

Beloved and Turbulent South Africa

By Terri Johnson

Located on the southernmost tip of the African continent, bordered by the Indian Ocean to the east and the Atlantic to the west, South Africa is a wild but breathtaking country.

Over 50 million people of very diverse cultural backgrounds coexist in this nation with 11 official languages, including English, Afrikaans and Zulu. This is a land where large and fierce animals still roam freely; animals such as lions, leopards, elephants and rhinoceros.



For many of us, when we think of South Africa, immediately ideas and individuals come

rushing to mind such as apartheid, fierce riots, Bishop Tutu, and Nelson Mandela. But South Africa is more than just a nation that has experienced political strife. It is a country with a rich and diverse history, a land of many cultures and tongues, and a place with such a variety of flora and fauna that it attracts tourists from all over the world.

South Africa has experienced a different history from the other countries on the continent principally because of early immigration from Europe and the strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route. The first European navigator to achieve circumnavigation of the Cape was the Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias in the year 1488. When Dias returned to Portugal, he brought news of his marvelous discovery. Depending on who he was addressing, he referred to the cape as "Cabo das Tormentas" (cape of storms) or "Cabo da Boa Esperanca" (Cape of Good Hope). Henry the Navigator, his financial sponsor, preferred the second and less used name for it promised a sea route to the riches of India, which the Portuguese were eagerly anticipating.

Prior to the arrival of European seafarers and South Africa's written history, the San and Khoekhoe peoples resided at the southern tip of the continent for hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years. In 1652, a provision post was established by Jan van Riebeeck on behalf of the Dutch East India Company at a location that would become known as Cape Town. This Dutch settlement continued to expand and draw colonists from Europe for the better part of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, primarily immigrants of Dutch, German and French Huguenot descent.

As the northern colonists came into contact over time with the southern indigenous people, an inevitable clash over the land ensued, resulting in a series of wars which have been called the Cape Frontier Wars.

To ease labor shortages on the cape, slaves were imported from other regions of Africa, as well as Madagascar, India and Indonesia. These slaves from the East introduced another ingredient into South Africa's racial and cultural mix, broadening its diversity even further.

The possession of the colony at Cape Town switched hands back and forth between the British and the Dutch until 1806 when the Dutch East India



Company declared bankruptcy following the Napoleonic Wars. Great Britain reclaimed the colony for its own. Then in 1833, due to pressures from abolitionists groups in England, the slave trade was stopped and slavery was abolished in the Cape Colony and elsewhere through the British Empire.

Unfortunately, the abolition of slavery did little to calm racial tensions on the southern tip of Africa. In fact, it began to escalate during the 1800's which triggered an event known as the Great Trek, a mass emigration to the north and east of approximately 12,000 discontented Afrikaner farmers, or Boers as they came to be called.

With the exciting discovery of diamonds in 1867 and then gold in 1886, immigration and economic growth exploded in the region and the tiny outpost at the Cape of Good Hope soon became a sprawling populous community of white settlers encompassing the whole area of South Africa, as it is known today.

Conflict between the Boers and the British as well as racial tensions among the white, black and "coloured" (a term still used in South Africa to define the interracial mixed) people groups continued to increase on the southern tip of the African continent well into the next century. Exactly eight years after the end of the 2nd and final Boer War, the Union of South Africa was created on May 31, 1910. In 1948, the National Party was elected to power and began implementing harsh segregationist laws that became collectively known

as apartheid. Sadly, South Africa continued in its racial struggles for another five decades when apartheid was finally thrown down in 1994. At that time, the first multi-racial elections were held in the country and with overwhelming success.

Today, South Africa is still not recognized around the world as the most peaceful of countries. Protests and riots still rage in many of the larger cities as the oppressed poor struggle for their rights and for equality with the wealthy minority.

Most of the population dwells in the larger metropolitan areas of Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town. According to a recent census, 79.5% of the population of South Africa defined themselves as Black African, 9.2% as White, 8.9% as Coloured and 2.5% as Asian. The major ethnic groups within the black African population include the Zulu, Xhosa, Basotho, Bapedi, Venda, Tswana, Tsonga, Swazi and Ndebele.

South Africa has a long and dramatic coastline that stretches over 1500 miles in length and along two ocean fronts - the Atlantic and the Indian. Because it is surrounded by ocean water on three sides and also because of its location in the more temperate southern hemisphere, South Africa has a generally mild climate. Although temperatures may vary from the blistering heat of the southern desert to the lush subtropical environment in the east, it is by and large a comfortable location in terms of weather conditions. This is perhaps yet another reason why South Africa is known as an ideal tourist get-away.



South Africa is one of only 17 countries in the world that can claim to be “megadiverse” in terms of flora and fauna. About 10% of all known species of vegetation on earth grow in this fertile region - that’s more than 20,000 different types of plants. There are only two other countries worldwide that have greater plant diversity than South Africa and they are Brazil and Indonesia, both vastly larger territories. From the bush savannah to the grasslands of the high plains, from the KwaZulu-Cape coastal forest to the rocky shore, the variety of vegetation in South Africa is magnificent to behold.

Farming still plays a large role in the economy of South Africa. Surprisingly, it is the eighth largest wine producer in the world. Other crops that are grown locally as well as exported throughout the globe are corn,

sugar, grapes, citrus, nectarines and sunflower seed. Livestock is also raised with the country producing 85% of all meat consumed by the local residents.

When it comes to education, the South African government has one of the highest rates of investment into the education of its youth, at almost 5.5% of its gross domestic product. Students attend school for 13 years - grades 0 through 12. Of these grades, years 0, 10, 11 and 12 are not compulsory. In 2006, South Africa recorded 12 million students in the government public school system, while approximately 350,000 children attended private schools and 100,000 children were educated at home.

While it is legal to homeschool in South Africa, it is not encouraged by the government nor subsidized in any way. Homeschooling has only been a legal option for South African families since 1996, when it was passed by Parliament as part of the National Schools Act. Families who were previously operating their home schools in a clandestine manner could now homeschool in the open and the stage was then set for the home education movement in South Africa to flourish.

Although the National Schools Act officially recognizes homeschooling, it grants the individual provinces in South Africa to draft and execute its own homeschool regulations. These regulations may either maximize freedoms or severely limit them.

According to a recent questionnaire, most parents who chose not to send their children to public schools did so because they didn't want them to follow the national curriculum, which bases its "revolutionary" methods on Marxist theory.

However, home education is under the spotlight in South Africa and the scrutiny of KwaZulu-Natal Education director Ina Cronje who has slammed it



more than once. She is on record to have said, "I am utterly against it. Part of a child's learning is to socialize and learn to cope in the world. If schools are microcosms of society, depriving the child of that learning experience will have a serious impact on overall development."

Donnette, homeschooling mom in South Africa, strongly disagrees. After giving the public school system several chances to properly educate her daughters, she gave up on the system and pulled them out completely. She has become a major advocate and voice for homeschooling in South Africa. Her website - www.staidenshomeschool.com - is a wealth of information on homeschooling in South Africa and offers many unit studies and links to helpful resources.

Donnette is passionate about homeschooling and would have it no other way. She writes, "the bonus of homeschooling is not only that we are able to monitor our children's progress, but that we can get involved with them, their safety is no longer an issue, and they are able to feel comfortable in any environment without fear of victimization or humiliation." These are the reasons that she has chosen to educate her children at home, even despite the financial sacrifices and continuing battles against a government that says it is legal to homeschool and yet makes it increasingly difficult.

Next time you see a picture or documentary on the wild animals of Africa or hear of South Africa in the news for political unrest, think of Donnette and the other homeschooling families in South Africa who covet your prayers as they blaze a trail for homeschooling freedoms in their beloved yet turbulent country.