

TRAVEL

14

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A typical hut in Transkei, South Africa.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

Into South Africa's wild blue yonder

Far from the global soccer fever, the Wild Coast and veld that the young Nelson Mandela loved retain their tribal traditions and natural beauty

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The man who became a legend recalled the carefree days of his youth, gathering wild honey and fruits, drinking warm milk from the udder of a cow, and swimming in clear, cold streams. "From these days I date my love of the veld, of open spaces, of the simple beauties of nature, the clean line of the horizon." Thus wrote Nelson Mandela in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, of his childhood in Transkei, where Xhosa tribes have lived, hunted and fished among green hills between the Drakensberg mountains and the Indian Ocean for 1,000 years.

Not much has changed. Some hilltop villages now have electricity, most have running water, and a few people have cars that jolt along dusty, unpaved roads. But the rural heartland of the Eastern Cape is much as Mandela left it, a patchwork of subsistence farming communities scattered over a land of tumultuous beauty. The hills rear and plunge in endless vistas of ridges and river gorges.

The few tourists that venture here are drawn by hiking trails along the well-named Wild Coast, and by end-of-the-road backpackers' hostels favored by the beads-and-bangles brigade. There are no big resorts or shopping malls, and the rare paved roads are obstacle courses of people, pot-holes and livestock. Once there was a network of hikers' huts, but in the 1990s they fell into disrepair and gradually became derelict. So when my wife proposed a five-day trek along the coast I was less than enthusiastic. "We can stay in Xhosa villages," she announced, "in traditional rondavels, and eat local food."

I'll be honest. I didn't fancy it — lugging a rucksack for upwards of 13km a day over serious hills, and who knew what dinner would be like? As a journalist I'd

covered bloody conflicts in the final days of apartheid, and was wary of South Africa's high rate of violent crime. But, as she pointed out, we would be meeting farmers, not muggers.

One great thing about wandering off the beaten track is the characters you meet. Thea Lombard is a single, white 59-year-old Afrikaner woman who sold an award-winning guesthouse in the Western Cape to buy a dilapidated fruit farm off a dirt track near the end of a dead end road in the middle of nowhere.

The last bit is not strictly true. The farm is actually in the hills about 10km from Port St Johns, our departure point, overlooking a bend in the mighty Umzimvubu river, the third-biggest in South Africa. With the help of an odd assortment of waifs and strays, Lombard has transformed these rooms with a view into a funky lodge and culinary haven in harmony with the subtropical forest around it. Just ask the sunbirds that turn up for breakfast.

"I've nearly had four head-on collisions here today," Lombard laughed as she steered us up the dirt track to her Wild Coast Kitchen & Country Lodge. "I keep thinking this is my driveway, but it's actually a road. My poor neighbors," she cackled again, hooting and waving at one in an oncoming 4x4 who swerved and waved back.

Character number two turned up the next morning. Sebenzile "Jimmy" Selani is a local boy who won a national tourist guide award and set up his own hiking and canoeing business. He was our guide and interpreter on the first day's hike, and along the way he filled us in on life in post-apartheid South Africa.

It's not all good news. "Mr Mandela stayed in prison for 27 years for a good cause. Now some politicians, instead of taking the baton from Mr Mandela to continue the race, are just sitting under trees enjoying the fruits of his misery. If

you go to the townships you see nothing much has changed."

Selani affirmed that racism is alive and well in the Rainbow Nation, and doesn't expect it to disappear in his lifetime. "I think whites are beginning to come out of their shells, but it takes time to gain trust. Freedom is not for our generation. It is for our children and their children."

The wind caught his words and carried them over sand dunes above a deserted beach pounded by huge Atlantic rollers. This is the domain of humpback whales and fish eagles, and thousands of dolphins feeding on an annual migration of sardines.

Selani sportingly volunteered to carry my pack, and mentioned that I could probably hire a porter in the next village for the remainder of the hike. It's a good way for the locals to earn a bit of extra cash. My social conscience gratefully accepted this opportunity to contribute to the local economy, and my wife entered into the communal spirit of the thing by allowing me to carry her day pack.

Our porter's name was John Mbuzeni, a truck mechanic who was spending the new year holidays in his home village of Madakeni. We were introduced to his mother, Sophelina, who lives in her compound of thatched huts with 19 children and grandchildren, and a menagerie of dogs, goats, chickens and three cows. By her front door is a vegetable patch where she grows enough maize, pumpkins, spinach, bananas, guavas and paw-paw to feed them all.

"Life is better than before," she assured us. "Then it was very difficult to come close to white people. We would go to sell fish, but they didn't want to come close to us. It was unheard of for white people to live in our homes, but they have changed a lot and now they are welcome among us. This is good for us all."

Our beds in Madakeni were mattresses

on the floor of a spotlessly clean *rondavel*, a traditional circular dwelling of mud and straw that is airy and cool, with a window looking out to sea. Next door was a simple hut with toilet and shower, and a kitchen where a young woman prepared us a fine meal of chicken with rice.

It may feel like the end of the world, but it isn't. Every village has a *spaza*, a store selling basic provisions including, happily, cold beer. We sat on plastic chairs by our door, slaking our thirsts and watching the village and the sun winding down for the day.

There are similarities to Scottish crofting townships — smallholdings with rough pastures, old fences in need of repair, livestock grazing by the shore, odd bits of disused machinery, and a sense of life reduced to simple necessities. As night fell there was a comforting buzz of humanity, the refrain of shared lives.

The hills are not so tough, especially when a strapping lad is shouldering your pack. For the next four days we wandered over hill and dale, following the coast over rocky headlands and along beaches deserted save for cows lolling in the warm sand. There are broad river estuaries to be crossed, and ferrymen waiting with rickety old wooden rowing boats. We took our turn, with local women carrying sun umbrellas, and sometimes children swam beside us for the fun of it.

The landscapes conjure illusions. Look one way and there is a vision of Brazilian rainforest; look the other and it could be the Yorkshire Dales. Then from a ridge there was a panorama of hills dotted with villages like an illustration of Africa in a children's storybook. This was Pondoland, home of the Amapondo people, neighbors to the Thembu tribe of Mandela, where traditional lifestyles are still valued. We met two young men, naked save for woolen blankets, painted head to toe with white

clay. They were in the final phase of an initiation ceremony to manhood, involving circumcision and rituals aimed at ensuring prowess as hunters.

Minutes later we encountered another group of youths, this time in smart check suits and hats. They had just completed the initiation process, and for the next six months would strut around in their finery to celebrate it.

The next day we passed women walking to the sea to collect mussels, and watch young boys diving for crayfish. Then we heard sharp whistles and saw a man with a pack of dogs hunting springbok. For lunch, our guide bought freshly caught crayfish and sea bream from a fisherman and cooked them over a wood fire on the beach. Nearby, a gaggle of children splashed in a rock pool like happy seals.

Later my wife offered a greeting in Xhosa to a woman as we approached a village where we were to spend the night and was rewarded with a laugh and a cheery reply in English: "You are very welcome. There is no crime in this place — just feel free and enjoy yourself."

We did. The highlight was a song and dance performance by girls from the village school, choreographed by an older girl blowing a whistle and accompanied by another banging sticks on a plastic fuel can. The foot stomping, high-kicking routines have passed down through generations.

Electricity has not reached this village, so we went to bed by candlelight, lulled by the sea and a low murmur of voices. Our alarm call was crowing cocks, a lamb bleating and an inquisitive monkey scratching at the door. Other memories linger: of tame zebras grazing in a nature reserve, the best spicy fish stew I've ever tasted, cooked on an open fire, and barefoot children running on the veld, free as the wind. Mandela would have loved it.

