

South Africa



June 2009

Sunday 7th of June 2009

As I write this diary I am listening to two little boys telling each other stories. Dan and Bailey are in bed together in a bed and breakfast cottage in a place called Bergville. Bailey has just confessed his love for Dan and told him to have a lovely sleep and he will see him in the morning.

Bergville is in South Africa about 300kms south of Johannesburg. We are here because Renee has come to teach maths at an all black primary school for 2 weeks.

It's a long story, but her doctor used to live in South Africa for 10 years and his practice was in the Bergville area. Since returning home he founded the African Aids Foundation. For a decade he has been trying to turn the tide on the aids pandemic in Africa.

Through his charity, Dr Schwarz has been helping Intumbane Primary School by raising funds in Australia. He has encouraged St Peter's Primary School in Campbelltown to become a sister school. The school and its children have raised money to buy computers and books for the african children to use.

He knows that Renee has been to Africa before and that she loves african children. She thinks they are all beautiful. Dr Schwarz is a Good Samaritan and a very good talker.

We arrived in South Africa on Saturday 6th of June 2009 at around 4pm.

It was a 13-hour flight so we were very tired. The time passed pretty quickly because you can watch movies non-stop or play video games. I watched at least 4 movies including seeing "Australia" for the second time.

The boys were both angels this time. Dan has had a reputation for playing up since we flew to Korea. This time we kept him off the orange juice, which we now know is full of sugar.

We flew South African Airlines but the plane was Qantas, staffed by South Africans.

When we arrived at Johannesburg Airport, we picked up a hire car from Europcar. They couldn't find the GPS or our travel documents so we sat around for at least an hour while Renee rang our travel agent to find out what happened. In the end we got our car and drove to our hotel, Garden Court, which was only 2kms away.

In Australian time it's now about 2am so we are exhausted.

We have a quick dinner in the hotel restaurant and go to bed. At 3am South African time, we all wake up and watch cartoons. It's Sunday and the hotel restaurant doesn't open til 7:30am. We are all starving having been awake for so long. Renee is in a feeding frenzy, she begins with healthy yoghurt and muesli but things turn greasy and ugly after that. She eats half a pig and then a croissant with jam. Dan's not far behind with 4 bowls of cornflakes mixed with rice bubbles. He had 4 weet-bix for breakfast during the week so he's in form. Bailey has one bowl of cornflakes and a croissant and he's happy.

I have 4 pieces of toast with Marmite. It's got the texture of glue but tastes the same as the Aussie made product.

Our travel agent rings to tell us that our paperwork is still lost but she has located our GPS navigator. We decide to go back to the airport to pick it up. Renee picks up the navigator and then by chance calls into Europcar. They have found our paperwork so now we can continue on our trip.

We have never used a GPS system before but friends from Sydney have said we must have one. It's a disaster; the bloody thing sends us about 50kms east of Johannesburg when we are supposed to go south. It costs us at least an hour. We go back to using a map and Renee gets us back on track.

Eventually we discover that it's just a flat battery that caused us all the problems. We plug it into our cigarette lighter and it starts telling us to go in the right direction. We have been warned to remove the GPS from the window whenever we park. They even told us to remove the suction mark from the window because the robbers go looking for this so they know which cars to break into. GPS are worth more than mobile phones so they are hot property.

As we travel down the N3 towards Harrismith we keep looking into the vast grass paddocks for animals. The first animal spotted was a squashed rat at the airport. Our next sighting was 2 Jack Russell dogs chasing a rabbit into a shrub on the highway. Renee sees a couple of ostriches. It is obviously no different to Australia in that you have to get far away from the cities before you see animals.

Apart from the rat the only other road kill was a very flat fox.

What has been interesting is seeing the africans waiting on the side of the road for a lift. These Toyota vans pick them up and they are full of black faces. I've been warned to watch out for these vans because their drivers don't obey road rules and they are often not roadworthy. We did see one go through a red light.

It's also amazing how far the africans walk. Today was Sunday so most would be going to church. They are all well dressed. We often saw older men wearing suits as they walked along the highway. The africans live in villages in tiny houses no bigger than a single garage. We would often see these beautifully dressed people walking across the paddocks.

At 4pm we arrive in Bergville. It's a small town that is littered with rubbish. Until now I have been so impressed with how clean the roads have been.

Anthony's Bed and Breakfast Home Stay is on the edge of Bergville. It's called Anthony's but we have only met Carol so far and she is very nice.

Our accommodation is like a granny flat out the back. It's nothing fancy but it has a garden – which we quickly explore.

The owner, Carol has 3 big pecan nut trees in the yard that are covered with nuts. They are ripe and hundreds are on the ground. The boys and I pick up a few and go into a feeding frenzy. I have just planted 3 pecan nut trees at home so I am excited to see the boys love eating them too. Carol says we can eat as many as we like. Carol has an older garden that could use a little TLC. She also has 2 big dogs and a cat which she lets go inside the house. One dog looks like Renee's mum's dog called Lucy. The boys start calling her Lucy immediately. The other dog is as big as a wolf. I don't like seeing dogs in houses especially when they are so smelly and dirty.

We have dinner at night in Carol's house. Roast chicken and vegetables. Carol is a Christian so before we started eating she said a prayer thanking God for helping us arrive safely. Half way through her prayer I could hear Bailey scooping up peas with his spoon. The stare of death across the table saw him get this huge grin on his face. It's our first prayer together as a family.

Carol tells us not to worry about locking our room. She tells us she leaves her house unlocked all night. She does have a dog the size of a wolf. I do notice however in our room a sign which says "Anthony's Guest House nor any of its employees accepts any liability for any loss, injury or damage sustained by any person, car or goods in or around the premises".

We noticed all the houses in Johannesburg had huge fences around the boundaries. They also had barbed wire and many had electric fences.

Monday 8th June 2009

This morning we are up early. Renee is getting picked up by the Deputy Principal of Intumbane Primary School at 7:15am. Its still dark and very cold, it has rained all night. We have a quick breakfast, and then go for a 20km drive along a country road.

It's rural land here and it reminds me of Australia. They even have gum trees. I was expecting jungle not rural land that looks like Yass.

Its pouring rain but we see school children walking along the road getting soaking wet. They are all beautifully dressed. The high school students are all tall and athletic looking, most have the bodies of models. As we drive you can see the small houses they live in scattered across the country side. They are neat and tidy with corrugated iron roofs. They put big rocks on the roof to stop the iron blowing away.

There are several schools along the way and as we approach more children appear out of the grass.

Renee's school Intumbane Primary is along a dirty muddy road. The children are looking into our car staring at all the white faces. They smile at us and wave. The school is surrounded by a wire fence. The

teachers drive cars so they must be well paid. We meet Bongi who has a huge smiling face and a loud happy voice. She laughs all the time. She introduces us to the other teachers who are all in the staff room.

The buildings are made from concrete blocks and they have tin roofs. They are not lined inside so you can feel the cold air. Water drips through in the holes and buckets are placed to catch the drips.

The teachers are all black. They are neatly dressed and despite the cold they all seem happy. Bongi introduces us to the staff and the Principal welcomes us to the school. Renee makes a speech too, and gives them a digital camera that is a donation from St Peter's School.

We go into one of the class rooms and the teachers get some jigsaw puzzles out of a cupboard. Only 4 children have turned up out of a class of 60. The mothers have kept the smaller children at home because of the rain.

Bailey complains that he is cold and he wants to go home. He and Dan are very shy and nervous. This is a new experience for them. There is a pretty little girl who is soaking wet. She has walked to school in the rain. She comes from a poor family, she has clothes that are not warm enough for this weather and her zipper on her jacket is broken. She sits quietly in her seat and shivers.

There are two teachers for just 4 kids. They get some jigsaws out of a cupboard. The jigsaw puzzles are all mixed up; it takes a while to work out what pieces go with what. The teachers haven't used them before and the children don't know what to do. The teacher says they would never get to play with these at home.

Dan starts putting puzzles together in a flash. He is Mr Jigsaw Man. The other children watch Bailey and Dan and they start to show an interest too.

I do a couple of easy puzzles with each child and then clap them if they get it right. They get big smiling faces. They are enjoying the attention. Within 20 minutes they have basically worked out what to do. One boy is cleverer than the others and he does them in a flash. In a tin shed outside I can see smoke coming out of the roof. A wheel barrow full of potatoes and carrots is pushed into the shed.



Two older women are going to cook a meal for the children. This is probably why the 4 small children turned up today despite the rain. If they stay home they go hungry.

The other class rooms are full of older children. They are all neatly dressed in school uniform. They smile and wave as we walk past.

Back in the classroom the 2 teachers have faces and paper face parts for the kids to glue. It's obvious these kids have never seen a glue stick before. I think the teachers are trying to impress us so they are bringing out the big guns.

Bailey and Dan have done this all before so within minutes they have glued on the eyes and the ears, the nose and the mouth. The 4 african children don't know what to do. But they watch our boys and pick it up so fast.

Then they colour in the faces. Bailey and Dan are colouring the faces pink with blue eyes. The children are only using the brown crayons. It's a defining moment. We play for about 2 hours then head home for lunch. Renee stays at the school. She will start teaching maths tomorrow. She is just listening and learning today.

At 11:30am we go back to the school to pick up Renee and Matthew, the maths teacher. They are going to a teacher's meeting in Bergville.

Renee seems much more relaxed now. She hasn't brought enough warm clothes so we might have to buy a long coat in a local shop.

We are home again now and the boys are sleeping. Yesterday we noticed the most amazing looking grasshoppers sitting on a climbing rose bush just outside our door.

There was a male and female pair. They looked so prehistoric and gladiator like. When we told Carol she replied, "Well I hope you killed them because they breed quickly and destroy gardens". It's still raining and very cold; I wish I packed a flanny!

When the boys wake up we'll drive into Bergville's shopping precinct. It's only 1km from where we live but we are not that confident yet to walk the streets.

Renee has been freezing all day so we are after a long coat. The town is so busy with people carrying big boxes of food. There are at least 4 supermarkets. You can look up and down the street and not see another white face.

We have been told to go to "Jet" to find warm clothes. It's a department store like any in Australia but the clothes are so cheap. Renee buys a jacket you could wear at the snow for 180 Rand. You divide this by 6 to get Australian dollars so the jacket cost \$30.00.

I bought a jacket for that little girl who was freezing at school today.

We look in some of the shops it's really interesting to see what they sell. I saw a lady buy 25kg of white sugar for 65 Rand. The teachers at Renee's school use a tablespoon instead of a teaspoon so they must drink a lot of sugar in their tea. I also saw a pregnant lady put a box of tomatoes on her head and walk down the street. She was beautifully dressed with a nice handbag and fancy shoes.

That night Renee and the boys go over to Carol's house at 5pm to light her fire. When I arrive at 6pm they are so cheeky and full of life. They have been putting wood on the fire and drinking apple juice.

Carols dogs and cat have been getting lots of cuddles since Bailey has arrived. He loves them and they love him.

We have a nice dinner in a warm house before going to bed early. Our house is freezing cold and it's a real challenge to get nude to have a shower.

Tuesday 9th June 2009

We slept a little longer last night, the boys have been waking up at 3am and then they come in to visit us. We are still getting used to the time difference.

Renee is starting teaching today at Intumbane Primary School. We have breakfast at Carol's and then head off.

Intumbane School is about a 20 minute drive from Bergville. It's not raining today but it is freezing cold. We can see snow on the mountains in the distance.

There are even more children on the road today, walking to school. When we arrive at the school the kids are lining up in their age groups out the front. The Headmaster talks to them, and then formally introduces us to the children. They all say hello in unison.

Then without warning they all begin to sing. It's one of those moments you will never forget. It's a Zulu song that gives you goose bumps. Every child is singing even the little 4 year olds.

When they stop a Minister reads from the bible for about 5 minutes and then the children say a prayer.

We have a meeting with the Principal, Thabani in his office. He says we will start a little later today because it's so cold, some of the children are arriving late.

The class rooms are full of children today – over 800 attend this school.

Renee has told the Principal that I would love to read a book for the children. We had discussed this briefly on the way to school but now I am committed. Renee goes off to teach maths and the boys and I go into a year one class. We sit down the back on a little bench. The timber falls off the metal frame twice before we finally get our bottoms on it. I must look so funny sitting on this little seat. The kids in the class are fascinated by us. They turn around to look at us at every opportunity and smile.

They are as quiet as mice when the teacher talks. Then they burst into voice as the teacher points at letters of the alphabet on the blackboard. They do English first, then Zulu. They are all looking at the board and chanting out the answers.

About 10 kids got the job of pointing at the letters with a stick. When the teacher asked for volunteers around 20 kids raced to the front. Later it was time to do maths so she asked the children to take out their counters.

Hands rummaged through pockets and bags to find rocks, bottle tops and soft drink bottle lids. Kids who didn't have enough borrowed off others. One child was like the bottle top king and at least 10 children sought him out for counters. The teacher got the children to count these out on the table until they had 10, in English first, and then in



Zulu. Bailey loved hearing the children do this and he even learnt some Zulu.

After about an hour the Principal came and got us and took us to another classroom. As we entered the room the Principal spoke to the teachers in Zulu. They seemed very confused but as he left they carried a table to the front of the class and vanished. I stood there for about 5 minutes in front of 60 year two Zulu children until I finally realised the teachers weren't coming back.

I was like a stand up comedian on his first night. I only wish I could juggle.

I sat down on the table and took out my books to read. I had "A Fish out of Water" and "Green Eggs and Ham". I started reading a Fish out of Water first but I noticed a few kids were disappearing out the door so I started just telling the story and pointing at the pictures. The kids started laughing; I was pulling faces and stretching out my arms to show how big the fish was growing. Bailey and Dan were laughing too and Bailey was helping me by describing what was happening in the pictures. The first book went OK then I started on Green Eggs and Ham.

It was much too wordy for them and the pictures, as you can imagine, made no sense at all. I struggled through the book and began to "ad-lib". They laughed a bit but I was happy to find the end.

Renee had also given me a box of bright coloured plastic shapes that could be threaded on a string. It had cards that the kids could copy.

I got one out and began showing the children what to do. They absolutely loved it and I got mauled like a rock star. It became quite dangerous because Dan had come to help and he was getting squashed. I had to get the children to all sit down again which took a while because they don't understand English yet at this age. I then chose 4 children to help and this worked great for about 10 minutes but then I turned into a rock star again just as Renee arrived to rescue me.

She took over the class with counting cards – that was a big success. Her recent teaching experience at Camden High School was a big help.

We left the school at lunch time today and decided to go to an animal reserve.

We asked for directions at a garage and got sent 50kms in the wrong direction. It was a reserve but not an animal reserve. Eventually we got our GPS working and found Spioenkop Nature Reserve. It is situated in Northern Kwazulu Natal – 35kms from Ladysmith and 14kms from Winterton.

The reserve was established in 1975 and it covers 6,000 ha.

We arrived at about 2pm and the friendly guy at the gate said we were his only visitors that day. He said we could see zebras, giraffes, rhinos and more.

We didn't see anything in the first 2kms but then we saw at least 10 giraffes. Their heads were sticking out above the trees. As we got closer, they crossed the road in front of us and walked slowly into the bush. They were so big and graceful. Bailey and Dan were so excited.

We spotted lots of other animals but we don't know their names. The brochure doesn't even list what animals are in the park. We did see lots of zebras and these allowed us to get out of the car to take a photo.

We saw more giraffes on the way back and we got out of the car to take a photo of these too. I got a great photo of Bailey with his pants down doing a wee with a giraffe watching on.

We searched everywhere trying to find a rhino. Renee had been told that they are extremely hard to find. The boys kept asking "where are the rhinos?" Renee turned into a tracker at one stage and made the wild allegation that she had spotted rhino poo! It looked like horse poo to me and later on we did see a few horses.

As we left the park we talked to the ranger and expressed our disappointment about not finding the elusive rhino. "You didn't see one" he replied, "We've got 26"!

It was fun trying to spot the animals but I couldn't stop thinking it really isn't much different to Dubbo Zoo!



The animals aren't native to this part of Africa. We are heading north in 10 days to visit other parks so I hope we see a rhino then.

So far Africa is not what I imagined it to be.

The landscape is so much like rural Australia. Then dotted in groups amongst the fields you see Zulu homes. In some fields you can see thousands of these tiny houses. They live so simply and they are so happy. Most are beautifully dressed and they are in great condition. They walk for miles every day, no wonder they look so good.

The population of this area must be at least 98% black. I've been shopping and only seen about 10 white faces. Everyone is friendly and we feel safe.

The children at school today just wanted to touch Bailey and Dan. 4 year 6 girls touched Bailey on the cheeks and giggled! They were so gentle.

We are at home now and Renee and the boys have gone in to Carol's house to light the fire. They have been talking about "lighting the fire" all day.

Carol is 66 years old and a real Grandma to the boys. She has many grandchildren whom she doesn't get to see very often because her children have moved away. She is very good with the boys answering all their never ending questions with enthusiasm.

Carol and her husband Anthony moved to Bergville from Johannesburg after they retired about 10 years ago. Anthony had always wanted a Bed and Breakfast but he died not long after setting up the place.

Carol does volunteer accounting for a charity group in the area. She loves the Zulu people and many stay at her house. A university student is staying here now. She has two Zulu housekeepers named Dudu and Xolile.

They do the house work while Carol goes to work. They have smiling faces and Bailey and Dan have fallen in love with them.



Wednesday 10th June 2009

I am very excited now. I have just returned from visiting three Zulu households to help with their vegetable gardens. A charity group, Philakahle, which is funded by African Aids Foundation, are providing families with the materials to build a vegetable garden. They supply the wire fencing, posts, gates, shovels and seeds. They also provide training on how to grow and cook the vegetables.

Zulus have traditionally grown maize which is not very nutritious. Philakahle supply medication to the Zulu people in this area who suffer from aids. The doctors have discovered that the medication is only successful if the patients have a healthy diet. Carol works for this charity group so this morning she organised for Dan, Bailey and I to accompany the team leader Mumsy on a garden tour.

It was absolutely fascinating. We got access to 3 Zulu villages. The first garden was owned by an older lady. You could see that she was having a go. She had dug up 4 small gardens within the fenced off area and planted every seed from the packet. The result was about 200 cabbage plants within millimetres from each other. She had done this with every packet of seed provided to her. She complained that the garden was too small to grow anything.

The real problem was she had just planted too many seeds. I gave her helpful advice on what to do. Only plant 10% of your seeds in one small seedling garden and leave the other area to grow the plants on. She didn't realise the seeds would last up to 5 years in a dry environment.

Her house was neat and tidy and she had a tap beside her garden. She couldn't speak English but Mumsy and her interpreter translated my English.

The next garden we visited was a real triumph. The entire garden was working at full capacity with silverbeet and cabbage all growing beautifully. The lady had even started another garden outside the fenced off area because she was having so much success. She was having trouble growing carrots and some of the outer leaves of her cabbages had aphids. I gave her advice on how to kill the aphids using soapy water. She was so lovely and so proud of her new found gardening ability.



Mumasy



She was even starting to sell the vegetables. I congratulated her and told her she was the number one Zulu gardener.

While I was helping with the garden, Bailey and Dan had made friends with her 5 year old son. Bailey and Dan were inside the round hut helping to put sticks in their fire. The houses are made from mud bricks with grass thatched roofs. The round house is where the fire is kept and it is usually where the grandparents of the family live. It was a hive of activity.

The next house was a complete contrast. As we walked into the village there was rubbish all over the place. The houses were in disrepair and snotty nosed children peered out of the doorway.

The mother was younger than the others we had met. Her garden looked unattended until she pointed out she had planted seedlings and covered them up with dead grass. We moved the grass aside and she did have about 15 silverbeet and a few cabbage plants growing. Only about 10% of the garden was dug over and the soil was full of rubbish.

You could tell she was down and out and didn't realise that this garden had the potential not only to grow vegetables but to grow her as a person too.

I said to Mumsy, she needed to take this lady and her children back to the last village we had visited and get her to meet their "hero gardener". She will learn so much in 10 minutes and the lady would become her mentor. Before too long Philakahle would have several hero gardeners that could help teach the others. Mumsy thought it was a great idea.

Thursday 11th June 2009

We are running late this morning. It's a mad rush to have breakfast and get to school on time. Yesterday we missed the children singing. Assembly starts at 7:45am and they go into class at 8am. I am amused by our lateness because Renee and the boys have been watching animal shows on TV since 3:30am.

Dan is eating 3 bowls of cornflakes mixed with rice bubbles every morning so breakfast takes time. After breakfast we quickly make 4 peanut butter sandwiches to take with us (plus 3 bananas). We arrive

at school early; the children are only just starting to arrive. We saw hundreds of children on the road this morning walking to school. The kids look so great in school uniform. One school has aqua coloured jumpers. I have noticed that africans look good in any colour. A road worker was wearing bright purple long pants.

Today a boy was wearing a bright orange scarf with his aqua jumper and he looked great. I am amazed how these beautifully dressed people just step out from the long grass. Some of the mud brick houses are 10kms from the road.

We get to hear the children singing this morning – its new songs for us and they are moving forward and then backwards as they sing. It's a fantastic experience; this alone is worth the trip to Africa.

The teachers are all excited today because the Headmaster and Bongi drove to Johannesburg to pick up the boxes of gifts sent by St Peter's Primary School.

The school's children have donated 4 laptop computers, lots of books and teaching aids. The Headmaster is a bit upset because he had to pay 1,480 Rand to customs. As a good will gesture, we offer to pay this so the school's not out of pocket.

Today I look at the schools veggie garden. They are growing vegetables to give to the poor families. These are the families who have orphan children living with grandparents or extended family. The parents die from aids so the children get looked after by the grandparents. The problem is the grandparents are too old to work so they can't provide food.

Carol has told us that around 60% of the black population has aids in this area (the blacks say its only 30%).

The school's garden is a success. They mainly grow silverbeet and cabbage in winter. In summer Bongi says they grew so many potatoes they were able to sell some too.

The school is lucky because a rich Zulu family lives next door and they have many cattle. The rich are measured by how many cattle, pigs and goats they have. The school is allowed to use the cow manure on the veggie garden for free.

Renee is teaching again today so we film a bit of this for posterity. She is now using the “repeat after me” method of teaching because the kids just got too confused. There are 52 kids in her class so it’s impossible to check their individual comprehension in a 30 minute lesson.

Friday 12th June 2009

Last night – we had our best meal so far in South Africa. Carol got her house keepers to cook us one of their traditional dishes. It was a beef stew with samp and beans. We have asked Carol if we can eat the leftovers tonight (samp is made from corn-mealie).

It’s the sunniest day so far in Africa. The mountains look spectacular in the distance as we travel to school. We have to be careful as we drive because cattle cross the road. They can appear within seconds out of the long grass and they seem to know that they are the kings of the road. There are no fences around the Zulu properties.

Renee has an early day today because schools here close at 12pm on Fridays. The children have lunch at 10:30am and then they clean the floors and the desks with wet rags.

This morning when we arrived Bongi gave the children a lecture about how dirty the playground was. Chip packets and paper litter the entire area. She tells the kids to pick up a paper today on the way to class. The kids don’t really take her that seriously but then Renee started picking up papers and then so did the kids. Within 5 minutes the school was spotless.

Yesterday we went into the school’s kitchen. It’s a corrugated shed out the back with a dirt floor. We noticed all this smoke coming out the door and window. Two older Zulu ladies were inside doing the cooking. They had 3 huge urns sitting in a fire in the corner. The 4 main ingredients here are cabbage, carrots, potatoes and silverbeet. They feed the children so early because for many it’s the first meal of the day.

The ladies were so friendly and they just wanted to touch the boys. Bailey and Dan have had constant attention from all the children. In the playground the kids gather around the boys to watch them play. Dan has enjoyed the attention. Bailey is more shy so for him it’s



uncomfortable. It's not my thing either, so after the first few days I've been happy to drop off Renee and then go and look at gardens.

Yesterday we got stuck on a rough bit of road, and part of our hire car has been dragging on the road ever since.

We went to a mechanic workshop this morning and they removed the offending part. It was only a cover plate so hopefully it won't be missed. We are not covered by insurance for under carriage damage. After going on some of these goat track roads, I now know why.

We meet Mumsy at Philakahle at 10am. We drive out along a dirt road for about 20kms. The first garden is a new one so they have small cabbage and silverbeet plants. The cabbage has aphids so I give her a hand held mist sprayer and show her how to mix up a soap and water solution. We have great success with this in Australia so I'm confident it'll work here too.

The soap they use here comes in bars 60cms long. They just cut it up to size. Its very oily soap so it should kill aphids fast. They are thrilled that something so simple can control their biggest pest.

We spray the aphids then it's off to see a friend's garden further down the valley. We park the car in their compound then off we go on foot. People come out of their houses as we pass.

The next house is neat and tidy and they have a beautiful vegetable garden. A little boy about Dan's age comes out of the round house and the boys become instant friends. They start having running races. His name is Tandii and he is a beautiful looking boy.

Yesterday I was telling Mumsy how easy garlic was to grow from a clove so this morning we called into Spar and bought some. We are giving each gardener 5 or 6 cloves and showing them how to plant it.

Garlic is a great natural remedy for colds and flu and almost every child under 6 here has a runny nose.

We walk back up the hill towards the car but Mumsy says we have to look at another garden over the hill. It's a big walk; more people have joined our group, we are turning into an instant garden club. I'm in trouble because I have promised Renee that I would pick her up from school at 12pm. I'm not going to make it, so I ring her on my mobile. She gets a lift with Matthew.

The next garden is owned by a lady who is very poor. Her house is tiny and on its own so she mustn't have any family. Her garden is a

hive of activity. The soil has been dug over and she has a huge patch of healthy carrots. She has cabbage and silverbeet seedlings that have just sprouted. She is full of energy and so enthusiastic about her garden. She brings out seeds rolled up in newspaper and asks me to identify them. I give her advice on how to store them and tell her they can last up to 5 years.

We spray her cabbages that have aphids and my new garden club agree to share the sprayer.

Bailey, Dan and Tandii are throwing rocks into a fresh cow pad much to their delight. Later, I take a photo of the 3 boys sitting on a rock together staring into space.

Another neighbour has joined our group and wants to know what's happening. I'm told we have one more garden to see. A lady passes us carrying a huge basket of washing balanced on her head. I ask if I can take her photo with the boys. She laughs and obliges and wants to know what she's missing out on. We go back to the car and drive a short distance to the next garden up the hill. The little boy Tandii has climbed into the back with the boys. When we arrive I expect it to be just Mumsy and the garden owner but our "garden club" has cut across the paddock and we've got at least 10 members now. This garden is a success too but the owner isn't home.

I say goodbye to my new friends and we head back to Bergville. Renee is so jealous when she finds out where we have been. It got hot today up to 20° so I wish I was wearing my shorts. I've had my new denim jeans on every day now so they need washing.



Yesterday I got a haircut in the main street of Bergville. I mean on the main street. They just set up a tent on the footpath and start a business. There were 2 plastic waiting stools which the boys sat on while they ate their chips. The hairdresser had a client when we arrived so he had an audience of chip munchers to watch him.

I got a quote before we started – 10 Rand, but when I sat in the chair it quickly went to 15 Rand. He thought the boys were getting the haircut. I asked for a No. 2 crew cut. His hair clipper was attached to a car battery near my feet. He made a big fuss about spraying the clippers with “cleaner” before he started. The No. 2 attachment had lost its clips so he held it on with his thumb as he ran the clippers over my head. They weren’t real sharp so it was more pull than clip. He realised things weren’t working so well, so he stopped and oiled the clippers then changed to an even older pair before giving up on these and going back to the original. It was an experience.

Finally he got out a paint brush, one of those huge ones that you oil a paling fence with. He brushed that over my face, ears and neck, then removed the cape. I paid him the money then rushed off with the boys to pick up Renee from school. As I was driving along I noticed he had forgotten to cut around my ears and the back of my neck. That afternoon we returned as a complete family and I suggested that I may have only got Part A of my haircut. I showed him the side-on profile of Bailey’s haircut then pointed at my head. “No problems” he said and after warning me, “this might hurt” he clipped around my ears. Renee gave him another 2 Rand for part B because he had a friendly face. My \$3.00 haircut looks like a \$3.00 haircut.

Now when we go down the main street we always say hello to “Ernest”.

Tonight the boys have been in big trouble. Dan thinks that “now” doesn’t apply to him and whenever you ask him to do something or not to do something there is always backchat. He and Bailey back-chatted Renee one too many times tonight so they were banned from lighting the fire place at Carol’s house. Well, the tantrums at first turned to wheeling and dealing with counter offers proposed by both boys. We heard every possible excuse why they had to be allowed to light the fire including “the cat won’t be very happy” from Dan.

Everyone’s in bed now after a big day. It’s a long weekend so we are thinking about going away for a few days.

Saturday 13th June 2009

We don't go away, we explore the mountains. Today we drove into the Drakensberg mountains to see Cathedral Peak. Saw 2 baboons feeding on the side of the road. They really do have ugly bums. They should have to wear undies. We have lunch at the Cathedral Peak Hotel. I had BBQ Boerwars which is African for sausage, with fresh salad. It was the best meal so far and we sat on the veranda looking out at the spectacular mountains.

The scenery was amazing on the way up to the mountains. Zulu villages clung to the hills. We passed hundreds of people walking along the road. At one point I lost concentration and nearly ran over someone's goat. The boy chasing the goat thought he was going to be in big trouble from his dad. A beautiful river ran through the valley and smaller streams ran down the hills. The snow from last week is melting. We see women washing clothes and children in the streams.

The rich come to these mountains to bush walk and fish for trout. They stock the rivers with Rainbow Trout. The hotel car park is full of Mercedes and Audis.

They have a fantastic playground and the boys make friends with a super confident 6 year old boy called Ethan. He's here with his two brothers – "They are friends of the helicopter pilot".

After playing for about an hour we walk down to the river to see the trout farm. There's thousands of fish all about 30cms long.

On the weekends Carol doesn't cook so that night we have dinner in a local restaurant, Bingelela. Its freezing cold tonight but they light fires to keep us warm. We have gourmet pizza and salad. 3 dogs walk between the tables. The whites have dogs to keep the robbers away at night. Many of the farms we've seen have barbed wire or electric fences around the houses.

Sunday 14th June 2009

During breakfast we have the conversation that we are eating too much food and at this rate we are going to get fat. I'm feeling guilty after eating 1½ pizzas and a big salad last night.

After another big breakfast Renee helps the boys do homework. They are keeping a story journal of Africa. Last night Bailey asked us, how did the first person get here? It's a deep question for a 5 year old. My initial response, "They walked of course" didn't suffice so I left it up to Renee to answer.

Later we set off to Champagne Castle for another day in the mountains.

We never make it, on the way we discover Thokozisa, an upmarket craft centre. It's a collection of craft stores set in a beautifully landscaped village. Each store specialises in non competing products. A leather store sold belts, wallets and beautiful handbags. I wanted to buy Renee a handbag but she wouldn't let me. They were only about \$100.00 Australian and they looked so nice. I almost bought one for myself.

One of the stores sold hand-made rugs. Several ladies were busy weaving beautiful rugs. There were no machines, it was all hand done and the ladies worked very fast.

The owner of the store, a white guy heard my accent then made smart remarks about Australia's rugby side. He was a very clever businessman. He kept up the banter because he realised the longer he kept us there the more chance we would buy a rug.

His plan worked, one of the ladies was weaving a beautiful rug with a modern design, and great colours that would suit our house. This rug had been designed in Johannesburg by an interior designer for an up market hotel. The owner said he could make the same rug for us. It takes 2 weeks to make a rug this size (1.8 x 2.7m) and it cost 3,000 Rand. We paid \$500 Australian plus \$80.00 delivery.

The price seemed reasonable so we bought a smaller one for our Manly unit. All up we spent 5,000 Rand. It will be a great momento for us to enjoy if they ever turn up?

We were surprised that the wool they use is New Zealand grown.

Our existing rug at home which is water damaged was declared dangerous by a carpet cleaner about 5 years ago. Our rug at Manly is such poor quality it is being eaten by our vacuum cleaner.



It took us so long to decide what pattern / colour to get that we ended up staying 4 hours. We had lunch at the café (the meals were huge) and then the boys played on the playground.

On the way home a small tipper truck passed us. It was carrying human cargo of arms, legs and heads. It looked so funny we did a u-turn, caught up and took a video. They all waved and smiled at us.

Today we saw at least 20 utes go past all stacked to the sky with firewood. Often several people were sitting on top of the pile as they travelled along at speed.

We have noticed that there is only one variety of tree left growing on the hillsides. Renee heard the only reason this tree survives is because the Zulu get diarrhoea from the smoke, if they burn the wood.

The white farmers have beautiful big trees growing around their houses. It just shows if you are poor, the environment doesn't stand a chance.

Oops, I have forgotten to tell you about the greatest find so far here in Africa. Back at Thokozisa I found what I think will be the best fly swatter ever. It has a twisted wire handle and a leather swatter. Where we live, next door to a dairy, the flies drive you mad. The swatters only last for about 3 months because they get so much use. I bought 6 leather swatters for 29 Rand each.

Monday 15th June 2009

It's a public holiday so we are not going to school. We drive into Bergville to do some clothes shopping. A few of the shops are open despite the public holiday. We've decided to buy the boys some winter clothes at "Jet". The clothes are around 50% cheaper here than in Australia. It's all still made in China but the clothes are more colourful.

We buy more tops and jackets for Bailey knowing that next year they will all fit Dan. Renee buys Bailey Denim jeans for about \$10.00.

Then we drive out through Winterton on our way to Monks Cowl in the Drakensberg Mountains.

We stop and have pancakes at the Waffle Hut. We drove past this place yesterday and Renee and Dan have been dreaming about pancakes and ice cream ever since.

The pancakes are great but Bailey refuses to eat anything sweet like this. He wouldn't even drink the milkshake. He has a banana instead. He will be the only skinny boy in the family.

In this tourist complex there is another rug factory. Renee decides to buy her mother a Runner Rug. The colours at this store are more ethnic. Renee loves these colours and she thinks her mum will love them too. It's a skinny rug so her mum can use it in her hallway or hang it on the wall. The boys don't like this centre as much because there's no playground.

Our next stop is Scrumpy Jacks. This little shop has jams and local foods like honey and trout. They also have pony rides but they only have one pony and there are at least 10 children waiting. I tell Renee that this place has so much potential. The carpark is full but there's really nothing to do. I see 3 beautiful Geraniums in pots for 16 Rand each. One is that beautiful red colour that you see in Europe.

We drive further up into the mountains. There is a golf resort that is surrounded by time share huts. On the hills exclusive new houses are being built. The estate is protected by an electric fence.

Today some Zulus are back burning around the perimeter fence. The boys think this is fantastic. They are fascinated by fire at the moment. They can't wait to tell Carol.

Along the road the Zulu are selling firewood in small packs. Often the children are given the job of selling the wood.

We stop and take a photo of 5 children. We ask the father if he would mind – "OK no worries" he says.

We gave them 2 Rand and some gingerbread men. They have runny noses and smiling faces.

As we climb the mountain the houses get bigger. This is like Mount Wilson in NSW. We reach dragon peaks – this is the home of the Drakensberg Boys Choir.

We hoped to see them on Wednesday but they are not performing again until July. Apparently they tour the world.

Further on, there is another exclusive hotel overlooking the beautiful mountains. The carpark is full of Mercedes. We reach Monks Cowl, a camping area for bushwalkers and fly-fishermen. We also called into a bakery on the way up. They were doing tremendous business and had run out of most cakes.

They had an old fashioned playground that the boys loved. It had a monkey bar swing that could knock your teeth out. As we entered this property, 6 Zulu boys around 15 years old did a dance routine hoping to get money.

On the way back down I decide to buy one of those red Geraniums from Scrumpy Jacks for Carol but they have sold out.

In the afternoon back at Carols we get a visitor named "Pum". She has just returned from a fund raising trip to Australia. To save money she had been living in a monastery near Cobbitty.

Pum had also visited Hong Kong and Canada. She was chosen to visit these countries because of her community work with aids victims in the Bergville area. Dan fell in love with Pum and started shelling Pecan nuts for her to eat. Pum is going to come with Mumsy, myself and the boys when we look at vegetable gardens again on Wednesday. We discuss the success of the gardens and I tell her about my Hero gardener idea.

It's a late dinner tonight because Carol has a full house. She has soil scientists, and a dung beetle expert.

They were as exciting as they sound. One French guy (Pascal) couldn't shut up. They ate all the cheese and biscuits without offering them to anyone else.

Tuesday 16th June 2009

This morning the French were much nicer. Pascal the talker had got up early and gone to work. It's a beautiful warm morning. The dung beetle expert had a go at me about our cricket team's performance in the 20-20 World Cup. I missed the few games we were in but apparently we got beaten by Bangladesh. I tell him we are going

through a rebuilding stage. That's twice now in as many days I've had to apologise for Australian sporting teams.

Breaking News! I killed a fly this morning with my new swatter. It's a revelation.

Today we went for a bush walk up into the mountains. First we drove out past Burgerville and Woodstock Dam. We passed hundreds of Zulu homes on the way. Cattle and goats again on the road, and huge pot holes. You have to concentrate because cars coming towards you are dodging pot holes too, so they often come over on our side of the road.

We crossed over Thukela River a few times on the way. We parked in the Royal Natal National Park and then walked up into the Tugela gorge. The boys loved stopping and throwing river stones into the water. We walked for about an hour and saw beautiful waterfalls. We passed about 50 Zulu kids who were on a school excursion. I got sore legs carrying the bag up hill; it's the only exercise so far. We crossed the river on rope and timber bridges that got your heart racing. We thought we heard baboons in the trees. I was happy to get back to the car to have a rest. We got some great photos and the boys loved it.

From there we drove to the cavern. This is another hotel in the mountains. It reminded me of those sandstone hotels in the Blue Mountains that were once grand but have now become old and stuffy. We had lunch and the boys played in the playground. On the way Dan spotted a baboon and when we stopped the car we counted at least 6. It was great to see animals in their natural habitat.

When we got home we all had a sleep before dinner.

The French were much nicer at dinner and I even warmed to Pascal. He is a know it all, but he did have interesting stories. I did notice however, that everyone else disappeared from the table leaving just me.

The soil scientists are here to prove that dung beetles make soil accept more moisture. They are simulating rain fall and measuring the absorption of test plots. The plots that have contained dung beetles are absorbing more water. With these scientific results they will encourage farmers to only use chemicals and fertilisers that are

friendly to dung beetles. That will mean a win for the farmers and the environment.

Wednesday 17th June 2009

Today it's back to school for Renee. The boys and I are going with Pum and Mumsy to look at more vegetable gardens.

Bongi sent us a text message asking me to address the children at assembly about littering. I am passionate about littering so I give a rant about how this school is their part of Africa so it's up to them to keep it clean. Bongi is interpreting my speech.

During the day, Bailey comments how much he loved my speech. I ask him what was I talking about – “I don't know” he responds, “I wasn't listening”.

We head back to Bergville to meet Pum and Mumsy. They can't all fit in our car so we follow them for about 40kms back towards Winterton and then along the road towards Cathedral Peak. We leave the asphalt and travel along a dirt road. There are hills covered with Zulu homes. Mumsy hasn't been to this house since they gave them the fences 12 months ago so she is having trouble finding it.

We stop and ask several people for directions. Everyone is friendly and helpful. They want to share in our adventure. We find the house; you can tell immediately if the family is wealthy. If there is litter around the property they are usually poor.

These people are wealthy because it's clean and they have pigs, cattle and lots of chickens.

Pum introduces us to the family. The husband and wife and a small boy, who is very shy. The lady has a huge growth growing out the side of her head. She has a head like a football. I know the boys are staring at her and Bailey is about to say something that will embarrass us all but I stop him just in time.

She is very friendly and shows the boys how to grind maize. Bailey is fascinated by simple things like this and he grinds away for 30 minutes. She shows Dan the chickens and gives him an egg to hold. A couple of hens are in the process of laying eggs. They are sitting in large buckets that have been wired to the wall.



Pum (centre)



They have a huge pile of melon like fruit, which apparently tastes like pumpkin.

Everywhere I look it's a photo opportunity. The sheds have so much character. One is filled with maize stacked about 2 metres high.

The man has a coffee cup full of maize kernels and he is crunching them up in his mouth. He says it's a light snack.

A brooding hen is in a cage with a family of chicks. The round house door is open, it looks sparse inside. About 30 freshly made mud bricks are laid out in the sun to dry.

We still haven't seen his garden. He is asking Mumsy for more seedlings but she says "show me your garden". It's down below the chicken run. I can count at least 20 chooks. Pum points out that he is growing Marijuana.

I laugh thinking she is joking but there is a 2m x 3m patch that's about 60cms high, so she's not. She remarks that a lot of Zulus grow it to use and sell. It's the first patch I've seen. We find the veggie garden, it has a tap and hose beside it.

The garden is full of vegetables but none are ready to eat. They know what they are doing because it's flourishing.

I congratulate them on having such a fantastic veggie patch. I give them advice on how to set it out better next season so they can fit more vegetables in. I suggest they mound the beds across the slope so the water doesn't just run down the hill. They laugh because my advice is so simple and they can't understand why they haven't done it this way.

I give them some garlic and show them how to grow it. I also give them a 1 litre sprayer and show them how to make soap spray. Lots of their cabbages are covered in aphids and the plants are stunted.

Again they are amazed that this simple product that they have in their house will control aphids. The beans have two spotted mites because the older leaves are yellow. I show them how to spray under the leaves to control this insect too.





They have great plans to expand the garden further down the hill. They will be successful because they have water and manure on site.

I give advice about digging in more manure and how to mulch. They have never heard of mulching but when I take off my hat and show them how it shades the ground they understand immediately. We are having a good time, they are happy to get advice.

We walk back up to the houses and I ask if I can look inside.

The round house is for their ancestors (their parents have died). It's where they do the cooking. A small fire place is in the centre.

Cooking pots and utensils are against the wall. Cow hides are used to sit on. It's a hard packed mud floor but it's shiny and clean like concrete. It's quite cool inside because the fire is out. The walls are at least 30cms thick. The smoke rises up and passes through the thatched roof. It's stained black. The thatching will last for about 3 years. The interior is minimalistic. His most treasured tools are hanging on the wall. I notice a saw and an axe. Beside this is a small box shaped house – its empty inside. It has a single globe light hanging from the roof. The thatched roof is supported by tree branches wired together to make 'A frame' supports.

When the family comes to visit they sleep in this house. There are no beds so they must sleep on the hides. There is another house that has cute steps and a blue door. It's where the family sleep. The husband tells a story how he had 30 of his goats stolen recently. The thieves came in the night, killed his 2 dogs then herded the goats away.

To ward off these evil spirits they killed one of their cows and invited hundreds of their friends and relatives for a feast. He said the good spirits from his friends would ward off the evil spirits and bring them good luck.

After we left, Mum & Pum told me that he had bashed his wife and that was why she had the huge growth on her head. He couldn't take her to the hospital or they would arrest him. They also said that his neighbours had got a witch doctor to put a curse on his wife and that's why she had the melon head. But I knew nothing of these stories when I bid the family goodbye and wished them gardening success.





Our next stop was a hostel which has been built from money donated to the aids foundation by Australian and Canada.

Here they house about 40 people every weekend. They feed them and check on their health. They also do counselling because many of the orphans who come end up pregnant at an early age. About twenty 12-16 year old children were here today. I got a tour of the kitchen and sleeping facilities. They also have a computer room with about 15 work stations. It was full of kids finding out about the world.

Then it was back to Bergville where we had 30 minutes off duty.

The boys and I went to the post office to send postcards. It was a big line up with only 2 tellers serving. People kept pushing in at the front of the line. One guy was an Indian. The Zulu didn't seem to mind but I wasn't happy.

We then met Mumsy and Pum at Renee's school. Renee wanted to come on a garden tour too. Our next client lived only about 3kms from the school. Her children had been telling her about Renee.

She was a single mum and her property was littered with papers. She did have a pig that was tied to a tree. Bailey managed to chase it so much it ran out of rope. The boys found a pile of dirt and spent the next 30 minutes playing with it.

This lady had a pretty good garden. It had a few weeds and the soil was hard but she was growing cabbage and silverbeet. She makes her living from growing these 2 crops in winter and sells the product to her neighbours. I gave her a sprayer and mixed the soap spray again and showed her what to do.

This will mean so much to this lady because she relies on her garden for survival.

At least 20% of her cabbages were being destroyed by aphids. I dug up a small section of her garden to plant garlic and told her how to harvest it. I gave her carrot and cabbage seeds. I liked helping her because she was working hard and having success.

We talked again about the importance of adding cow manure and mulch. Cows roam the fields here so it's a simple job for the kids to pick up the poo.

I congratulated her for having such a beautiful garden and how proud she should be for being able to provide her neighbours with healthy fresh vegetables.

Some of her children arrived home from school. They were happy to see Renee, and Pum said they would be so proud that we had come to *their* house.

Bailey was in the bad books because he ignored me all day. It was as if he had gone deaf.

Thursday 18th June 2009

The boys are in a coma this morning, so I woke them up with the kissing machine.

We drop Renee off at school and listen to the children sing again. Renee is coughing today but she refuses to take a Codral. The boys and I head back to Bergville to pick up Mumsy and Pum.

We go back to one of the gardens we have already visited. When we arrive two girls are watching black and white TV. They look about 20 years old. They both have children but they are not married. Their father has taken on a second wife and has built another house next door. The daughters don't like him. He turns up later and they can't even look at him. Their birth mother works on a farm as a house maid and only comes home on the weekends. She earns 600 Rand a month. That's \$25.00 Australian a week.

They have 5 goats, 10 chickens and a pile of fire wood so they are not destitute. But the houses are in disrepair and paper litters the ground.

Pum does the introductions. The daughters say that their brother looks after the garden. Philakahle gave him the fencing because he is suffering from aids. He's not here today and wasn't here last time I called. We empower the girls to help us dig up the soil and make a start.

They bring out a shovel to help us dig. They don't have shoes and the soil is very hard so it must be hurting. I've got my garden fork and shovel. A fork is much better in hard soils.

We dig up 2 patches about 2½m x 2½ms. We take buckets of old manure from the goat pen and spread it over the soil. While we are digging we find broken glass, plastic bottles, old tin cans and rope etc.

We terrace the gardens so the water doesn't just run away. We put a path around the boundary fence and up the middle. I've noticed at other gardens that the chickens put their heads through the wire and eat the veggies so the walkway will stop this.

We transplant cabbage and silverbeet seedlings that are struggling in the hard soil. I show one of the girls what to do because she is showing a real interest. I get her to plant silverbeet seeds into the beds we have prepared.

At the top of the garden, Mumsy and I dig a seedling bed. This is where the girls will grow their cabbage seedling etc that can be transplanted once they reach the right size. I give them enough seeds to last a couple of years. I show the bright girl how to plant seeds. She picks it up within minutes. I can tell she is a potential green thumb.

I tell her she has 3 weeks to dig up the rest of the garden. By that time the cabbage seedlings will be ready for transplanting. We plant garlic and we give her the run down on its health benefits and storing. I donate another sprayer and show them how to make soapy water insecticide. I am leaving tomorrow so I give her my new garden fork. I tell her that I am only lending it and that I will be back. I say this so her father doesn't sell it. We get a photo together to celebrate our gardening achievement. It's only a start but they now know exactly how to prepare a garden bed for planting. I tell her the next time I come I expect to see her son with a fat belly. They all laugh at this. As we leave they all have smiling faces.

We have empowered them with the ability to become self sufficient. They have plenty of land so the garden can be expanded in time. They have a running creek within 50 metres, a ready supply of manure and good soil.

Bailey and Dan had a lovely time today. They helped with the digging and picking up the rubbish. They chased chickens around for an hour and climbed over the pile of wood.



Pum and Mumsy think Dan is “African” because he always has a smiling face.

When we went back to Intumbane to pick up Renee, Dan has 15 kids around him giggling with his antics. Bailey is more reserved, he likes to sit back and watch. Both boys were well behaved today. I bought 2 small packets of chips at 8:30am and said if they were respectful today, they would get the chips.

Friday 19th June 2009

Tonight we are at the Salt Rock Hotel in Ballito. It's a 3½ hour drive from Bergville. We are on the beach about 45kms north of Durban.

Salt Rock Hotel would have been exclusive 20 years ago. Today it's a bit tired but it's in a fantastic position. We've just had a great dinner. I had chicken curry with rice and beans followed by a stir-fry. I have really missed spicy food whilst staying at Carols.

We had a fantastic experience this morning at Intumbane Primary School – the school gave us a cultural show which involved the kids singing and dancing for us. They were in traditional clothes.

They treated us like royalty. After several dances from the girls and boys the teachers all got up and started singing and dancing too. These people really love music and they just can't sit still.

As the performances were taking place I looked around the crowd and saw other kids singing and dancing too. The show went for at least an hour then Bongi made a lovely speech thanking Renee for coming to the school. They also thanked her for the many gifts she had brought to the school. Bongi then presented Renee with a traditional Zulu outfit including a dress, headwear and earrings. Renee did a little dance and the kids all laughed and clapped.

The boys also got Zulu head wear that made them look so cute. This experience is priceless. They gave us a farewell lunch. Renee was a bit teary saying goodbye to the teachers that had been so welcoming. Before the performance I had given advice to the gardeners who are **looking** after the veggie patch at Intumbane.

I helped them make liquid manure out of cow manure and water. We used this to fertilise the cabbage, silverbeet and onions. I gave them

veggie seeds and a sprayer. Again they have been having trouble controlling Aphids on the cabbage. They had been using Malathion but this has been banned in Australia for years because it is too dangerous. The Zulu guy looking after the vegetables was keen to learn. At the moment it's a big job keeping the water up to such a big garden because they have to use watering cans. The school has just got a quote to install an electric pump (20,000 Rand). This will make gardening so much easier.

It was sad for the boys to say goodbye to Carol and her maids Dudu and Xolile. We have noticed that many of the white South Africans still treat the blacks as slaves. There is supposed to be a minimum wage but because there is so much unemployment it is impossible for the government to enforce this.

It was very satisfying to help the Zulus to become better gardeners. Although I only visited about 12 gardens I gave Mumsy ideas that will help the Zulu gardeners of the future. Instead of having workshops in a class room they are now going to do hands on training in someone's garden. (A Hero gardener's place).

The experience was educational for me too, and the boys and I got to meet beautiful friendly people at their homes.

Anthony's bed and breakfast was also a great experience because we got to meet a diverse mix of professionals who came to stay during the 14 days. It cost \$120.00 a night including dinner and breakfast. We ate at least \$120 worth of pecan nuts!

The boys did love Carol and she was a real grandma replacement. They loved making the fire every night and patting the menagerie of animals.

It was a great experience just going to the shops to buy bread and bananas everyday.

Now we are in Ballito and it's at least 10⁰ warmer than Bergville. As we drove up the coast we saw sugarcane farms. We have the windows open in our room and I can hear waves crashing on the rocks below.

Tomorrow we head north to Hluhluwe to see the animals. We have a big breakfast again at the Salt Rock Hotel then go for a walk on the

rocks below, a pod of dolphins cruise past. The boys have a quick turn on the playground then we check out. Ballito was a bit like Noosa. The hotel had a great reception and dining area but the rooms were tired. Our room was two levels with a very steep set of stairs going down to the bathroom. Dan fell down the stairs in the first 60 seconds and banged his head on the tiles below. If it was Renee or I, we would have been badly injured but Dan just got a bump on his head and a big fright. The boys slept downstairs so it wouldn't happen again.

Heading north reminded me of Cairns. Sugarcane plantations lined the road for 150kms. There must be money in sugar because some of the farm houses we saw were mansions. If the farmers weren't growing sugarcane they were growing forests of Eucalyptus.

It took about 3 hours to reach Hluhluwe Nature Reserve. It's a funny set up; you just drive over a cattle grid. It's another 30 minute drive before you reach an information centre. We see an elephant about 100 metres from the centre. It's huge but within minutes it just blends into the bush. The park covers 96,000 hectares and comprises three reserves. Hluhluwe and Umfolozi – two of Africa's oldest game reserves, both founded in 1895. The corridor that links the two reserves was proclaimed in 1989.

It's another 30kms or so before we reach "Hilltop Camp". On the way we drive very slowly hoping to see some animals. Three zebras cross the road nearby. We see about 6-7 giraffes. Renee spots a heard of elephants about 50 metres away in amongst the trees. They are on the move and they disappear into the bush. We are driving slowly then suddenly a huge elephant steps onto the road from behind a tree. It's absolutely huge and only 10 metres from our tiny car. My first instinct was to take a photo. The elephant filled the windscreen. It flapped its ears as other elephants followed it across the road. I put the car in reverse and backed up to give the elephants room. I didn't feel in danger because I'm thinking, these are friendly animals. It wasn't until later that night at the bar the waiter told us that last year a bull elephant crushed 2 cars and killed the passengers. We were so lucky, but what an awesome experience to see 8-12 elephants that close.

The guide told us a few stories about elephants and a lion that had killed people in the park in the last 3 years.

Hilltop camp as the name suggests is on the ridge. It is surrounded by an electric fence. Last year an elephant just walked in through the main gate so they have now electrified the cattle grid. We did notice a bush buck near our campsite so it obviously doesn't stop every animal from entering.

Tonight I have had to go out to the car at least 5 times. It's in the dark so my heart is racing. I'm expecting a lion to jump on my back. The boys keep asking Renee if she has locked the doors.

Bailey just scared me because I'm writing this under a reading light in the dark and he taps me on the shoulder "dad" he says "have you seen any animals". I walk him back to his bed and give him lots of kisses. I tell him there's nothing to worry about because "we have locked the doors".

We are going on a "Big Game Hunt" at 6am tomorrow. Apparently a lion has killed a giraffe so we hope to see it. There are 250 lions in this park but they are hard to find.

Sunday 21st June 2009

Its 3pm and we are all very tired. We were up at 5am to have baked beans on toast. It's our healthiest motel meal so far. We drive our car 500 metres to reception. It's dark and we are not taking any chances with those imaginary lions.

The driver introduces himself; he has that Zulu friendly smile. The ugly Zulus must be drowned at birth. We sit up the front of the safari jeep. We have told the boys they have to whisper or they will frighten the animals. The driver starts up the 4-wheel drive, it sounds like a truck. We hurtle down the mountain with the driver shining a spot light into the bush. I'm thinking, this could be a Work Cover issue, but hey, this is Africa.

We don't see any animals. I am expecting our guide to shine the light on every animal in the park. It's freezing cold and my eyes are watering. We have rugs over our knees. We have two English guys (oops a Scottish and an English) with us.

We drive for miles without seeing anything. The animals must be still in bed. We are driving on a dirt road following another tour. A couple

of days ago a giraffe got killed by lions. So we are going to see if they are still eating it. It's thick bush so unless the animals are near the road we will drive past.

The vehicle in front has stopped. We slow down and park behind. The guide points out the dead giraffe. Most of its legs are missing. Nearby a male lion is asleep on its back. It has paid no attention to our noisy vehicles. Another male lion is asleep on the other side of the giraffe. It's bizarre; we are within 5 metres of a couple of killers in an open jeep. I'm expecting them to leap on top of us – "Children First Please!" The lion closest to us gives a yawn and opens his eyes, looks at us, and closes them. Six spotted hyena's are on the road in front. One keeps coming forward to see if the lions are nearby.

Another two cars turn up. Word has got around the camp that there has been a lion kill. The passengers in the first car climb out the windows and sit on the sills. The driver of the second car opens the door steps onto the road and starts taking photos. This is within 8 metres of 2 male lions. The lions haven't moved, the guide says their tummies are full so they are sleeping.

Soon another 2 cars turn up, coming towards us. A car alarm goes off and one of the lions wakes up with a roar and wanders off into the bush.

As the giraffe gets smelly the other lion will leave the carcass for the spotted hyena.

It's becoming a traffic jam so we drive off.

Much later, we pass another guide and one of his passengers tells us they have just seen "massive elephant". We are all excited now and discuss what massive could mean. We see huge piles of poo on the road; it's still steaming so it's fresh. We drive for a few kilometres but the elephants have gone. It's incredible how these huge animals can just be absorbed by the bush.

Much later the guide points out elephants in the distance, they are following the tree line moving fast. We drive with purpose hoping to catch up to them when they cross the road up ahead.



We speed up and wait on the side of the road for perhaps 10 minutes. The guide tells us that elephants always move into the wind so they can smell any danger up ahead. We look back where we had come from and another herd of elephants is moving along a hill towards our road. We do a u turn and speed back. There are about 8 elephants in this herd including a baby, about 2 months old. They are busy feeding on a fern like plant, oblivious to us. The guide tells us they eat around 300kg of vegetation every day. They only have one stomach so they don't get full value from the food like buffalo.

We watch them for 15 minutes. The other herd of elephants cross the road back where we were waiting. One of the elephants is massive. We watch them move quickly across the valley.

We stop at a gate to have coffee and a toilet stop. I've been busting for an hour. On the way back to our camp we see buffalo, giraffe, bush pig and warthog. It was a great experience and we enjoyed talking to our fellow travellers.

Renee has quizzed the guide and he says the easiest place to see the animals is at the southern end of the park. This is called Imfolozi Reserve and it's about an hours drive from Hilltop. It takes us much longer to reach Mpila camp because we only drive 40kms an hour. The further you get from Hilltop the sparser the vegetation becomes so you can see the animals. We saw buffalo, blue wilder beast, kudu, bushbuck, impala, giraffes, water buck, reed buck, zebra, eland, wart hog, baboons and vervet monkeys. On the way back we saw two herds of elephants. But we still haven't seen hippos, crocodiles or rhinos.

We arrive back at Hilltop around 2pm. The boys are asleep in the car and Renee and I are exhausted. It required a lot of concentration looking for the animals. It takes a couple of hours before you begin to look into the bush and not at it!



Renee has gone to do washing because the boys are running out of clean clothes.

When I wake up from my afternoon nap I want to go home. I am sick of it now.

We have dinner again at the restaurant. The place is empty but they have so much food on offer. They could feed 200 people. Renee keeps telling me we are early. When the safari tours return at 8pm it will be busy.

Because of the lack of customers a lot of this food is being reconstituted. It's served warm not hot so this could be a health hazard. It is beautifully presented. I am cranky with our family because it's a smorgasbord and you always take more than you would normally eat. We are also leaving so much food uneaten. Our African experience has taught us nothing.

We go to bed early. There is no TV so I read my Barrack Obama book. It's hard going but when I read it I can hear his beautiful voice.

We get up early and pack our bags, have breakfast, then the boys write, draw, and do numbers in their journals.

Renee has been home schooling them on tour. We have noticed Bailey is already mathematically advanced. He can do addition in his head.

I send a postcard to Carol thanking her again for being such a good host. It was so rushed on our last day we didn't do the farewell justice. Then it's back in the car. We are going to another game park today which is further north. We still have to drive about 30kms in this park as we make our way towards Memorial Gate. Today we are playing the game, "Who can spot the most animals". Dan keeps chucking tantrums because "I'm not spotting anything".

But the real challenge is to find a rhino. We don't see any until we're about 1km from the exit gate. I see a huge grey bottom in the bush. We think it's an elephant at first but then it turns around and we celebrate. It has a baby nearby. We watch it for ages. It's still in the distance.

We travel another 200 metres and see 6 more rhinos. It's a bloody "rhino convention". No wonder we haven't seen any in the rest of the park. As we exit the park I'm telling the Zulu attendant that I have just seen 8 rhinos. He's not interested in my story. I tell him "David, get excited".

We head north for 3½ hours. Vervet monkeys scurry across the highway. Many of the properties on either side of the road have animal proof electric fences. They must be private game parks. It's dry country here, there is little grass and the scrubby trees have small leaves.

We stop at Pongola to have lunch at Wimpys. It's a McDonald's inspired food chain. The town has a feeling of prosperity. They are growing sugarcane, macadamia nuts and avocados.

As we exit Wimpys we notice people selling oranges, grapefruit and huge avocados.

Renee goes and haggles a deal on the biggest avocados I've ever seen. When she comes back we laugh. They are so rock-hard they may not ripen in time for us to be able to eat them. We travel into the hills, its dry country again with cactus and aloes growing wild. We stop and do some shopping at Louwsbury. It's a black community; the roads are covered in litter.

There are 2 small supermarkets and 5 or 6 smaller shops. It's about 2pm because school children are on the roads walking home. We get directions for Ithala Game Reserve; it's only 10 minutes away. As we enter the park, it looks treeless but the further we drive the more shrubbery we see.

Three adult giraffes are on the side of the road eating the leaves from the tops of the trees. We see an ostrich and three zebras. The park doesn't have the same feel as Hluhluwe. Our self contained little house is nice though and it's beside a grass clearing so the boys can kick a ball. We have our own brick BBQ. We get excited and drive back into Luwsburg to buy meat, potatoes, tomatoes and more avocados.

The butcher shop reminded me of Italy. You choose the meat then they cut up the chops or steaks with a band saw. The shop was very busy with a line up of Zulus buying sliced Devon. The boys made

friends with the owner who had a Jack Russell. Most of the shops in Africa are owned by white people. They sit in an office, usually overlooking the cash registers.

We bought tomatoes from a lady selling off the street. Every town has a street market where people can sell their home grown or made products.

We bought milk in the Spar Supermarket. The bottle was unbranded and someone had written melk (milk) with a black marker. There was obviously no use by date.

Renee has lost her hair brush so she goes looking for one. We are waiting in the car. Two boys walk past with live chickens under their arms. Guess who's having a roast tonight?

We drive back into the nature reserve and buy firewood from the curio shop.

Renee cooks 9 chops on the BBQ. The boys keep busy putting sticks on the fire. There is no outside lighting and we don't have a torch so Renee is cooking in the dark.

When the chops are finally cooked Renee goes into a feeding frenzy. She eats with her hands; the chops taste smoky and delicious. We decide to go back to cooking with wood when we return to Oz. Everyone goes to bed early except me. I'm watching New Zealand versus Iran in the Confederation Cup which is being played in South Africa. It's a terrible game; even the commentator says the net is the safest place in the stadium.

When I go to bed I hear a loud thud on the thatched roof above. A family of baboons are having a fight. It goes quiet but an hour later they come back. We have seen lots of vervet monkeys and rock dassies in the camp. The latter look like giant guinea pigs.

Tuesday 23rd June 2009

We get up early and have Weet-Bix. The no label milk is off!

We take our car and go on a safari. The roads here are dirt and dusty.

We only see antelope, zebra, baboons, monkeys and one buffalo. There are fewer animals here and the vegetation is not as lush as Hluhluwe. We don't see any elephants or rhino.

I have been surprised how small zebras are. They are no bigger than donkeys. The two lions I saw weren't that big either. On the wildlife shows I have seen them hunting zebra so perhaps the small zebra make the lions look bigger.

We are disappointed that we have booked and paid for 3 nights at Ithala Reserve. Hluhluwe was better value because you get to see the big 5 animals. The boys were allowed to go on a guided safari tour but here you have to be at least 6 years old. Hluhluwe also has asphalt roads so you can drive yourself around with the windows down and not eat dust. If I visited South Africa again I would only spend 2 days in a wildlife park. I think we also got spoilt by our elephant experience on the first day.

Wednesday 24th June 2009

Tonight we are at Forresters Arms Hotel in Mhlambanyatsi, Swaziland, Africa.

We were booked for 3 nights at Ithala Game Reserve but it was just so quiet we decided to move on.

We drove about 350kms today. Back to Pongola first, where we had coffee at Wimpys again, then we bought oranges, bananas and paw paws from the street markets.

Bailey ate 9 bananas and a peanut butter sandwich today, which has got to be a record for a 5 year old. Tonight he had 2 plates of spaghetti.

This holiday Dan has turned into a farty bum. They are not SBDs (silent but deadly) but rather loud and deadly. He almost always says pardon me but that isn't much help when you're gasping for fresh air.

After Pongola we drove south for 25kms then left to Golela. At Golela you pass a huge nature reserve that has a large fresh water lake. The sign on the main highway warned you to watch out for game crossing the road. We did see a family of monkeys scurry across the road as a truck was approaching.

It took us about 20 minutes to get through customs as we entered Swaziland.

We entered at the Lavumisa border control gates. The country here was dry and sparse and very poor looking. But as we travelled further north past Big Bend, Siphofaneni and Hhelehhele, they were growing sugarcane. A huge river named Nsongweni passes through this area and tonight we heard it contains crocodiles. I was looking but didn't see any.

As we passed through Manzini we noticed the houses were much bigger than in South Africa and were very westernised. Swaziland is run by a king who lives near Manzini. The schools looked better here too. Renee thought the people looked shorter than the Zulus.

Only 6,000 white people compared to a million blacks live in Swaziland.

Forresters Arm's Hotel is in a pine forest up in the mountains. When we arrived it was cold and tonight it's got even colder. I've got the heater on 5, Renee is complaining how cold it is and poor Dan is coughing non stop.

We had a great meal tonight in the restaurant then we had a coffee in the lounge room and spoke to other guests. A German couple are off to Kruger tomorrow. They had already been to Hluhluwe and St Lucia. At the latter, they saw hippos and crocodiles. We are disappointed we didn't do the cruise of this waterway, as it's only an hour's drive from Hluhluwe. We also spoke to two South African guys who live in Johannesburg. One guy had been robbed three times despite having a huge fence around his house. They said up to 40% of people don't have jobs in South Africa so the desperate steal.

Today we arrived at about 4pm and kicked the soccer ball around until it got dark. The hotel's clients are very white so we will have to go for a drive tomorrow to experience the culture of Swaziland.

We stopped three times on the way and we found the people to be very friendly, one family was selling firewood on the side of the road and it was displayed so artistically. We stopped and paid them 2 Rand and 2 paw paws to take their photo. The adult ladies spoke perfect English. They complained to Renee that they had to sell firewood because they couldn't find jobs despite being well educated.



Friday 26th June 2009

It's a beautiful sunny morning. I've got my shorts on again. It's at least day 10 for these babies and I'm still looking good. Renee has just tried to put her shorts on only to find they don't fit her any more. She has been eating bacon and cakes all holiday so this weight loss program isn't working.

This hotel hasn't helped our dieting regime either. They have at least two entrees and four main meals and they encourage you to try all of them. The meals are small servings but when you are eating 2 and 3 it soon adds up. Breakfast is even more ridiculous with cereals, fruit and yoghurts followed by bacon, sausage and eggs. This is washed down with pikelets, cake, jam and coffee.

We had a great day yesterday exploring. We visited the craft markets first to see a thousand carved soap stone animals. There were 25 shops in a row and they all sold the same stuff. We turned off the highway to Manzini into the Ezulwini Valley. Here were more art and craft markets. Guava Gallery had some really nice things. One shop had bizarre wood carvings that I really liked but the size of them would make it difficult to import. I loved the colour of the buildings too. Army green brown with red doors looked fantastic together.

If you really want to experience a city you must go to the markets where the locals buy their food everyday. This can be challenging.

We drove into Manzini, found the markets and found a parking spot. The place was alive with people buying and selling clothes, shoes, fruit and vegetables, live chickens and roosters etc. The people were so friendly, one old guy followed us around for a while gibbering away in broken English how "our children were his future". He had a few teeth missing and looked homeless but he was very friendly. Eventually some women selling tomatoes told him to leave us alone – "They are visitors".



We could hear singing across the road in another part of the market. There were lots of sweet potatoes being sold here. A Minister was preaching God to about 50 women – yelling and screaming – they had their eyes closed and they were reaching out to God. When the Minister finished his sermon he passed around a small colourful box collecting donations. This must be a good gig because he was easily the fattest man at the markets. I was quite relieved to get back to our car.

I saw a lady carrying a watermelon on her head and wanted Renee to get a photo as we drove along. I was still recovering from the market ordeal when I took a turn down the wrong road.

It was the bus and van terminal where thousands of people were getting in and out. We were going to get caught up in this huge traffic jam. I put the car in reverse and backed up quickly. It was a one-way street so there was much yelling and concern from Renee and onlookers. We got away safely.

Saturday 27th June 2009

I am sitting in the sun on the veranda of our guest house. We are now back in South Africa at a place called Dawson's Game and Trout Lodge in Mpumalanga.

This is the most spectacular country retreat I have ever seen. It's colonial African, with beautiful buildings, amazing interiors and beautifully landscaped grounds.

“The eight well appointed en suite rooms have been individually decorated to create an African colonial ambiance with the emphasis on luxury. It's used for small conferences and intimate weddings. Activities include trout fishing, horse riding, game drives, scenic walks or just relaxing”.

I've already caught two trout about 40cms long. Its dam fishing so it lacks the atmosphere of wild river fishing but when you hook a fish, all that is forgotten.

We left the Forresters Arm Hotel yesterday morning at 10:30am. It was an easy drive so we stopped at Ngwenya Glass Factory. We watched glass blowers making wine glasses and it was very interesting. Bailey was fascinated by the process. Up to 10 people

had a hand in making each wine glass. They had a great gift shop that contained glasses of every description plus animals and vases too. I contemplated buying wine glasses but we break so many it would be impossible to buy replacements.

As we drove towards the Oshoek border post we got pulled over for speeding just 500 metres from the border, a radar trap caught us doing 82kms in a 60km zone. I didn't even see the sign and they had at least 6 cars pulled over.

They charged me 60 Rand in cash on the spot. I gave the money to the policeman and I got no paperwork. It was obviously a scam, but what can you do. 60 Rand is \$10.00 Australian – so I had a smile on my face.

As we drove back into South Africa we saw people walking along the roads again. We also noticed the houses got smaller. Swaziland has buses and their houses are much better quality although not as interesting to look at.

We had a nice easy drive and arrived at Dawson's Lodge just in time for high tea. More cakes, scones and sandwiches and coffee or tea.

The boys had a rest while I snuck up the hill to one of the trout dams. The fly rod they gave me had a 10 pound leader that was only 1.2 metres long so it took a bit of luck to catch a nice Rainbow Trout. I got up at 7am this morning and went fishing again for an hour and I possibly caught the same fish.

After breakfast we all went fishing and didn't have much luck. The boys just love casting so catching fish isn't really required. We did go for a long walk down the hill to a dam that is stocked with Large Mouthed Bass. These fish aren't active during winter so no fish today.

All the family are having an afternoon nap. I didn't sleep at all last night because we have an open fire in our room and it made the place so hot I couldn't breathe. The boy's bed was only about one metre away and I was worried it would catch on fire. Eventually the fire went out and the temperature plummeted.

This morning when I went fishing my feet and fingers got frozen. I had to go home and get back into bed until I thawed. Now it is a beautiful 22^o with blue skies just like Australia.

Wherever we travel overseas, I'm always telling Renee how no country has blue skies like Australia. Well Africa does.

We go for a game drive at 4pm, its part of our deal. The boys just love sitting up in the open jeep. We cross a few creeks and see a few springbok etc.

The best part was talking to the driver and finding out what a white man thinks about South Africa. Dieval was about 24 and his family owned a couple of farms in the area. The farms have been confiscated since the blacks took over.

The tractors and machinery get sold and the houses go into disrepair. The farms don't get farmed any more. Others get to keep the farms but they now have to pay rent to the government.

Dieval said you won't be hearing about this because they are doing it slowly but he said only two farms are left in this area that are still privately owned. He thinks the same thing that happened in Zimbabwe will eventually happen here too. This is why so many South African whites are fleeing the country. They see no future here for their children.

We haven't noticed this, all the places we have stayed at and most of the shops are still white owned. Government has introduced rules where large companies have to employ blacks as managers. There is a shortage of blacks with managerial skills at the moment so this isn't working.

We have just had breakfast and are about to check out. We enquired about staying another night but they want 3,000 Rand so we are going into Johannesburg.

There has been lots of sport on TV since we have been in South Africa. The Confederation Cup is on and the Springbok are playing the Lions in rugby.

A couple of days ago I watched Bafana Bafana (boys, boys), the South African team play Brazil. South Africa lost 1-0 in a match that

was decided in the last 5 minutes. South Africa played very well though.

In a boil over, USA beat Spain 2-0 to go into the final against Brazil.

An ad for the Confederation Cup has been running non stop and now I can't stop saying it. An old man says "I've been waiting a lonnnnnnnng time for this". Another voice "The greatest teams, the best players" (a young Zulu boy) "Now that they are here, come watch them flyyyyyyyyyy".

The young boy flies like a bird with his arms outstretched. It's a simple ad but I have fallen in love with it. Bailey and Dan love me impersonating the ad but Renee is sick of it.

The boys have had a great time here at Dawson's. There are so many fires throughout the house and our room has one too. They have also fallen in love with a 9 year old girl called Lauren. She is blonde so Bailey is besotted, but this time Dan has fallen for her too. Last night they sat on either side of her in front of the fire as she read books. Lauren's parents Richard & Susie have come from the UK recently and bought a food business.

They employ 1,000 people so it must be big. They have a 5 year plan to get rich and then go home. From what we have been hearing this dream could be a dream.

Suzie's mother is not happy that they have bought her grand daughter to this so called "dangerous place". They live in Johannesburg. When Suzie's mum and dad came out for a holiday they took them to a game park and they got charged by an elephant.

Monday 29th June 2009

We have breakfast and pack our bags; Renee goes to the office to use the internet to find us accommodation in Johannesburg. The boys are playing with Lauren while her parents are checking out. I get a photo of the boys with their new girlfriend. It's a sad moment when she drives away. Five minutes later Bailey bursts into tears. He has a broken heart at 5.



Bailey, Lauren and Dan



Renee's finding it impossible to find a room in Johannesburg. The rugby was on in Pretoria yesterday and the soccer final is on tonight in Johannesburg.

After an hour of ringing she finds a place that is only 1,100 Rand including breakfast. The drive to Johannesburg is very uninteresting. The land becomes flat, we pass suburbs of tiny houses that all look the same. There are no trees – it's lifeless.

As we enter Johannesburg we see high fences. The tops are electrified to keep the baddies out. It's a very unfriendly place. The housing estates are fenced in with security guards at the gates. The road into our motel has been fenced off so we have to drive around the block. It's in "Sunny Road" but with the ugly streetscape of electric fences it's a contradiction. We find the gate to our motel, the "African Centre" in Lakefield, Benoni.

I push a button on the wall and wait for a response, "Who is it?", I got asked. "Hi," I reply, "we have a booking in your motel". The huge gate opens and we drive in. Renee's got a bee in her bonnet. She wants to get all the bags out of the boot and repack. Somewhere in the next 10 minutes I loose the car keys. They could be anywhere. It's getting dark, I'm starting to panic and I'm busting to go to the toilet.

I've done this before in New Zealand, lost the keys on the day we were flying out.

I eventually find the keys in the garbage bag that was in the boot. If the boot had been closed it would have been a disaster. We carry the bags to the reception area, it smells of cigarette smoke. While we are booking in, Bailey knocks a stuffed kuda bust off the wall. It's not a good start. Renee asks if we can have a non-smoking room.

The owner gets all high and mighty about this request, responding with "all our rooms are non-smoking".

The owner walks us to our room. We pass two cleaners trolleys on the way. It's 4:30pm so this seems unusual. The door to our room is open; it's obvious it hasn't been cleaned yet. The beds are a mess. We leave our bags in a corner and take the kids down to the playground. As I'm climbing down the rickety steel staircase I really look closely at the vulgarity of this place.

The Walls are painted with the following colours – lime green, blue, orange, pink, khaki, yellow, brown, red and apricot.

Stuffed animal heads hang from almost every wall.

As I'm writing this, Renee is sitting on our bed reading the motels "A la carte" menu. In the menu it describes "Moussaka – this Greek dish is a popular meal which contains a combination of minced beef, *aborigines* and potatoes in a rich tomato base sauce". We have a laugh. Perhaps they meant aubergines.

The landscaping really compliments the buildings. It's impossible to describe. Our room is in total contrast to the exterior, it actually looks OK. Beech laminated floor with matching kitchenette. The curtains are light brown with black animal print. The walls are cream. The room smells of smoke.

The boys are playing up tonight; perhaps the exterior coloured walls have affected them.

We decide to "experience" the motel restaurant; I've heard that aborigines taste like chicken. The restaurant is up the stairs but there's a notice on the window telling you to order your meal at reception. We go to reception and ask to see the menu. I ask the owner what her favourite dish is, "well the stir fry ostrich is very nice," she replies.

We go for something less adventurous but we have to wait in the bar for 30 minutes before it's cooked. I order a scotch and coke. They don't have any coke – they are waiting on a delivery.

I have a tequila, lime cordial and lemonade. Renee has a Bacardi and Orange. The boys are writing and colouring in their African books. The bar décor is just as gaudy as the motel. More animal heads and skins hanging or lying here.

The food arrives, Renee's is nice but my dish lacks any taste. African food has not lived up to my expectations. I expected it to be full of spices but it's been bland. Motels obviously cater for whites.

We go back to our room to watch the Confederation Cup final between USA and Brazil. We search everywhere for the remote control. It's missing. We ask management for help but they suggest we search in the cupboards. Renee is technical and she can change

channels without the remote. Brazil win 3-2 but USA was winning 2-0 at half time. It was exciting to watch.

We sleep, cuddle, and then go for breakfast back in the restaurant. It's continental help yourself, but I notice a lady asleep behind a hot plate. So you can order a fried egg or an omelette, but not now. The boys have honey on toast; it's become their staple diet in South Africa.

We decide that the motel isn't that bad really and it suited our needs. But when Renee rang to book she enquired "how many stars" the motel had. Four stars the owner responded. She must have been looking up at the night sky.

We check out and go to the local shopping mall. We have 8 hours to fill in before our flight. On the way we notice at every set of traffic lights there are black people waiting to sell you something. There were also a lot of black people being used as bill boards.

The mall is single storey with many of the same stores we have in Australia. The world is becoming smaller; soon everyone will be wearing the same clothes and listening to the same music.

It's just like shopping in Australia, except if you want a plastic bag; some shops charge you for it.

The drive to the airport is uneventful; we return our hire car and load up a trolley with our many bags.

Renee does a bit more shopping, she has wanted to buy the boys stuffed animal toys since the start of the holiday. She buys Dan a lion and Bailey a cheetah. It's a piece of Africa to take home.

I try on a shirt and see my upper body in the mirror. It's scary; I've put on at least 10kg in just 3 weeks.

Renee has eaten so much bacon we've been joking she's onto her second pig.

We have basically done no exercise in 3 weeks. You can't go walking at night or you might get robbed. This fear is real with even the locals saying they don't go out after dark. The biggest industry in South

Africa is security and electric fences. The biggest export is white people moving to other countries to live.

We met a family at the terminal who were going to Brisbane for 3 weeks to see if they like it. They can get a working visa for 5 years because the father is an electrician. The mother will be in for a big shock when she has to do her own cleaning, washing and gardening.

It's been a nice holiday and I have enjoyed meeting the Zulu people. I am not frightened of black people any more. They have smiling faces and they are very friendly.

For Bailey, Dan and I, the best part of the holiday was going out to the Zulus homes and meeting the people.

Renee loved seeing the elephants up close. She regrets not going to Kruger to see hippos, crocodiles, leopards and cheetahs.

I hope you enjoyed our story.

Tim