

South Africa: Off the Beaten Path

Demeter Communications Senior Partner Sharlet Teigen (sharlet.demeter@hughes.net) and her husband John spent a week in October 2006 touring South Africa, guided by Ricus de Villiers, owner of White Lion Safaris (www.whitelionsafaris.com). This is another example of how Demeter members strive to enhance their knowledge of global agriculture. Here are brief highlights of their trip to this agriculturally-rich and often misunderstood nation..

Wildlife Wonders

Growing up watching Wild Kingdom on television in no way prepared us for the spectacular animals. It still seems a bit surreal to be within a few hundred yards of elephants, giraffes, hippos, Kudus, baboons, warthogs, rhinos, Springbuck, Water Buffalo, Jackass penquins and seals.

It's also evident that the guide makes all the difference. Ricus, being an avid outdoorsman, spotted wildlife that we would not have seen.

The U.S. could take a lesson on wildlife management. The game on S. African property is the landowners'. Species have been improved through genetic selection and there is a financial incentive for land owners to keep a diverse and healthy eco-system to support big game for hunting and eco-tourism.

Enormous Eco-Diversity

Our trip north of Johannesburg took us to an area known for its game ranches and state preserves. Not only were there a huge variety of animals, but also birds, trees, rock formations and soil types.

The infamous Kimberly area—where DeBeers started their diamond empire—was very productive and diverse, with alfalfa, a little corn, poultry facilities and even a few vineyards. Heat-tolerant cattle, sheep and goats grazed on grass and brush.

As we headed south through the Karro, it reminded us of the vast sagebrush flats of Wyoming. Then, we were into rock mountains that protected incredible valleys with miles of vineyards. The closer we drove to Cape Town, the greener it became, even during this early spring season. The coastlines were spectacular.

Cultural Crossings

Yes, there are still shanty towns—and the country has many issues similar to U.S. reservations. Nomadic tribesmen were more evident in the North. Not once did we feel unsafe. Many challenges lie ahead to give the lowest income peoples incentives to move into the working—and tax-paying—class.

Incredible Infrastructure

The roads are much better than our area in southeastern Montana and cell phone service was almost everywhere! All major roads are paved and well-marked. All signs are in English.

We saw many indications that people share similar concerns, no matter where they live. For example, "purified" water was advertised often.

