

South Africa: road trip through the Free State

On a road trip from guesthouse to guesthouse in South Africa's Free State, Jim White immerses himself in history, and hears a dramatic tale of love and loss.

By Jim White

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Smack in the middle of the undulating emptiness of the Karoo desert, enclosed by towering outcrops with scary names like the Valley of Desolation, Graaff-Reinet looks like a place that has seen a bit of history.

The town was established by Dutch settlers in the late 18th century. Many of the buildings carry the date they were built on the gabling – 1837, 1841, 1852 – just to remind you how long the Afrikaners have been in residence here. They were already well ensconced in 1901, when, according to a monument in the town, several of their young men were executed by the British Army for the crime of wearing khaki in a public place.

Up the main street, flanked by Cape Dutch houses, their verandas freshly whitewashed, their roofs a uniform blue, not much appears to have changed over the years. Walking past the muscular church modelled on Salisbury Cathedral, you half expect to encounter a covered wagon full of determined Voortrekkers making their way north.

But it was a more personal history that was on the mind of one of our party as we arrived in the symbolic heart of Afrikaner land. Dave and I had been reporting on the World Cup in South Africa for three weeks when we left Port Elizabeth and headed north for England's game with Germany in Bloemfontein.

With us was our driver, Richard, a man with a past – he had been a self-confessed terrorist in Angola and Mozambique back in the Eighties and was now a freelance security expert. However, steering us away from trouble was not always easy for Richard.

There was the time when, suffering the effects of too much medication for a bout of flu, he had driven off the highway near Pretoria at 90mph, crashing to a halt in the central reservation, where, as Dave and I panicked, he dozed peacefully, his head slumped on the steering wheel. Then there was the night in Cape Town when he threatened to nut a restaurant owner who made Basil Fawlty look like a model of customer-friendly service. Suddenly, we were all embroiled in a shouting match, which only concluded when I opened my wallet and threw cash at the restaurateur. Hell, Richard said as we walked away, it would have been cheaper for you if I'd just hit him.

Through shared experiences such as this, Richard had become not so much our driver and protector as our travelling buddy. Still, even after sharing a hired Toyota Yaris for three weeks, there were things we didn't know about him. Such as his association with Graaff-Reinet.

"I've been to that place," he said, when I suggested that it might be a good stopping-off point.

"It sounds fascinating," I said, reading from a tourist-office brochure. "Says it's full of beautifully preserved and restored old buildings. Calls itself the jewel of the Karoo." Which, admittedly, is a bit like Gravesend being known as the gem of the Medway.

"I didn't go for the architecture," Richard said.

Six hours after leaving Port Elizabeth, after skimming through endless prairieland of a sort my father, a veteran of the colonial service, called "MBA" ("miles of bloody Africa"), we arrived at the outskirts of Graaff-Reinet, a place so sleepy a sloth might find life a touch slow-paced.

"Looks the same as when I was here 26 years ago," Richard said as we rolled down the wide main street, avoiding a dog asleep on the tarmac and taking in the garages and shops whose Afrikaans signage suggested threatening purpose. What, we asked Richard, went on in a slaghuis? Disappointingly it turned out to be a butcher.

"You should try the biltong there," he said. "Famous for it."

Until then, we had found the strips of dried beef that serve as South Africa's contribution to world cuisine somewhere between shoe leather and damp cardboard. But in Graaff-Reinet's slaghuis, the meat carved from great hides hanging on hooks from the ceiling by a gentle-eyed Afrikaner lady who spoke no English melted in the mouth, filling it with lingering flavour.

So had Richard come here before for the dining? "No," he said. "I didn't come for the food."

We were staying in a b & b, just up the road from the slaghuis. I had booked it by phone the previous day, a procedure we had adopted throughout our stay on the recommendation of a South African who said it was the best way to meet people and immerse ourselves in the culture. Plus it was cheap.

Bedrooms that would shame many a boutique hotel, en-suite facilities with walk-in showers, and exceptionally attentive service – so far for never more than £60 a night. Sure, some of the places weren't that grand – there was the guesthouse in Colesburg that resembled the inside of a freezer cabinet. But since it only cost £25, complaint would seem harsh.

Yes, some b & b owners expressed rather strong opinions. There was the bickering pair of Zimbabwean exiles ("Mind if we call it Rhodesia? We just can't bring ourselves to call it, you know, Zimwhatever..."). And there was the place run by a Briton who had left his country 30 years ago and was keen to tell anyone who would listen (and many who wouldn't) how it had gone to the dogs. But hey, who cared about his views, his sausages were excellent.

In Graaff-Reinet, if any such robust views existed, they were buttoned up. Here we were in for a real treat. A sizeable 1880s clapboard villa, the Avondrust b & b looked from the outside alarmingly like the Bates Motel. But each room had been painstakingly restored to its original condition, and was now swaddled in Victoriana.

This was lace heaven, a paradise in chintz, the place where embroidered toilet roll covers come to die. And it was presided over by an Afrikaner couple of such attentiveness they seemed on a mission to change the world's perception of their tribe as cold and aloof.

"Welcome, Jim, Dave and Richard," said our host. "Have you been to our beautiful town before?"

"Richard has," Dave and I said, simultaneously.

"And what brought you here, Richard?" asked our host. "Was it work?"

"It wasn't work," Richard said.

"Ah pleasure, Richard, is it?"

"You might call it that," came the reply. "But I wouldn't."

The next morning, we had breakfast in the old stables, converted into what appeared to be a lace museum. Like all the breakfasts we had enjoyed in South Africa, this was a meal in stages. First there was the fruit compote and yogurt. Then there were the pastries. Then the toast and jam. Then the porridge. Then the cooked assortment of slaghuis fare: sausages, bacon, chops and drierwurst (a sort

of salami), with a supporting cast of eggs, tomatoes, hash browns and mushrooms.

If this is the standard scale of breakfasts here, it is no wonder that the average Afrikaner male at middle age finds himself with a waist the size of Wales.

Thus nourished, Dave and I set off for a day filming for the Telegraph website. Richard asked us if we needed the car. We didn't.

"Mind if I take it?" he asked. "I have some business to attend to."

So while we went up the hill to Desolation Valley (after first examining the place in town where the local vicar shot a rhino in his vegetable plot in 1897), Richard went the other way, for an appointment with his past.

Desolation Valley is appropriately named. An echoing rift of jag-toothed outcrops, it could easily double as Middle Earth or the badlands of Wyoming. With the winter sun setting behind the hills, leaving the eagles to swoop and shriek in a gathering gloaming, it made Death Valley look inviting.

But from the top of the 3,000ft outcrop, the view of Graaff-Reinet was so clear it took us back in time. We could see the old town marked by the bend in the river. The neat clapboard houses, the schools with their trim sports fields, the church with its substantial tower, visible for miles across the desert. Under apartheid this was the area reserved for the white man, designated as such by the Group Areas Act.

To the right, a mile out of town, stood the trim brick bungalows and tarred streets of the coloured township; to the left, a mile the other way, the corrugated iron shacks and dust roads of the black zone. And nothing had changed in 16 years here.

Yes, there was no longer a legal prescription preventing anyone living where they liked. But there was an economic one. With wealth accounted in land and property value, the money congregated still in the part of town described by the horseshoe of the river: still the white zone remained overwhelmingly white, the coloured one mixed-race and the black black.

And it was to the black township that Richard, it transpired, had headed. While we were taking in the view, he had spent the day there, tracking down past associations.

That evening we compared notes in the Coldstream restaurant, the fabulous colonial building in Graaff-Reinet's main square, where the guards of that name had been billeted during the Boer War – accommodation they had left with such relief that they embedded a celebratory flourish of bullets in the bar. Which, this being a place where little changes, were still evident.

Dave and I reported seeing a view of the rising winter moon so startling in size and colour that it appeared we had been teleported to the surface of Jupiter. Richard had returned with two photographs. One was of a dude dressed for a Saturday Night Fever-era dance floor: all fedora and aviator shades and expansive disco trousers. This, he told us, was him when he last came to Graaff-Reinet.

The other picture, of a young man smiling beside a bed, was presumably him, too, we said. It certainly looked just like him.

"No," Richard said. "That is my son."

And so out tumbled a history so magnificent, yet so sad, it could easily do service as the plot of a novel.

When in the town on underground political duty in the mid-Eighties, Richard had met and fallen in love with a local girl. He had taken her back to Johannesburg, but things had not worked out. Her family didn't like his ANC activities. She had left him suddenly and without a word. When he had tried to pursue her, he was told she was dead.

So, on his first return to the town, now a married security consultant living in Jo'burg with a wife and two young daughters, he had sought out her family, hoping for news. Walking through the township, one of the first people he encountered was his old flame

– now a nurse living in Cape Town, who had happened to be visiting relatives. She told him that she had been pregnant when her family intervened and that she had a son, now aged 25.

"So did you meet the boy?" we asked.

"No," said Richard. "He has been in prison since he was 17."

The boy, it transpired, had been part of the eruption of gang violence that scarred the country in the Nineties. He was caught with a gun in the aftermath of a fatal shooting. And while no one suggested he had pulled the trigger, he went down as an accessory for murder. So Richard had a son who was inside for the rest of his life.

"And tell me, Richard," I said. "If we hadn't come to this town, if I hadn't booked that b & b, would you have ever found out that you had him?"

"No," he said. "I always assumed she was dead, so I never tried to find her. It was because you chose to come here to stay I thought I'd go look if there was any trace."

Such, it seems, are the unexpected outcomes of b & b in South Africa. As we left Graaff-Reinet, Dave and I had only one thought: what hidden element of Richard's past lurked ahead in Bloemfontein?

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General questions:

1. What type of publication was this text taken from?
2. Who would read it?
3. How formal or informal is the language, and why?
4. Find examples of descriptive language.
5. How is an article different from an essay?

Read the article and find words or expressions which mean:

1. right in the centre
2. very tall rock formation
3. has been around for a long time
4. the top part of a wall of a building just below the roof, that is shaped like a triangle
5. established
6. having things on either side

7. with a criminal or infamous background
8. a short period of intense activity or illness
9. slept lightly
10. to be sitting or leaning heavily forward
11. to butt someone with your head
12. involved heavily in an unpleasant experience
13. the best part of a place
14. an animal renowned for laziness
15. animal skins
16. lasting
17. dusk
18. neat and tidy
19. makeshift buildings
20. meander

Explain the following phrases from the article:

1. a restaurant owner who made Basil Fawlty look like a model of customer-friendly service

2. What, we asked Richard, went on in a slaghuis? Disappointingly it turned out to be a butcher.

3. Bedrooms that would shame many a boutique hotel

4. But since it only cost £25, complaint would seem harsh.

5. if any such robust views existed, they were buttoned up

6. now swaddled in Victoriana.

7. the place where embroidered toilet roll covers come to die

8. with a supporting cast

9. If this is the standard scale of breakfasts here, it is no wonder that the average Afrikaner male at middle age finds himself with a waist the size of Wales.

10. An echoing rift of jag-toothed outcrops

11. Which, this being a place where little changes, were still evident.