

THE GREAT GAY ESCAPE -- NOTES FROM A FAR COUNTRY

Finding a holiday destination that is sophisticated, rugged, wild, tame with great beaches, mountains, cities and wilderness which is cheap would appear to be almost impossible, but we've found it. Forget San Francisco, Key West, even Sydney. Head to the gay capital of Africa -- Cape Town. Without doubt one of the most beautiful waterside cities of the world.

Since the 1994 elections the new 'Rainbow Nation' that is South Africa prides itself on being the most liberal in the world with freedom of self expression and sexuality enshrined in the constitution.

We discovered South Africa in 1995 when they were still in the afterglow of the great leap from the darkness of nearly 40 years of global isolation and the horrors of apartheid. The experience was unforgettable. This year we returned to see more, although it would take many years to see all of this enormous country, ten times the size of Britain.

The strong pound makes a trip today very cheap indeed, very much as Spain was in the sixties and seventies. Imported Gordons Gin is just £4.00 a bottle (have I got your attention now?) a three course dinner with wine costs around £6.00, car hire is around £60.00 a week; the living is good and cheap.

This year we concentrated on the Cape, Table Mountain providing a stunning backdrop to the truly cosmopolitan, friendly and bustling metropolis that is Cape Town. A visit to the local state-run tourist office 'Captour', produced an introduction to Daniel Croucamp who runs a new outfit called 'Gay esCape' from a very elegant office right in the heart of Cape Town. We needed to look no further for a very helpful and professional introduction to all the many delights on offer on the Cape.

Daniel certainly knows his business and his country very well. Cape Town has a distinct Gay Village with bars and clubs, although with guidance we were able to find restaurants, shops, saunas, beaches etc. spread throughout the city and immediate area.

After a full immersion in Cape Town we decided to see the famous Garden Route which lies on the Eastern Cape coast. This spectacular area starts only 4-5 hours drive from Cape Town (this is a BIG country, 4-5 hours to South Africans is just a short hop. They think nothing of driving from Johannesburg to Cape Town, 1500 miles in one go). The roads are excellent and virtually empty *and* they drive on the left.

The Garden Route starts at Mossell Bay and ends just beyond Tsitsikamma National Park where you stay in four-star cabins on the beach beside the Indian Ocean



which costs just £12 per person per night with full breakfast. Breathtaking scenery and incredible value for money.

This stretch of coast is justly world famous and can best be described as a combination of Scottish mountains, Cornish coastline, Mediterranean climate, spectacular beaches and very friendly



most definitely not Europe. After so many years in isolation it still comes as a surprise to them to hear that you are from overseas and that you do not have a mobile phone (they all have mobile phones). When booking anything from hotels to restaurants you must repeat that you come from abroad and listen to a mixture of wonder and pleasure and standby to be asked what you think of their country. It is very hard to avoid politics, after such a turbulent past. South Africans are some of the most politically aware people we had ever met.

people. Daniel at 'Gay ecCape' directed our footsteps throughout our trip and we stayed at several gay-owned B&Bs and self-catering flats of the highest possible standard and, again, exceptional value for money.

Although this part of South Africa looks and feels very much like Europe in a thousand ways, it is

Back in Cape Town, a visit to Sandy Bay is essential. Just a few miles outside the city this is a gay beach with full sand-dune facilities. The bars and clubs of Cape Town cater for all tastes as does Steamers, the excellent and well appointed bath house. Have tea at the Mount Hotel and revel in a true