South Africa was not high on my list of countries to visit though knowing Ben’s affection for it I always knew it would come up in conversation at some point. Early April 2017 was that point and after some apprehensions I decided to join the ‘Cooper Clan’ on their proposed visit.

After an early morning start we arrived at Birmingham Airport and following directions around many roundabouts and travelling down country lanes finally found the car park we had booked. It was an efficient service and we were soon on a 20 minute bus drive to the terminal. Having dropped the bags off and negotiated the ubiquitous airport security we settled down to a meal at Wetherspoons. The Emirates flight was on time and we were off by 9.40 on the first leg of our southern hemisphere adventure . The A 380 is an awesome aeroplane and today relatively empty – we had 3 seats each and were able to spread out.

Dubai Airport is big but surprisingly not in the same class as Singapore. We had an hour or so to kill and fortunately the change of terminals was relatively straightforward.

The ‘Coopers’ had arrived before us – Sally and Tony from Johannesburg and Ellie and Aled from the Cape . Both parties had already spent some time visiting friends and taking in the sights. This family is well versed in this part of the world and has past roots and association in both South Africa and Rhodesia so I was well aware of the feelings they all shared for the Southern African continent. For me it was an experience in the making.

I have had two travelling adventures this year where I had a certain degree of mixed emotions – excitement and apprehension. Both holidays commenced with a torrential soaking and thunderstorm. Was this an omen?

We sorted out the hire cars and quite speedily drove out of Durban airport and on to the highway for Pietermaritzburg. The rain was constant and the road busy and of course by now darkness had fallen. This was also a holiday when I had ‘surrendered’ my inherent sense of control and now found myself being driven along unfamiliar roads, in unknown country with no clear expectation of the destination.

It was about 6.30pm when we arrived in the darkened outskirts of Pietermaritzburg and finally turned into a blacked out compound, through a security gate and after few yards saw a torch light signalling in the distance. Erica our host was leading the way by torch. It immediately reminded me of my arrival in India almost 15 years before when I arrived in a power cut, a very common occurrence there.

Was this part of a primitive culture or just a coincidence of a freak storm? I asked myself!

Erica is known to the ‘Coopers’ and Ben and I were to stay with her for a few nights. She was a most congenial host and we all gathered by candlelight in her bungalow for coffee and rusk type biscuits which I took particular fancy to. Erica is in her eightieth year but on the button and was not in the least phased by a power cut.

After coffee the rest of the family went off to stay with their host Dave – one of Tony’s workmates from the past while we settled down to a delicious pea and ham soup still by candlelight !

Although briefed beforehand, I was intrigued by the metal shutter gates not only outside but inside the house though felt quite safe throughout our holiday but vigilant.

The weather next day was warm and sunny and Erica laid out a handsome breakfast on her veranda. It faced onto a neat little garden and beyond past the security fence a wide open scrub landscape. Stewed fruit, yogurt and bacon and eggs was enjoyed whilst watching some birdlife that I had not seen before.

It was planned that we would join the rest of the family at Dave’s for a ‘brai’. This is another established feature of Cooper life, originating in their previous times in South Africa. So our first foray was to the local Spar supermarket. This simple trip – which we make frequently at home – was my first experience of seeing South Africa and was enlightening. First the drive in daylight. I was not expecting to see such a multitude of product on sale, particularly the fresh vegetables – and there were things on show I have never seen. It was noticeable to me that we were in a supermarket with predominantly white customers and all black staff but that chuckily laugh and intense smile you see in black Africans was abundant. Ben wasn’t too sure of what should happen on leaving with our trolley as we very soon had a female follower back to the car. She was genuine and we later learned that it was common to let the blacks help and to tip them.

I was introduced to the milk tart and stocked up on those rusk biscuits.

Dave lived in a substantial property in its grounds and as with most it was surrounded by high fences and electric gates. There was no doubt that he was an accomplished man from the past and to me epitomised the white ‘South African’. Erica had joined us with other friends and a true brai was lit, food cooked and eaten. Tony and Dave had both been rangers in Southern Rhodesia and much enjoyed recalling those days of friendship by dressing up in their former uniforms for a photo.

Many reminiscences were fed into the mix of food and liberal drinking until dusk fell and we departed back to Erica’s house.

Saturday dawned fine again and Ben and I met up with the family again down in central Pietermaritzburg by the Dusi river for Park Run. We had been doing this back home and so to do a run in South Africa was something we had looked forward to. Not all plain sailing as Ben in a rush to get ready and strapping his foot etc in readiness forgot his bar code ID. Major trauma !☹ However, we parked up and joined the large group of runners. On hearing the organiser ask if there was anyone new running my hand shot up resulting in us being identified as itinerant English. This earned us a round of applause from the assembled 700 crowd and caused several during the run to jog alongside asking where in UK we had come from. It was the usual 5 k distance but due to grassy and hilly conditions coupled with the heat I had to walk the occasional few metres. Ben, Ellie and I all finished amongst a very friendly crowd. Ben hastily returned to car to plonk his foot in a bucket of ice we had brought from Erica’s. It was still only just past 9am when we headed back to her veranda for another -this time- well earned breakfast spread,

One of Sally’s engagements was a reunion with some nurses she had worked with whilst living in Pietermaritzburg. Ben and I offered to take her, so after breakfast we headed out for the venue where we deposited her amongst her past workmates. Whilst there we had a coffee, connected to internet and resolved the issue of the forgotten bar code by contacting the Park Run organiser who kindly credited Ben with his time and record .

The venue was on the start of a designated road known as Midlands Meander. A novel idea of identifying a stretch of countryside along which all the places of interest, for eating and adventures were marked. Within a few miles we found the site of Nelson Mandella’s final capture .We toured the informative museum and wandered down to an amazing sculpture which when viewed at just the right angle portrayed Mandella’s unmistakable facial features.

Motoring on further, we came to ‘Piggly Wiggly’ an oasis of craft shops, restaurants and adventure playgrounds. We stopped under a thatched gazebo for lunch. It was here that I reflected on how peaceful and also how European the scene around me seemed.I was just settling down to enjoy the second hand bookshop when Sally called to say she was ready for picking up so we retraced steps back to the hotel and finished the afternoon over tea with her friend Brenda and daughter.

On Sunday, we took our leave of Erica, as she left early to attend a long arranged choir event. I hope we will see her again someday. She is a delightful person with a wealth of experience of life in this remarkable country. We had brought her a painting of ‘Old John’ an historic folly in one of our parks together with the parks history and we were pleased to see it speedily placed on the walls of bungalow. She often referred to the ‘blacks’ in warm tones and although not in need of one maintained a maid as she believed it gave them work. We headed over to rejoin the rest of the family at Dave’s and were soon saying farewell to him and heading north to Estcourt and on to our next destination – the game reserve.

In a very short space of time I had already seen some facets of life in South Africa and was quite relaxed though vigilant as we toured around. In many ways it reminded me of India with a mix of rich and poor though I believe neither its riches nor its poverty surpassed what I had seen and witnessed in India. I was intrigued by the way the black population just seemed to wander everywhere – along main roads, hedgerows, wherever. I guess most walked miles to their work or schools. I watched then use old fashioned scythes cutting grass by the roadside and with children in lines behind them the women balancing goods on their heads.

We drove a fair few miles and it was just as well petrol was relatively cheap. The roads in general were very good , well tarmacked and smooth. I think in many respects the driving from place to place always is an excitement for me and no less so here. Not being on a package tour and making your own way is always the best way to explore and so it was on our journey north. We arrived at the Slyverie Game Reserve by late afternoon, still in bright warm sunshine. Zebra Cottage which was to be our ‘home’ for two nights looked just like an African mud hut with reddish walls and thick thatch. The interior resembled a hunting lodge and outside featured a patio falling away to a pool.

It was an idyllic spot and within 10 yards or so in the front various animals were free to roam around.

There is little twilight in this part of the world and the darkness falls quite quickly which meant it was time for Aled to exercise his baebecue skills. Plentiful wood collected for us and a sizeable metal trough for the fire meant all the ingredients were to hand for a good fire – and plenty of smoke!. When cooked, burnt, and braised or otherwise the meats together with salads made a fine feast eaten under the stars.

Early the next morning we were collected and chauffeured for a game drive by Paul one of the rangers. In a purpose built jeep we were shaken up and down the trail routes in search of the wildlife particularly the giraffes. When found they were stunning and numerous both old and young. A host of gazelles, ibox and other similar species hid amongst the vegetation and packs of wilder beasts crossed our path. Overall an unforgettable experience concluding with a full cooked breakfast by the trees near a watering hole.

We left the reserve early Tuesday and headed for Howick, a small town again of sharp contrasts. Its approach road was lined with private clinics and professional offices which spoke of a strong white affluence and its centre has many aspects declaring its prosperity. The focal point was the Howick falls a 94 metre waterfall with stunning scenery. Due to my aversion to heights I observed at a safe distance. We had coffee and did a little souvenir hunting amongst the outdoor black marketeers.

Granny Mouse Hotel was a luxurious oasis along the road from Howick and an ideal spot to spend the last few days of our South African adventure. We had a spacious room of very high standard even a wood burner – which of course despite 22 degrees plus Ben had to light to try out! Surrounding the grounds was a pack of wild monkeys and in common with their species very playful .We were warned to ensure we didn’t let them get into the rooms otherwise they would trash it !

Tony wanted to show us the Drakensberg mountains and next day we embarked on a fairly lengthy trip further north. The route took us through some townships where despite the ubiquitous satellite dishes one could see first hand the population living in more deprived conditions. Here groups of men huddled by the roadside and others waited for minibuses to ferry them presumably to and from their work. It was noticeable how well kept these minibuses and nearly all vehicles were - again a stark contrast toIndia where every means of transport is worn out or nearly falling to bits.

The Royal Natal Park is truly awe inspiring and the feature known as the Amphitheatre is stunning. It resembles the Victor Emmanuel memorial ‘the wedding cake’ in Rome but in much greater scale . Once again we were in a peaceful environment and enjoyed a walk among the lake where women waddled along doing their head balancing acts. In a field a few women were weaving some really pretty ornate baskets and we bought a few for gifts and souvenirs.

Our last day was lazy. Ben and I walked over the road outside Granny Mouse to a craft emporium and then deposited ourselves by the outdoor pool and ordered lunch. Despite being autumn it was very warm and the sun shone. The monkeys came close to observe us and given chance would have gone of with the sugar which apparently is what they go for.

We all decided to have our own special wine tasting event in the afternoon and gathered in a very well stocked wine cellar beneath the hotel to absorb some instruction in the art of wine appreciation. We sampled the wares with appropriate cheeses. It was fun and tasty and in the main we all managed the stairs back up to ground level afterwards.

We enjoyed some fine meals and wines whilst at Granny Mouse and I think all were finally sad to leave.

South Africa would undoubtedly leave anyone visiting with many impressions and memories. It is a place I would re visit and probably would have to visit many times to really feel you are getting to know the place. Ben and I only visited a small segment and not places of more tourist interest or famed notoriety. Nevertheless, it was an experience and enjoyable holiday for us all.