

IFYE participant tells of trip in S. Africa

Ed. Note: This is the second in a series of newsletters written by Mark Wilson, Adams County, who is currently serving as a delegate in the International 4-H Youth Exchange program in Swaziland. In the Spring Mark had the opportunity to take a 4,267 mile trip through the Republic of South Africa, camping for three weeks. His observations follow.

As of March 1st this year, South Africa eased its petrol (gas) restrictions allowing petrol stations to remain open all day Friday and Saturday. Previously stations were required to close at noon on Friday and remain closed until Monday morning, which would have forced us not to travel on weekends.

Camping is a big pastime for South Africans. We had no trouble finding campgrounds. Most towns have a municipal campground with excellent facilities. Charges per night ran from free to \$4.87. Usually we paid about \$2.90.

Our journey took us through Lesotho, or really into Lesotho. The one road crossing the country can only be traversed by landrover. The Kingdom of Lesotho is completely surrounded by South Africa and can be reached only by light plane or landrover.

We tried matching wits with that one road that crosses the country. It was a breathtaking drive as the sparsely traveled gravel road twisted around the rocky peaks and through the mountain passes. All along the way the huts of the Basotho and their small plots of wheat dotted the steep slopes.

But the road proved too much of a challenge for my pickup. We were forced to turn back when we spun out on a mud-slicked grade after about 3½ hours of driving. After leaving Lesotho I thought I'd been through the most striking mountain country I would ever see. I thought that only until reaching the Swartberg

mountains in the southeastern part of South Africa.

We got our first taste of the Swartberg as we passed through Merring's Poort, a spectacular road pass following the channel cut through the mountains by the Grootstroom (great stream). The road crosses and recrosses the stream twenty-six times beneath towering cliffs of warped and twisted rock splashed with velvety colors of brown, orange, and yellow blending and mixing with each other.

Although spectacular at any time, it was even more so when you consider that we had just spent most of the day traveling mile after mile through the flat, arid desert of the Great Karoo, and now found ourselves beneath great sandstone cliffs made even more stunning by the long shadows cast by the setting sun. Quite a marked change of scenery.

But the drive through Merring's Poort was by no means all that Swartberg had to offer. Hidden within the Swartberg mountains is a once-lost valley called Die Hel (the abyss). The valley has a very interesting history.

During the Anglo-Boer War a band of Boer guerrillas found themselves hotly pursued by British soldiers. Since all the mountain passes were closely guarded by the British, they decided to lead their horses directly over the range and escape into the Great Karoo where they hoped to rejoin the main body of their commandos led by General Smuts.

Darkness set in before they had made the summit and clouds swept in and enveloped the peaks. They shivered in the dampness until dawn, then started making their way down the other side of the mountain. It wasn't until almost four o'clock in the afternoon that they were below the clouds. They expected to see the Great Karoo, but instead found themselves looking down on a narrow valley. A few primitive-looking mud

huts were scattered across the valley floor.

They went down to investigate and were greeted by a giant, shaggy white man who spoke to them in a strange, long drawn-out Dutch. It seems his name was Cordier and he was head of a small community living in the valley. For two nights the visitors remained as guests, then Cordier and several of his sons guided them along secret paths across the rugged mountains to the Great Karoo.

The history of this hillbilly community was strange. According to them, a party of trek-boers (nomadic farmers) had been wondering along the northern slopes of the Swartberg about the beginning of the 19th century. Several of their animals made their way along the Gamka River to the hidden valley. Following the tracks of their missing livestock, the trek-boers discovered the valley and decided to settle there. It was uninhabited although numerous paintings in the caves, as well as wooden peg ladders up the rock faces to reach wild hives, were indications of the former presence of Bushmen. Shut in the mountains and quite self-sufficient they had been forgotten by the outside world.

In 1962 a road of hair-raising heights, twists, rises, and drops was built back to the Valley of Hel. It's 30 miles of the most exciting road I've ever been on. Although the whole length of road is breathtaking, the final descent into the valley of Hel is awesome. To say that the road was a steep, twisty, narrow path gouged out of a cliff face is

somewhat of an exaggeration - but not much!

As we traveled the floor of the valley, I didn't think that the stony soil and scrubby vegetation looked quite like the Promised Land. Nevertheless a handful of people withdrawn from society still call the valley home.

Suddenly I slammed on the brakes. All four wheels grabbed at the loose gravel trying to get a hold as we slid to a halt. There, squarely in the center of the road was a baboon skull looking

strangely human with its gray hair still clinging to its scalp, empty, ominous eye sockets staring out of nowhere into nothing, the grinning teeth bidding us an eerie welcome.

With my heart pounding, I took a long look sizing up the situation in the pale light from an overcast late afternoon sky. Slowly I drove around the guardian of Hel hoping not to offend any spirits lurking in the shadows.

Just as we started the climb out of the valley back

to the outside world, the sun suddenly burst through the clouds setting the mountains ablaze in a pale, ghostly sort of light casting long shadows and giving an even eerier atmosphere to the day's end.

As we turned for one last look across Hel, we caught the last rays of the sun before it was extinguished behind a distant peak. The night quickly rushed in to take control, but not before the sun had painted the retreating storm clouds with vivid colors.



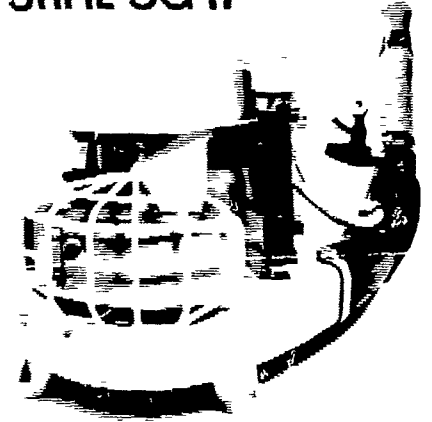
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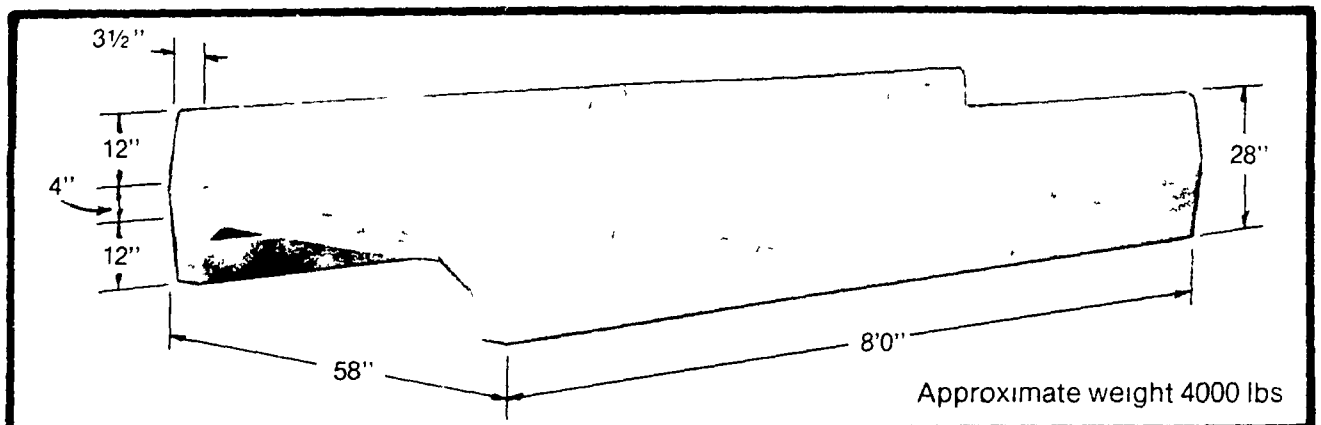


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