

TRAVEL

Business trip to South Africa is an eye opener

(Richard Bobosky of Canton recently took a business trip to South Africa for Chrysler. He records his impressions of the country.)
BY RICHARD BOBOSKY
SPECIAL WRITER

I left Detroit Metro flying into New York at JFK with a connecting flight to SAA (South African Airlines).

A little nervous as I tend to be when flying, maybe it's just a fear of the unknown, or just being away from what is comfortable for me, I was eager to see South Africa and meet the people, as I have done in South America and in the Middle East. I always try to see the similarities and the differences to Michigan.

I had a 14 hour flight ahead of me with a single stop for 40 minutes in the Cape Verde islands. With a six hour time difference and the long flight, I knew this could turn out to be a grueling trip. But I was optimistic that seeing the African continent for the first time was going to be interesting. Flying corporate business class made the trip much more enjoyable.

Seven hours after Cape Verde, we were over South Africa. The temperature was 68 degrees and it had been rainy and overcast. The houses below were similar to a farm community. The pilot

told us that the winter season in South Africa was approaching. I thought if the 60s was winter, bring it on.

Here I was in Africa, so where are the lions, elephants, Tarzan. The jungle I stepped into was a sea of people holding up signs with names on them for airport pickup services. I eventually found the person who was supposed to pick me up and I was on my way. Back to the jungle, I got out into the parking lot and things look like any other sea of asphalt parking lot at a large airport in the United States. Except they were driving from the passenger side of the car and on the "wrong" side of the road. I arrived at my hotel a little confused about which side of the road was which, but I made it just the same.

My hotel was in Sandton City, a suburb of Johannesburg. The Sandton City mall across the street from my hotel is said to house the greatest concentration of wealth in Africa. I stayed at the Holiday Inn Garden Court for \$50 a night. The currency is the Rand with an exchange rate of 3.89 to 4.45 depending on where you exchange your money.

The business I was working at was in a small town to the south and east of Johannesburg called Germiston. The town appeared to be what I would consider blue

collar, a working man's town. Germiston has a lot of auto-related businesses.

On the way to the dealer, we passed what appeared to be a camp of some kind, smoke rising up from wooden shacks made of everything from old street signs and billboards to bricks and sheet metal. The people at this squatters camp, mostly women, were gathering water at a well at the entrance and carrying pails and containers on their heads filled with water back to these makeshift homes. I wanted to get out and take pictures but I was advised not to by my co-worker who had been living there all his life. He said crime was an issue. People are flocking to build these camps on vacant land because they have come here from neighboring countries and have no place to live and cannot afford rent. The squatters camp was near a gold mine.

Local news accounts show a large increase in violent crimes like carjackings and rape. The police seem to be non-existent. I personally didn't feel unsafe or threatened.

The overall infrastructure seemed intact and the roads and buildings are nice. The food at the restaurants was good.

Mass transit can be a problem in Johannesburg. The taxi drivers have small vehicles, so there is a market for vans or combies as they are called.

On the weekend, I couldn't work, so I finally got a chance to see the real jungle. I caught a taxi bus to the Pilanesberg National Park. It cost 450 Rand (about \$90), a bit pricey but it included lunch and included Sun City and the Palace Hotel. Pilanesberg in South Africa's third largest park, nestled in the crater of an extinct volcano with a sprawling 338,540 acres stocked with 7,000 animals. This park has what is known as the "big five," lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo and leopard. On our "safari" we only saw three: rhino, elephant and buffalo. The following day I got to see the lions at a



Palatial pachyderm: Richard Bobosky in the courtyard of the Palace Hotel in South Africa's Sun City.

lion and rhino park just outside Sandton.

The disappointing thing is you can't see the elephants up close, but the tour guides were very knowledgeable.

Sun City wants to be the Vegas of South Africa. The Palace of the Lost City Hotel is a fantasy hotel that cost 5,000 Rand a night. You can have your own floor wings that accommodate you and your guests. The Desert suite even comes complete with sand. The hotel grounds are the ultimate in excess, everything used to build this \$250 million structure was made in South Africa by 6,000 workers that worked around the clock for 19 months to build it. The elephant courtyard has tables and chairs with elephant heads and tusks and pictures of elephants everywhere. The hotel also has wave pools, a 24 hour

casino and a volcano bridge.

The last place I planned to visit was downtown Johannesburg. My taxi driver, a Russian, thought I was a nut case for wanting to go downtown. His name was Boris and had been an engineer in the building trades in Russia and came to South Africa when he married a South African woman in 1990.

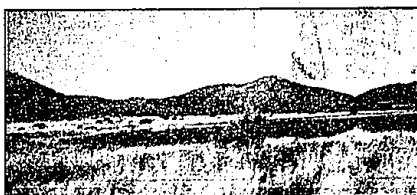
Boris told me he was armed and would take me to Alexandra where there was a squatter camp near the downtown. He said he felt things could erupt in South Africa if changes aren't made.

As we cruised the streets, we saw people selling drugs, shoes, whatever you wanted to buy. When the Mercedes taxi rounded a corner, people would spring to their feet and whistle to us as we passed. Much of the commercial

trade has moved to the suburbs. The banks remain but many people are forced to barricade themselves in order to survive.

This situation is not different from any big city in the United States or other cities in the world I have seen. The crime is an issue but laws can change and I think if you walk with a purpose and be careful and smart you can avoid most problems.

The people in South Africa must get involved to make change, find something that works for everyone. I think South Africa has so much to see and do, it was a great opportunity for me to see and I would love to go back and take my family on vacation. Maybe next time I can see Cape Town.



Park view: The rugged landscape of South Africa's Pilanesberg National Park is a contrast to the crowded cities.

GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads to Hugh Gallagher, assistant managing editor, Observer & Escapist Newspapers Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 691-7279.

LITTLE INN OF BAYFIELD

The Little Inn's Verandah menu is available July and August on the Victorian gingerbread Verandah. Under the direction of Chef Jamie Stearns this patio menu offers some of the lighter and more informal selections from the main dining room menu such as smoked

salmon, vegetarian roll up and Caesar salad. The Inn is in Bayfield, Ontario along Lake Huron.

HOLLY FESTIVAL

Holly, Mich., is the location for the fourth annual Seven Lakes State Park Balloon Race, July 18-20. Seven Lakes State Park, host of the yearly event, is accessible one hour from Detroit and 15 minutes from Flint. A Michigan State Park Motor Vehicle Permit is all that is required for entry. Featured at the event are the daytime activities at the park of swimming, hiking, biking, fishing and just plain relaxing.

Michigan Balloon Corp., coor-

dinator of the event, plans to offer tethered balloon rides at approximately 7-9 p.m. each evening. The tethered rides take passengers up approximately 50-100 feet in the air and back again. For those interested in actually taking flight, Champagne Hot Air Balloon Flights are available. Mass ascension of the balloons takes place at 7 p.m. each evening.

BUMBERSHOOT '97

Seattle is host to this annual arts fair on Labor Day Weekend, Aug. 29 to Sept. 1. The festival features a roster of talent from international, national and

Northwest artists and performers in music, literary arts, dance, theater and comedy, film and kids performances. For information on the festival, call (206) 281-8111 or visit their website, <http://www.bumbershoot.org>

WEBSITE ORGANIZER

Rita Mace Walston, formerly of West Bloomfield and now living in Nuffingen, Germany, has joined the Mining Company as the South Germany for Visitors Guide. She joins hundreds of other guides all over the world working with the Mining Company. As the South Germany for

Visitors Guide Walston is responsible for mining the Web for the South Germany "gems" - the most relevant and timely information, valuable links and lively conversations - and presenting them in a clear, concise way at the site - <http://gousouthgermany.miningco.com>

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For more information, call Henry Ford Hospital's Department of Urology at (313) 523-2722.



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