

## South Africa – Fall 2010

I decided to postpone the cold weather a bit by heading south. Also, I had to use up my last KLM frequent flyer miles before they expired, and South Africa was the furthest place possible that I wanted to see. Travelling around alone in South Africa did not seem like such a good idea. I would have had to plan a route and rent a car and find accommodations in or near the various national parks. Plus, you hear stories about crime in South Africa, especially against people who are alone, although maybe it isn't really worse than Florida. Anyway, I opted for a group trip organized by Djoser, the same outfit I went to India with three years ago. It turned out very well, and probably a fair amount cheaper than I could have done alone.

**Thursday, 14 Oct.** Unfortunately, with my frequent flyer miles I could not get a direct flight from Amsterdam to Johannesburg. So I had to fly KLM to Nairobi and change there for a Kenia Airways flight to Johannesburg. I couldn't even get this combination on the day I wanted. So I had to go two days early.

I was up early to get the 6:27 train to Schiphol. For intercontinental flights you have to be there 2 hours in advance! I just made it, checking in 2 hours and 1 minute ahead of time, although I doubt that KLM is that strict. When I checked in on the computer yesterday it looked like the flight to Nairobi was pretty full; there were no more window seats. But I did get an aisle seat with (at the time) no one in the seat next to me.

The young lady at the baggage drop-off was apparently rather new. It took her a long time searching through the computer to make sure that I didn't need a transit visum to change planes in Nairobi or a visum to get in to South Africa. Finally she gave up and asked the woman at the next desk. Conclusion, I didn't, which I was sure of for S.A., but not completely sure of for Nairobi.

There was indeed no one in the seat next to me, and the flight was uneventful, arriving on time at Nairobi. Changing planes was very easy. There were not many signs, but lots of people you could ask, and I was directed to a gate just a couple of gates down the hall from where I arrived. There were many little tax-free stores along the hall, several selling coffee. The Kenia Airways flight was also uneventful. There were not many passengers, maybe a quarter full. I ate dinner and drank two little bottles of wine—the steward immediately offered a second bottle when I said I wanted wine. Drunkard Europeans? No, he also offered blacks second bottles. It was the same Chilean wine I had had on the KLM flight. So I guess the KLM-Kenia Airways collaboration goes further than code sharing and frequent flyer program. I managed to get a bit of sleep before we arrived at Johannesburg in the middle of a thunder storm, which slowed things down a bit so that we landed 10 or 15 minutes late, just before midnight.

Bored people at passport control photographed me (without glasses, since they give reflections), collected the form I had filled in on the plane (and threw it onto a stack of other ones without looking at it), and stamped my passport.

My suitcase was waiting for me when I got to the baggage belt. I walked through the green lane at customs. They were doing spot checks on a few people, South Africans

I think rather than tourists. At that time of night almost everything was closed. There were lots of banks, all closed, but none of them seemed to have an ATM. Finally I found one at the last bank in the row. So I could get some South African money.

Then I had to call my hotel, the same one where the tour group was to stay its first night and which I had reserved some days before on the internet, to get them to come and pick me up. Fortunately my mobile phone worked, since there was no sign of public phones. The hotel said the car would be there in 15 minutes. I waited by the door to the parking lot. One of the many security guards waited with me. He offered to wait since, he said, it wasn't safe to be there alone. Finally, after about 40 minutes the car showed up. The excuse was that someone had come to check in just as he was about to leave, and at that time of night he was alone. By 1:30 I was in my room, which looked quite nice: big (two double beds, sofa, desk).

**Friday, 15 Oct.** I slept late, and so I arrived for breakfast just before 9, which was when they stopped serving. So there wasn't much left on the buffet. No eggs left; the sausage and bacon was getting cold, the juice was thin, and the jam low on fruit and high on sugar. But the toast was OK, and the coffee not bad.

It is nice that South Africa is in the same time zone as the Netherlands. So I simply have to recover from yesterday's long day without the complication of jet lag.

The group doesn't arrive until Saturday evening (late). So the question was what to do on Friday and Saturday. The hotel, actually more like a motel in layout but without being able to drive up to the rooms, is called the Airport Game Lodge. Close to the airport, but quiet, with game in a pasture next door: springbok (or maybe it was steenbok, or maybe both), ostrich, various fowl, and apparently in the middle of nowhere. It seems to get its business from business people flying in late one evening and flying out the next day, as well as from tour groups like mine, which arrive late one night and leave on the tour the next morning.

I asked at the reception about possibilities of things to do. Well, there were various tours I could sign up for, and the tour company would pick me up in the morning and drop me off in the evening. They all looked rather expensive, and didn't sound all that great. Also, since I had slept late, it was too late for any of them that day. I said I would like to go into Johannesburg and asked how I could best do that. As a result, the hotel car drove me to a train station about 15 minutes away. From there I could take the train to Johannesburg.

This was part of the new train line connecting the airport to Johannesburg and Pretoria. It is hyper-modern with chip-cards on which you load up some money and the fare is automatically subtracted when you leave the station at your destination. Similar, I guess, to the London underground, or public transportation here in the Netherlands. The train is supposed to attain speeds of 160 km/hr (160 km/hr and no fines, they advertise). It is called the Gautrain, presumably a pun on the name of this part of the country: Gauteng.

But, either the guy at the hotel had it wrong, or I had misunderstood. The train line was only partly completed. It will be fully operational some time next year. The

guy at the ticket desk was very patient and explained how I could get to Johannesburg: Take the Gautrain to Sandton, and from there one of their feeder buses (not an ordinary bus) to Rosebank. In Rosebank I would have to take a taxi to Johannesburg. He said I should ask one of their people which taxi to take, since you couldn't always trust taxi drivers. Of course, coming back I would have to find a taxi in Johannesburg by myself, and I should be careful.

The Gautrain has more security people than I have ever seen. In the station there were maybe a dozen downstairs. Then there were two or three more on each of the platforms upstairs. And in the train there were several—not quite one per car, but close. In the bus there was also one. I got the feeling that security might be a project to increase employment. The unemployment rate is officially around 25%.

At Rosebank, there was a large shopping mall in the middle of town. I didn't really like the looks of any of the taxis and decided to abort my trip to Johannesburg. Instead I looked around the shopping mall, and ate lunch. Prices seem only slightly less than in Europe, but food is cheaper. I had a Greek souvlaki with a salad and a few fried potatoes and a beer at a restaurant with tablecloths and attentive waiters for 80 rand, about €8.50. Then I walked around the neighborhood, which was residential and fairly well-to-do (middle to upper-middle class, I would say). Also I took a look at the South African crafts market, which had lots of small stalls selling 'crafts'. Not surprisingly, many of the sellers had a "special price especially for you," and many were very happy to hear I was from Holland (because of its soccer achievement in the World Cup). Then I got the bus back to Sandton, where the shopping complex just a block or two from the Gautrain is supposed to be famous. And with reason—I've never seen anything like it.

First a word on the design. It covers a full city block (or more). In the center are all the stores, on 4 or 5 levels. Surrounding it is the parking garage which has entrances to the mall on each floor. It is, in fact rather difficult to find an entrance if you don't arrive by car. The only break in the garage is a luxury hotel covering one part of the perimeter. And the stores have everything you would find in New York, Paris, or London. It is also easy to get lost, since the layout is anything but a rectangular grid.

Actually, the Gautrain station in Sandton is similarly laid out with a multi-story car park covering most sides. The Gautrain is meant to be a complete system—you pay to park with the same card you use to pay your fare.

Well, I got good and tired of wandering around the mall. I did find a couple of grocery stores in it, and bought some fruit and a bottle of wine. Food seemed to be quite inexpensive, but alcohol was at European prices. Then I ate a fairly good meal at a seafood place, which, no doubt because of the location, was rather on the expensive side. I had a Calabresi salad (cheese and tomatoes with pesto sauce), grilled line fish with Cajun seasoning, rice, and mixed vegetables (sort of like a ratatouille), and a glass of wine for 260 rand.

There was light entertainment from a neighboring table, where 4 adults (3 women and 1 man) sat with 3 kids (2 girls about 11 or 12 and a boy about 8). Tijkla, Gonda, Hilde, you are not going to believe this. The adults were starting with oysters on the half shell and the kids were making all kinds of comments about how could you

possibly eat such raw, slimy, stinking, yucky things. It wasn't clear to me what the relationship was, but at a certain moment the man offered 100 rand to each kid who ate an oyster. One girl managed it fairly quickly. But the second girl, after many false attempts interspersed with the necessary comments, finally pinched her nose shut and ate an oyster immediately followed by a large glass of water. Having done it, the girls were intent on telling the boy how terrible it was. Every time he would get the oyster somewhere close to his mouth a comment from one of the girls or even from one of the adults, who were having a lot of laughs about it, would cause him to stop. But finally he succeeded with one girl holding the 100 rand note in front of him and the other holding a full glass of water ready. Applause and "well done" from the adults and from the waiter. Then their main courses came. The girls got steaks; I couldn't see what the boy had. One girl complained that her steak was still a bit pink in the middle. The waiter said he had asked the kitchen to make it as well done as possible, but took it back to the kitchen to get it cooked some more. After they were all finished the boy asked if he could have some spare ribs—whether a second portion or something new I'm not sure. The man asked if he was serious, and after a reply of "yes" they were ordered. And he ate them all up, his face rather colorful by the end.

I called the hotel from the restaurant asking them to meet me at the train. The telephone connection was poor and there was a lot of background noise. So I could hardly hear them. I thought they said I should call them again when I got to the station. I said that in the morning they said I should call from Sandton because there were no phones at the station I was going to. I couldn't hear what they said after that. So I went to the train station, caught the train and to my surprise discovered that it was good I hadn't waited any longer because there was only one more train after the one I got. They seem to shut down early; it was only about 8:30. When I got off the train I waited awhile hoping the car from the hotel would show up, but in vain. I looked around for a phone, but there weren't any. I tried my mobile but there was no coverage. It was getting cold. During the day it had been nice and warm, mid-twenties, but after dark it cooled off fast and the wind was pretty strong. Finally I asked one of the security people if there was a phone so I could phone my hotel to come and get me. He said no, but I could use their phone. He would check with the boss. I waited. After a while a white security man came up to me, the first white security man I had seen. I explained the problem to him and gave him the telephone number. He went back to the office, and after a while came back to tell me that they were on their way. By then they were locking up the gates to the parking lot, since the last train had come a while ago. So when the guy from the hotel got there he couldn't get in. But one of the security people saw him, asked what he wanted, and he was directed to a back entrance. Another security man took me there and opened the gate when the car arrived. I must say that the security people were very helpful but that the service from the hotel was pretty bad.

In fact it got even worse, since we couldn't drive straight back to the hotel, but first had to go to the airport to pick up someone who had just arrived. And then we had to stop by a big casino/resort a few miles further to pick up a couple of hotel guests who were busy losing money. When we got there they weren't ready to leave; so we had to

wait another 20 minutes. It was 10:30 before we got back to the hotel. I was pretty disgusted.

**Saturday, 16 Oct.** I woke up at 8:30 fearing I would miss breakfast. But no problem; it was the weekend and breakfast hours shifted by an hour. So I was right in the middle of breakfast time and there was a good supply of everything.

After my experience the previous day I decided just to sit around the hotel all day, admiring the tame wildlife (see photos at <https://goo.gl/photos/LA6v62oZk1nJEXBLA>) and reading. It was very relaxing. I had a lunch with the stuff I had bought the previous day, and I sent out for a pizza in the evening.

**Sunday, 17 Oct.** Again up at 8. At breakfast there were a number of people speaking Dutch, presumably the rest of the group. I went out and saw the large safari truck and a couple of guys, our guide, Thor, and his sidekick, Julian. Thor was a very interesting guy: 51 years old, 10 years in the South African army – sergeant, various jobs, and the last 12 or so years doing mainly tours. Julian was 21 or 22, and, as Thor said, had been to university, although it turned out that he had dropped out in his second year—he likes nature, especially the animals and learning all about them, but university was too scientific. So now he is in training to become a guide. Most of his spare time during the trip would be spent adding species to his list of plants and animals he could identify. Apparently there is a very tough test to get a guides license. Thor said he had originally taken his test in the winter and failed the tree identification—without leaves it is really difficult—but passed on his second try a few months later.



Apparently they had waited some time for me at the airport the previous evening, since Djoser had not informed them that I was not on the flight from Amsterdam. They were glad to find me.

Thor had wanted to get us all together in the restaurant after breakfast, but some had eaten earlier than others and were back in their rooms packing. So we met at the truck. Thor told us his plan for the day, and about 9:30 we finally got underway. First stop was to fill up the truck: 400 liters of diesel, including the long range tank. Petrol costs about 8 rand/liter (about 85 euro-cents) and diesel a bit more.

Then to a shopping center where people could buy any supplies they might need. For most that was beer and water and snacks. The Dutch are constant snackers, and it seemed like every half hour or so someone was passing around a sack of crackers or candies to which I said no thanks. I had read that water in most of South Africa was safe to drink, but I checked with Thor. He confirmed that. So I didn't buy any water. I also didn't buy any beer, figuring (correctly) that I would be able to buy it at a camp site and that it would then be cold (although there was a large ice chest in the truck).

Nor did I buy any snacks. In fact, I didn't even go into the supermarket, but glanced around other stores, in particular a book store selling remainders. I had seen in Sandton that English books were rather expensive, about the same price as in Holland. But here I managed to find an Ian Rankin I hadn't read before heavily marked off, and I had found another mystery (not all that good) at the hotel, its having been left by a previous guest. So now I felt that I had enough reading for the trip. I had been worried I would run out after all the reading I did on Saturday.

Photos for today are at <https://goo.gl/photos/Cb1QTu9L7Qgc9MaCA>.

Then we ate lunch at a fast food restaurant in the shopping mall, which I would classify as typically American except with lower prices: bacon and eggs breakfast, burgers, spare ribs, cola, ice tea. Apparently they didn't have an alcohol license. So I ordered ice tea—a mistake; it was a can of Liptons lemon flavored ice tea, much too sweet for my taste.

There were 15 people in the group. Serena, the youngest at 23, was alone, although that seemed to be a temporary state—she seemed always busy composing or reading SMS messages to/from her boyfriend. Serena was short and thin; Thor nicknamed her Bokkie—think diminutive of *bok* as in steenbok or springbok. Slightly older was Esther (24) and her husband Rik (31). Then Karina (38) and Jacco (40). The rest seemed all in their late forties or early fifties: Frieda, a Belgian traveling alone, was the only non-Dutch person. Edith was also alone, as was Peter. Then three couples: Betty and Hans, Astrid and Jan, Marja and Arie. I was by far the oldest.

Fortunately it was not far to our first National Park, and being not far from Johannesburg and Pretoria, the roads were good. We got to Pilanesberg National Park about 2:00. While waiting for Thor to check us in at the Mayane Resort, we observed a troop of monkeys using a tent as a trampoline. They were having a lot of fun. I can't imagine that the owners of the tent were all that happy though.

The “resort” (I would say camp ground), just outside the Park entrance, had a full range of facilities, from camp sites for your own tent with or without electricity, or for your caravan, to permanent tents on a concrete pad with a wooden door, electricity and a refrigerator, but no water. That last was what we had. Not having water was not so bad since there was a quite acceptable shower and toilet facility about 100 m away.

After settling in, it was back to the truck for our first “game drive”. From the name you could expect to get positioned at some advantageous place and have a crew of beaters drive all the game in your direction. But that wasn't it. We sat in the truck and Thor drove it through the park in search of game until the park closed at 6:30. We saw a fair amount of game for our first drive: wildebeest (or gnu), zebra, giraffe, impala, some water birds whose names I don't know, crocodile. Not bad for the first day.

The camp, like most of the places we were to stay, had a restaurant. I had impala chops (3) and beer for 106 rand. The chops were tasty, but parts of them much less tender than others.

**Monday, 18 Oct.** Up at 5:15, just before sunrise, to be at the park entrance when it opened at 6. (Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/FziNHnyPaW45BJ5FA>.) We added

rhinos, both black and white, to our list, as well as more birds, both water and land, a terrapin in the lake, hippopotamus, tsessebe, elephant, a Southern tree agama (a kind of lizard 20–30 cm long and quite colorful).

The elephants were really nice. Thor spotted a whole herd and positioned the truck in their path. So they all came along past us, some just a few meters away.

About the rhinoceros: The white one has a rather square mouth and grazes, while the black one has a more pointed mouth and browses for leaves and such. Despite the names, there is not much difference in color. One theory is that white is a corruption of the Dutch *wijd* and referred to the wide square mouth. The white rhino is a bit bigger than the black, but not so much you would notice it, since size also increases with age. The black rhino is much more aggressive than the white. A black rhino places her baby behind her with herself ready to attack. A white rhino, on the other hand tends to retreat with the baby going ahead of her.

After the drive we went back to the camp for breakfast/lunch. I just took an omelet for 30 rand rather than the brunch buffet at 110, which was far too much food for me.

It was now getting terribly hot, too hot to be worth game-driving. The animals aren't stupid; they seek out a shady place. A few members of the group were thinking of taking a walk up a hill close to the campsite, but I figured there wasn't all that much to see, and it was really hot, probably close to 40. Most of the group lounged around the campsite. I went to the walk-in aviary, which I had seen a sign pointing to. (Photos at <https://goo.gl/photos/9YqMXh6tiSkAwCkK7>.) It wasn't actually wild, but I could get a lot closer to the birds. The weaver birds were nice, actively weaving their new homes. There would be lots more of them throughout the trip

At 3 we were back in the truck for another game drive. (Photos at <https://goo.gl/photos/VP47Gt8on3dGoKAx9>.) Warthog, black-backed jackal, springbok, kudu, lion were all added to the list. We weren't actually keeping a list, or at least I wasn't. It was enough to try to take pictures of everything without having to identify it and write it down.

One of the giraffes we saw was about 28 years old according to Thor. She had wrinkles. You can tell male and female giraffes apart by looking at the little “horns” on the top of the head. Females have a tuft of black hair at the end of the horn, males don't.

Unfortunately, it was getting late when we saw the male lion lying at the side of the road. We stopped just before him. After a while he woke up, yawned, licked himself (looked like he had been wounded), got up and slowly walked along the side of the truck. My pictures, though, are rather blurred—not enough light so late made the shutter speed only 1/15 s.

We again ate at the camp restaurant. They were out of kudu and eland, so I settled for lamb chops.

**Tuesday, 19 Oct.** Again up at 5:15 for a short drive: more lions, but they were pretty far away. (Photos at <https://goo.gl/photos/cN9k5NGexvE5krmx5>.) Back for breakfast at 8:30. Then to a shopping center to get something for lunch and dinner, since

there were no restaurants along the way to Marakele National park and no restaurant in the park. We each bought our own stuff for lunch, and Thor and Julian bought the stuff for dinner, which they would fix, and for which we would reimburse them.

(Photos for the afternoon are at <https://goo.gl/photos/umTJU9LZ5nB4x2KEA>.) We ate lunch at a picnic area in the park just after arriving. Then we drove around looking for game, but without much luck. In this park the woods are much denser so that it is harder to spot the animals.

We are staying in the Tlopi Tented Camp, a series of tented accommodations on top of stilts at the edge of a lake. There is the “tent” which contains beds, chairs, and bathroom. Outside of the tent, also on the platform is a table to eat on and a cooking area with an electric range as well as a barbecue grill, a refrigerator, and cabinets containing cooking pans and table ware. So all you needed was food. There was also a notice that the baboons knew how to open the refrigerator and cabinets—so lock the cabinets and, if necessary, put something heavy in front of the refrigerator or turn it so that its door faces the wall. Despite all the equipment, Thor and Julian preferred to cook on their own equipment from the truck. It was some kind of pasta with some kind of sauce. I was rather disappointed and wondered how many more times they would cook.

Most of us paid 180 rand to go on a bush walk with park rangers tomorrow morning—starts at 6. Thor said it was cheaper here than in Kruger and he thought there was probably a better chance of seeing something. To go on the walk you had to sign a form releasing the park and the rangers from all responsibility. I was sort of complaining about this to Thor. He assured me that the National Park rangers are highly qualified but that nevertheless accidents could happen because of things beyond the ranger’s control, like some member of the group doing something stupid. I agreed but argued that if an incident was due to gross negligence of a ranger, it should be possible to hold the ranger and the park responsible. Then he told me about an incident a year ago in the Kruger National Park. A ranger had brought his group between a rhino and the water; the rhino charged; and one person was killed. As a result they canceled all bush walks for three months during which all rangers were retrained. He didn’t say what happened to the offending ranger.

That night we had a big storm: lightning, thunder, a fair amount of rain. I was awakened when a window flap of my tent blew open on top of me. I managed to get it shut again and went back to sleep.

**Wednesday, 20 Oct.** <https://goo.gl/photos/3i6XYF3JiKZj61wA9> has this morning’s photos. We were up early and left before breakfast with the rangers. The bush walk was disappointing. The rain during the night had wiped out animal tracks, which made it difficult for the rangers. We walked single file with a ranger in front and in back, each armed with a rifle. My only similar experience had been in Jerusalem, but there the two security men had Uzi machine guns. We saw a bit of game: zebra, gnu, tsessebe, warthog, baboons, monkeys, ostrich. But they were all pretty far away, and it was difficult to get a steady shot. The most interesting was that the ostrich had just laid a clutch of 14 eggs. They were still warm to the touch. Apparently the ostrich just



leaves them lying there in the open, there not being any real enemies.

Photos for the rest of the day are at <https://goo.gl/photos/PKzr6t1AqAnGr6Am8>. After breakfast we packed up and left for the next National Park. Unfortunately, Frieda (the Belgian woman, traveling alone) had developed a severe toothache. So we had to take a detour to find a dentist. Thor phoned the tour company's head office for the address of a good dentist. That gave us a chance to see a town out in the middle of nowhere. I can't say that it was prosperous or that I would want to live there, but the shopping area in the middle of town didn't look exactly poor either. And the dentist who filled Frieda's tooth had been educated in Europe according to the diploma on the wall, and he seemed to have modern equipment. She was satisfied anyway.

Then it was a long drive to Mapungubwe National Park, arriving just after sunset. So, no game drive. We just checked into Leokwe Rest Camp. This was a cut above our previous accommodation. Each cabin had a fully equipped kitchen, living/dining room, bedroom and bathroom, the shower actually being outside (but surrounded by a wall for privacy).

Again, there was no restaurant, and Thor and Julian cooked. This time it was a real South African *braai*, or barbecue, with steaks, sausages, a macaroni salad, small squash about the size of a grapefruit cut in half and filled with maize and spices. Very good. So good we were asking when they were going to cook again.

**Thursday, 21 Oct.** We started the day, as usual, with a drive looking for game. Photos at <https://goo.gl/photos/peBNJrBU1TWqsjXK7>. But this morning had something more. ' The South African side of the river forming the boundary with Botswana is rather high above the river, and there were two outlooks. The first had a walkway constructed well above ground and was in an area fenced off from the rest of the park. It was an experiment to see how things developed if the large animals, read elephants, were kept out. There were lots of different species of trees and birds to see. From the outlook we could look down on the river. There was a little water in the deepest channel of a very wide, sandy river bed. Thor said that you got flash floods which filled it all up. We watched various animals come down to the water to drink.

On the other side of the river, Botswana seemed very flat. Thor and Julian told us a lot about Botswana, a country about which they were both enthusiastic. Since independence (1966) they have been blessed with good leaders and benefit from the lack of ethnic diversity. According to the CIA factsheet 79% are Tswana, 11% Kalanga and 7% white. They are proud of their country. There is virtually no crime—when there is it usually turns out to be a South African according to Thor. There is no law requiring children to go to school, but school is free. So most people do indeed send their kids to school. In fact, the school expectancy is 12 years (definition analogous to life expectancy) and the literacy rate (fraction of those 15 or older who can read) is 81% according to the CIA. It spends 8% of GDP on education making it number 10 in world ranking.

Corresponding figures for South Africa are 13 years school expectancy, 86% literacy, and 5% of GDP spent on education. I suspect that the main reason South Africa's school and literacy numbers are higher is its higher fraction of whites and Asians.

Both countries have a huge HIV problem, but Botswana has “one of Africa’s most progressive and comprehensive programs for dealing with the disease” according to the CIA.

The second outlook was a bit further upstream (north-east). From there we could see the hills of Zimbabwe a bit further upstream where the river marking that boundary feeds into this one. The scenery here reminded me very much of the American South-West: hot, dry, sandstone with lots of wind erosion.

Then it was a long drive to the Forever Resort near Tshipise. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/2p2EWxBerFVfBbiR9>. This is a real commercial resort, not a national park. There were lots of facilities we didn’t need, like tennis courts, horse riding, swimming pools. But the grounds were nicely planted, and the restaurant was not bad.

After settling in we immediately set off on a game drive in the nearby game reserve. That was a disappointment. We didn’t see hardly anything except for a lot of construction: new pipe line, improved roads. Probably that had frightened all the game off to the furthest corner of the reserve. Thor tried to get to a more remote area of the reserve by taking a road reserved for 4-wheel drive vehicles, which the truck wasn’t. But when we came to a stream with a sandy bed, he decided not to risk getting stuck. He had to back up quite a ways before he could turn around.

This evening we all started taking our malaria pills, since the following day we would be getting into a malaria region. Except for Bokkie, who had decided to play it “super-safe” and start the pills immediately on arriving in South Africa. Since the risk at this time of year was not very high, the type of pills we all had were not the strongest ones on the market. In fact, I don’t think we really needed them at all. On the whole trip I only saw one mosquito, and that was before getting to the malaria region. But, better safe than sorry, I guess. Fortunately, none of us had any of the side effects that occasionally occur with this medicine, like diarrhea and vomiting.

**Friday, 22 Oct.** We could sleep late today, it not being worthwhile going back to the reserve. But I woke up at 5:30 anyway, laid in bed for a while and then went for breakfast about 8. We were in the truck by 9, entered Kruger National Park by the Pafuri gate around 10:30, and arrived at our first camp in Kruger in time for lunch. Photos for the morning are at <https://goo.gl/photos/jpLp5cfL1wvij4G76>. The Punda Maria Restcamp is the most northern place to stay in Kruger, and hence one of the smaller camps. The cottage was small, but OK. There were no cooking facilities, but we weren’t using them anyway. As usual, there was a refrigerator and bathroom.

It’s hot—you can tell we have been heading north. The thermometer at the restaurant (in the shade) says 36°. Fortunately, there is little humidity. So it is bearable in the shade with a slight breeze, but not when standing in the sun.

The afternoon game drive was partly successful. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/MWYWAsbrmGscxpxQA>. We came on a water hole, which we observed for a while. Various animals came and drank and left, including some buffalo. There was also a buffalo carcass lying a short ways from the water hole. Probably died of anthrax according to Thor; there is an outbreak every year.

Kruger is overrun with elephants. There are about twice as many as can be naturally supported. Blame Greenpeace, said Thor. Because of them they are not allowed to shoot off the excess elephants. To keep them (and other game) from migrating out of the park towards the south, they have installed water tanks, using windmills to pump up water from underground.

As we drove along we saw large spider webs in the brush, but they were rather strange in that in the center there was a large solid looking piece. Thor told us these were spider clusters. In that solid piece there are around 500 little spiders who all rush out when something gets trapped in the web.

**Saturday, 23 Oct.** Breakfast at 7 and in the truck by 8. We first stopped by the same water hole we had visited the day before. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/AK2uoH4RpyMFgn3F7>.

Then it was a rather long drive heading southeast within Kruger. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/6wm3KpmqmGdwVhs6>. Every so often there would be some wildlife to see. About 10 we stopped at a picnic area for a short break, where we met a group of black South Africans, mostly women, who were visiting the park. They were quite colorfully dressed, and we took lots of pictures of them and us with them. They were very friendly.

About 12:30 we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn, where there was a monument, which served the purpose of a few more pictures. So now we were officially out of the tropics. A bit later we stopped at a camp for lunch and then proceeded on, seeing some more game (photos at <https://goo.gl/photos/PNLd7UyoC99te5Rp6>) and arriving at Olifants Rest Camp around 4. It is a large camp with nice cabins. It is situated high on a cliff looking down on the almost dry Olifants River. Some hippos were bathing in the remaining pools, but they were too far away for good photos.

Dinner in the restaurant of the camp was a buffet. There were three choices: the buffet, a vegetarian version (which was rather *ad hoc*, thought up by the manager on the spur of the moment when confronted with the demands of three of our group), and the pensioners buffet (which was listed along with the full buffet on the menu). There were also *à la carte* items, but after 8 only the buffet was served. After checking what the difference was with the ‘real’ buffet, besides that it was about 30% cheaper, and being told that the pensioner could only choose one rather than all of the three types of grilled meat but did get dessert, which was extra with the normal buffet, I chose to reveal that I was a pensioner. Of course, no one would have guessed—ha!

**Sunday, 24 Oct.** Up early in order to leave, without breakfast, at 6. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/rJQUr5xPmqLBY4PSA>. The game are better early when it is not so hot. We stopped about 8:30 for breakfast.

Then proceeded on towards the next camp, Skukuza. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/nu36rY4kAigiSALq8>. Around noon we stopped for a break at a picnic place along the way. There were no colorful South Africans at this place, just whites with fat meat on the barbecue—it appears that is all they eat.

We arrived at Skukuza around 1:30 and checked into our cabins. Those who wanted to went for lunch. Since it had been a big breakfast I made do with an apple left over from the breakfast buffet. There was a large colony of bats hanging from the roof covering one of the outdoor tables. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/HirBarm19LYV4mZNA>.

Around 3 we were back in the truck for an afternoon game drive. Skukuza is the biggest camp in Kruger, and so there were lots more people on the road. It was slightly reminiscent of Yellowstone with traffic jams at places where game was spotted. I say 'reminiscent' because the scale was much smaller, only 10 or so vehicles at most.

As the trip progresses, it becomes harder to find new types of game. Impalas, giraffes, gnus have become almost boring. Elephants are still interesting if very close.

**Monday, 25 Oct.** Again up at 5 to be at the camp gate when it opened at 6 for the earliest possible game drive. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/ArS7xAixonkaajxy8>. We stopped at a rest area with a snack bar and a nice view of a river. And across the river in the tall grass we saw our first (and last) leopard. Well, we sort of saw it—it was very far away.

Then back to Skukuza to pick up suitcases and a couple of people who hadn't gone on the drive. We stopped for brunch at 11. Then we continued driving south leaving Kruger Park and heading to Swaziland. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/tojC41Wo6ModLysH9>. It is really hot today, above 40, and also the wind is hot offsetting the advantage of low humidity.

At the border we all had to get off the truck and troop through South African immigration to get a stamp in the passport saying we had left the country and then through Swaziland immigration for another stamp. The differences were rather striking in that the South Africans had modern computers apparently hooked up to a national database whereas the Swaziland equipment was decidedly old-fashioned. However, the officials on both sides of the border were bored and slow. Still, one of the South Africans found that one of our party was missing a stamp in her passport. There are supposed to be two stamps, one saying you had entered the country and one saying how long you could stay (standard: 3 months). That second stamp was missing. It is important because if you leave and come back in again within that period you don't get a new period of 3 months but just continue with the old one. So after consultation with superiors and a lot of fuss she added that stamp to the passport. I was in a different line where the official didn't notice that I too was missing that stamp. Finally everything was taken care of and we could proceed on our trip. One item of note: On the immigration officials' counter and elsewhere in the office, both in South Africa and in Swaziland, there were large signs warning about HIV and a container of free condoms. Swaziland leads the world in per cent of the population with HIV.

Swaziland is clearly poorer than South Africa. This is obvious not only from the immigration offices, but from the houses and villages we passed. We were stopped once by a police road block—just checking drivers licenses and vehicle safety. One of the policemen had to see that the required fire extinguisher was present in the truck—it was. He was quite friendly and wished us a pleasant trip joking that he wished he could

go with us rather than sit here in the heat by the roadside. Fortunately it got cooler as we progressed, Swaziland being at a somewhat higher elevation.

Sugar cane seems to be a mainstay of the economy. We passed countless fields of sugar cane and a large sugar processing plant before arriving at the Hlane Royal National Park around 4.

Hlane means wilderness in siSwati. Originally this was a Royal hunting reserve, but was made public as part of the growing interest in preserving Swaziland's game, which had been almost reduced to extinction. The turn-around was started in the early 1960's by Ted Reilly who made a game reserve out of his farm (460 ha = 1137 acres) and started to repopulate it. As the idea caught on, he got support of the king as well as international support to increase the size by a factor 10 or so, and the king decided to make his hunting reserve a game reserve open to the public. Now both, along with a third area are part of a private, non-profit Royal Trust administered by Big Game Parks.

At the entrance there was a huge collection of poachers' traps and snares. Poaching incidents run at the rate of 3 or so per week. According to Thor, Botswana has the right approach to poachers. Their anti-poaching squad includes ex-mercenaries, and where poachers are active (not the occasional poacher who captures a wild animal to feed his hungry family, which is only a very small part of the poaching) they are gone after in a military type operation, which likely as not ends up with dead poachers.

The cabins are in the traditional round shape, stucco walls on a concrete floor, complete with a bathroom, but (for the first, and only, time on the trip) without electricity. We have to make do with kerosene lamps. Fortunately, they provide matches. And to be absolutely sure, just before dark someone comes around and lights them all. They also warn that the water is not safe to drink. So I'll have to buy some for the first time of the trip.

The dining room was open on one side, and beyond an electric fence was a water hole. Rhinos were grazing, a hippo was in the pool, there were birds, and other animals wandered in and out of view. That was quite enjoyable.

**Tuesday, 26 Oct.** It seems almost cold after the past few very hot days, but really it's only hot rather than very hot. We took a game drive to a pond where you could watch the wildlife from a blind. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/Ub3aVGdk4a4v4MUb6>. There were most of the usual animals including a giant crocodile. The evening before someone at the lodge said she had seen a crocodile catch and eat an impala at the water hole, but we had no such luck. The crocodile just lay there—maybe he was still digesting yesterday's impala.

Going further, the truck came to a thick tree branch too low to get under and too big to just break through. Thor had to back up a considerable distance before he could turn around.

For lunch we went to the country club in a near-by town. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/GRg8gSm7akTnhDDDA>. The houses in the vicinity seemed quite nice. The country club seemed to be run by the sugar company, which dominates the countryside. We ate lunch, used their electric outlets to charge up our camera batteries, and most

of the group jumped into their swimming pool. Finally, around 4, we went back to the camp and relaxed until dinner at 7. After dinner there was a traditional dance performance by the staff of the camp—not really all that great.

**Wednesday, 27 Oct.** It took a long time to check out. They had kept track of what we all ate and drank by writing it down according to room number, which was more efficient than one big list as in some of the previous places we stayed. But they had not processed these lists. So one by one they did that. One woman had the lists. She would read off what you had to another woman who would write it down on the bill while yet another checked the price. Finally, with the help of a calculator everything would be added up. Then she asked you to check it, which you had already done in your head while she was using the calculator. After you agreed that it was OK, yet another woman would take your money (or process your credit card). It went extremely slowly because the woman who read the list could hardly read, the woman who wrote the bill could hardly write, and the woman who used the calculator could hardly do that. But they were all very cheerful and pleasant. And we could look at the birds and animals while we waited. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/MGKC1dAKsDgf77sV7>.

Then we headed back to South Africa. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/8gXRkizSpKXZfTcv5>. Again a police road block, this time at an intersection. They were stopping everything coming from any direction. There were quite a few cars and trucks. Finally we got through. The border crossing today is more important than the one where we entered Swaziland, and both the Swazi and South African facilities were nicer. The South African part looked brand new, probably just completed in time for the World Cup. We were lucky that there were no other tour buses or line of trucks. According to Thor it can take a couple of hours if there is lots of traffic. This time my passport was checked by a white woman, the first white South African immigration person I had seen. She seemed very efficient, noticed that I was missing the stamp saying how long I could stay, and without comment added it along with the entry stamp. The other officials also seemed quite efficient. Also here there were boxes of free condoms and posters on HIV.

We got to Bayala Lodge about 1, had lunch there and then went to a Zulu curio shop selling lots of stuff made by hand by local people. Then on to a nearby town because Peter needed an ATM. This was clearly a less well-to-do area than those we had been through on the first part of the trip. The town looked pretty filthy and run down. There was a market where people from the surrounding area were trying to sell a few vegetables. Some of the group used the opportunity to buy some cheap tee shirts. I went to the SPAR supermarket and bought another bottle of water, since our lodge said that their water came from a bore hole and was not safe to drink. The supermarket was interesting. There was virtually no processed foods. Meat was self-service, and I don't mean that you helped yourself to plastic-wrapped packages. Rather, you took a plastic bag and with tongs filled it with pieces of meat out of large plastic bins. Flour was sold in 10 kg sacks. So either they bake a lot or they don't get to the grocery store very often. I found that there too they round off to 5 cents (or whatever they're called), but not like in Holland. The 7.99 rand bottle of water only cost me 7.95 rand.

As we drove back to the lodge the sky darkened and it looked like a good storm was brewing. Indeed, dinner kept being interrupted by power failures. Thirty seconds after each failure the emergency generator would kick in. Then after a few minutes the main power would be restored, only to fail again a few minutes later. Finally they just turned the emergency generator permanently on.

**Thursday, 28 Oct.** We spent the day driving around the Hluhluwe Umfolozi Park. It is a nice park, quite hilly. Unfortunately, it rained a lot of the time. Nevertheless we did see some game. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/GDFUuN7Yo2rpuVWu5>.

**Friday, 29 Oct.** Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/SbA4DNKVcNxG5iDYA>. I was up a bit early and so could take a short (30 min.) walk into the woods around the lodge. I didn't see any wildlife, but heard a few birds. It was rather muddy from all the rain. So I turned back earlier than necessary. The thunder storm had not only played havoc with the electricity, but also with the telephone, which still hadn't been fixed. So the credit card terminal didn't work—I had to pay cash, which sort of messed up my plans.

It was a long drive to Drakensberg, a long mountain chain. Along the way we stopped at Howick Falls to (1) see the Falls and (2) to eat lunch. The Falls were pretty nice; there was a nice view of them from a look-out on the edge of the town. The town itself, at least in the area near the look-out seemed quite touristy. I chose the pensioners' menu for lunch; the others were envious.

There was a change in hotels. Apparently the place we were supposed to stay got a big booking from a police convention and asked that we go elsewhere. The organizers found us a B&B, the Easby Historic House, near Bergville. It is a large old ranch house. 'Historic' refers to an important battle in the Boer War which was fought up the hill from the house. A friendly, elderly couple run the place. The rooms all bore names of army officers, presumably ones who had participated in that battle. The man gives tours of the battlefield. We could have signed up for one, but none of us felt close enough to the Boer War to make it interesting.

The woman fixed baboetie, which turned out to be a ground meat dish served on rice. It reminded me of moussaka, but with beef rather than lamb and without the eggplant and béchamel. And there was a salad. Portions were a bit skimpy, which some of us complained about. There was a very red sunset, which was made even more spectacular by the fields in the distance that they were burning off.

**Saturday, 30 Oct.** Being a B&B, they served breakfast; so we didn't have to go to a restaurant. Unfortunately, it wasn't all that great a breakfast. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/QQhh6JGfZGhUtkDd8>.

After breakfast we drove to the northern part of Drakensberg, the Royal Natal National Park, where there were some hiking possibilities as well as a camp site. We split into two groups. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/hgq3HFUpxmQdnHtv8>. Thor led most of us on the more demanding route up to Gudu Falls, a nice waterfall, while Julian took Peter, Frieda, Marja and Arie on the easier route, which was paved for a

large part, though as it turned out, still quite steep. Some were surprised that I went on the more demanding hike. But I had checked with Thor about how high it went; he thought about 300 m, and I thought I could do that. And I had my walking stick with me. Most of the hike was easy enough, though the last half hour or so up to the foot of the falls was very steep, and the path was overgrown so that you had to climb over fallen trees and duck under low branches. I got pretty winded but just took my time. The falls were worth it, as was the chance to get some exercise after so many days of mainly sitting in the truck. I say sitting, but sometimes the roads had been so bad that it was more like flying, being suddenly a foot above your seat when the truck's wheels fell into a pothole followed by a good jolt to your back when you again made contact with the seat. We rested around the pool at the base of the falls and ate the sandwiches the woman at the B&B had prepared. Then we walked back down by a different route. In all it was about 5 hours, 8.5 km, and 300 m. Several of the late-forties/early-fifties members of the group congratulated me on the walk and hoped that they would still be able to do something like that in 20 years.

Back at the B&B, most people gathered in the bar to watch a rugby match on TV. At the end Julian was happy; his team had won. Dinner this evening was better, an eland roast with rice and succotash, a bit of cold wart hog on the side, and ice cream for dessert.

**Sunday, 31 Oct.** On our way to the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, we passed the Sterkfontein Dam lake, which serves as a reservoir for Gautang. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/YKUNwXVSzmmnbADM6>.

The Golden Gate N. P. really made me think of the Southwestern U.S. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/HACNaSBuciumPgch6>. It was just that the wildlife was different. In the park the only place to eat was at a fancy resort hotel, which only served a buffet lunch for 140 rand. I refused and went for a walk while the others ate. It looked like the lunch was good and worth its price, but I don't like heavy lunches. So I climbed up the hill behind the hotel and hiked around for an hour. There were a couple of caves, the inside of which was cool and a bit damp. In one of them there was a large plant spreading out over most of the floor of the cave, which had nice flowers. I wondered whether it grew there naturally or had been planted. A barbed wire fence had been put up around it to protect it from tourists.

Then it was late enough that we could get into our chalets at the Glen Reenen Rest Camp, which were very nice. After that I went for a walk up to Echo Ravine. That wasn't anywhere near as steep or as far as yesterday's walk. The ravine narrowed to almost a cave; at the top the two sides almost touched. At the end it opened out again. And yes, there was an echo. Just as I was about to go back down, I heard others coming: four of the younger members of our group, who were very surprised to find me there.

Later in the afternoon we all got into the truck for a couple of scenic drives. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/fPqnEMtJ6bhqUxaz9>. We saw some animals, but unfortunately there were no vultures at the site where they hang up carcasses for them in an attempt to help an endangered species of vulture. There wasn't any carcass hanging



there either, which maybe explains the absence of vultures.

Thor and Julian did another *braai* this evening: lamb chops, sausages, potato salad. But there wasn't as much space as the previous times they cooked, which made it rather cramped. Still tasted good though.

**Monday, 1 Nov.** We left the Glen Reenen Rest Camp around 8:30. Photos are at <https://goo.gl/photos/pdTzJq6QQF5akD2R6>. An hour later we stopped in Clarens for breakfast. Clarens is a nice, very neat, town, supposed to be a center for artists. And there were several shops selling art. It also appeared to be a mostly white community.

It was a long day in the truck. First, it was a long drive to the Johannesburg/Pretoria area. There we got stuck in traffic. South African freeways are not much different from European or American ones. The idea was to see a few sites in Pretoria.

We ended up seeing only Jan Smuts' house in a suburb of Pretoria. He was an important South African military and political leader: led innovative commando raids in the Second Boer War, held various cabinet posts including Prime Minister from 1919 until 1924 and from 1939 until 1948, led South African forces in World War I until invited by Lloyd George to be part of the Imperial War Cabinet, was a chief negotiator at the Paris Peace Conference and supporter of a strong League of Nations, again a member of the Imperial War Cabinet in World War II (apparently there were plans that he should replace Churchill as prime minister should he die or become incapacitated—an idea that may or may not have been constitutional), took part in drafting the United Nations Charter and in the negotiation of the Paris treaty ending World War II in Europe. He is the only person to sign both the WW I and WW II peace treaties.

His house is now a museum, which was closed by the time we got there. Julian was particularly disappointed by that. He wanted to show us the photo of his grandfather, who had been a senator. We could only look around the grounds. We saw the Cadillac limousine Smuts used as prime minister, the gun carriage on which his coffin was carried at his funeral, and a couple of tanks used by South Africa in WW II.

Then we drove to a restaurant. The crime problem was obvious as we drove. All houses were surrounded by walls with barbed wire or razor wire and had alarm installations, mostly with a sign that the alarms had armed response.

The restaurant was The Godfather Restaurant, complete with pictures and drawings reminiscent of the movie. It was, however, not an Italian restaurant, but a steak house. My steak was big (300 g), and good, and not expensive—together with 2 large draft beers about €15.

While we were eating, a heavy thunder storm came up, but it was almost over by the time we finished. Then to the airport where check-in was fairly efficient.

**Tuesday, 2 Nov.** Took off about 20 minutes late, the delay due to the plane having arrived a bit late because of the thunder storm. The plane was full, but I could get some sleep. We arrived at Schiphol on time at 10:20 but had to wait 15 minutes for a free gate. It was raining here too. I just missed the direct train to Nijmegen. Luckily it was dry for my walk home from the station.

In all, it was a good trip. The group was fine, and the food was generally acceptable, if not outstanding in any way. Of course, things can always be better. It would have been nice if the rainy day had been when we visited the reserve with all the construction rather than at Hluhluwe Umfolozi Park. But still, we saw lots of wildlife, often from close-by. We saw the Big Five—elephant, rhinoceros, buffalo, lion, and leopard—although the leopard was so far away it almost doesn't count, and numerous other animals, as well as lots of birds and plants.