



Travelling to South Africa conjures up the fancy of finding oneself standing on the Cape of Good Hope – upside down. If that happened we didn’t notice, but upside down is an apt metaphor for many experiences during the tour. Outdated information, ideas, and imaginary notions would be turned head over heel as we journeyed 17 magical days through a familiar, but at bottom (pun intended), unknown part of the world. Come along . . .

First some backstory. Because NAS back-burnered touring after 2008’s financial finger in the eye (save for a small and brief tour to Cuba in 2010), and because South Africa loomed as a possible destination, the response was swift. NASers – current and alumni, singers and groupies -- from Hawaii, Germany, France, and California as well as the Right Coast – all drawn by the lure of a unique and romantic adventure, signed on to form an unprecedented tour group of 51 souls (34 singers and 17 groupies), roughly the size of a military platoon.

Donna Zalichin and James Crowell stepped up to take on the task of making it all happen with Donna supervising overall strategic operations – multiple, complex and shifting -- while James took command of troop movements (a/k/a cat wrangling), assuring that we moved to and from and between events on time. Give or take. Since many of the group hadn’t toured with us before and others not for a while, the traditional NAS Head-Count security check took a while to work properly. Getting 51 people to call

out numbers that ended at 51 is not as easy as it sounds. At this writing both Donna & James are enjoying a very well-earned rest away from crowds, questions, numbers under 51, and anything calling itself Plan B.

The gig was a special one as well. NAS was to be one of several groups participating in the “IHLOMBE South Africa Choral Festival,” arranged by Classical Movements, a company specializing in orchestral and choral musical tours. IHLOMBE (pronounced Ish-LOM-BAY) translates from the Zulu as “applause,” an excellent omen. Four concerts and one Mass in as many venues over nine days, interspersed with sight-seeing tours and visits to sites of cultural and political significance beckoned.

On July 4th we lifted off JFK, minds undoubtedly abrew with expectations and apprehensions as we flew across six time zones on the fourteen and one-half hour flight to Johannesburg. All of us had some acquaintance with South Africa and its troubled history, its miraculous transformation from apartheid to equality, and of course the life of the extraordinary Nelson Mandela, yet much mystery remained.

Right from the get-go, looking out the bus window after a morning flight to Cape Town we saw the “instant townships,” collections of single-storey huts and hovels improvised from corrugated iron, plywood, and whatever else could be found and hammered together. Expected. We’ve all seen the photos, read the news. But surprise! Squeezed

among the ramshackle dwellings are equally rickety barber shops, funeral parlors, auto repair, and “tuck” shops (small retail food stores), signaling a lively everyday community life. Of course, we realized through our surprise, lives are being lived here.

In our travels to come we would see other townships, among them in the world-famed Soweto (an acronym for “southwest township”) in Johannesburg. Many of which are composed of the same make-shift materials, but we also saw many simple, sturdy and colorful homes of wood or cement, often with one-car garages. Apartheid is gone and poverty clings but is being nudged.

On the other hand, downtown business areas in Cape Town struck us with their ordinariness – could be anywhere in the world -- save for the oddly empty commercial streets and the shops that close at 3pm on weekends. Also the tall white walls embracing homes in upscale residential neighborhoods hinted of a danger we never saw.

We are living a charmed life here on tour, guided by a knowledgeable, soft-spoken Afrikaans gentleman with deceptive charm, Dries (trees with a D) de Bruyn. We are welcomed with open arms – literally – everywhere we go. After all, we came to share the wonder of music with people whose own music we hear first in the cadences and lilt of the languages they speak. There are eleven official languages in South Africa and music spills from each



in seductive rhythms and ear-catching sounds.

For a nation repressed under Apartheid for five decades, a wicked sense of humor thrives. We got our first glimpses in signs we passed on the road. To wit: “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” which turned out to be a gigantic catering hall that we dined at after one concert; an enterprise that could surprise H.B. Stowe. Another corner turned up “Jungle Tots childcare;” yet another “Arthur Ashe Tennis Courts.” But the hands-down winner was a dessert item on a restaurant menu: “Chocolate Orgasms.” Your reporter has no idea how many were ordered or by whom.

Our visit to Robben Island, the prison in which Mandela was confined for 18 years but which failed to trap his spirit





or squelch his vision was another emotional turn-around. No one could fail to be appalled by the spare and tiny cell, and no spine would not be chilled by the fact he slept on that hard often wet floor all those years. But you might find yourself smiling, pleased even. Because standing there staring at the now whitewashed cruelty, you know the prisoner is free and about to celebrate his 95th birthday.

The educated and articulate guide taking us about the re-dedicated island offered another moment of dry wit along with a sharp poke at our own racial history. A black African, the guide was detailing the hard life endured by prisoners when an enthusiastic tourist called out a penguin sighting and a request for where more might be seen. The guide reprimanded with a sly smile, “Why do you want to see penguins? They all look alike.” The laugh that followed was slightly swallowed by the mostly white visitors.

Visits to The District Six Museum (a sector in Cape Town famed for its wanton destruction of hundreds of homes and expulsion of more than 60,000 people in the early 70s), Freedom Park in Pretoria, the Apartheid Museum, and Mandela’s Home filled in much more detail of the nation’s attempts to have the 9% control the 91% of the nation’s humanity. We knew, but we didn’t really know, and now couldn’t forget.

Apartheid ended not long ago in 1991, yet one gets little sense of dismay from the people we met who lived it. As seen and felt in the warm smiles and friendly, helpful words that always greeted us, there is much summer in these brave and hopeful people.

But it is winter here below the equator. We travel in bright sunshine through short days; temperatures cooler down at the Cape, growing warmer as we moved north – another disconnect -- but often a bit bitter at night everywhere. And every effort was made to be sure no part of South Africa remains unphotographed. Nikons, smartphones, Ipads, even point-and-shoot cameras were ever-ready to document our movements from the Cape of Good Hope

to Pretoria. Why not? This is a spacious and beautiful country, mostly flat and scrubby but with grand upshots of mountains, particularly Cape Town’s Table Mountain offering a stunning view from above the clouds. Outlying game preserves offered sightings of zebra, giraffe, donkey, lion, warthog, wildebeest (gnu to crossword puzzlers), elephant, and wild dog. And everywhere, colorful African arts on display (and sale). Click! Zoom! Pan! Post!

Mix the eleven official languages, three official capitals, 45 million inhabitants -- 77% black, 10% white, 8% mixed race, 2.5% Indian or Asian descent -- and you have an idea of the weft and warp of this huge (almost twice the size of Texas) nation’s complex tapestry. With such an eclectic mix of ethnicities, a varied and exotic cuisine was probably inevitable but came as an unexpected delight, though sometimes too special for some western tastes. We dined on Malay spicy tomato soup, South Afrikaanse bobotie (spiced minced meat baked with an egg-based topping), an Indian lentil and bean dish; an occasional tang of Asian, French and Dutch taste, and being on the edge of two oceans, plenty of fresh fish. And, of course, we’ll always have the Chocolate Orgasm.

But sing is what we came to do, and the opportunity to sing with choruses from Australia, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, Africa, and the U.S. proved to be an exciting challenge as well as a thrilling, visceral experience for NAS.

Imagine yourself in a church or auditorium filled with folks eager to hear a mega-concert combining exciting, expressive music of various African cultures, story songs from Canadian First Nation peoples, popular songs from Australia, western classical and religious music, all nicely sweetened by a dynamite rendition of “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B” delivered with top-drawer musicianship and energetic choreography by thirty teenagers from Toronto. Patty, Maxine, and Laverne times ten.

Equally diverse are the members of the collective choruses; flesh tones from pale peach to deep ebony and ages pre-teen to post-middle age. Our audiences – mostly

black Africans – embraced it all, voicing encouragement and delight with each chorus as it performed, rising to their feet to applaud, stamp and cheer loudly at the close of each set.

Exposed to such contagious energy and led by Music Director Clara, the usually staid New Amsterdam Singers couldn’t help but “get down.” Baritone Steve Hanna had acquired a beautiful 12 inch djembe (drum) at one of the many craft markets and skillfully added a seductive, pulsating intro and sensual underbeat to the singing of “Si-yahamba,” a rhythmically engaging South African Hymn and Freedom song. Music books were abandoned as the singers became one with the beat, swaying and clapping time as they sang. Clapping along, the crowd roared their appreciation and approval filling the hall with spontaneous, energetic joy. You would’ve loved it.

And so IHLOMBE, “applause” in Zulu, was fulfilled beyond expectations. The Xhosa (KOH-sa) people of eastern

South Africa use the same word to express the transcendental feeling induced by music. No better word in any language is available to describe the unique emotional effects of this tour on audiences and performers alike.

Post concerts, a group of twenty NASers remained to enjoy recreational visits to Chobe Safari Park in Botswana and Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. As we welcomed the quiet reflection of a Zambezi River dinner cruise, spotting crocs and hippos during cocktails, enjoying a candlelight dinner of freshly caught fish, we toasted the comradeship of the adventure. As the sun slipped into the Zambezi, the word heard most was “magic!” What better word to describe all we did, all we learned, and all we felt on our journey to the bottom of the world?

Still not sure we didn’t stand on our heads.