

An aerial photograph of the FNB Stadium in Johannesburg, South Africa. The stadium is a large, white, oval-shaped structure with a distinctive roof. In the background, the rugged, dark peaks of Table Mountain and other surrounding hills are visible under a clear blue sky. The foreground shows the stadium's exterior and some surrounding urban infrastructure.

CultureShock!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

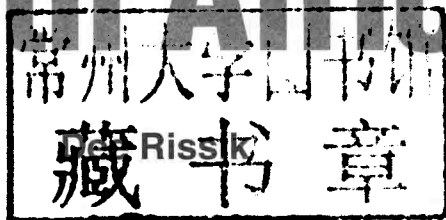
South Africa

Dee Rissik

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A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

South Africa



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Moving from the cosy confines of wherever you call home to the strange and wonderful (or initially sometimes far from wonderful) ways of a new land, a new people and a new culture, is certainly no easy task. In fact, it rates very high on the ladder of the most stressful thing we do in our lives.

But one of the best ways to minimise the hassles, inconveniences and insecurities we all feel when surrounded by things strange and new, is to be as well-informed as possible about each aspect of the life we are about to begin.

Being a born and bred South African who has had the privilege of living and working in a wide variety of foreign countries and cultures, I am only too aware of how the initial difficulties seem insurmountable: the smallest setback can seem like a major calamity in those early days. But once you are an old hand, you can rest assured you will look back at those tetchy moments in stunned amazement and with a large dose of merriment.

I hope reading this book will give you a little insight into who we South Africans really are, how we live and how we have changed. I hope it will be enough of a taste of the Rainbow Nation to make your stay, however long or short it may be, a positively memorable one.

Writing this book was no easy task, but for the first edition I had the assistance of my mother, Jan Rissik, whom I thank for all the hours of research she did for me, for reading some of my copy and bouncing ever more ideas off me. Now, more than a decade later, I hope this fully updated, new edition again captures the spirit of a very different country. My great appreciation and thanks is extended to everybody who has helped me put this book together—wittingly, deliberately, or quite unintentionally by simply being South African.

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS: SHIFTING SANDS

CHAPTER 1



'I heard the drum beat behind your footsteps
And the children of the south began to sing.'
—Mazisi Kunene, South African poet

IT MAY SEEM STRANGE FOR ME to be writing about my 'first impression' given that I was born and raised here. But the explanation is simple. I have lived away from South Africa on so many occasions in my adult life—sometimes for a number of years at a time, sometimes only for a year or two, or even just a few months—that each time I return home, I find myself almost as an outsider looking in on my countrymen, my kith and kin and our volatile nation. It is always with renewed amazement, with sheer delight that I re-experience the changes, reconnect with who we are becoming.

This is probably because in many ways we really are a new nation. From 26–28 April 1994, when we all stood together in queues that were hours, if not days, long, we really were voting not just for a democratic government, but for a totally new existence. The changes in South Africa since then have been monumental, and, some say with justification, miraculous. Of course they have not all been easy, but I think it is that very grittiness that gives South Africa an edge, a dynamism that gets under your skin. It's that sense of really being alive. And I sorely miss it when I am away. I regret at times the fact I have not always experienced each change as it happens, that I have missed out, at least first-hand, on some of the political imbroglios that have been blown wide open by our ever-watchful press, the growth of vast new business empires by people who were once disbarred from leading a real life, the transformation of our culture from racially

segregated pastiches into a rich and constantly changing whole.

But then I step off a plane at OR Tambo International Airport (and even the airport has changed its name twice in the last decade or so!) in Johannesburg and within seconds the transformation from an outsider to being 'at home' begins. At first I notice all the little details that could otherwise become background noise in our busy heads. I notice how so many

people smile and are warm and friendly. I notice how pleasant and helpful ordinary people can be. How they greet each other, and me, even if they don't know me, and even if they may never see me again. I notice how brightly the sun shines and the utterly blue sky. I notice the *pizzazz* with which our youth wear their clothes, their attitudes, their iPods, their hope! I see them all as if for the first time, again. And I marvel at how much has changed. I marvel at our fortune at having been given a second chance, a chance to start our country all over again, and I marvel at the new and exciting way we are going about it.

Sometimes, from afar, I wish I had a closer understanding of who our new young South Africans really are and where they plan to take our country, our future. But when I get back and meet them again, face to face, I realise there is no knowing where we are going, but I do know I have every confidence they will make exciting, new choices.

Just recently I had the most wonderful experience of enjoying my country through the eyes of a very dear friend from New York (a French Canadian, born and raised in Montreal) who had never before set foot on the African continent. I have been lucky to be able to include Lise Curry's insightful and generous first-timer's impressions. You enjoy!

Naming of Airports

In 1994, the post-apartheid government decided on a policy of not naming airports after politicians. Hence Jan Smuts International Airport (named after a former prime minister) was changed to Johannesburg International Airport, as were the Cape Town and Durban airports. In 2006, it was decided that Johannesburg International Airport would be renamed, again, as OR Tambo International Airport, in honour of the late anti-apartheid statesman.

My South African Journal (12–26 February 2007)

A dream come true—embracing the land of Africa. Right off the plane at the Johannesburg airport, I feel a sense of ease—



The author, left, with Lise Curry, a friend from New York, on an excursion in the bush near Nedile Game Lodge in the Welgevonden Game Reserve. It was Lise's first ever visit to South Africa.

not only because Dee and David are there to greet me, but because I sense all around me an atmosphere of welcome.

As we drive into town, Johannesburg strikes me as a world-class city with beautiful neighbourhoods—all hills, glorious trees and well-tended homes—though I cannot help noticing that every house is strung with wire (electric fencing), surrounded with steel gates and posted with prominent security signs warning of an 'Armed Guard Response'. I am not taken aback. I do not relate this especially to South Africa; after all, you see such features in many European spots.

It is the following day that I really feel I have landed in Africa. As we head out of the city for a 4-day visit to the Nedile Game Lodge, the landscape outside the city of scrub brush is exactly what I had imagined the 'African terrain' to be. And as we drive north I observe some scenes that first brought to me the dichotomy of feelings that have stayed with me ever since.

While we were travelling on a modern highway I saw people walking, mostly alone, on either side of the road. And I couldn't but help realise that they were walking long distances in the full African sun because I too was travelling those same forlorn distances from one remote crossroad to another—but by car. I couldn't help thinking: Walking to where? To seek work, to seek shelter, to seek aid? The question stays though we move on, soon to arrive at the land of total enchantment.

As we arrive at the game lodge entrance we are received by our guide Walter, and I know the very minute I board the Land Rover that this is why I've travelled so far. The air is magical, my first sighting of wild life completely stuns me and the drive up and down valleys and mountains, through the mix of stony terrain, unusual trees, bushes and grasses, makes me feel I have entered another world.

The lodge is magnificent—a 5-star establishment. The accommodation is superb, the surrounding landscape awe-inspiring and the service first-class. The key element is of course our guide. As Walter takes us on twice-daily excursions into the bush, we quickly realise that we totally lucked up. Walter is extremely knowledgeable and totally sensitive to the land, the flora, the animals, the birds. He projects such a feeling of security and belonging that I'm overtaken by an intense sense of wonder and harmony. He stops the Land Rover frequently to point out plants and he tells us of the traditional use black people make of them. He points out birds (that we surely would have missed), gives comments on the land and the various animals we encounter. I am transfixed by his passion.

He led us to observe almost all the major animal species and birds of the region, including a lioness and her two daughters right after a kill, an owl on a kill, rhinos right near us, zebras, giraffes, warthogs, wildebeest, kudus, jackals and a magnificent male lion making his way down the road all alone at sundown.

The Ranger and The Bull Elephant

One adventure will forever stay with me and I've recounted it dozens of times already: on one of our outings we came across a herd of elephants. A young bull started walking towards the Land Rover. As the elephant approached Walter told us to remain quiet, that he would deal with the situation. The elephant came to within a couple of feet of us on the passenger side. Walter started speaking, "Hey, boy, you've come over to say hello? OK, now, go back." The elephant took two steps back and then flauntingly another step forward. Walter spoke more loudly and banged the vehicle with his hand upon which the elephant somewhat sheepishly stepped back and rejoined his group. To Walter's immense credit I never had an ounce of fear—all as a result of the total confidence we had in him. From the very start he gave us to feel his total respect for and communion with the animals.

I was so totally immersed in our experience at Nedile that I had not a thought of any life before or after. The staff at the lodge was a big factor in our contentment. All the service people, except the guides, were Tswana or Venda, including the chef who prepared great buffets and sit-down dinners. All the food was superb. The produce was incredible: I had the best peaches and pineapple ever at their table.

Still floating on a cloud, we headed back to Johannesburg.

There I was warmly and hospitably received at the homes of Dee's friends. Bronwen, an artist and teacher, owns a house in a 'mixed' neighbourhood and is committed to stay in the area as she loves the multicultural atmosphere. Clive, an international artist and curator, and his partner, Rocco, a well-known musician, are settled in a beautifully redesigned house and grounds. I felt welcomed everywhere and also privileged to be on the inside. The feelings I retain from my social exposure in Johannesburg, inside and out, remind me of the societal atmosphere in Montreal that prevailed in the 1960s during my college years when the English, though a small minority, still held dominion over the French Canadian population. Though major changes would soon come, as they have now in South Africa, both populations in Quebec took time to adapt. So too are the South Africans. Real change takes time. I was struck by many beautiful street scenes, but also troubled by the incredible crowdedness of the city's black neighbourhoods and the living conditions in the townships. Although some areas had some nice houses, these were crowded onto minuscule properties, as were the shanties a few streets further.

When I took a tour of the townships I felt so intrusive, yet I know how important it is that the living conditions be seen first hand in order to precipitate change. But to see women doing laundry at a sort of water hole some few miles from a cosmopolitan centre, to see people fetch water at communal water taps, seemed so retrograde. It truly shocked me. If I had observed the same scenes in far-off areas

I would not have been so disturbed. But not so near to a modern and rich city. At the same time I found it incredibly moving to see people living such an archaic way of life

yet keeping on day after day. The striking sight of the mini-bus taxis making the round trips from city centre to townships crowded to overcapacity with people who have no other option to get to work filled me with admiration and compassion. All that in plain sight of others going to work comfortably in their private cars.

From Johannesburg, I went on to Cape Town with great anticipation. All I'd heard of Cape Town was how beautiful it is. And it is so. My lovely hotel, right on the waterfront, with full view of Table Mountain, started my stay on the right note. Somehow, everything seemed to me *sotto voce*—the perfect weather, the perfect views. The next day, on an excursion to Cape Point, I met a fellow visitor from Edmonton, in Canada, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police on assignment for the United Nations in Sierra Leone. After we talked a bit, he asked me if I had noticed what he had. He was totally astounded to observe that here he was in Africa and everybody around was white. And right he was. The fact is the only black people I came across in Cape Town—at the hotel, in the shops and on the various excursions and outings I took—were a few front-desk staff, some restaurant help and some public service workers. Most everyone I saw was white. It surprised me.

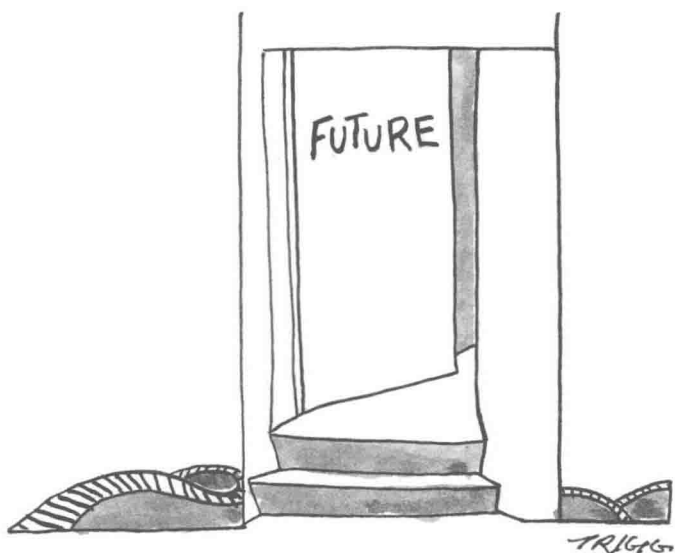
However, those observations could not take away the incredible experience of travelling to Cape Point, climbing up to the lighthouse and feeling truly at the tip of Africa. Looking out at this magnificent view, I felt such a sense of communion with the earth, the ocean and the sky, it brought me to a spiritual plane I can never forget. And again, the land in these parts: I found such wonderment in the trees, the wine lands, the penguin retreats, the seals sunning on their rocks.

My heart is filled with emotion as I write these lines. I am so grateful for the opportunity to have lived this experience. I do know that it has changed me. It opened new vistas outward and inward. All I can call for is more rapid progress to bring greater parity in living conditions. I wish for this with all my heart for this most beautiful country—South Africa.

—Lise Curry, Brooklyn New York

THE LAND AND ITS HISTORY

CHAPTER 2



'Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.'

—Inaugural address of Nelson Mandela, first democratically elected president of South Africa, 10 May 1994

AS ONE OF, OR PERHAPS EVEN the first cradle of mankind, South Africa has as long and convoluted a history as it has a diverse and dramatic geography and wide range of climate zones. Entwine all these and there is a life time's worth of things to explore, observe, immerse yourself in, or just chill out and enjoy.

THE LOOK

Two oceans, a warmer one down the east side of the country and a chilly one on the western seaboard, wash the 2,800 km (1,740 miles) coastline and its long, sandy and sometimes, rocky beaches. Dramatic mountains erupt from the ancient land and areas of vastly differing rainfall give rise to scrubby deserts, rolling plains, delicate indigenous forests and lush, semi-tropical vegetation. But it's not all beauty and environmental paradise. A fast-growing population means the need for ever more industrial and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of natural and mineral resources. Although the conservation lobby is strong, the country wages a constant battle to keep a balance between pristine natural beauty which drives a large part of the local and foreign tourist trade, and the upliftment of poorer population groups.

WHERE IS IT?

South Africa's land area is 1,184,825 sq km (457,463.50 sq miles), as compared to the continent of Africa which measures some

30 million sq km (11,583,065 sq miles). From west to east, it stretches from longitude 16°E of Greenwich to 33°E. The northernmost tip of South Africa is at latitude 22°S, just north of the Tropic of Capricorn, while the southernmost point, Cape Agulhas is at latitude 35°S.

Being the southernmost country of the African continent means it is a very long way, even by air, from Europe, Asia, North America and even North Africa.

As part of one of the three major land masses in the southern hemisphere, South Africa does not stretch quite as far south as either Australia or Tierra del Fuego in South America, but it still has gloriously warm, sunny summers from about October to March, which does mean no white Christmases. Late summer and autumn merge quickly into one another in April and May and winter generally sets in from June till late August. Spring is usually short with changeable weather.

A WORLD IN ONE COUNTRY

It is not a difficult task for the tourism industry to promote South Africa as a travel destination as its geographic and cultural diversity lends itself well to the well-worn slogan “a world in one country”. In the east of the country there are rolling grasslands and lowveld bush, then forests and sugarcane plantations in the sub-tropical coastal belt. However in the west, the earth is baked-dry by furnace-like skies, fanned by desert winds, and sometimes threaded with rivers that are frequently dried by the droughts.

The Central Plateau

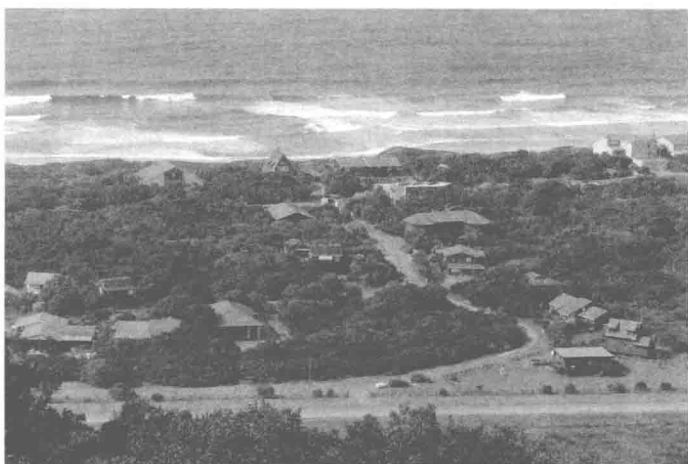
Perched atop a dramatic mountain range, the Drakensberg, the central plateau was mostly a treeless savannah at the time of the African mass migrations in the early- to mid-1800s, and the arrival of the first foreign settlers in the early 1800s. Today the geography is only altered by the massive urbanisation and extensive industrialisation. Major cities like Johannesburg, Pretoria and Bloemfontein rise high into the radiant blue African sky where once only grass swayed in the wind and thousands of antelope grazed peacefully.



Outdoor fun—diving into a crystal-clear mountain pool in the Magaliesberg, only an hour or two's drive from the harsh hustle of Johannesburg.

The Eastern Seaboard

From Kosi Bay in the north to Cape Agulhas in the south, the eastern seaboard is washed by the warm, balmy Indian Ocean. The KwaZulu-Natal coast being near the equator, has mild weather and warm seas, so holiday makers can 'do Durban' in mid-winter and still enjoy the surf. The eastern Cape coastal



South Africa's eastern seaboard is a top summer holiday destination because the beaches are long and golden and the weather is usually perfect for seaside fun.