when the fences separating the park and the Timbavati and Sabi Sand Reserves were taken down, effectively increasing the size of the reserve by 15% and allowing the wildlife greater freedom of movement.

What was it like in the park? Picture yourself driving in the family car with the family along a nice paved road (or dirt, your choice) with a chance of seeing in their natural setting, elephants, buffalo, zebra, kudu, giraffe, impala, white rhino, black rhino, hippopotamus, lions, leopard, cheetah, wild dogs and spotted hyena, among others. The difference between the park and the private game preserve is that you must stay on the roads in Kruger, whereas in the private areas you can go off the road and "bundubash". Of course, you stay in the car and keep the windows rolled up – especially around those naughty baboons and monkeys!

Leaving the game park area we drove through the scenic mountains on the Eastern side of South Africa known as Mpumalanga – where the sun rises. Driving through the Blyde River Canyon (considered to be one of South Africa's greatest natural wonders and the third largest in the world) we saw the Three "Rondavels", massive boulders overlooking the Blyde River and beautiful scenery.

Stopping at the Bourke's Luck Potholes, we climbed on the yellow dolerite scoured by the swirling waters at the confluence of the Treur and Blyde rivers. Then on to God's Window for a panoramic view of the valley, towns and country side. From here we traveled to Pelgrims Rest and the Royal Hotel. The hotel decorated in the colonial style was the first hotel established in the prosperous 19th century gold-mining town. The town, restored to its former glory, is now a quaint and interesting living museum and you're right, a great shopping opportunity!

From here we traveled to visit Nico Bernard and his family on the farm and see the African Knife Handle factory (www.giraffebone.com). Nico, Louise and their daughters live on a most picturesque farm with a running stream which Nico has filled with gorgeous plants and less than wild animals: horses, ducks, dogs and even 2 stray pigs came to live there. After a fabulous lunch with homemade bread and meats roasted on an outside fireplace, we toured the factory. It was quite interesting to see how Nico has developed unique formulas for treating his bones and woods for use in knife making. There were plenty of bones lying around too – at various stages of drying in the African sun.

We stayed the last night in a wonderful hotel in Nelspruit (capital Mpumalanga) and situated on the Crocodile River. The rolling hills are covered in orange and fruit trees covered in ripe fruit. The trees all over Africa were breathtaking: blooming poinsettia trees, the flamboyant tree, bougainvillea and the umbrella tree to name a few, flowers and birds everywhere. In the south Cape Town area the hills are covered with grape vineyards and home to very large wine producing farms.

Not to miss a minute, we did last minute shopping on the way to the airport to make our connection to

Johannesburg and home. The most interesting stop was the Coppercraft Africa factory (www.coppercraft.co.za) where we watched the craftsmen and women at work. Aside from the parks, this was Tommy's favorite thing. It is a working factory where the products are all made of copper, brass, nickel silver and other metals. The techniques for the jewelry, tableware and other unique products employ many of the same tools knifemakers use in their work.

Reluctantly we said good bye to Celia at the airport and made our way home. Africa is still out there and calling to us to return. I believe we will one day.

We would highly recommend this trip to you. (www.carolinaknives.com) Please contact us for discussion or more details about how much we enjoyed it. For any further information contact Celia at safariyes@yahoo.com. The 2006 Second Knifemaker tour to South Africa is scheduled for June 6 - 20, 2006. Hunting trips are also available. The parent company for our Timbavati Camp is (www.kingscamp.com) if you would like to check out their great web site for more information about the Bush and life there.

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