

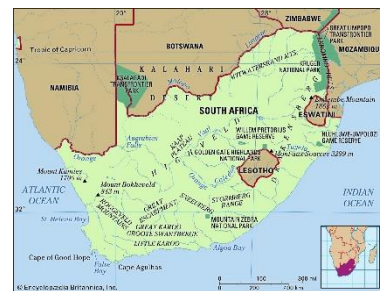
14 DAYS IN SOUTH AFRICA

JR Harding

Driving around the neighborhood at Christmas time to see the lights has been a pastime for my family, maybe yours. Now imagine driving through your neighborhood not to see the lights, but the hippos. Yes, I mean one of those 5 feet tall, 8 feet long, 4-ton aquatic critters. They can run faster than they can swim. Consciously or unconsciously, they kill up to 5,000 people a year in South Africa (SA). They are considered the most dangerous animal in SA. It is not recommended to walk your dog at night in St. Lucia. We did just that – drove around the St. Lucia neighborhood in SA looking for hippos. They come out each evening to eat the luscious green grass and fatten up. Often, they can be aggressive because their babies are with them for up to 2 years. This was a small part of our 14-day experience in SA Spring 2022.



The pioneer blood has run in my family for years. A member of the family scouted for Gen. George Washington during the Revolution. Others guided settlers in the Great Crossing west to fulfill their Manifest Destiny. Naturally, Erika and I have spent years making the door just a little bit wider as advocates for Persons Living with Disabilities. Part of this advocacy has been through travel. As a quadriplegic, I travel with 7 bags and a PCA whether I am gone for 1 night or 14 nights - each adventure has its own challenges. It is through travel that we meet new people, enjoy new foods, experience cultures, and the wonders of the world.



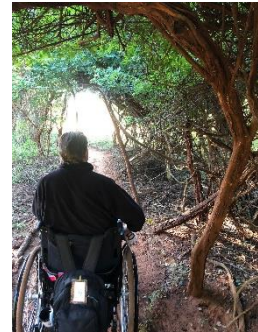
In the spring of 2020, COVID shut our SA trip down. However, with pioneering blood in our veins, and need for adventure, we kept a positive attitude. With the lockdown, we had a chance to improve our tentative plans with those who are more experienced in safari excursions and the various accessibility options. We discovered through our friends at [QuadPara](#) that choices were almost limitless for those without disabilities, but fewer for those with disabilities. Its not that we could not choose a “traditional” safari, but I would have to do it without ideal accessibility in mind. With my 2018 flap surgery still relatively fresh, I did not want to unnecessarily take risk, but at the same time, wanted to indulge in the *real* SA. After all, why fly all day and not see the “Big 5” (Elephant, Rhino, Leopard, Buffalo, and Lion)?

Thanks to our good friends and some fellow advocates, we were able to find the right tour company to see and feel SA without sacrificing my health to accessibility barriers. Truth be told, the “go to tours” would be happy to include me, but I would have to give up tools like a roll-in shower and accessible transportation. I love showers too much, and I am too old and grumpy to use a garden hose. I did that before in the Dominican Republic back in the 1980s – it’s fun but gets very old and cold quickly.

In May of 2022, we took off for our 14 days in SA with a vendor called [Access2Africa](#) (A2A). The owner of A2A is [Jenna](#), and she provides exceptional care for her guests. She understands our issues from a firsthand lived experience and built an itinerary that was inclusive, accessible, and exceeded our expectations. With Jenna’s help, we decided to focus on East SA (the Indian Ocean side) rather than trying to do the whole country.

For those who are uninformed, SA is about 5 times the size of Texas. It is big and has a significant diversity in terms of land, animals, and languages. Today, SA has approximately 60 million people representing all kinds of religions, ethnicities, and backgrounds. It is one of the world's leading exporters of precious metals, exporting around the world, and it has a multiparty republic with 2 legislative houses. It was of course, where the world witnessed the ending of apartheid and the leadership of Nelson Mandela.

Erika and I took on SA like eating an elephant – one bite at a time. We visited Johannesburg, Hluhluwe (Leopard Walk Lodge), St. Lucia (Leopard Corner Bed & Breakfast), and Durban. While this is just a toe in the water for this vast and diverse country, it was worth our time, effort, and limited resources. Each morning in the bush, I would take my enchanted pathway to the main lodge for breakfast.

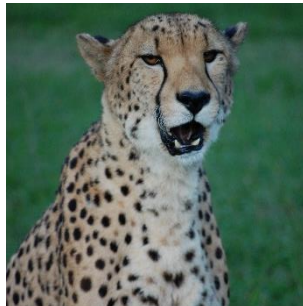


Some of the highlights included visiting Zululand, Isimangaliso Wetland Park, the Hluhluwe Game Reserve, and the breathtaking view of the Indian ocean. The game reserve tours were methodical with each morning and afternoon meant to discover new animals in the wild. With our exceptional ranger/driver, Dave, we were able to skillfully track different animals on different days. In the wild, there are no guarantees, but we were very lucky to see almost everything. Here are a few highlights.

There is nothing quite like turning the bend and seeing 6 black rhinos all sharing the same water hole. These are magnificent animals that do their own thing – and no one bothers them.



Giraffes graze independently or in families. It is amazing to watch them nibble off of trees at 20 and 30 feet high. They are quite elegant.





The safaris took patience and determination. With my accessible van that allowed for 180-degree lines of sight (front, left, and right), we did not miss a beat. Some of the photos we took were simply breathtaking. Sometimes, I felt like I was spying on them. Other times, the animals clearly knew we were present. They even acknowledged us from time to time with direct eye contact, then going about their business.



Some of the most exceptional experiences occurred during our Elephant and “Big Cat” encounters. We had a chance to feel, feed, and literally hug the animals. You could tell that they were loved.



We concluded our deep dive into SA with 3 days at Durban. This is a coastal city, tucked on the upper eastside of the Indian Ocean. It is a metropolitan community with 5 million residents. It made me think of the city of Miami. Durban hosted the 2010 World Cup and has been trading with the world for nearly 2000 years. This lighthouse was the view out of my bay windows. The reflection of the lighthouse is captured in the infinity pool overlooking the Indian Ocean. If you ever get a chance to visit Durban, we highly recommend the historical [Oyster Box Hotel](#). The Queen of England has used it, and they do host a fabulous teatime each afternoon with all the chocolates, cheeses, and treats that you can imagine.



The sign that caught our attention was the “Monkey Business” sign. Guest are warned to keep their doors and windows closed – monkeys make a mess out of hotel rooms rather quickly (they are a protected species). In fact, one morning, one of these furry friends snatched a blueberry muffin off of my breakfast plate! He had jumped down off the roof and onto my table so quickly, I as unable to react. I swear, he winked at me and said “Thanks”. He was gone as quickly as he appeared.



As pioneers in the disability community, Erika and I would like to recommend SA to all of our fellow adventurers. A full and unfeathered experience can be enjoyed by persons with significant disabilities. However, we did learn a few things along the way. Due to water shortages, you need to shower *quickly*. Hot water only runs for 10 minutes. While SA does have accessible features throughout the country, it is not the same as the standards in the US. The roll-in showers were smaller, the transfer

seats even smaller, and the 90-degree turns were hard to make. We also found the low beds to be a little challenging to get in and out of. They do have accessible hotel rooms at almost all properties. Accessible vans, however, were scarce. We enjoyed the vehicle supply provided by A2A for most of our trip, but as you can tell from the 30-degree slope getting in, it was a little tricky to manipulate. At the same time, the vehicle provided during our 2 days in Johannesburg ([Charly's Care-Transport](#)) was modern and had all of the U.S. tie-down features. In fact, the owner, Carel, is more than happy to provide accessible tours throughout Johannesburg or to the traditional safari location called Kruger. We found him to be equally as pleasant and customer oriented as our A2A provider. Both vendors should be on your speed dial if you ever consider visiting SA as a person with a disability. Thanks for riding along with us. We are thinking about what comes next.