

KBP-2

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Johannesburg; First Look

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

American Express Travel Services,  
Merbrook, Box 9395,  
Commissioner Street 123,  
2000 Johannesburg, South Africa  
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Dear Peter,

South Africa certainly fits my criteria for a country in the midst of great change. It appears to have input from so many directions, its identity is still visibly a collage of many cultures, not yet the melange out of which will emerge what this foreign visitor would describe as a uniquely South African culture. From the airport, along the freeways, and into the city proper, at least physically, the country is very western in appearance.

On arrival at Jan Smuts (pronounced "Yon") little struck me as different from any other international airport except for the extraordinarily high ceilings, and the WWII vintage police uniforms—Sam Brown belts, pistols with lanyards, and high peaked caps. However, for a place accused of being a police state, the official presence was low key; I had expected everything up to a strip search from customs, and yet I entered the country without opening a bag. Must have been that boyish look of innocence...

The only things that made me distinctly aware that I was in South Africa were signs indicating a nonwhite toilet, and a cocktail lounge for "White/Blanke" only. However, since the huge airport dining room was serving both blacks and whites, apparently these examples of apartheid were for the sake of exclusivity versus blanket segregation.

Once on the M-1 (four lane divided roadway) to Johannesburg, I saw the names of many American and internationally well-known firms adorning the buildings clustered industrial park-style along the highway. Rank Xerox, Squibb, and Ford caught my eye, although there were many more. Except for the fact that we were driving on the wrong side of the road, the cars, buildings, and signs looked so American—down to the ubiquitous neon Coke-Cola advertisement—it was hard to believe I was in another country, let alone Africa.

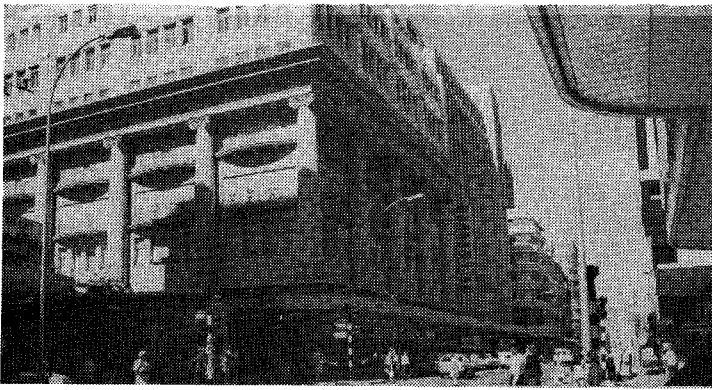
In Johannesburg, the confusion only deepened. Dominating dead center city is the high-rise Carlton Hotel and Shopping Complex with underground arcade, parking, and (believe this?) ice skating rink. Built in the Any-Modern-Metropolitan-Center style of Architecture, it is a functional and utterly nondescript monolithic structure that made me feel right at home. Within a half a dozen blocks there are multi-storied department stores, many of them American, and those carrying South African names had displays and merchandise identical to any J.C. Penny's Bamberger's, or Bloomingdales in the U.S.

A good number of the major small shops are chic, and although depending a bit heavily on a high-tech glass and stainless steel decor, most are tastefully laid out. Yet, a larger



Not everything looks American

Kendal Price is a Fellow of the Institute studying the cultures of South Africa, her black homelands, and the bordering African nations.



Neo-Pseudo-Semi-Something, but practical

number of stores, mixed right in with the classy boutiques feature schlocky and garish displays which through a combination of antiquated advertising jargon and overcrowded displays give the impression of being Times Square discount stores.

Many of the most recent American movies are currently showing in Johannesburg. South Africans take their film-going seriously, and on a Friday or Saturday night, reservations, and in some cases, tickets purchased ahead of time are a must in order to see anything. Apparently there is not a great variety of entertainment here, thus, going to see a film becomes an entire night's activity. The movie theaters are plush, and a screening is made into a real show with two formal intermissions; one after the shorts, and another in the middle of the main feature. The theater owners are so tuned into the appetite of the filmgoers, that in some of the larger complexes there are bars in the lobby, and even restaurants adjacent to the box offices.

Television is in its infancy here in South Africa, with only one nationwide station, which broadcasts between five and eleven p.m. The programs are in either Afrikaans (the Dutch based language of the non-English speaking white South Africans) or English. Every evening the order of programs in English or Afrikaans is reversed. With a new and popular item like television, but only one channel, it is a challenge to be fair to both the English and Afrikaans speaking segments of the population. As for the Xhosa, Tswana, Zulu, and assorted other black African language speaking inhabitants of South Africa, a channel devoted especially to their interests is in the incubation stage at the moment. However, realistically speaking, with the official South African Government reported average annual wage of black South Africans being in the five to seven hundred Rand range (Rand 1.00= U.S. \$1.05,) and the price of televisions comparable to the U.S., it is unlikely there will be a huge demand for this station in the immediate future.

Transportation is something to marvel at in the vicinity of Johannesburg and its suburbs. The largest percentage of the buses are loaded (and often appear overloaded) with black people. Most of these buses are painted one shade darker than sky blue, or covered entirely by one, usually extremely colorful advertisement for everything from Kentucky Fried Chicken to laxatives (some say one and the same.) The buses for whites do not manage to avoid the overwhelming ads except for when they are painted entirely white. During rush hour

there are sizable lines at the white bus stops, but these buses become noticeably empty as they reach the suburbs—just as the buses "chock-a-block" full of blacks start appearing, travelling in the opposite direction.

The reason how people get around here is such a marvel is because while the buses chug slowly up steep hills (altitude of Jo'burg: 5,400 ft.) either remarkably full or similarly empty, motorcycles dart in and out of traffic, and people in all sorts of cars drive as if they are totally insane.

After such a short stay, it is not difficult at all to understand how South Africa reportedly has the highest car accident rate in the world. Excluding Beirut, where drivers depend as much on their weaponry as driving skill to negotiate traffic, South Africans have to be among the most aggressive, impatient, and status conscious drivers in the world. Within only a month I had seen the results of four sizable accidents, including one conflagration near my hotel that took five lives.

The only thing more remarkable than



Downtown Jo'burg in the afternoon



The advertising is aggressive in Jo'burg

the quantity and severity of car accidents here, are the responses they elicit from white South Africans. An acquaintance was giving me a ride one afternoon, and told me she had just seen an accident occur in front of her apartment house. "Oh?" I replied with similar indifference. I expected the drawn out account of some fender-bender.

"The car hit the corner post and the woman was thrown through the windshield."

"That's awful," I said, as taken aback by her complacency as by the thought of the accident. "Was she hurt bad?"

"Oh, she was killed," said my acquaintance with no change of expression as she continued tailgating a BMW down the street at 20kph above the speed limit.

Two days later I said to her, "the way these guys drive their motorcycles here, it's a wonder more of them aren't killed."

"They are," she said. "I saw a motorcycle accident yesterday. Two bikes were racing and they both ran into the side of a car stopped at an intersection."

"Oh," was all I could manage as I waited for the rest.

"One of the bikers was thrown over the car, and the other's bike was imbedded in the car he was going so fast."

"And?" She was actually going to leave it at that.

"The mother with two children, and the two bikers were killed."

"You actually saw this accident? I mean saw it as, or just after it happened? You were there?" I asked one more time, holding in check the urge to say and you can sit there like some kind of vegetable...?

"Sure."

"Sure?"

The thought of that much carnage almost made me sick, but awe was my primary emotion

as I sat and watched this seemingly normal twenty-year old tell me yet another horror story with hardly a blink.

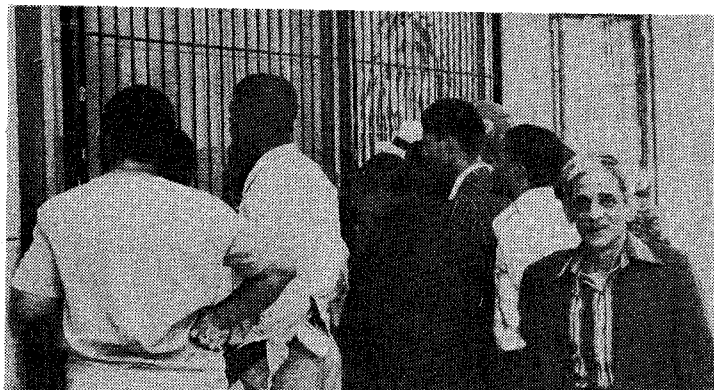
At my show of skepticism that she could have seen such an event and not been deeply affected by it, she acted as if I was the one with something wrong to become so concerned about people I did not even know personally. However, on the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) radio report about a later accident, the announcer said "in the accident on Louis Botha Avenue today two white persons and three blacks were killed...." This explained in a small way the reason South Africans might have an entirely different way of looking at things like this.

One thing I could claim to understand their emotions about was the excitement generated by a snowstorm that hit Johannesburg two days after I arrived. It was the first time it had snowed here in seventeen years and as we drove around the city it was fun watching people in three piece suits abandoning their cars to romp in the snow.

There was only one thing that put a damper on my enjoyment of the snow. As we travelled along Louis Botha Avenue (one of the main arteries into town,) I saw dozens and dozens of black men and women waiting in long lines for their buses. Everybody in the city had been caught by surprise by the sudden snowfall, but most of the clothing of the black people was dark with wetness, and they looked particularly cold standing ankle deep in the wet snow.

The very next day, all traces of winter had disappeared, and when only a day after that the temperature was in the nineties, I turned the pity on myself. Between the unexpected attitude, and powerful sun, my whole body felt like when you wake up in the morning and can't even make a fist.

A letter on South Africa would not be



A common city sight; blacks crowding around a store display to watch television

complete without some comment on my first impressions of apartheid. It is indeed strange for an American accustomed to seeing signs declaring "We are an equal opportunity employer," and "Discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color etc.,, is illegal...." to suddenly see posted with the same official air, "...white males...can be trained..." or "Europeans/whites Only," and "Blacks, Coloured and Asians." However, just as the jet lag wore off in a matter of days, so did I overcome the surprise and surface displeasure of seeing these things. I had known well before-hand what I could expect to see in South Africa that would challenge my values. What the real challenge now was to see how and why this set of values came to be, and continues.

Sincerely,  
*Berry*



A black policeman ticketing a white still draws a glance from from passer-by

Received in Hanover 2/1/82

THE WHITE STATION IS TV 1. TV 2 & TV 3 WILL BE FOR BLACKS.

JANUARY 7, 1982  
**Day by Day**  
 by Abe Berry  
 FROM THE STAR,  
 S.A.'S BIGGEST  
 ENGLISH DAILY

