

Trip to Lesotho

One day, a Tuesday, a week before Easter we decided to leave our four walls for about two weeks or so with the aim to make a visit to Lesotho. There was no hurry to return as we had no kids nor anything to worry about, as pensioners we felt we own to go about to see the small world. How wrong we were with our assumption not to care for anything but ourselves, we learnt after our return. We were sponsored by Rolf with 20 Maloti, luckily for us, we received this one but have not seen anyone later. This apparently is the Lesotho currency.

Whenever we decided to lock and leave, roaming around in South Africa, we had no concrete plan where we will stay, sleep. I want to mention it was one week before the long Easter week end, I know what you are thinking, they must be mad. As the saying goes; Buure make a plan. So off we went towards Pietermaritzburg on the N3, passing Nottingham road, thinking of our Sport Target Shooter friends; the long way they have to travel to enjoy the day out. At Harrismith we turned into the N5 towards Bethlehem. What I know about Bethlehem, it is the coldest area in winter but we were blessed with a blue sky and it was very hot, and this in autumn. Eventually I had to make a plan to drive in the direction to Lesotho, just before Bethlehem we turned left towards Clarens. We saw the Drakensberg coming closer and closer, our heart was beating and reminded us of the Swiss Alps, although the mountains were not made from granite but the elevation of them were good enough to feel at home. Finally we reached Clarens, greeted by the famous Clarens rock. It was quite a famous tourist centre which we found out later.



Clarens

Getting late, we decided to look for place to sleep, went to the Information Centre to inquire but been told that everything was booked out. ???

But why don't you try here, just next door, maybe you are lucky, the lady said, called "By the way Guesthouse" a B&B. And we were lucky to get the last room until Friday night. Breakfast will be served in your room, just tell me the time. We decided to stay until Friday, as we had no reason to rush. Tired from the trip we went early to bed.



Next morning we got a knock on our door, the time we ordered breakfast, a nice young lady brought us breakfast in a basket, Yoghurt, Jam, Milk, Cereal and bread beautifully prepared every morning in a different way, really outstanding! This alone was worthwhile to stay at this place. As a welcome gesture we received a voucher for a bottle of wine if we were dining at the "GOSTO" restaurant.

The next day we wandered a bit around in Clarens to explore this town. As suspected we have seen quite a lot of tourists, obviously I made quite a lot of photos. The Clarens female population was quite accommodating, giving them their time to go shopping, while their husbands been kept in a:

"Husband Day care centre" "Need to relax? Want to go shopping? Leave your husband with us, Just pay for drinks and food", a blackboard sign in front of "Crouse and Claret Bar" says.

In the evening we decided to visit the GOSTO. Very hungry we ordered half a chicken with chips and of course a bottle of wine, as we did not want to lose out of the offer. While waiting for the food we noticed on our opposite table a man and a middle aged lady in a conversation, not that the conversation was the focused part, but she was wandering around from the bar collecting

drinks for her, and going to the open air kitchen, I was a bit puzzled. As a non Clarens citizen I thought she might check on her food how far it is, and what about us? A little while later we have been served with our order. As mentioned we were hungry, dug in and started eating, after a while our hunger was a bit satisfied we realised how tough the chicken breast was, but we carried on eating. To our surprise the "Bar lady" came to us, asking how we enjoyed our food; I just nicely explained her how tough the breast, (chicken breast) was, which she explained that hers (chicken breast) were OK. To cut the story short, we gained a bottle of white wine and a marvellous raspberry ice-cream dessert. We left as old friends.

The next morning we went to play golf on the Clarens Golf estate, met the manager Dick, had a good chat, talking about Hillcrest which he was familiar with, Kloof Country Club and many other stories, eventually we were invited on his behalf for a free round of golf. Hurrah

Thursday we explored Clarens, needing some food and cool drinks. The only "Super market" we found in the centre of Clarens. Cost conscience as we are, looking for prices of items we like to purchase, but no luck there were no prices displayed. We had no choice to take what we needed. We wanted to pay by credit card, no luck, the Chinese behind the counter referred us to a sign, machine is not working, cash only. I do not support this kind of treatment and left. Later we find out that the citizen in general were not happy with this store either. On our trip to Clarens we found besides a "Herberg Klein, and a "Roter Hahn, German Style Bier Stube". Wow middle of nowhere Germans?? I wanted to taste my favoured "Erdinger Weiss Bier" but found it



was a little bit diluted, maybe because the owner was at home and left the "Bier Stube" to his apprentice, or the imported Bier got diluted during the transport.

We found some really nice Art Galleries in this areas well, never seen in Hillcrest!

The next morning I wanted to fill up the petrol tank in Clarens, the only one I found, did not have 95

unleaded, I was forced to carry on and hoping to find one on the SA side before we enter Lesotho. At Fouriesburg we found a petrol station with a "super Market", stopped, nobody came out to help. I went to the shop for help, the Chinese owner told me that the petrol station is closed and showed me with a hand sign where I will find the next station. Here as well we wanted to buy some food, no prices displayed, and his credit card machine wasn't working either. Finally I found what looked like a petrol station, filled up, asked to check the tyre pressure, sorry Sir, air not working. Disappointed we drove on in direction to Ficksburg, Lesotho Bridge Customs entry, which seemed to be a bigger town hopefully with better shopping facilities. In this town, the main street was filled with pot holes for Africa. At last we found a real Spar supermarket, price display and credit card facilities.

Lesotho

As we entered the Lesotho border, we had to pay R30.00, presumably to use the Lesotho Highway, then everything changed, people people, cars, taxis, taxis, cars. Left and right on the road, Africa shops for miles. Amazingly, I have not seen any driver behaving badly, if there was any it was a ZA driver. With max of 80Km/h we made way to Katse Dam. I have booked in Clarens via Wi-Fi for 3 nights into the "Katse Dam Lodge" and waited for a confirmation, but without any response. So we took a hell of a chance, especially into a foreign country, a long weekend ahead.

The 110 km tarred road to our destination over the MafikaLisiu Pass, 3090m above sea level, was breathtaking, which has won an engineering prize. Once up it went down again, then up to the next pass. Down the valley we have seen the first part of the Katse Dam which stretched at least 40 km.

Katse Dam

After a 4 hour's drive we eventually reached the Katse Dam village. We booked in, yes they have received our booking, god thanks. The room which was allocated to us was not what we expected. It had two beds, no bed side lights, one chair to dump our clothing, no toilet in the room but a common male/female toilet, shower and basins! The dormitory consisted of 10 rooms. Real army style for only R700.00/night. At least there was a room big enough to hold a conference for about 50 people. The interior of this room, consisting of a kitchen and fridges as well as the glass door leading to the outside were in a desperate state of repairs. Not quite inviting to prepare a meal, never mind using the run down fridges. It becomes obvious we had to rely on the "Lodge's" prepared food. At least it was Bed & Breakfast.

For dinner there was a buffet R150.00/person. Too much for us small eaters. The first night we left it and eat what we carried with us. The next evening we learned that we could ask for a menu card, for obvious reasons they did not display it openly.

But never mind the lodging, we did not come here for that, the breathtaking scenery of the Katse Dam itself was worth the trip.



The next day we wanted to know more about the Katse Dam and joined an guided tour which was just out of this world, especially the highly expensive construction work.

The Katse Dam is the second largest dam in the world. 35,8km² surface area and 1'950Km³ capacity (1'950'000'000m³), in my judgement, the entire Katse Dam must be more than 50 Km in length, if it would be stretched to one straight line

It is the highest Dam in Africa 1993m above sea level.

Second largest Dam height (185m) in Africa, crest length 710m.

The water from the Dam travels 45 Km through 4m in diameter towards South Africa and ends in the Waal Dam.

The Katse Dam was build and finished 1996 by various international companies, where South Africa is benefiting from their supply. The road to Katse Dam village was also tarred during this time. Phase 1A was inaugurated on the 22. Jan 1998 by his Majesty King Letsie III and his Excellency President Nelson Mandela.



We heard that in this area is the highest, above sea level, Botanical Garden, we therefore did ask the tour leader where about we can find it. He explained about 3 Km outside Katse Dam village.

The next day we went to look for the Botanical garden, to make sure to find the place, I entered "Botanical Garden" onto the GPS. The GPS guided us outside Katse Dam village and soon we found ourselves onto a gravel road, suitable for a 4x4, but not for an AUDI. The destination was according to the GPS 25Km. Oddly I did not question the information as normally direction given by people are not always accurate. After about 24 Km the GPS indicated, turn right after 70m, which indeed was a small gravel road leading to a small village. That's when I got suspicious, no indication whatsoever of a sign nor a Botanical Garden. It was pointless to ask any human being as they could not understand English. It was clear this was not the correct info we received from

the tour guide nor by the GPS. So we travelled all the 25 Km gravel road back to the Hotel. Finally we reached the Boom gate of our destination, over a couple of speed humps, what did we see: a sign "Katse Dam Botanical Garden, turn right". This was only 500m from our room. We turned right to see the Garden. It was just something before 14:00h entering the Garden, we were told that the Garden closes 14:00h.



The next day we went back to visit the Botanical Garden, a large area on the mountain side, overlooking part of the Katse Dam. There were plenty herbal plants in the "Herbal Garden" ranging in healing power from diarrhea to headache to syphilis, as well as the famous spiral aloepolyphyla and many more. We enjoyed a rest on a bench



at the slope of the mountain overseeing part of the enormous Katse Dam.

On the last day, we wanted to visit a Lesotho village to experience the Lesotho people how they live, guided by a young fellow who was really keen to lead us a path like the locals are taking. The tour was supposed to be between 1 and 2 hours max. In our company there was a lady our centuries with her daughter and her friend. Driving to a place looking downhill, parking and enlighten the car we head towards the slope. After not even 5 min walking, we realised that if we reach the location, eventually we had to come up the same way, but decided this is not for seniors. We drove further downhill and at the bottom we parked again and walked along the river towards the promised "location". On the way we had to cross a small little river. No ways we could cross it without taking our shoes off, or jumping over rocks 2 metres apart. No one of us was an Olympic high jumper so we had to do what was inevitable. Then we walked at least for on other half an hour, seeing nothing else than some cows grassing on the other side of the river, then we decided enough is enough and turned back to our cars. The tour guide asked R50.00 of each of us for his effort to give us this scenic tour. At least we felt we had done something good for the young man, at least he could feed himself, or invite his friends for a couple of drinks, back at the lodge, eventually we had our own drinks at the bar.

The next morning we left this memorable place towards South Africa. The night we slept at the Camel Rock camp, just a few meters outside Lesotho. Again we were lucky, just one chalet left. On Thursday, the day before Karfreitag we were heading towards Sterkfontain dam, another famous dam. At the end of the dam there was the



"The Border Post" or "Phatt Chef Roadside Dinner & B&B". The sign was inviting so we decided to stay here for the night or two depends if there would be space during the seasonal time. Again we were lucky, just one room left. The room was old fashioned so was the building. We organised ourselves in the room, I did the maintenance thing, connecting the low battery containing Cell phone, iPad and connected a kettle to make hot water, or

I wanted to. The light went out, unplugged the kettle, then I called the Boss, indeed his size was unmistakably the Phatt Chef. He had to search in the fuse box which one dripped, found it and switched back on again. I went back and plugged the kettle back again, bang out again. He called his maid to bring another kettle, but the same thing happened. After he found our cool box (70V) on another plug, he lost his temper, removed it and screamed you cannot do this, this is an old building and cannot handle all this equipment, even told me to unplug all the electronic stuff; but allowed me to plug the cool box in the adjacent room. I overheard the maid told Ruth

that she had told her boss earlier that said plug was faulty, “but he is not listening”. Typical for an ignorant boss.

Entering the “Breakfast-,Dining room” I noticed a Blackboard

“Today’s specials”

“Take it or leave it”.

In the evening we wanted to have dinner and placed ourselves at a table and waited to be served. We found out later we had to go the bar and ordered drinks, later had to ask for the menu card which we found being through many of hands of diners who left a trace of their supper on the card. (Signatures) The Blackboard notice came to my mind. However we were hungry so we ordered a sirloin steak and hoped we will get same. On the menu was written:

“If you order from the menu card you might get it, if we have stock of, the supplier is not very dependable, otherwise you will be served what is available at the time”.

I think this sums it up. The next morning we left towards Drakensberg Central, hoping during this high season we will be able to get somewhere to sleep, otherwise home is only a few 100Km away.

On the way down to Bergville and Winterton we drove towards the Drakensberg Central in the hope to get some accommodation. On an Intersection we found an Information Centre. At the desk we enquired if there is a possibility for any accommodation, she looked at us and spontaneously she replied, unfortunately all booked out until next week, we are middle at the Easter long weekend you know, she added. She must have sensed our disappointment, after a few seconds she said, wait a moment, I know somebody and went on the phone, spoke a while, then she gave us the good news: there is a place, self-catering, R 650.00/ night, “Are you interested?” Without any hesitation we agreed, thinking on last night’s heavy priced “take it or leave it” message for R750.00/night, surely this cannot be worse. Eventually we ended up at a quite nice place at the “Bell Park Dam”. We spend the Easter weekend here and left for home on the following Tuesday.

Those signs we found at the gate of well-advertised water sport entertainment area at the Bell Park Dam



The entire trip was enjoyable, we have experienced a variety of entertainment. But when we arrived home, seeing our closest friends, a relief from their face saying “we happy to see you again, as we didn’t know what happen to you, we called your home, no answer, no nothing, thinking the worst”.

We simply forgot to tell them we are going away.

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In the whole world there are good people and others, one just has to treat them well and one will receive all their attendance and good will, never ever forget your friends.