Early this summer we took a trip to Southern Africa. I thought I might share a bit of our adventure with you.

We arrived in Johannesburg, several days before beginning our safari (safari is actually a Swahili word, meaning journey). Johannesburg lies in the northern part of the Republic of South Africa, not far from the administrative capital (Pretoria). The city grew out of the gold mining industry (abandoned mine tunnels snake for miles underneath the city) and, as befits a country founded on natural wealth, is now the commercial center of the country.

Perhaps the most famous part of Jo'burg (as locals call it) is Soweto, with stands for South Western Township. The townships are fairly crowded living areas, where black Africans were relocated during the period of apartheid. They are not shanty towns (these too are present, but they house recent immigrants from central and western Africa), but they consist mostly of rectangular building blocks constructed by the government.

Our short time in Jo'burg did not leave a favorable impression. Word has it that the central business district is dangerous even by day, so we remained in a northern district that is much safer. Hence I was surprised to find that the entire district consisted of compounds, each building surrounded by an 8 to 10 foot fence with razor wire on top and electronic gates. There were no sidewalks for much of the area and the only means of transit for us was by cab from our hotel to the commercial part of the district. The cabs will not pick up any passengers on the street, day or night, and they took us from our hotel compound directly into the compounds of the restaurants or shops to which we were headed.

How did Jo'burg dissolve into this nightmare vision of a city of the future? There are many causes, but the combination of the apartheid policies and the mining industry were particularly lethal. One of the aspects of apartheid (an Afrikaans word meaning separate) was that black Africans who worked in the mines around Jo'burg were not allowed to bring their families with them. They stayed in secured areas, not for their safety but ostensibly for the safety of others. Indeed, the cab driver who took us from the airport to our hotel grew up away from his father, who worked in these mines. This history of compounds, fear of crime and violent outcomes continues today.

We left Jo'burg as snow fell for the first time in 25 years. From the relatively low altitude of our plane, we could see the flat tableland on which the major cities sit. After an hour or so, the large escarpment that forms the edge of the table passed below us and we flew into the low veld (veld, pronounced felt, is the Afrikaans word for bush). We landed at an airstrip in Kruger National Park, in the northeastern corner of the country. (As the following narrative occurred in real time, the present tense is in use.)

We were met at the airport by rangers from Mala Mala, the private game park where we will be staying. They pick us up in modified Range Rovers that have three rows of seats installed, stadium style, behind the driver. As there is no roof, the vehicles have the look and feel of the jeeps on the Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland. I ride shotgun, next to the driver, and the door comes up only to my elbow.
(which will be important later). There are no windows, and surprisingly, no windscreen. Good thing I have glasses on as it becomes apparent I will be the windscreen for the passengers behind me. Mounted on the hood, just in front of the driver, are two large hooks that currently hold a long stick shaped in a particular way. "What's that for?" I ask. "To help us with branches and bushes." I imagine the driver gently prodding an errant branch out of my path as we sail by. Little did I know.

As we travel down dirt roads for about 45 minutes, we pass through a semi-arid landscape. There are large bushes, acacia trees (which appear a bit like large bushes) and the occasional more substantial tree. It is winter in South Africa, so the temperatures are quite moderate (with highs in the 60's) and there is no rain (winter is the dry period). Glancing around I don't see much until, wait, is that a giraffe? It is. Grazing about 100 yards off the road.

When we are more than halfway there, a crackle comes over the radio. The ranger ahead of us (they are some distance ahead, to avoid giving us a dust bath) has spotted a leopard. We slow down and pull into a dry wash filled with sand. I look into the wash, recall the modern Range Rovers in Santa Barbara that cannot make it to the car wash without falling apart, and silently wonder if it is a good idea to drive into such deep sand. With me riding shotgun near the shovel. And a leopard about. Oh well.

Zoom, down we go into the wash and come to halt (intentionally). We see the other jeep and, maybe 40 feet away, a leopard sitting down. The leopard doesn't really react to the jeeps. After a few minutes of sitting and cleaning, the leopard gets up and starts to stretch. Now we haven't been given a lot of instructions by the ranger, but he did say to keep seated. A lad, not mine, decides to stand to get a better view and picture of the leopard. Immediately, the leopard changes his behavior and becomes more interested in us. The lad sits down. Good decision. The leopard reverts to its former state (you could almost imagine the leopard, "What, is that food? Oh no, just a jeep") and decides to stroll out of the wash, heading our way. "Please be very still" our ranger whispers. After the earlier instance, nobody twitches. The leopard heads straight to our jeep. This is probably a good time to remind you of where everyone is sitting. The leopard is coming up to the left side of the jeep. Recall that South Africa is a British colony, so the driver sits on the right. Guess who is sitting on this left side, as Mr. Leopard approaches. Me. The jeep does have good ground clearance, but still the leopard stands quite tall. My door (only up to my elbow) doesn't really seem like much of a barrier. The leopard approaches and walks right next to the jeep to exit the wash. As he (or she) passes by, I could easily have reached out and touched it's back. Needless to say, I knew to keep my hands and arms inside the vehicle at all times. My first inkling that our Range Rover has a heritage closer to the legendary Land Rovers of African fame, was the way we exited the wash. A quick switch into four wheel drive and we swam up the sand bank.

I was still a bit stunned as we drove into camp. I had read a bit about what one often sees in this part of the wilderness. They refer to the Big Five as the major animals to spot (if you don't already know, close your eyes and try to guess before you read on): lion, leopard, rhino, elephant, cape buffalo. Of these, the leopard is by far the hardest to find and I had not really expected to see one (much less come so close to one).
We arrived at the camp, which is quite luxurious even by luxurious camp standards. The camp owner, one Mr. Rattray, is the perfect embodiment of an African bush camp owner. Dressed in khakis, nearing seventy but hale and hearty, he carries a walking stick. I imagine him carrying the stick not so much for support as for emphasis when making a point (or remanding someone). Conversation is right out of a novel: "Did the boys spot a rhino this morning?", "You won’t want to miss the elephants passing through the river bed right now". He also loves to be quite understated. When I complement him on the architecture he replies "Oh, it’s not much really. Every once in a while we knock down some of the old stuff and put up something new."

Mala Mala is the Shangan word for sable antelope. While we never saw any of these rather rare animals we did see a wide variety of other antelope. All are impressive, even the ever present impala. The impala is one of the smaller antelope and, as you can imagine, is very fleet of foot. They are absolutely beautiful to see in the wild, as they spring across the land. While most of the rangers were trained in college (what a great collection of majors, one of the rangers studied game preserve management) much of the remaining staff were Shangan. The Shangan were neighbors with the Zulu, who controlled much of the south eastern tip of Africa long ago. Neighbors might be a bit strong, as the warlike Zulu enforced their will on the other tribes of the area.

After a wonderful dinner (impala and kudu - another type of antelope - often appeared on the menu, it seemed that we ate what we saw) we headed out for a night drive. Not two hundred yards from the entrance to camp we came across a pair of female lions out for a hunt. (I had always imagined these camps, surrounded by large fences. Not so. Hence you do not walk around at night unless you are with a ranger.) The lions head up the road and then into the bush. We follow. In jeeps. Crashing through the bushes, driving over plants, making a racket and shining big spotlights. We must be destroying the lions chance of hunting success, but the ranger says with confidence that we are not really impacting the success of the hunt. The lions spot a waterbuck (a rather large antelope, whose main defense is to let off a musky order telling other animals that it doesn't taste good - but as this evening's hunt indicates, it is a rather poor defense mechanism) and chase it through the shrub, before losing it in a wash. We are part of the hunt. In fact, I literally felt like I was part of the hunt when a female lion seemed to take a particular interest in approaching the passenger side door of one of the jeeps (guess who's). Just as it seemed as though she might reach up and open the door, she suddenly turned sideways and sauntered off.

In the morning, as we head to the jeeps I notice each ranger with a rifle loading brass bullets. The bullets are huge and look more like small mortars. " .375 caliber" the ranger replies, although they have never had to use them. Aha, that is what the hooks are for and, sure enough, the ranger takes the stick and places it in the back of the jeep while putting the rifle on the mount in front.

The remaining two days at Mala Mala consisted of morning game drives, and afternoon/evening drives. Dinner was served at communal tables, outside under the stars (although in a fenced area of the compound to avoid animal interest) with Shangan singing and dancing to conclude the evenings. It really was a bit magical to be nibbling on kudu, gazing up at the Southern Cross while listening to
Shangan melodies.

On the remaining drives we saw an inordinately large number of animals. One afternoon we rounded a bend and found a rhino and her calf (which we immediately named rhinocerito). They were so gentle and shy that it was hard to reconcile with the images I had seen of the fierce rhino, standing alone in the bush waiting to charge anything that comes near. On another morning, we drive off-road right into a herd of Cape Buffalo. Calves nurse from mothers, older buffalo browse and young males try out their horns on each other. When two males charge hard enough to produce a resounding crack as their horns collide, we all wonder just how much is play.

The rangers work in tandem with Shangan trackers, and the combination is amazing. We are frequently tracking animals, as on one afternoon when we went on a long drive to find a cheetah. We found tracks, judged their direction and freshness and had a good idea where the cheetah had gone, but we could not follow. Through the Junior Ranger program, Greg had the chance to identify spoor (animal tracks and markings, not scat). So Greg had a kick looking out of the jeep and telling us "That is not an antelope track, it is a giraffe track and it is not very fresh."

Question (this might be a good one for the SAT):

A giraffe is browsing on an acacia tree. He stops browsing before all the leaves are gone. Which direction will he head?
(Answer below)

Speaking of giraffe, with their long purple tongues (that are both thorn and sun proof), their 25 pound hearts (that is a long neck to pump blood up), their unique neck valves that ensure the giraffe does not pass out from all the blood in the neck rushing to the brain when it bends over to drink, they desire to eat the thorniest bush around, the acacia. Obviously the acacia has developed thorns to protect its tasty leaves (and as this is Africa and everything is two sizes too large, the thorns are 3 inches long) but this does not deter the giraffe with its thorn-proof tongue. As we watch a male giraffe (here's a tip the next time you are at the zoo, the male giraffe has no fuzz on the top of the two little horns atop his head) begin to devour an acacia, we learn that the acacia brings tannins up from the roots to the leaves as the giraffe browses. Eventually the tannin buildup (which causes indigestion) causes the giraffe to move on. Moreover, the acacia then releases tannins in the area. The wind carries them to nearby acacia, where the tannins collect on the leaves. Moreover, the collected tannins trigger a release of more tannins to further protect the trees. Hence the giraffe who leaves the acacia with lots of tasty leaves still on the branches (due to tannin buildup) will head upwind.

And thus ends part 1 of our adventure. If you were able to read this far, stay tuned for part 2.