

An Old Camdenian in Africa Nov 2009

Well here we are again.

You all look pretty good for 100. For those who made the dinner, I hope you all had a good time.

I thought of you as we headed into the Karoo and even managed to find a bit of the old Empire still in tact despite the efforts of so many to obliterate the colonial past. At the end of the day there are always aspects of colonisation that leave a permanent and valuable mark on the new lands.

I am not thinking of soccer or cricket or even rugby, although I would be justified in doing so.

No, in this instance I am taken back to the late 19th C and the people are Thomas Baines and Prince Albert.



In 1762 an Afrikaans family set up a farm in the fertile area in the Great Karoo. This became a small village that was named Prince Albert in 1845 after Queen Victoria's Consort. They deemed it necessary to link up with Oudsthoorn being a prosperous Ostrich Feather centre the other side of the Swartberg Mountains.

It was in the late 1880's that British engineer Thomas Baines had the task of constructing a pass of some 25 kms over the mountains reaching around 1300metres. The first mail-coach left the Swartberg Hotel at 6 am in 1886.

Our journey took us over this wonderful Swartberg Pass that remains the same basic gravel road. Not a ride for the fainthearted nor those in a hurry. It stands today as a marvel of road engineering and when combined with the superb scenery it should be retained as a cherished heritage site.

Our saloon car made the trip ok and we slid quietly into the old Prince Albert village and our overnight stay at the Swartberg Hotel.

Pre dinner drinks in the courtyard, candlelit dining with original furnishings and ghostly paintings contrasted with a sumptuous breakfast on the grapevine



shaded veranda before the mid day temps reached out into the high 30s C. From an historical point of view the next stop at The Karoo National Park revealed fossils dating back to the Permian period that takes us back to Gondwana and some 255 million years ago. So I guess the Old C`s have some way still to go!



One or two pictures try to express the silent serenity and grandeur of the Karoo and the gentle nature of Prince Albert.

I am in danger of turning this into a travelogue and so I will resist the temptation to carry on in this vein.

England is here trying to play one day cricket but the test series will reveal their better side. I enjoy the 5

day game but it does seem as if I am one of the few and even the ODI`s fail to excite and rest in the shadow of the 20/20 form.

In early Dec the 32 World Cup nations will be here for the group selections and it does seem as if FIFA will so arrange matters to provide the hosts with the softest section in the hope that SA may progress to the next round.



We are in the midst of a drought here in PE with gardens going yellow and pools dropping below their filtration levels as water restrictions and price hikes curtail usage.

In George and Knysna the situation is even worse with dams at around 26% that represents only weeks or a few months of water. The summer holiday rush will hit these garden Route spots and in 2010 they are host towns to two of the world cup teams. The political need to sort this matter out for the WC will provide the will and resources to make special measures possible. But it is going to be tight thing.

We have just had Aids day with the news that Nigeria may have more HIV positive pregnant women than SA. The new Health minister here has plans to spread the use of ARV`s to around 80% by 2011 with I think only about 50% covered at the moment. There is lots and lots to be done in a crumbling health care sector that has management, skills, resources and staff shortages plus a need to return to a work ethic that has care, respect and accountability included.

On the sporting front the ASA (Athletics SA) board was suspended with the Caster Semenya affair being the last of many straws that brought the body into disrepute. They refused to go and in the end an Olympic body here rejected them thus denying them any sporting participation internationally. A new caretaker group have been voted in and they will attempt to get back the sponsors who have fled the debacle.

I imagine that lots will be revealed if an enquiry is held including, no doubt, where all the money has gone.

In the same vein other Govt para-statals have fallen to poor governance and we are short of CEO`s at the SABC, Transnet, Eskom to name 3 that easily come to mind. The vacancy at the NPA (National Prosecuting Authority) has just been filled with a chum of Jacob Zuma which many see as being the means to stop any possible court case against Zuma.

The economy has just come out of recession. This will be of little consolation to the million that have lost their jobs this year. Remember this year we were told by Zuma that 500000 jobs would be created!! Unemployment may be 26% - official - or more likely 40%. We have over 19 million people below the poverty level which means a monthly income of less than R800 – about £70. Most of this will be Government handouts.

Inflation hovers around 6% but will rise as Govt controlled prices e.g water, electricity, rates, zoom upwards from 30 to 60%.

At the same time there is a growing outcry here as the new body of ministers purchase cars valued at some R1 million each. It is a shocking disregard of the plight of the country and the fact that they are the servants of the people and not their masters.

Tax collections are expected to be R70 billion lower and at a time when the Government is spending so much to try and meet the FIFA requirements for 2010. On top of this is the even more pressing needs of most areas of governance from health, education, justice, housing etc. the big question-where is the money going to come from?

Transport will be an issue at the World Cup because it is an issue today. I still do not understand why the WC is a target date as I remain convinced that the fans are not going to come from those areas that the new routes are supposed to serve.

The Gautrain is now unlikely to be fully ready for 2010 and the Rapid Transport system in CT will also not be fully operative. Not sure about the other cities but at least the strikes and violence by Taxi operators has stopped for the time being.

The holiday season fast approaches and we wait to see what effect the recession will have on consumer spend and holiday plans. For our part we have got down the boxes of Xmas stuff from the loft in readiness. We will have Melanie and family over from England in Dec and then some friends of ours from St Neots are coming over in Jan.

We already have Andrea and Courtney with us and an 8 year old always completes the Xmas scene somehow.

So a fairly full house over this time for us which should mean lots of braais and gatherings by the pool (drought permitting).

I hope you all enjoy your wintry festive time and I will write again in the new year when all the WC groups will be known (draw this Friday). We will know the places where they will play and where they will be based. Another tranche of tickets will then be available.

In the mean time it is goodbye from sunny Port Elizabeth.

Alan Shearn