

APTA EDUCATIONAL TRIP MAY 2008

We started our educational trip with an overnight stay in Fransshoek, in the Cape Winelands area. Fransshoek reminded me of a charming European or Northern California wine town with quaint sidewalk cafes and restaurants, boutique shops, and galleries. The countryside was very scenic with surrounding mountains in the background and undulating vineyards with lovely Cape Dutch-style buildings.

Capetown is very chic and sophisticated yet laid-back and comfortable. Unfortunately, Table Mountain was completely covered by clouds, so I'll just have to go back to see it! The hotels we inspected were lovely in range from historic Grand Dame to contemporary boutique. There are many top-rated hotels and restaurants in Capetown and it offers a wide variety of sightseeing activities for visitors to choose from. We had a full-day tour of Cape Point and the pretty beach towns along the way. One of the best experiences was being introduced to a captive cheetah by the Cheetah Rescue Foundation. Everyone had the opportunity to pet him and have our picture taken up close and personal. He purred loudly the entire time. What a gorgeous animal!

For INDABA, we stayed in Umhlanga (pronounced like Umschlanga), a nice beachside town a half hour's drive from Durban. One of our highlights here was being entertained on Rovos Rail by South African Airways. The evening ride was lovely and we had a fantastic dinner. We were also able to inspect many of the staterooms on the beautifully restored train.

Our drive from Umhlanga to Kruger National Park was a long one, but offered beautiful countryside vistas, excellent roads and clean bathroom stops along the way. It's a more reasonable transportation option to recommend to clients on a budget. Our group was divided into two lodges in Kruger National Park, Lukimbi and Shishangeni. I stayed at Shishangeni, entering at the Crocodile Bridge at the southeastern most part of the park and drove about 45 minutes to reach the lodge. Our lodge was lovely with lots of wood and an eclectic mix of old and contemporary artwork. Each room was a private bungalow with fireplace, sitting area, decorative bed canopy, refrigerator, outside deck, large bathtub, and a wonderful outdoor shower. The stars were magnificent at night from the shower! Our arrival dinner was a magical Boma-style dinner with good wine and food cooked on the grill. Everything tastes good cooked outdoors! The lodge included 2 daily animal drives with excellent driver guides. We had some fantastic sightings and the only animal we didn't see was leopard. We even went on a guided walk with certified Park rangers, and enjoyed an in-room massage by a trained local woman.

For me, the safari in Kruger was the best part. I love to see all of the animals in their natural habitat and especially enjoy the comfortable lodge experience. South Africa is such a diverse country and the APTA educational trip gave us a good introduction into a few of the many travel options available for us to recommend to our clients. I now have much more confidence to sell South Africa as a destination.

Mary Tomita, June 2008