

South Africa Trip

With Willis's Walkabouts

Monday 3 September to Monday 22 October 2001

Diary by Ron Blomfield

Party Members:

Russell Willis Trip Organiser and Team Leader Darwin.

John Murray Chemist & **Marie Agrums** Architect Wollongong.

Pat Sampson Retired Horticulturalist Claremont, Tasmania.

Ron Blomfield Electrician Gosford..

Sharryn McWilliam Personal Carer Erina.

Christian Wesley Historian Austria.

Karen Sheedy Primary School Teacher Melbourne.

Monday 3rd September 2001; On the road to Sydney by 5.30 am and a most welcome surprise awaits me at the International Airport. Sharryn and I have been upgraded by Qantas to Business Class for the fourteen hour flight to Johannesburg. The plane departed Sydney at 9.25 am. and flew 11,000 km on a path south over Canberra, Melbourne and almost to Antarctica before travelling westward, trying to reduce the severe head wind effect of the Roaring Forties. Arrived in Johannesburg at 15.45 local time.

Note: there is a plus eight hour difference between South Africa time and Australia.

We were required to collect our baggage and clear customs here before a very hurried dash for the Domestic terminal and catch a British Airways flight to Cape Town. This was a 2 hour flight spanning approx. 2,000 km. Arrived in Cape Town and collected our luggage before hiring a local Taxi for the transfer to Dale Court Guest House where we met with John and Marie.

The weather is light rain with cool winds blowing.

Totally exhausted after more than 20 hours of travelling, we are soon through a quick shower and into a very welcome and comfortable bed for a good nights sleep.

Dale Court offers excellent accommodation-very neat, clean, tidy and secure and close enough for easy walking to the waterfront and the Cape Town centre.

Tuesday 4th. September 2001; A casual start and stroll into Cape Town centre with Sharryn, John and Marie. View some of the many open markets with a huge variety of craft goods and the old Botanical gardens then visit the National Gallery, South Africa Museum, and the 1666 Castle of Good Hope. Dinner at the Victoria waterfront complex.

There are many seals in the bay and on the jetties within this area.

Cape Town is a very picturesque and relatively clean city set between the delightful backdrop of the huge Table Mountain and the bustling complex of the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront. There are always people trying to sell you some craft goods and many buskers entertaining the people in the streets. Unusual however was the many lads directing motorists to vacant parking spaces, then promising to " look after your car " for which they received a direct payment and they then would only pay the parking fee if a patrol person should appear! A cunning way of earning quite large sums of extra income.

Wednesday 5th; Absolutely gale force winds overnight, reported to be "the worst for 50 years" with "waves to 17 metres" inflicting severe damage on the waterfront areas and several ships blown aground or badly damaged.

We meet with Russell and Pat at breakfast before walking back into the town centre so Russell can make final arrangements and bookings relevant to our coming trips. It is now raining steadily and we dodge between undercover areas and markets. The Pan Pacific Markets occupy an old multi story building and is an absolute maze of narrow corridors and dingy rooms packed full to overflowing with (mostly Junk) items that the locals are desperately trying to sell to all who dare to venture into this complex. We escape and spend the remainder of the day strolling around in the shelter of the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront – *very similar to Darling Harbour*.

Thursday 6th; We hire a local Taxi to take us to the bottom terminal of the Cable Car for a ride onto the plateau top of Table Mountain. This takes us from a pleasant mild morning in Cape Town, up into extremely dense cloud and misty rain with absolutely no view in any direction. We locate a trail that winds across the plateau through the thick fog cloud, to pass Maclear's Beacon built in 1844, before descending via the very wet, steep and badly eroded Skeleton Gorge and Smuts Track to emerge in the **Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens**. This delightful park has fabulous displays of the many native Proteas and offers good views back up towards Table Mountain which is still shrouded in the clouds that we have just walked through. Another Taxi for the return trip to Dale Court Guest House and a delightful dinner at the nearby Belgium Restaurant.

Friday 7th; We wake to an absolutely magic clear morning and stroll to the nearby Green Point waterfront viewing some of the devastation caused during Tuesday nights storm. Everyone (including Russell) admits to being very muscle sore after yesterdays steep descent off Table Mountain.

Take delivery of two hire Fiat Palio Weekender Station Wagons and start a casual tour southwards towards the Cape of Good Hope via Koeel Bay and Llandudno to Hout Bay. From here our route along Chapman's Peak Road has been closed due to a landslide and we were diverted to Noordhoek via Tokai which allowed us to visit Groot Constantia Manor House -1692, oldest in South Africa. Just south of of the Slangkop Point Lighthouse we came across the Singapore cargo vessel "Ikan Tanda" hard aground off Scarborough. Floundering in Tuesday nights storm, there seems little hope that this vessel will be refloated and will probably become another victim of this very wild coastal stretch.

We entered the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve late so proceeded straight to Cape Point and rode the last available Cable Car to the Lighthouse to view the Atlantic and Indian oceans joining to the South. Many very tame Baboons in the carpark and surrounding areas put on a good display for the tourists. Stop off at Cape of Good Hope, Africa's Southwesternmost point, sighting Ostrich and Bontebok at quite close range before a late exit from the park and drive to Boulder Beach in False Bay. Here we get very close to African Jackass Penguin which derived its name from the donkey-like braying call they use. Dinner at Muizenberg before returning to Dale Court concluding a fantastic day in great weather.

Saturday 8th; Last minute grocery shopping before we start the journey north to Yzerfontein on the West Coast. Here we sight many Dassies (Hyrax) sunning themselves on the rocks. They are supposed to be related to the elephant but to my unprofessional judgment I would suggest more like a large malformed guinea pig with no tail and very short legs.

We are booked into the delightful private Cape Villas right on the beach front just out of Yzerfontein and treated to the delightful scene of several whales, including a mother and her new calf, frolicking just beyond the first breaker directly out the front of our flat. Dinner at the local Restaurant.

Sunday 9th; Early rise and finalise packing for the start of our first hiking section. A short drive further north and we enter the **West Coast National Park** beside the Langebaan Lagoon and continue to the Postberg, Tsaarsbank gate where we leave the vehicles and commence hiking by 9.15 am. This section is renowned for its fantastic displays of wildflowers and is only open to visitors between August and September. Light rain and cool winds prevail as we pass through fields of absolutely millions of tiny, very colorful flowers and sight Scorpion, Leopard Tortoise and Ostrich eggs.

The afternoon weather turns foul and we make very quick time as we proceed to our designated overnight campsite beside Plankiesbaai Beach, completing 13 km. for the day. We hastily pitched our tents between torrential rain squalls using the toilet facilities as refuge when required. A lucky break for dinner and everyone retired to bed by 7.00 pm.

The Postberg section of the West Coast National Park is a "Contractual Park", which means that it is private property managed by the South African Parks Authority while the owners retain the right of entry and occupation of certain sections.

Monday 10th; Overcast with misty rain and strong winds as we pack to leave Plankiesbaai Beach by 9.00 am. Remaining close to the coastline, we soon cross a headland and descend onto the sandy Sixteen Mile Beach. Many common Terns and large Kelp Gulls are sheltering between the rocky outcrops and a huge Ostrich is disturbed from her nest containing 18 fresh eggs, as we pass nearby on route to the shipwreck of "Pantelis A Lemos" which ran aground in 1978. The trail then cuts back behind the sand dunes returning to the cars at Tsaarsbank gate where we finished by 1.30 pm. after completing 11 km. on this day.

A large Eland is grazing nearby with the usual entourage of cattle Egret. Lunch and drive to Langebaan for grocery shopping before travelling to Citrusdal for booked overnight accommodation in Cederberg Lodge. We meet Austrian, Christian Wesley who will accompany us for the next few stages. The evening was spent busily drying and cleaning gear after the Postberg hike and packing for the next 5 day outing.

Tuesday 11 th; A very cool morning with patchy snow on the adjacent Cederberg ranges (this is the area we will be hiking next week). Drive north for approx. 170 km to Nieuwoudtville where we had lunch and collected information and a key for access into the **Oorlogskloof Nature Reserve**. Retrace approx. 6 km from Nieuwoudtville to enter the reserve along a 10 km dirt track. Locate the Groot Tuin parking area, complete pack adjustments then start hiking by 1.30 pm following the Rock Pigeon Route. The first section of just 4 km to Brakwater campsite descended through some very rough rock terrain and took us over two hours to negotiate. We passed a group of 39 university students departing after a horrific few days of torrential rain and one of their party needed to be evacuated due to a sprained ankle. The weather is however being very kind to us and we locate the delightful Brakwater camp with tents and mattresses already set beside the now fast flowing Oorlogskloof River.

Wednesday 12th; Break camp in sunshine and cross the swollen Oorlogskloof River on a crude log bridge. This is the start of the route distance markers and our climbing. Up, down, then up again. Very demanding in some places with rough log ladders and strategically placed ropes to assist with the more dangerous sections. We emerge onto a plateau just after the 2 km mark, but not for long. Another very steep descent back to the river where we stop for a welcome lunch break near the 4 km marker. The next section followed the river bank with some very serious boulder hopping to the 7 km mark before the steep narrow ascent of the cliff began. Many Baboons could be seen and heard playing along the river now well below us. We gain 500 metres of elevation in just 1 km of travel to find a huge waterfall drenching our route. A rough bush scramble around and relocate the last steep ladder/step climb to Driefontein.

The campsite is neatly nestled among an Aspen grove beside a cool stream with several caves nearby-some containing ancient San paintings. This day has been relatively tough with many very steep sections and much rock scrambling which took over 7 hours to negotiate just 8.5 km.

Thursday 13th; We leave Driefontein Campsite by 9.00 am retracing our arrival path for just a short distance then negotiate the extremely steep descent to the Oorlogskloof river, passing the old ruins of Kameel se Gat erected by pioneer farmers of this area. Crossing the swollen river on a crude log bridge with three separate spans proved quite daunting then back up the other side of this deep gorge. We pass through a rock chimney using ropes fixed in the hole for added safety. We are now high on a huge undulating plateau with the path winding through many large Proteas bushes and a great variety of wildflowers. We stop for lunch near the 14 km marker then continue to meander across the plateau to approximately 18 km before descending to the open valley below and following a river course to the Doltuin campsite at approx. 20.5 km. This is an open grassed area where early Afrikaans once attempted to cultivate land and establish small-scale farms with a delightful rock walled weir containing the adjacent stream. We need to cross this weir for our camp. Arriving by 4.00 pm. after hiking for approximately 12 km today. Apart from the strenuous start, which " was over by mid morning, this was a delightful day with only short steep sections and easier than reports had led us to expect.

Friday 14th; Today has the greatest distance of this outing to be traversed. 17 km from Doltuin to Pramkoppie. Crossing back across the weir at 8.30 am. in good sunshine after a very cool night we traversed a grassy plain to the south west before ascending onto yet another plateau through a beautiful rock archway.

This was to be a delightful area for me as there was a multitude of gnarly rock formations and the trail actually passed through a total of ten different arches. Many brilliant natural sandstone sculptures as we approached the 29 km mark and a quick lunch break at midday. Leaving our backpacks stowed in a safe place, we took a 2.6 km circular route to the 915 metre park high point of Arrie se Punt and the splendid panorama view off the escarpment overlooking VanRhyns Pass and the village of Vanrhynsdorp far below to the west. We return to gather our backpacks as the weather starts to deteriorate to overcast with scattered showers and extremely strong winds starting to gust across this open plateau. Walking became extremely difficult with much care needed as we placed our feet after each step. The trail passed very close to the exposed 600 metre escarpment edge and the winds became gale force, hindering our progress and greatly slowing the pace till we descended through a rocky outcrop and walked into the sheltered campsite of Pramkoppie by 3.00 pm. Unfortunately, Christian has suffered a twisted ankle near 35 km and is now in severe pain as he hobbles into camp 2.5 km later with some assistance from Sharryn who has returned to investigate his late arrival.

Saturday 15th; Wake to an early thunderstorm and a short sharp shower of rain. We distribute Christian's load amongst the other six, strap his ankle securely and start walking cautiously towards the cars at Groot Tuin by 8.15 am. Progress is very slow and painful for Christian particularly over the larger rocks and the steeper sections till we are again on a plateau by 10.00 am. We split the group and Russell, Pat and Sharryn go ahead to purchase provisions for the next hike as shops here close on Saturday afternoons and all day Sundays. Christian continues his steady progress with myself, John and Marie assisting. We arrive back with the cars under threatening storm clouds by 1.30 pm and take a welcome lunch break and rest for Christian. We opted for a slightly shorter route and completed the last 8.5 km in 5.25 hrs.

This has been a very demanding hike with extremely steep sections including some rockclimbing while carrying full backpacks. The campsites all have very good quality heavy duty canvas three person tents with foam mattresses in each making every camp a delight. Added to this is good fireplace facilities and crude log seats.

Firewood is scarce at most campsites and I believe that water could be precious in the drier times .

It was as we left this area that we learned of the disastrous Terrorist Bombing attack in New York at the World Trade Twin Towers and Pentagon last Tuesday.

Saturday night was spent at a delightful little Farm Stay cottage "Karakadouw Guest House" approx 13 km out of Clanwilliam. A lovely BBQ Dinner as we again clean up after the last walk and ready everything for the next five days. Many Weaver Birds nesting in the tree adjacent to our cottage.

Sunday 16th; A slow and casual start, driving back into Clanwilliam and then on to Algeria for the start of our **Cederberg hike**. Lunch and a 2 hour car shuffle plus leave Christian to recuperate at accommodation on Cederberg Property where we will finish this next hike in four days time.

Finally start hiking at 3.00 pm in warm conditions on a trail that zigzags steeply up the face of this very imposing Halsekioof (Hells Ravine) mountain. We climb 700 metres in the next 5 km from Algeria Forest Camp, passing a beautiful waterfall before arriving at the quaint stone Middelberg Huts, nestled peacefully in a sheltered saddle, shortly after completing this strenuous climb. These two huts were built in 1903 and used by local patrolmen. A refreshing dip in the small pool near these huts and a lovely campfire evening in very clear conditions before retiring to bed.

Monday 17th; We wake to a beautiful clear and still morning. Pack and leave by 9.30 am on a trail to the south that winds up and through several small plateaus with each section revealing a whole new panorama of tall rock cliffs and some expansive valleys. We break for morning tea on a plain just after a trail junction. From here we can clearly see the "Sleepad Hut" (the proposed camp for tonight) above a tall cascading waterfall high on the opposite hill. We proceed through a very steep ravine and emerge on a plain to locate Crystal Pools by 1.30 pm. and stop for lunch. The clouds are closing in very fast and the weather is looking really threatening. With only another 0.5 km to go to reach the Crystal Pool Hut, we continue and arrive at this delightful stone building which is heavily shrouded in thick cloud by 2.30 pm. We have travelled only about 9 km in 5 hours and choose to stop in the safety of this sturdy building, hoping for clearer weather tomorrow. A party of five friendly Africans arrive later in the afternoon and will share the dwelling with us which was great as we were able to derive much local knowledge and general interest information from them.

Tuesday 18th; We wake to the sound of light rain on the roof and extremely dense fog clouds outside. We pack and leave by 9.30 am and continue to climb even further into this thick fog. Visibility is reduced to only about 50 metres beyond my wet and dripping Parka hood. We follow a trail up through a rocky water course and join onto an old 4WD Jeep trail.

This trail is followed to Sleepad Hut which is a welcome refuge for a morning break then we continue to follow it till locating a small track leading to Welbedacht Cave. We again join with the African group and shelter from the elements for the evening. Total traversed today is approx 11 km in 4.5 Hrs.

We spent a very relaxed remainder of the afternoon around a fire sheltering inside this huge cave overhang that easily accommodated everyone.

Wednesday 19th; Overnight light rain and wake to a heavy cloud cover. However by 9.00 am the clouds start to thin and the sun even attempts to peep through and light this delightful cave to create a beautiful atmosphere. We depart and return to the jeep trail that we were following yesterday. Continuing in a southerly direction for approx. 8 km till locating a tee off to the left at Die Rif with a small cluster of Oak Trees. A huge number of Baboons were moving through the rocks maintaining a safe distance from us as we travel through their territory.

From Die Rif, the path zigzags steeply to the top of Gabriels Pass then just over the saddle we locate another path on the right which climbs through beautiful sandstone rocks to emerge on a delightful plateau that leads us to the truly spectacular and imposing Wolfberg Arch. This huge sandstone arch of approx 15 metres in height and just a few metres in thickness, stands like some ruined castle overlooking a vast expanse of valley beyond. Even the adjacent hills could be described as the remnants of some ancient city. We proceeded through the Arch and across the plain beyond to enter the next expansive rocky outcrop. My own fault for becoming separated from the rest of our party in this section, had me waiting at the Wolfberg Cracks for the others to arrive. When this did not happen, it was necessary for me to retrace back to find Sharryn and Pat frantically searching for me and very happy to be back together as they had already established a campsite approx half way between the Arch and the Cracks. A pleasant site affording distant views of the Arch with a spectacular sunset performing in the western sky.

Today we have travelled approx 13 km.

Thursday 20th; Heavy overnight Dew made everything quite wet, however a clear morning sun and we soon had our gear aired and packed ready for departure by 9.30 am. Proceeding slowly southwards through this magnificent rock wonderland, we arrived at the start of Wolfberg Cracks (again for me) by 10.00 am.

These Cracks consist of three parallel vertical clefts approx 30 metres deep carved through the sandstone walls of the Wolfberg escarpment. Russell and myself were the only two who managed to crawl through a tiny hole and down over a two metre ledge into the depths of this most spectacular cavity. Two enormous rock archways deep within this gorge were encountered as we traversed through the first crack to emerge high on the edge of the Wolfberg Escarpment overlooking Cederberg property far below. A bit of a hairy traverse to cross the face of this mountain and we were able to return to the rest of our party up through the second of these magnificent Crack formations. We had a quick lunch break and explored the third crack before continuing back down the middle crack to the escarpment face. A very steep descent – slipping, sliding and rock scrambling down to rejoin with Christian who had been recuperating at the Cederberg property accommodation cottages. We now needed to reverse our car shuffle and collect the second vehicle left at Algeria, return for everyone at Cederberg before driving to Citrusdal.

We drive a further 30 km south on the Ceres Road to stay in a delightful pre booked B&B farm stay "Kunje" arriving by 7.45 pm to a welcome bath, delicious home cooked dinner and a bottle of red wine. The evening was however spent washing and drying clothes -almost becoming a ritual.

Friday 21st; " A casual day stroll in the vicinity of the farm stay"! Leaving at 9.30 am and walking through their orchid, then, hey presto, the route went straight up the face of a mountain for the next 1.25 hours. Once on top, we were on relatively flat ground amongst a myriad of rock formations that offered many exploration opportunities and revealed several art sites. We stopped under a rock arch/cave for lunch before attempting a treacherous steep undefined descent of the western face and complete a circuit back to the vehicles at "Kunje" by 3.00 pm. Final pack up and drive approx 100 km to Ceres. Unable to locate suitable accommodation for the evening, we continued through Wellington and on to Paarl for overnight stay at the very nice Oak Tree Lodge. Dinner at "Saddlers"

Saturday 22nd; Early start from Paarl to drive approx 55 km on N1 freeway into Cape Town and to Dale Court Guesthouse where we meet with Karen Sheedy from Melbourne. Need to shop for the next sections so we return to the Victoria Wharf Complex. Depart after lunch for Bettys Bay, arriving about 3.30 pm in very overcast weather conditions with low cloud and quite cold. The next two nights will be spent in a fantastic private residence "Sandpiper" right on the beach front as guests of local Neil Tyers, who will also be our guide tomorrow on the Kogelberg Day walk. Dinner at home and a casual evening relaxing.

Sunday 23rd; Early start and we follow Neil Tyers a short distance towards Kleinmond and then enter the **Kogelberg Nature Reserve** where we meet with Neil's assistant (Boss). Our two very knowledgeable local guides led us through a wide variety of Leucadendrons, Proteas, Yellowwood, and lowland Fynbos. What these two didn't know about this very diverse area is not worth knowing – all too much for me, I just enjoyed the stroll. We started by walking up a gorge, through open scrub then a small wet forest till emerging in a cleared saddle. We then climbed further to skirt the side of the steep Kogelberg Mountain till joining an old Jeep track which descended to meet the River Trail and complete a loop back to our starting point. A delightful day on a loop trail of approx 24 km taking 8 hours to complete followed by a hearty dinner at "The Whaling Station".

Monday 24th; (Heritage Day-Long Weekend in South Africa) Four of us started early to see a huge colony of Jackass Penguins on Stoney Point at Bettys Bay. This was well worth the effort as we were able to get quite close to them while they frolicked in the edge of the surf and along the rocks.

Travel to Hermanus where a Whale Crier dressed in old English gear advises the many watchers where to look for whales that usually come very close to shore in this huge bay area. Today unfortunately was not a good day with strong winds making the water quite rough and the whales staying mostly below the surface. This is however a delightful seaside resort town and well worth the time to visit. We continue our trip back out to join the N2 freeway eastwards to Swellendam and enter the **Bontebok National Park** with overnight accommodation in on site caravans. BBQ and Vegies for dinner.

Bontebok Antelope was seriously endangered and in 1931, this park was proclaimed to protect the last few remaining. Today they boast in excess of 2, 000 Bontebok from their program.

Tuesday 25th; I woke early and was pleasantly surprised to see 3 Bontebok and 2 Guinea F owl within the camp area. Also a huge variety of small birds. We walk the 1.5 hour River Trail before again driving through the Park and sight many more Bontebok plus Red Hartebeest and Cape Mountain Zebra.

Return to the N2 freeway and continue eastwards to Knysna where we have lunch and complete the bookings for the Harkerville Trail. Continue to the Harkerville Coastal Reserve and spend the night in their Bunkhouse accommodation. An old house converted for the purpose of sleeping hikers of this trail.

Wednesday 26th; "The Harkerville Trail"

We relocate the two vehicles to the nearby Forest Rangers Station for that added security feeling. Start hiking by 8.00 am with the first 10.5 km being a fairly casual stroll along a clear trail that meanders through a good shady forest. We emerge on a high cliff top overlooking the Indian Ocean and an extremely rugged section of coastline. The next 0.5 km descends very steeply via rugged wooden steps anchored into the cliff face, clambering over or around huge boulders and lowering oneself using anything appropriate as a handhold trying to prevent a too rapid descent. We arrive on a boulder strewn beach by 11.15 am and start following the shoreline eastward. The route involves some very difficult and challenging manoeuvres requiring us to negotiate rough wooden ladders, crude stairs, serious bouldering and even clambering around a huge rock face grasping onto a chain anchored just metres above the pounding surf. Break for lunch at 12.30 pm near the 13 km mark, sheltering in a bush grove as the weather has turned into a steady drizzle. We continue along the shoreline till locating the path and very steep 300 metre ascent "" which brings us to the delightful Sinclair Hut where we arrive by 2.45 pm. The hut comprises two bunkrooms with verandahs and a great cooking area in between all under one roof with an ample dry wood supply. We have completed a total of 15 km today with the last four being extremely strenuous and quite slow going. I managed to stroll for a further 3.5 km along the cliff top on a series of walking, 4WD and bike trails with many more fantastic views of this rugged coastline below.

The weather has now turned from drizzle to rain and Sinclair Hut offers very comfortable and cosy camping facilities.

Thursday 27th; After lots of heavy rain and strong winds overnight, we wake to a overcast but dry morning. Start hiking by 8.15 am, the first 2 km undulating along the cliff tops then the inevitable steep descent down a loose rubble cliff, back to the shoreline. We had to swim while floating our packs across the swollen mouth of the Grooteiland river. While drying off after the swim, a very heavy shower of rain started, making the next 2 km section quite treacherous with more chains, rough ladders, rock scrambling, and boulder hopping. This required 4 hours of concentration and caution to negotiate safely. Lunch on a small beach before climbing back onto the plateau and returning the remaining 5 km through indigenous forest on undulating trails to the vehicles left at Forest H.Q. Total distance of 12 km today.

The Harkerville Coast Hiking Trail has a total distance of 27 km negotiated over two days. While being quite treacherous in some sections, this trail has taken me to probably the most spectacular section of coastline that I can remember and the delightful Sinclair Hut just compliments this fantastic outing.

Back into the vehicles by 3.45 pm and just a short drive to Plettenberg Bay where we locate and check in to a beautiful private home B&B at Anlin Bay. We all spent the evening busily trying to clean and dry our gear in readiness for the next outing.

Friday 28th; Rejoin the N2 freeway by 10.00 am continuing up the coast road. We take a short stop at the Tsitsikamma Forest to view this huge 800 year old tree and stroll the 2.5 km Rainforest Trail.

The N2 is a major highway, mostly unfenced with cattle, donkeys, goats, even baboons likely to just stroll out onto the roadway while the majority of the vehicles are travelling at speeds around 140 kph. Quite scary for the drivers.

Many roadside stalls in this area, mostly selling fresh pineapples.

We were stopped by the Police for a "license check"! Well this poor officer searched and searched through a huge pile of paperwork for some reference to my Australian license with no luck, so after much discussion with his fellow officer they decided it was all too difficult so they just returned my papers and told me to continue.

Drive a total of 530 km staying on the N2 arriving in East London around 6.00 pm and managed to get beautiful accommodation and a great evening meal in the Regent Hotel.

This has been a No Photo day! Went past the Baboons too fast, the tree was too big, the forest was too dark and damp, antelope were too far away and we've all seen pineapples before.

Saturday 29th; Still on the N2 as we travel from East London to Umtata. We take a small deviation to visit the home village of Nelson Mandela which is a typical Black African community comprising sprawling clusters of round mud huts with thatched roofs and donkeys, pigs, goats, chooks etc all freely roaming the streets and living areas. Turn off the main road and travel to Port St Johns, a total of 350 km for the day. Late lunch at The Gecko Restaurant and a stroll around the village centre that is bustling with open markets mostly just laid out on the footpath or under shady trees. Piles of clothing, shoes, woven baskets and hats, fresh crayfish and clay model 4WD cars.

We manage to gain quaint accommodation at Second Beach in "Bulolo Holiday Camp" in a delightful bungalow made from two round mud huts joined by a living section all under a thatched roof. Several small monkeys are seen bounding through the trees within the camping compound. Obvious was the 24 hour gate security person and another patrolman armed with a machine gun wandering within the compound.

We are now well into a very poor totally black community with only basic facilities available. Speaking only broken English and unable to answer more than just basic questions.

Sunday 30th; " The Transkei Trail"

This trail has a reputation of violence and is considered by many locals as a safety risk. I am personally quite frightened at this point of time.

We pack and leave early, driving just a very short distance to leave the vehicles at the rangers office within the Silaka Nature Reserve. After some difficulty with understanding the office girls and their requirements, we are finally all loaded into the back of the Ranger's utility (bakkie) to be driven to the trail start. To our great surprise and with fits of laughter, we find ourselves standing outside the Bulolo Holiday Camp that we had just checked out of! We now start hiking to the southern end of Second Beach, cross a small creek and just 200 metres up the very first hill to locate our designated first nights accommodation at Silaka Huts- arriving by 9.00 am. Unfortunately the huts were in a totally disgusting state of filthiness and no water, so we beat a hasty retreat back for another day/night at Bulolo Holiday Camp at Second Beach. We stroll the beach, watch the local lads play soccer and into Port St Johns but being a Sunday, almost everything is closed. A real lazy day!

Monday 1st October; Yes, we are actually starting to hike the Transkei Trail! Leaving Second Beach at 8.15 am, we pass the Silaka Huts, continue around this first hill and drop on to Third Beach where a herd of Wildebeest and several Zebra are grazing less than 50 metres from where we parked our vehicles yesterday. Also many timid Vervet Monkeys are playing in the bushes adjacent to the Ranger's office. We are following the coastline south towards Coffee Bay.

In the vicinity of Sugarloaf Rock, we are met by our first large group of young local children and they follow us for several kilometres and over several quite steep hills. We arrive at the very upmarket Umgazi Resort complex and choose to have our lunch on their manicured lawns beside the Mngazi River. A good motored ferry boat transports us safely across this river mouth for just R3.00 each.. Cross another small hill and along a beach to what was to become the hairiest and most unforgettable river crossing of my life. Across the Mngazana River mouth. As we approached the edge, a young man came around the corner in a tiny row boat that was already half full of water. He offered to take us across, three at a time, for R10.00 each. Sharryn, Karen and myself with 3 large backpacks and the rower in this tiny boat struggling against a strong run out tide with waves crashing over the bows threatening to sink us is not an experience that I wish to repeat. However after three separate crossings, we were all safely on the south bank very relieved, although quite wet.

A group of young local lads seemed keen to direct and follow us through the streets of their tiny village and into the hikers huts at Mnciazana. This action however is a ploy and they were not about to leave until we paid them for their directional services. A bad mistake!

We arrived at the basic mud huts nestled on the side of a grassy slope near a small sandy beach by 4.45 pm. Fortunately, these huts were much better cared for than those at Silaka and even had a resident caretaker lady.

Tuesday 2nd; After a very refreshing early morning dip in the adjacent ocean, we started hiking by 8.00 am. The trail keeps mostly inland because of the rugged coastline and soon enters the small very run down village of Luhlango. Here we are again met by an entourage of young children who come running from all directions as we approach. Most are looking for a handout of sweets but the more demanding and slightly older youth are quite emphatically looking for money. We pass men harnessing 4 cattle with log yokes in preparation to cultivating their adjacent garden plot with an old single tine plough and two African ladies carrying huge bundles of wood delicately balanced on their heads. Cross the Ndluzula River for a short steep climb then on to a very steep descent down a water course and waterfall and onto a nice beach. We wade across the mouth of this Sinangwana River and through the adjacent Sinangwana Village then just a short distance to locate our next overnight hut

accommodation at Mpande by 12.30 pm. A relaxing afternoon with a beach stroll and even a short nap as the weather turns to a light drizzle rain.

Wednesday 3rd; Wake to a glorious morning and a beautiful sunrise. Several small timid monkeys playing in the adjacent trees. Break camp by 7.30am and walk along the beach to cross a small creek at the end and join a trail which we follow through a small village. Many large youth, some with machetes, started to amass and walk very close behind us. This made me feel very uneasy and quite threatened at the time however we soon took a different trail to the youth and my fears may have been totally unwarranted. 2 hours to Vuk'uzenzele Farm Café and some more local children anxious to lead the way and show where we are to cross the Mnenu River mouth at 10.30 am. A relatively easy sand bar wade crossing before walking the full length of this beautiful beach and enjoying a refreshing swim near the southern end amongst some sheltered rocks pools. We now enter the Hluleka Nature Reserve via a stile over the high boundary fence and proceed on to the Rangers Headquarters overlooking Hluleka Bay -a well kept old stone building in magnificent well maintained grounds.

The trail huts at Hluleka Bay are also very clean and well maintained and situated beside a small beach. A large herd of Blue Wildebeest are grazing nearby and I was lucky enough to get quite close to lots of very timid Vervet Monkeys playing happily in dense tree groves. A brilliant evening with dinner and campfire as a huge full moon appeared over the adjacent headland just adding to this already serene setting.

Thursday 4th; Another beautiful sunrise across the beach on a clear day. We start hiking at 7.30 am and soon exit the Hluleka Nature Reserve via the front entry gates. Climb the headland and continue near the coastline sighting a whale and dolphins swimming just off this rugged coastline. Descend for a very treacherous deep wade crossing of the fast flowing Mtakatye River at 10.00 am. then follow the beach to the southern end and join a trail up "another bloody hill" and into a small village. Here we join a well used gravel road which we follow to the village of Lwandile and the sandy banks of the Lwandile River where we break for lunch. A relatively easy crossing of this river on a good sand bar and continue along the length of this next beach then just a short ridge crossing and locate the tidy huts of Ngcibe Camp by 2.30 pm. A collection of four very clean and tidy huts within a fenced enclosure beside a small stream with a resident caretaker family.

Later in the afternoon we were treated to a training game of soccer by the local men playing on a crude field on the verge of a very sloping hillside.

Friday 5th; Another beautiful clear morning and start hiking by 7.00 am. Continue southwards along the beach and immediate coastline till reaching the Mdumbi River. A very deep fast flowing river that was extremely treacherous to wade across particularly as we all had large heavy backpacks that needed to be kept relatively dry and safe. Once across, we stayed on the beach, passed Tshani Village and the small resort of Umtata Mouth, till arriving at Mtata River and our last major river crossing. Although not very wide, this river is flowing extremely fast and the current is much too strong to attempt a wade crossing. Soon a young local with a row boat appeared around the point and offered to ferry us across for R5.00 each, three at a time. After our last row boat experience we were a bit dubious at first however this crossing was much safer and greatly appreciated. The last 6 km from Mtata river into Coffee Bay is all along a rough gravel road and a strong head wind has now started to blow just to make us earn our "Transkei Trail" finish.

The Transkei Trail traverses approximately 60 km. of coastline through many small African villages which we completed in five great days. Apart from the one incident with the machete wielding youths to which I probably overreacted, due to prior warnings, most people were very friendly and this trek was a real insight into the village lives and ways of black African people.

How Many people can you fit into a 15 seater minibus? Wrong! For the return journey from Coffee Bay to Umtata we managed 18 people, 8 large backpacks and 4 twenty litre paraffin drums all very tightly packed into a rattling and groaning Toyota Lite Ace. Cost just 25 rand for the first leg of approx. 130km. completed in 1.5 hrs. And it got no better for the next squeezey 1.25 hr section to Port St Johns where we were all very relieved to arrive safely and collect our two vehicles left at Silaka.

Leaving Port St Johns by 5.00 pm, the weather has turned to drizzle then rain and as we climbed into the hills the fog became very thick, making driving quite dangerous. Deciding to stop, we located a comfortable old Hotel at Flagstaff by 6.45 pm and enjoyed a good hot dinner in the deal.

Saturday 6th; Drive to Underberg and stop for grocery shopping then continue approximately 120 km to Giants Castle Nature Reserve in the Drakensberg Mountain Range. Late lunch and register in the walkers log then finally start hiking by 3.00 pm in drizzling rain conditions. While Russell and I parked the vehicles in the designated area, the other five started along the stated trail. Unfortunately, as we started climbing the Giants Ridge, it was obvious that the other five were not ahead of us! They had missed the tee off to Giants Ridge. Back together with about half hour lost, we still have about 10 km to complete to Giants Castle Hut. The track continues to climb virtually all the way as we gain 530 metre in altitude and arrive at the hut by 7.45 pm. Most of the trail has been negotiated with light rain falling and with the onset of darkness and fog, visibility was reduced to approximately 50 metres. The Giants Castle Hut was a very welcome sight with thick stone walls, a thatched roof, 2 bedrooms, kitchen, dining area and even a flushing loo! a pleasant cosy retreat from the outside elements.

Sunday 7th; Wake to a glorious clear morning sunrise with a light frost covering the ground. The Giants Castle Hut looked absolutely magnificent on this grassy shelf with the huge Giants Castle Walls rising imposingly behind and dense fog cloud lifting from valley far below. We packed for a day walk to the "Giants Castle Pass" and set off at 7.30 am. Returning back along the Contour trail for 2 km then a further 2 km to the start of a very steep 2 km climb up this pass. For the next three hours, Russell, Pat, Christian and myself literally hauled ourselves up this gruelling mountainside of huge boulders and very treacherous loose scree to finally stand and look over into the country of Lesotho far below.

We are now at an altitude of 3114 metres (Kosciusko = 2200 metres) after climbing from the hut at 2300 metres.

Patchy snow lay in the sheltered crevices around us as we rested after probably the most strenuous climb of my life at an altitude that made breathing very difficult. Towards the end of this climb, I could barely manage more than a mere three consecutive steps between breaks and progress was extremely difficult. A huge personal achievement.

Lunch then start the treacherous descent back down to the contour trail and return to the Giants Castle Hut for a second night. Very glad to be safely back by 3.30 pm as the weather is closing in with a cold wind blowing and dense cloud now enveloping the hut and making everything quite damp.

Monday 8th; Pack and depart the hut by 7.30 am in wet, thick foggy conditions that only got worse as we followed the Contour Trail North Westerly for approximately 18 km towards Bannerman Hut. Very cold, wet, miserable conditions with visibility often reduced to approx. 75 metres. I was so cold that we feared I may have endured mild hypothermia (still exhausted after yesterdays mammoth effort). We just kept walking, not wanting to stop till safely inside our next hut. Just short of our hut, the weather turned even worse with thunder and lightning followed by a good fall of light hail that covered the ground like snow. Safely within Bannerman Hut by 1.30 pm, we felt that we had endured almost everything that "Huey" had to offer.

Barely inside and very heavy rain started to fall which continued well into the afternoon so most of us just retired to rest and try to warm up in bed.

Bannerman Hut was another delightful solid stone building nestled on a shelf in front of the imposing Bannerman Face.

Both of these Drakensberg Park Huts have unfortunately been severely vandalised, however they offer very welcome refuge from the harsh mountain elements prevailing outside.

Tuesday 9th; Hard to believe that we are in the same place as yesterday. The sun is shining brightly and the clouds have totally dispersed. Patches of snow are clearly visible on the huge peaks behind the hut and we are able to admire the fantastic scenery that was totally obliterated by yesterday's lousy weather. We retrace our path approx. 4.5 km before locating a trail that descends to return us to main Camp past a large herd of grazing Eland. Arriving at the vehicles by 10.30 am after completing approx. 11 km. to discover that a crow with a rubber fetish has demolished the windscreen wiper blades from our car.

We take a very interesting tour of Main Cave to see brilliant San (Bushman) Rock Art and learn much about these ancient inhabitants of this area.

Just a short drive North East to White Mountain Lodge near Estcourt and enjoy a big evening meal as this is Christian's last night with us.

Wednesday 10th; Another beautiful morning as we leave Christian and White Mountain Lodge. Driving north, we visit Rourke's Drift where a mere 100 British soldiers defended their location against over 4000 Zulu warriors, then on to Isandlwana where many huge piles of stones are an eerie testimony of the entire British Regiment annihilated by a force of over 25000 Zulu Warriors in the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War.

Finish at the quaint Babanango Hotel for overnight accommodation and meals.

Thursday 11th; Still in Zulu country, we visit their Ondini Cultural Museum near Ulundi. This is the beautifully restored Zulu Kingdom and Royal residence of King Cetshwayo complete with several traditional "beehive" huts within a circular fortification of many strategically placed barbed logs.

We continue on to arrive at the Game Reserve of Umfolozi via the west side Cengeni Gate by 2.00 pm. The next two hours is spent very slowly driving to our base camp at Mndindini and in that time we are very excited to be lucky enough to get quite close to Impala, Warthog, Buffalo, Kudu, Giraffe, and White Rhino. A truly wonderful introduction to the famous African wildlife!

The camp is a delightful permanent tent arrangement on the grassy banks of the White Umfolozi River where we meet our guides Tom and Richard and have a serious introductory lesson on the rules and requirements for our coming trek within this reserve. The eerie sounds of nearby hyenas and baboons were heard through the night.

Friday 12th; Our first is to load all necessary belongings into canvas Donkey Bags so that they can be delivered to our next camp and we will walk with only day packs throughout the day.

A delightful riverside breakfast and a glorious sunrise with Rhino just upstream from our campsite. We wander off in quiet formation as instructed, with Tom at the lead and Richard always close behind, both armed with large caliber rifles always, at the ready and ever watchful for anything of interest. We sight several Giraffe, Impala, Water Buck and White Rhino. The day is very hot as we arrive at our next tented campsite at Dadethu again on the bank of the White Umfolozi River. We were allowed a short refreshing swim but only under the constant watch by our armed guides.

The camp cook has prepared a delicious hot damper and has water heated for a bush shower. Very well set up.

Saturday 13th; After a very good comfortable overnight sleep, we wake to a light drizzle morning and sight hyena, warthog and rhino while enjoying porridge beside the campfire. Setting off on a day expedition from this site, we soon encounter a three metre long African Rock python but the weather has turned to rain and we hastily retreat to the shelter of camp.

We set off again after lunch and were lucky enough to sight wildebeest, giraffe, warthog and white rhino before again returning to camp at Dadethu for a second night. Sunday 14th; Early rise and re-pack the donkey bags with gear heading back to base camp at Mndindini. We continue our safari trek in single file formation between our armed guides. We sight water buck, impala, nyala, warthogs, large hornbill birds and a badly injured white rhino. While crossing the Umfolozi River we found fresh lion tracks keeping us very aware of the dangers that may be lurking within the dense riverside reeds. Sighted many baboons playing along the river and impala as we made our way back to our original campsite at Mndindini to end a truly memorable experience hiking within the African wilderness. Our guides Tom and Richard were very experienced and dedicated themselves to our safety while keeping us ever informed on all aspects of their brilliant game reserve. More game near the camp included zebra, a huge white rhino and a rare black rhino that ventured right into the cleared camp area causing much concern to all. I have thoroughly enjoyed this experience and have been left with memories that will last a lifetime.

Monday 15th; Concern as a rhino grazed very close to our tent at around 4.30 this morning. I rise at 5.00 am as a beautiful clear day dawns and sight a large rhino lying on the river bank and another just upstream plus a hyena.

Leaving camp by 7.30 am we drive slowly towards the Nyalazi gate at the eastern side of this reserve sighting impala, giraffe, zebra and buffalo along the way. Here we visit the Interpretation Centre and Capture Bomas, pat a very cute baby white rhino and learn a lot about animal capture, relocation and support programs. We pass from Umfolozi park into the Hluhluwe Reserve and continue on to Hilltop camp for lunch. We depart this fantastic reserve via the Memorial gate to join the N2 main road northwards and soon encountered a violent storm making progress treacherous. We located a very nice home stay B&B accommodation at Piet Retief and settled in around 5.00 pm (with a power failure-not my problem).

Tuesday 16th; An early breakfast and on the road heading north by 7.30 am. A short stop at Malelane before entering the world famous Kruger Game Reserve from the southern gate of Malelane at 12.30 pm. Proceed to the nearby picnic area of Afsaal for lunch where we were greeted by many very friendly yellow beaked Hornbill birds and Velvet Starlings, also several playful dwarf Mongoose. We spent the remainder of the afternoon travelling in the Southern regions of this very extensive reserve before arriving at Lower Sabie by 5.00 pm.

During the afternoon we received a typical tropical storm and we were well rewarded with sightings of Kudu, Water Buck, Giraffe, Zebra, Buffalo, Elephant and many beautiful birds. On arrival at Lower Sabie, we were straight into a three hour night drive travelling in the back of a converted truck and spotlighting after dark. Firstly we stopped at Hippo Pool and saw many huge hippos just wallowing in the lily pond with a large African Fish Eagle circling overhead against a beautiful sunset backdrop. We went on to sight , Klipspringer, Bush Buck and Giraffe before dark then using the spotlight we were able to see Hyena, Giraffe, and White Rhino with baby. A very rewarding experience before returning to Lower Sabie Camp by 8.00 pm. Enjoy alate BBQ (brae) meal and relaxing evening.

All camps within Kruger Park are safe areas fully security fenced with armed guards in attendance at all times. We are required to be inside one of these camp areas before 5.00 pm and cannot leave before 5.30 am each day. It is an offence to be outside one of these safe areas (outside these times) except on such as the organised night tour. Also it is an offence to get out of your motor vehicle at any time, anywhere within the park, except inside a designated safe area. Speed limit at all times is limited to 40 k.p.h.

Wednesday 17th; 5.30 am and straight down to Hippo Pool. Many hippos were evident, however they remained mostly submerged as we find to be the norm. They leave the water after dark to graze and can travel up to 40 km per night in search of good edible grasses, returning to the water before daybreak. We were however very lucky to sight a fairly rare large Saddlebilled Stork at quite close range before returning to Lower Sabie for "breakfast with the birds". Travelling northwards, we crossed Hippo Culvert and stopped off at Mlondozi Picnic Area, Eileen Orpen dam, Tshokwane, Baobab Tree, and finally to Muzandzeni picnic area for a lunch break. During the afternoon we had to negotiate through a raging grass fire (quite scary) on route to Satara and finally in to Olifants Camp for overnight accommodation. We have been lucky enough to have sighted many elephants, giraffe, zebras and even two Secretary Birds. A fairly hot dry day while travelling almost 200 km at less than 40 kph while intently trying to spot anything that moves.

Soon we were on another brilliant night drive with spotlighting where we sighted Hippos, Hyena, Genet, many elephants and a porcupine.

Thursday 18th; A very hot, dry day as we travel further north to Letaba for a welcome lunch break then on to Shimuwini Bush Camp for the evening. Very little wildlife activity was seen en-route and we arrived at 4.00 pm all fairly weary. This camp however was ideally located beside a peaceful lagoon with plenty of Hippos and crocodiles swimming nearby. The highlight was to happen just on sundown when a herd of eight very large elephants and four young calves wandered up the creek and extremely close to the established waterside hide that Sharryn and myself had settled in to watch these huge mammals. Great viewing at very close range.

Friday 19th; A very hot night with a severe storm raging around 4.30 am. The temperature has dropped slightly as we wake to a beautiful sunrise with Hippos and crocodiles still dominating the lagoon. Remaining overcast with scattered showers, we continue to travel north to our last camp within Kruger Park at Shingwedzi. Booking in at 2.00 pm only to discover that we have a very bad front tyre on our vehicle-thank heavens that we are inside a safe area and able to change it. A stroll around the park then short drive later in the afternoon to sight many baboons, zebra and elephant.

Saturday 20th; Early rise to be on the road by 6.00 am and heading south. We stop at Mopani Resort for breakfast. The overcast skies have turned to rain as we leave Kruger park at 10.30 am via the west side Phalaborwa Gate. Now on the final leg of this incredible outing, we travel through the spectacular Strijdom Tunnel to stop off at the Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve and have lunch at The Potholes with light-hearted entertainment from the local "cleaning ladies". Continue on to view "Gods Window" (completely shrouded in dense cloud) and stroll the very wet Rmn Forest walk, before travelling through Graskop and Sabie on route to our group's final evening together in a private B&B just outside Waterval-Boven. Lucky to find such a nice place so late in the evening, we enjoyed a beautiful dinner and gathering before the onerous task of packing everything safely for the flight home.

Sunday 21st; A slow, quiet, almost morbid start with final adjustments to baggage and on the main highway into Johannesburg by 8.00 am. Arrive at the International Airport by 11.30 am and settle the vehicle hire.

We have travelled just over 6,000 kilometres in these two Fiat station wagons in the last seven weeks, each consuming 500 litres of fuel (= 12 km/Litre) costing 1825 Rand (approx. \$460.00) with our only problem being the front tyres on my vehicle. Very good.

1810 pm flight out of Johannesburg arriving Sydney at 1400 pm Monday.

This has been an absolutely fabulous outing, brilliantly planned, coordinated and executed by Russell that I believe offered fantastic value for money. The people have been very good company and I have been left with a treasure of memories that will genuinely last a lifetime.

My sincere thanks to everyone who helped make this a true team effort.

Ron Blomfield

Note. Ron's original diary was illustrated with small photos on almost every page. Putting them into any sort of document file produced something that would take forever to download, so, sadly, I left them out. I did scan four large photos and put a link to those on the website.

This diary was scanned into a computer. That scan was less than perfect and created a number of strange spellings. I've corrected most, but may have missed others. The scan lost all the original formatting but I've tried to put back the bold and the italics so you can get a better feel for what Ron wrote. A copy of the diary was a wonderful present, so I'll thank Ron publicly here.

Russell Willis