

It was pitch dark, and the air buzzed with strange insect sounds and animal calls over the quiet ticking of the Land Cruiser's cooling exhaust. Moments before, our ranger/guide Lyle had killed the Toyota's engine and headlights on this lonely road in Kruger National Park in order to point out the Southern Cross constellation just above the horizon. The sudden stillness of the brisk, achingly beautiful night under a sky packed with stars was spine-tingling—minutes earlier we had watched a pair of cheetahs prowl the *bushveld* 10 yards from the truck; before that a young bull elephant had mock-charged us from 20 feet away. Two game drives that day and this evening loop had sealed Kruger's legendary reputation for wildlife viewing, with dozens of "Big Five" sightings, as well as giraffe, hyena, warthog, kudu, and on and on. As Lyle described the cross-shaped pattern of stars that navigators in the Southern Hemisphere have used for centuries, we wondered what else might be listening out there in the darkness. Perched high on raised seats in the bed of the specially modified game vehicle—a .458 elephant rifle within Lyle's easy reach—we were quite safe from clawed, toothy creatures, but it was another unforgettable moment among many on the Ayres African Southern Cross Adventure.

Dreaming of AFRICA

AYRES AFRICAN SOUTHERN CROSS ADVENTURE

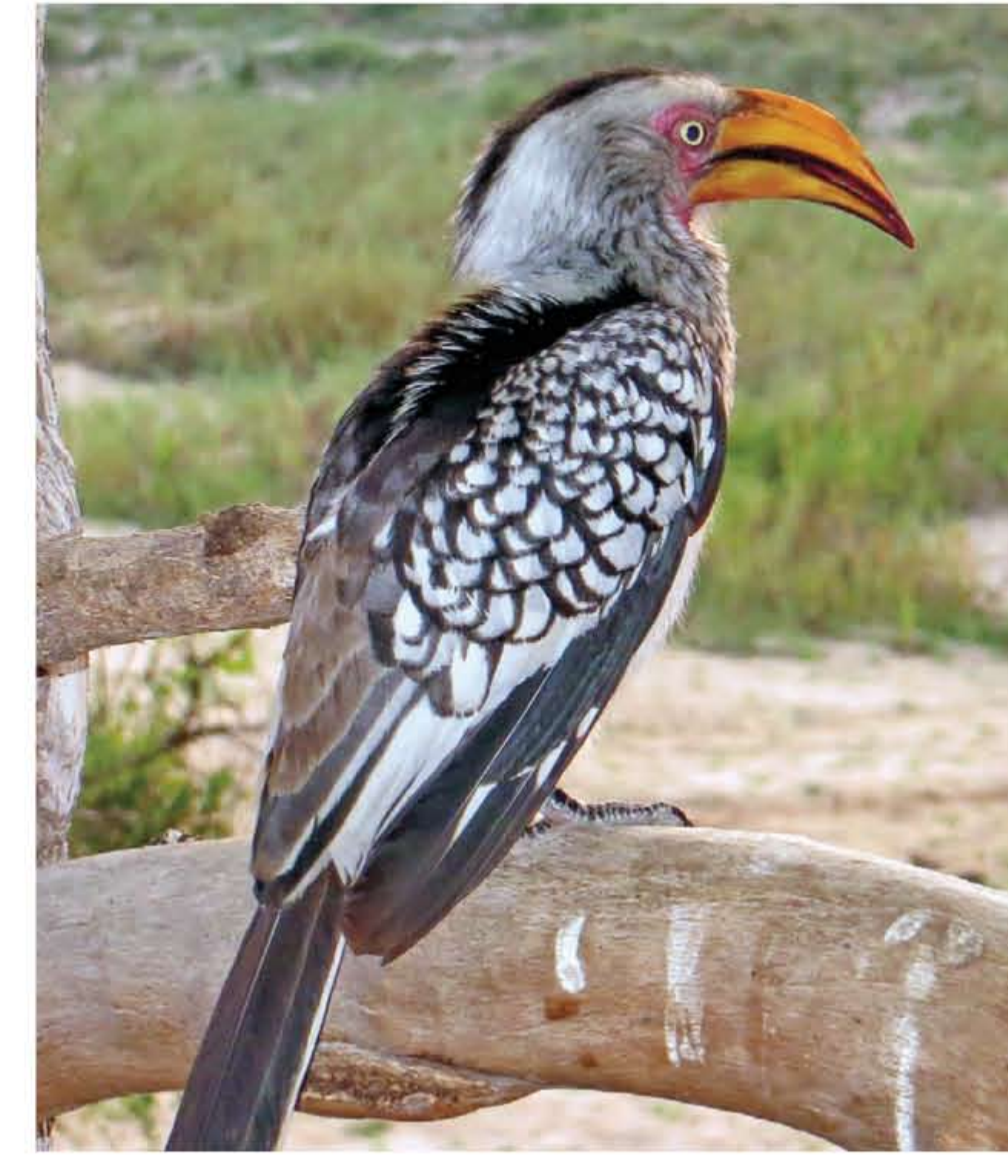
STORY & PHOTOS BY MARK TUTTLE



Our merry band in the mountains, including Ron Ayres and his wife, Barbara (2nd row 2 and 3), and guides John Jesson (back row 4) and Ed McClure (inset).

Twice the size of Texas, South Africa has been described as "All the world in one country" for its amazing mix of scenery and people who speak 11 different languages, including Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa and English. Southern Cross is an apt title for this 1,900-mile, 14-day Ayres Adventures motorcycle tour that covers the best of South Africa, crossing it from Cape Town in the southwest to Kruger National Park in the northeast before ending in bustling Johannesburg. Starting at an upscale hotel on the Cape Town waterfront, we rode to the African continent's southern tip, wound along the rugged, scenic coastal Garden Route and through the mountains and desert of the Western Cape province before crossing the rural Eastern Cape with its farms and traditional African villages. More coastal scenery and cultural experiences welcomed us in KwaZulu-Natal province and the tiny landlocked country of Swaziland before the Grand Finale—two nights at a safari lodge in Kruger, where the abundance of African wildlife is unmatched.

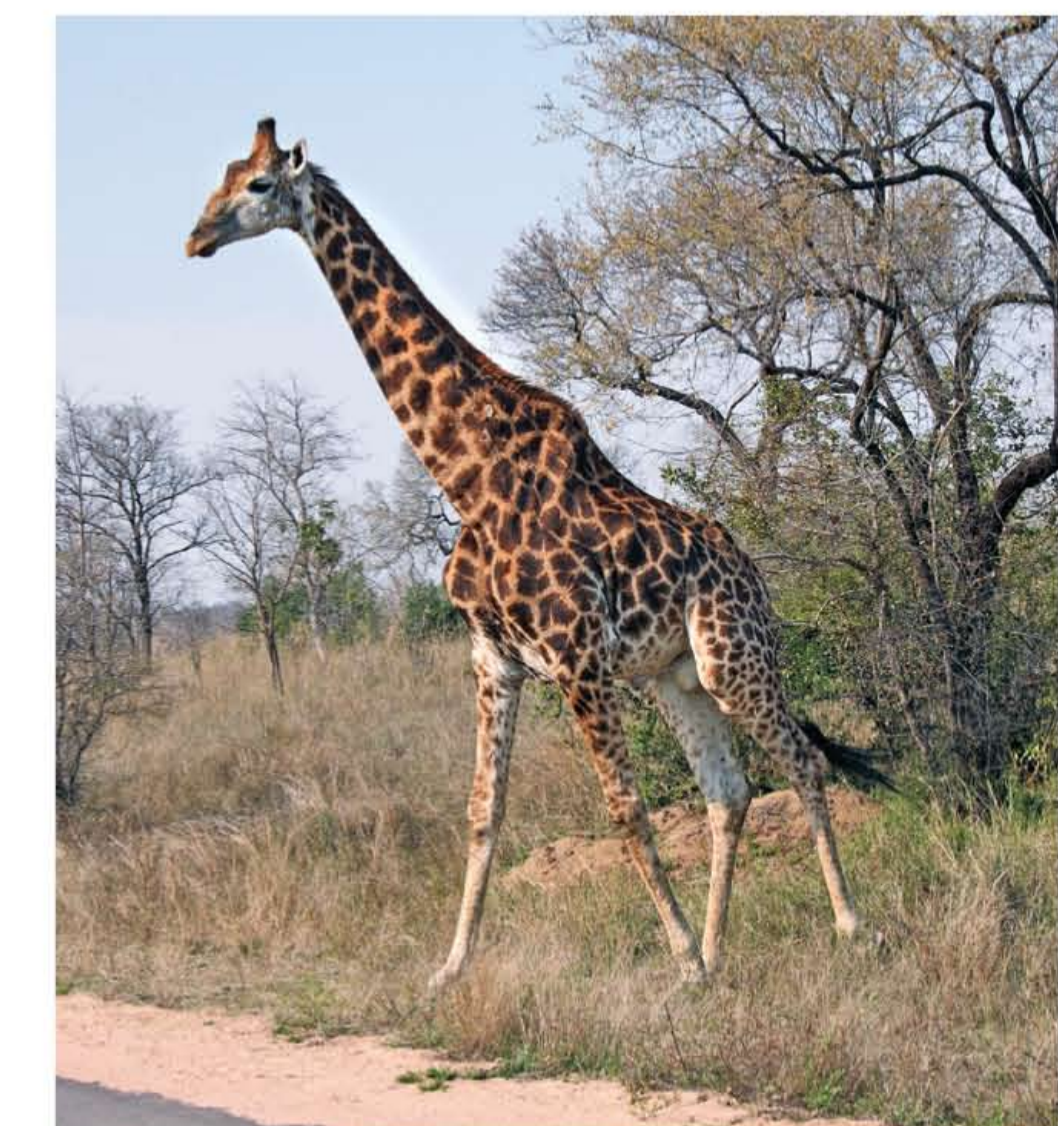
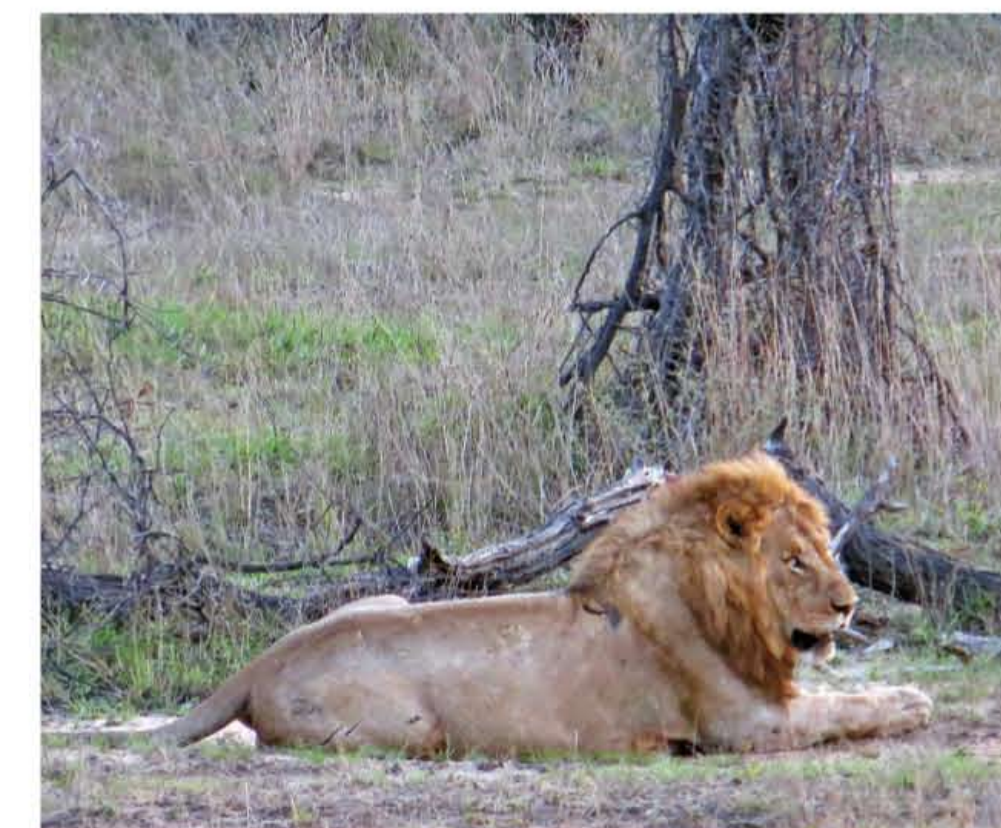
Below: The Southern Yellow-Billed Hornbill, a.k.a. Zazu in *The Lion King*. Below below: Rotating Table Mountain Cableway car ascends into mist.



Left: Up close and personal at an elephant sanctuary outside Knysna. Below: Awed by an abyss from atop Swartberg Pass.

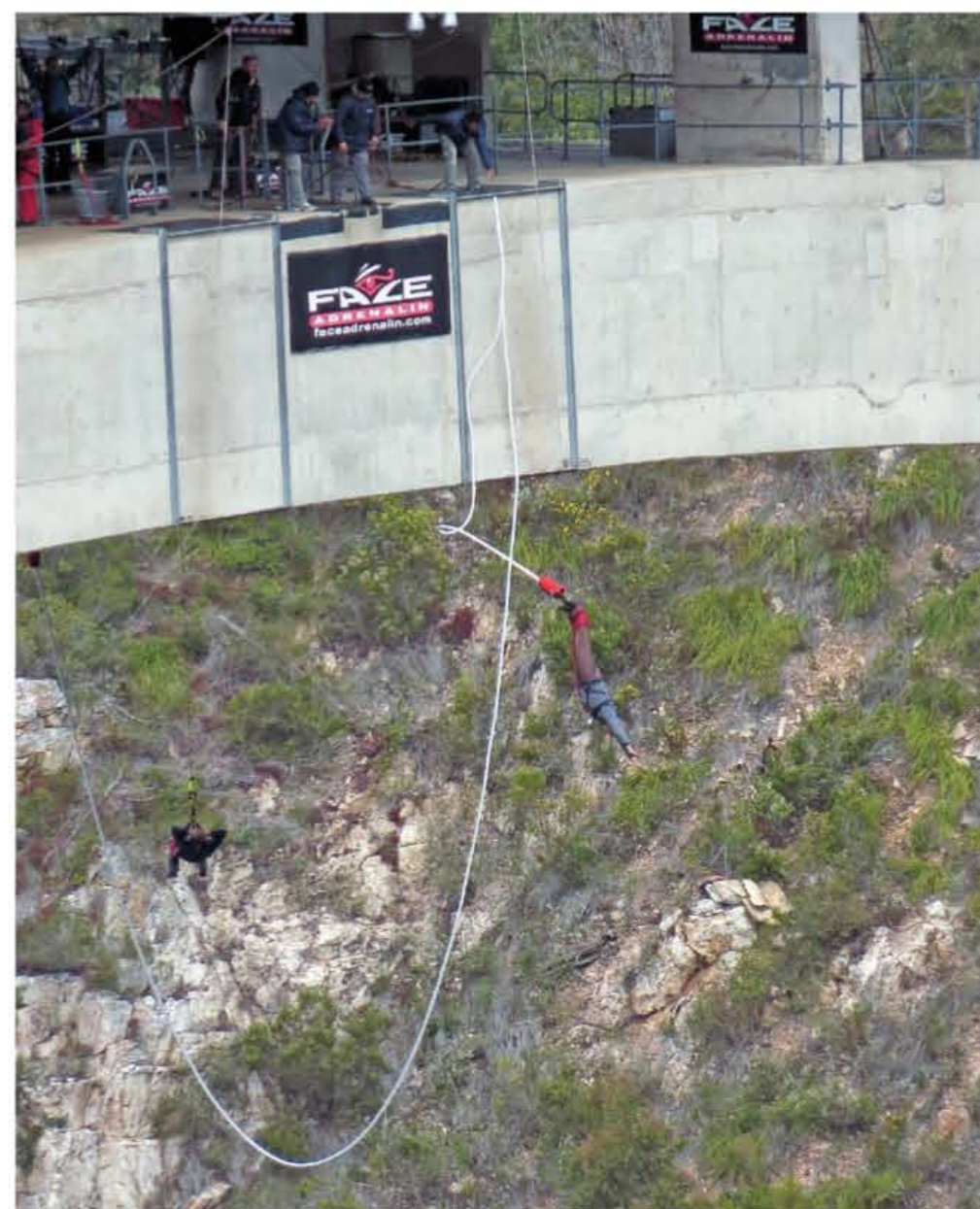


Above: Just walking home from the store in Swaziland. Right: King of the Jungle in Kruger National Park.

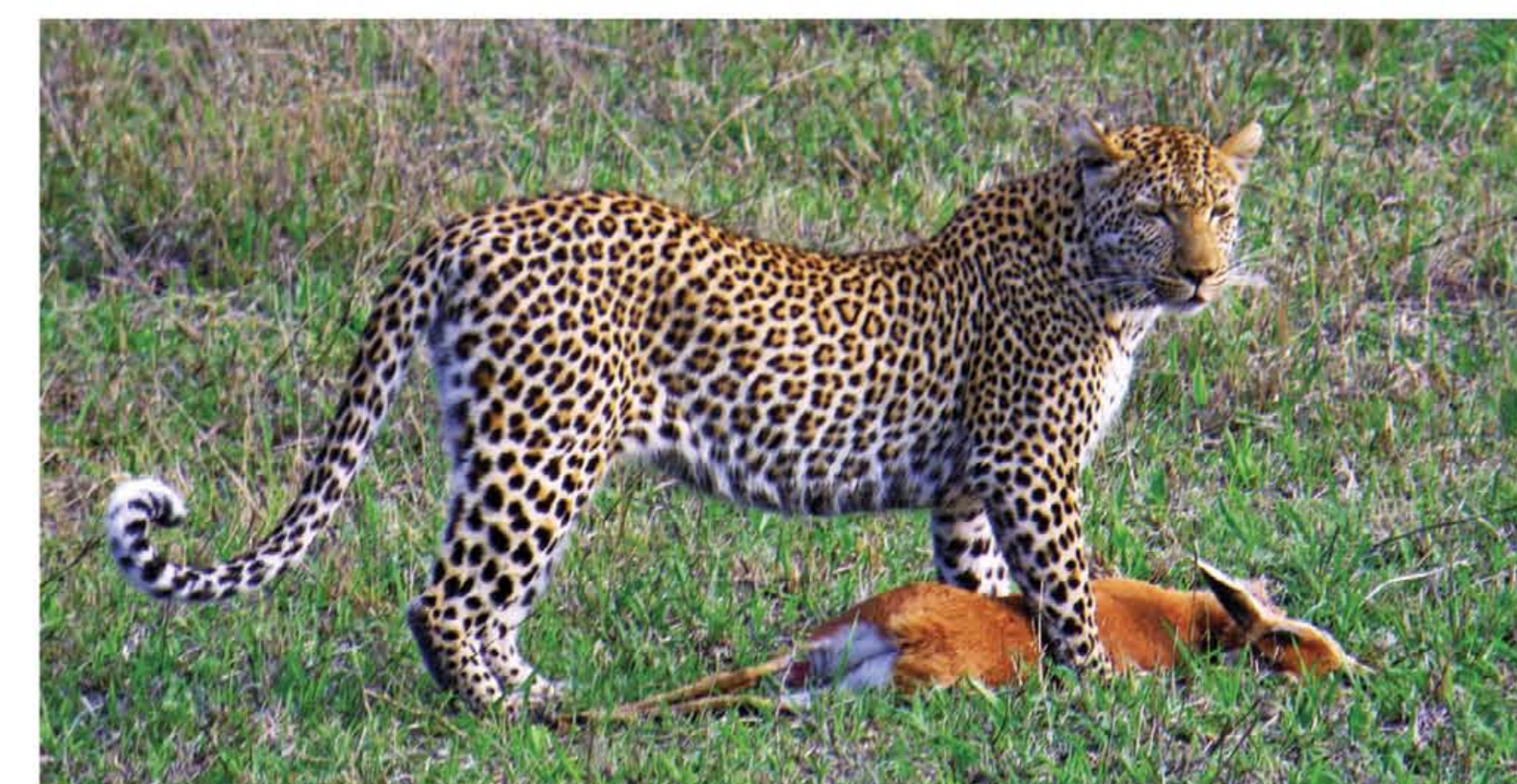


Above: Table Mountain and Devil's Peak tower over Cape Town Harbor. Left: The tallest animal in the world can reach a height of 16.5 feet.

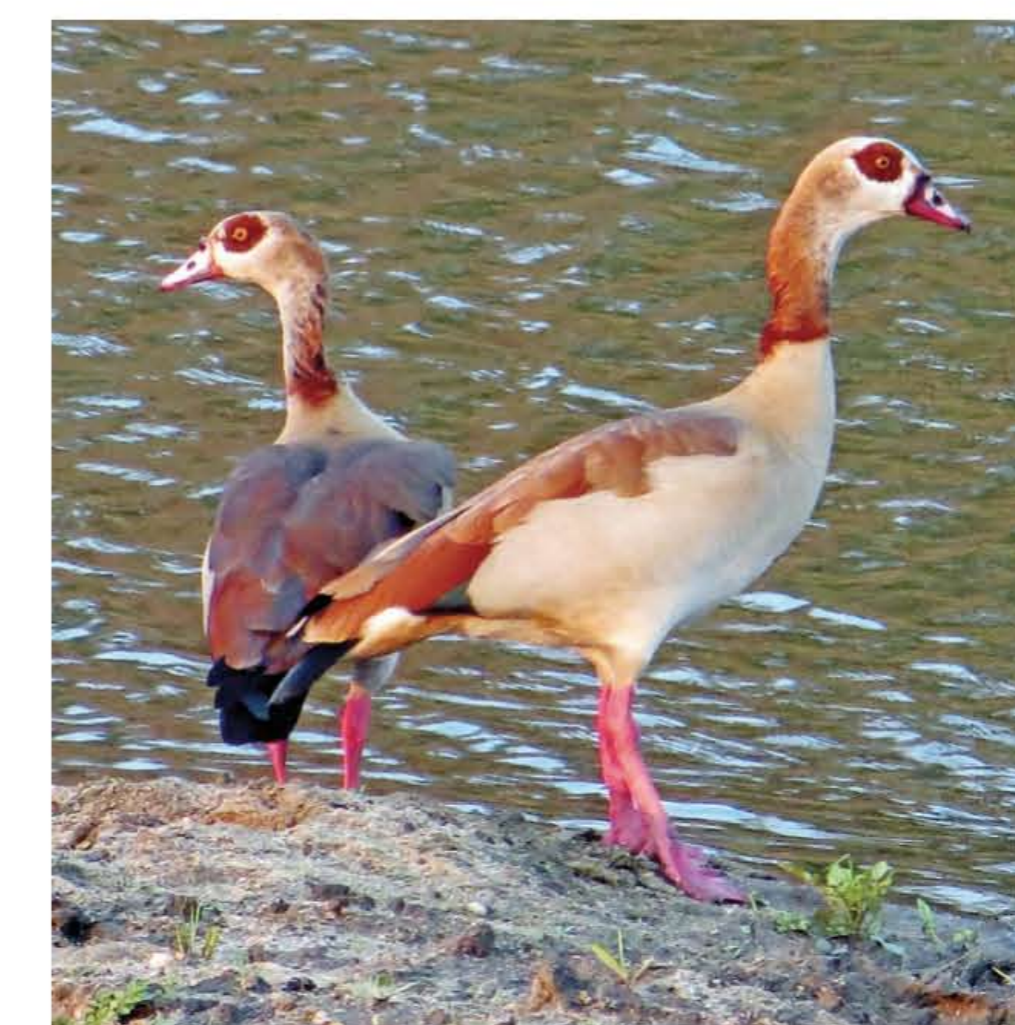
Right: One of our gang leaps off 216-meter-high Bloukrans Bridge. Banzai!
Below: White rhinoceros in Kruger are ruthlessly poached for their horns.



Left: Switchbacks on Swartberg Pass. Don't forget to ride on the left... Below: Children in grades 1-7 at the Nsukazi Primary School in Eshowe treated us to some traditional Zulu dancing.



Above left: We watched this leopard take down that Steenbok antelope from 15-20 yards away. Above right: Shona stone carvings, Eastern Cape Province. Far right: Ostrich in Outdshorn having a light snack of carbon fiber.



Far left: Hillside homestead in Swaziland. Left: Egyptian geese use the buddy system to watch for Kruger crocs.



Below: A vulture surveys Kruger at sunset. Below below: Shakaland Resort beehive guest hut.

Like many on the tour, my wife and co-pilot Genie and I arrived in Cape Town early in order to shake the jet lag and play tourist a bit. Back-dropped by massive Table Mountain and Devil's Peak, the historic, Dutch-influenced port city is the second largest in South Africa and probably the most beautiful. We took a tour on one of the open-topped, hop-on, hop-off buses that loop around it, and rode the mind-blowing Cableway up Table Mountain. When it's not wrapped in clouds, the view from the top stretches over the city out to Robben Island four miles offshore, where former president Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years. Though apartheid was officially abolished in 1990, economic segregation is still a major problem here, and from the top of Table Mountain the contrast of the luxury resorts on the beaches below and shanty townships covered in a smoky haze off to the west is striking.

At the tour briefing that evening, we discovered our group had already accomplished an Ayres "first" by consisting entirely of couples, a fine mix of 16 people from the USA and Canada on 10 bikes, including owner Ron Ayres and his wife Barbara, who were along on their own vacation (of sorts). Some would stay on after the Southern Cross with our two capable guides, John Jesson and Ed McClure, to ride parts two and three of the

Ayres African trilogy through Botswana, Namibia and back to South Africa, for a total of six amazing weeks on the continent.

We left the posh Victoria & Alfred Hotel in a light rain the next morning on a range of BMW enduro-style motorcycles like the R 1200 GS and F 800 GS, good for the rougher roads and construction in places and hard-packed dirt on the optional sections. The taller seat heights of these bikes also provided a commanding view over the manic traffic in some of the cities, a plus when you're already busy riding right on the wrong (left) side of the road. In the Southern Hemisphere, the seasons are reversed as well, so the last day of our September tour would be the first day of spring. Though it doesn't rain much in South Africa, we had our share on three of the nine riding days. Fortunately every one of the riders was skilled and a good sport, and all had brought adequate gear.

You can take the Southern Cross tour in March when it's slightly warmer and even less likely to rain, but then Kruger is at the beginning of the tour, and you won't catch the southern right whale migration. We spotted several spouting and breaching from the coastal towns and winding roads on the red rock cliffs down to Cape L'Aghulas (Cape of Needles) at Africa's southern tip, where we stayed in a cozy newer lodge

built of stone and 300-year-old timbers from a mine. A monument by the lighthouse on the rocky shore nearby marks the point where the Atlantic and Indian oceans converge, an area infamous for storms and shipwrecks.

From L'Aghulas, we made long, fast leaps through farmland and pine forests with snow-covered peaks in the distance, then climbed into the mountains and over numerous passes like Tradouw and Huisrivier before arriving in Outdshorn, the ostrich farming capital of the world. Between rocks large and small, much of the rust-red landscape is covered in the low bush, scrub and grasses called *fynbos* in Afrikaans, or "fine bush," its carpet of green often punctuated with early spring violet, white and red blooms or slathered in beautiful yellow flowers. We had fine, warm weather for more fast riding through the Klein Karoo, or little desert, on R62, the longest wine route in a country known for its hearty Pinotage reds. While some stayed behind in Outdshorn one morning to visit an ostrich farm, the rest of us made a loop from the city over mighty 4,700-foot Swartberg Pass, a good dirt road that winds up and down sharp switchbacks in the Swartberg Mountains. Back on the pavement, we closed the loop by swooping down lovely, winding Meiringspoort Pass through an amazing river gorge with sheer

rock canyon walls.

Our next overnight was at a quaint country lodge, and then we spent two at a coastal resort in Knysna, where one of the couples got married on the rest day. They said their vows in secret at a nearby elephant sanctuary, then generously hosted the rest of us for dinner and a celebratory evening at the waterfront. From Knysna, we made time on the straighter coastal and rural highways of the Eastern Cape, slowing only occasionally for African villages and towns large and small teaming with people getting on with their day, carrying packages and bundles on their heads and smiling, waving, whistling and shouting at our big group of bikes and Gore-Tex-wrapped riders. Colorful paint on the buildings cheers up the poorer areas in places, and we never felt uneasy at stops or meals in this province, though it is less frequented by tourists.

Back at the border of the Eastern Cape, four brave souls in our group made the highest bungee jump in the world off Bloukrans Bridge; at 216 meters, it is the highest road bridge in the Southern Hemisphere. This punctuated a day of wet riding past game reserves and baboons on the side of the rural highway to Grahamstown, where we stayed at a guesthouse compound built in 1826. Both Nelson Mandela and former

President Thabo Mbeki have stayed here and today it's a National Monument.

Two more days of riding from Grahamstown to Kokstad and then historic Eshowe offered some of the best riding and cultural experiences of the trip, winding through low mountains and over jungle passes, with spectacular views of the red, fluted Drakensberg Mountains to the north peaking through the mist. It rained heavily and we stayed together as we passed through the former black "homelands," which were sovereign black states with their own governments during the apartheid years. Little has changed since. Round huts called rondavels with pointy tile, tin or thatch roofs dot the rolling landscape between the shanty towns and villages, where a kind of chaotic order dictates the ocean of traffic and pedestrians inching along in the muddy streets. We were quite happy to reach the lovely Willowdale homestead surrounded by hills and farmland outside Kokstad and warm up by its giant, blazing fireplace.

Crossing the Umzimkulu River in the morning, we entered KwaZulu-Natal, heartland of the Zulu kingdom and the country's most African province. It was the site of many battles between the Boers, Zulus and British, and is steeped in Zulu and British colonial history. Today the Zulu people wear western clothes, but they still speak Zulu and remain a force in the country's politics. We spent the day riding northeast, overtaking the highway traffic between numerous cities, towns and wildlife reserves, the Drakensbergs always towering in the distance over our left shoulders. Reaching Eshowe, the former colonial capital city of Zululand, we rode to Shakaland, a theme resort originally created as the set for the television series *Shaka Zulu* about their first warrior king. Here we made the fully plumbed tourist version of a Zulu beehive hut with a thatch roof home for the next two nights, took in a re-enactment of some Zulu traditions and dancing and visited one of the local schools to get a feel for life in KwaZulu-Natal then and now.

Eventually the rain departed and the tiny country of Swaziland greeted us with warm sun and white puffy clouds. We rode along wide, open highway over the low Swazi moun-



Julia and Rick hold up the monument at Cape L'Aghulas that marks the southern tip of Africa, where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet.



tains, around dams and through desert in this arid landscape punctuated with tall, spiny Bitter Aloe plants, classic African-looking flat-topped acacia trees and endless fynbos, forest and logging farms. It was all quite beautiful.

A short ride brought us to Kruger National Park the next day. Leaving our bikes outside the 7,500-square-mile game reserve, rangers from the five-star safari lodge picked us up and drove us there through the park, since riding apparel protection does not extend to claws and teeth. Ayres says its Southern Cross is the only motorcycle tour to stay in a luxury tented game lodge in the famous park (as opposed to visiting it for a few hours during daylight hours), and we made all of the day and evening game drives in the lodge's trucks on its 15,000-acre private concession. Our luxurious private suite had a Jacuzzi spa and outdoor shower and opened to a large covered deck over a riverbank in back, with wildlife roaming just outside the compound fence below. Before and after the game drives and candlelight dinners, we sipped drinks on the deck and watched rhinoceros, elephant and kudu less than 100 yards away.

Instead of making a beeline for Johannesburg on the final leg, some of us took the long way and enjoyed miles of fast winding roads in the mountains to the north. Rejoining the group, we skirted the worst of the traffic in South Africa's rough largest city, parked the bikes at a hotel for the last time in the safe, upscale suburb of Sandton and celebrated our successful adventure with a steak dinner. Everything on this once-in-a-lifetime tour had been incredible, from the people, food and 4-5-star hotels, to the guides, roads, riding and scenery. I wish I had 10 extra pages to tell you more about it. In short, just go. You'll never regret nor forget it.

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