

Americans in the World: Reflections on a Travel Course to South Africa

Eric J. Morgan

In June of 1966, Senator Robert F. Kennedy visited South Africa to deliver a speech he had been invited to give to members of the National Union of South African Students at the University of Cape Town. He began his “Day of Affirmation” speech with a clever rhetorical strategy:

I come here this evening because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which was once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage. I refer, of course, to the United States of America.

With this implicit comparison, Kennedy highlighted the strong historical connections between the United States and South Africa, two nations that have faced myriad challenges related to democracy, justice, and race throughout their histories. As Americans were also struggling mightily with racial strife in the mid-1960s, Kennedy’s speech concluded by calling on the youth of South Africa “to strip the last remnants of that ancient, cruel belief from the civilization of man” that “clings to the dark and poisoning superstition that his world is bounded by the nearest hill, his universe ends at river’s shore, his common humanity is enclosed in the tight circle of those who share his town or his views and the color of his skin.”¹

Nearly a half-century after Kennedy’s inspiring

speech, I visited South Africa for the third time, bringing with me fifteen students from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay on a travel course to Cape Town. Immersing ourselves for two weeks in South African history, culture, and society gave us a unique opportunity to confront issues of democracy and justice in a global context, as well as to engage in a comparative exploration of the historical ties and similarities between the United States and South Africa. Leading American students into the larger world for the first time was an exhilarating and challenging experience, one that broadened not only my students’ understanding of important international issues and their place in the world, but mine as well.

My travel course was not the typical study abroad experience in which students enroll in classes at a foreign university and live with local people. Instead, the course was intended to be a brief yet intensive introduction to life outside the United States. As a result, I had complete control over our itinerary and the focus of the trip. My colleagues have taken students to locales across the world, from London to Spain to Jordan to Ecuador, and the subjects of these courses have been as varied as the destinations, from history to linguistics to service learning. Preparing for the course, which would focus mainly on historical and contemporary political issues in South Africa, was both exciting and exhausting. After gaining approval for the course from my department, our International Education committee, and the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, my year of work began.

I had traveled to Cape Town twice before—first in 2002 for research for my M.A. thesis and then in 2007 for my dissertation research—and was thus familiar with the major offerings of South Africa’s legislative capital (and second-largest city, after Johannesburg). With the assistance of the small but talented staff at our Office of International Education, I began the process by making bids for airline tickets to South Africa. After I had decided on the length of the trip—just over two weeks during our winter interim—and committed to tickets, I began researching activities and lodging possibilities. For accommodations, I decided on a highly rated backpacker (the South African equivalent of a youth hostel) located within walking distance of nearly every major Cape Town attraction.

At the backpacker (with the relatively pedestrian name of The Backpack), the women would be housed in two separate rooms, while the poor men would have to live together in a single eight-bed dorm room. The backpacker offered excellent and affordable breakfasts to start our days, laundry and kitchen facilities, a relaxed lounge and small bar, and as has always been my experience in such establishments, was a crossroads for travelers from across the world. My students interacted with not only South Africans, but visitors from Great Britain, Germany, Australia, Zimbabwe, and many other places. With a large



Cape Town, South Africa

group of sixteen I was able to negotiate significant discounts with the backpacker, which helped arrange some of our excursions. The total cost of the trip per student, including airfare, accommodations, all excursions, international health insurance, several lunches and dinners, and a \$500 meal allowance, ended up just under \$4000.

I chose Cape Town as our destination for several reasons. First, it is South Africa's oldest city (from a Western or European perspective, of course), founded in 1652 by Jan van Riebeeck and the Dutch East India Company as a refueling station for ships on their way to Dutch colonies in the East Indies. As such, it provides a perfect environment for delving into deep historical themes including slavery, European colonization, the exploitation of natural and human resources, and twentieth-century struggles for human rights and self-determination. Cape Town is also a truly international city, where English is widely spoken, and I felt such a setting would help my students better adjust to living, albeit briefly, in a foreign land. Additionally, Cape Town is the gateway to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela and various other liberation leaders who opposed apartheid spent many years in prison. Robben Island was a must-see destination, as my students read Mandela's inspirational autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, for the course.

Finally, Cape Town is simply a beautiful locale. The city, which mixes historical Dutch architecture with modern buildings and has a fascinating blend of cultures from Europe, Africa, and Asia, nestles between the Atlantic Ocean and the towering Table Mountain, and the vistas in the city and the larger area are amongst the most stunning in the world. Cape Town and its environs are home to diverse fauna and flora, much of which is on display at the impressive Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden. To the north are winding mountain passes and the dry Karoo



Hiking to the summit of Table Mountain

desert. To the east lies the rich wine-growing region of South Africa, where scenic roadways traverse through endless acres of verdant vineyards and picturesque villages. To the south the curving highway sits atop massive cliffs that hug the Atlantic coast, leading to various seaside suburbs and pristine beaches on the way to the stunning Cape of Good Hope.

Yet Cape Town had its limitations for my course. The city and its encompassing province are hardly representative of the overall demographics or political makeup of South Africa. Cape Town maintains a strong British influence (the British displaced the Dutch as the colonizers of the Cape by 1800) and is 20 percent white, while whites make up less than 9 percent of the whole of the South African population

(at the height of apartheid in 1970 they made up nearly 18 percent). Cape Town itself is only 6 percent black (though hundreds of thousands of blacks live in townships just outside the city), while blacks make up nearly 80 percent of the total South African population. Over 70 percent of Cape Town's population is coloured—a unique amalgamation of various ethnic groups.

Politically, Cape Town and the Western Cape are also rather different from the rest of the country. In South Africa's last national election, held in 2009, the Democratic Alliance, the official opposition party, won the Western Cape province with 52 percent of the vote. It was the only province that the African National Congress did not carry on its way to gaining just under 66 percent of the seats in the National Assembly. The Cape has been traditionally liberal in its politics, particularly during the near half-century rule of the National Party throughout the era of apartheid, and many of the Democratic Alliance leaders were former anti-apartheid activists in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the Afrikaners left the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century because of the liberal politics of the British settlers. Political grievances led to a century of war and strife that involved both whites and blacks in the South African interior and culminated in the horrific Anglo-Boer War at the dawn of the twentieth century.

After trip logistics, my next task—recruiting students—was the most time-consuming, and also the most nerve-racking. Our travel courses at UWGB operate on a cost-recovery basis, meaning that a certain number of students must commit to participating for the trip to go ahead. As this was my very first travel course and I was a new professor, I was slightly concerned that it would not draw enough students. Fortunately my fears were unfounded. UWGB's Office of International Education handled some of the recruiting process, creating promotional material, posting housing information for study abroad opportunities on their website, and hosting a study abroad fair, where I promoted the trip and displayed photographs and artwork obtained on previous trips to South Africa, but the major onus for attracting students was mine alone.

The courses I taught during the fall of 2012—one on the history of South Africa and a senior seminar on the United States and the world—turned out to be the main source of recruits. My university is interdisciplinary in nature, and I teach in the Department of Democracy and Justice Studies. We focus on problem-based learning and attract students who care deeply about issues of democracy, justice, and equality, both in a historical and contemporary framework. It was not difficult to promote the trip as one that would delve deeply into such concerns, offering both historical and comparative perspectives on themes such as human rights, social movements, race, and economic inequality.

To my great delight my course garnered twenty complete applications. Unfortunately I could only take fifteen students with me, as I had originally planned for about ten total applications but did reserve sixteen seats on our flight. Turning students away from such an opportunity was difficult, though as some of my colleagues advised, a ratio of ten students to one faculty member is about as high as one would want to agree to for a travel course. But I decided to take fifteen students, eight of whom were Democracy and Justice Studies majors, and hoped that my previously established relationship and rapport with the majority of the students would overcome any of the burdens of going the trip alone.

During the months before our departure I held two orientation sessions to provide basic historical and political background on South Africa, allow students to introduce themselves to each other and establish relationships before the trip began, discuss health and safety concerns (my solitary unbreakable rule: never, ever walk in Cape Town alone), talk about logistics such as passports and money,

and answer any questions that students may have had about South Africa or international travel in general. Most of my students had very little experience traveling, and only a few had been outside the United States before. One poor student had never flown at all, and I could do little to prepare her for the joys of multiday transatlantic air travel. Most of my students were excited but also slightly anxious, though none had any serious worries or showed any severe trepidation.

After a year of preparation, we finally departed from Green Bay at the beginning of January 2013, making our slow way from the Midwest across the Atlantic to Europe and then south over the African continent to Cape Town. Following a late-night arrival and a much-deserved opportunity to sleep in a bit to recover from jetlag, our course began in earnest with a leisurely stroll in the bright sunshine (to replenish our melatonin) through the Company's Gardens—a verdant park in central Cape Town where the Dutch East India Company planted fruits and vegetables for its refueling station—followed by an informal talk at the former Slave Lodge from Chris Saunders, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Cape Town. Professor Saunders provided my students with a brief introduction to the history of Cape Town within the larger context of South Africa's past, then answered some excellent questions from my students on modern Cape Town and South African politics as well as the 2010 World Cup, which was hosted in South Africa's major cities, including Cape Town. We then explored the Slave Lodge, the original building where slaves transported to the city were housed and sold. It houses excellent exhibits on slavery in the Cape and on topics such as the development of the Afrikaans language.

Our travel course balanced the historical and political with the natural offerings of the area. We visited a wild game reserve, where my students were excited to see lions, elephants, cheetahs, buffalos, rhinos, and other animals in their natural environment; we explored South Africa's wine country, tasting a variety of high quality red, white, and dessert wines; we visited the Castle of Good Hope, a massive fort that is the oldest remaining colonial building in Cape Town, along with several fine museums; and we successfully hiked to the summit of Table Mountain, where we looked out from great heights over both the city and the ocean.

The academic requirements for the course were fairly straightforward. Students were assessed on their participation—including discussions of two texts—and on a daily journal in which they could record their thoughts on that day's activities, reflections on South African society, or any other ideas they wanted to express. Basically, I wanted students to engage with both what they were experiencing in South Africa and what it meant for them to be living in a foreign land far removed from the United States.

We talked a lot throughout the trip, both about South Africa and other issues—some of my fondest memories are of watching the sun set over Table Mountain as we talked politics, books, sports, and other topics at our backpacker over a few beers—and students threw themselves with vigor into Africa's diverse cultural milieu, visiting nightclubs, going to jazz fusion concerts in the park, eating a wide variety of excellent cuisine (including kudu, ostrich, and crocodile) and cheering on soccer teams during the first round of the African Cup, which was being played in South Africa during our last week in the country (host South Africa advanced to the quarter-finals of the tournament, which was eventually won by Nigeria). To give my students a break from our fairly grueling schedule and to maintain my own sanity, I scheduled two free days when the students were completely on their own without group activities or my guidance. To recharge I retreated to the solitude of the natural world, hiking several scenic trails on



Nelson Mandela's Former Prison Cell on Robben Island

Table Mountain and at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden. My students did a variety of things with their off days, from relaxing by our backpacker's pool to taking excursions to beaches and nearby towns to experimenting with more adventurous endeavors such as surfing and shark diving (which, thankfully, they survived intact).

While an immersion into South African culture was a critical component of the course, I made sure that the major focus of the trip was historical, with particular emphasis on the apartheid era. From 1948 until 1994, the National Party—led almost exclusively by nationalistic Afrikaners, descendants of the first Dutch settlers to arrive in South Africa in 1652—dominated South Africa's political, social, and economic worlds. Very briefly, apartheid created a stratified society in which white South Africans benefited from the control and exploitation of the black labor force. Throughout its nearly half-century rule the National Party enacted a variety of oppressive legislation that mandated, among other things, a defined racial hierarchy, petty segregation in public accommodations, tight control of the movement of blacks through pass laws and influx control, the destruction of black education, and the removal of non-white populations from their homes for white development. For decades South Africans of all races fought against apartheid, which remained a powerful force until the end of the 1980s, when a perfect storm—the sudden end of the Cold War, a massive international movement to isolate South Africa from the world community, a widespread internal protest campaign that made the country nearly ungovernable, and a timely change in leadership—created the opportunity for transformation from apartheid to full-fledged democracy.

One of the most vivid representations of apartheid can be seen in District Six, a vibrant coloured community in Cape Town that was declared a whites-only area in 1966. On a hot sunny morning, my students explored the District Six Museum, which contains numerous artifacts from former District Six residences along with poignant photographs, maps, and oral histories of the forced removal of coloured residents. A former resident of District Six then led us on a walking tour of some of the major sights of the area and offered us an account of his life before, during, and after removal. After the end of apartheid, former District Six residents began to move back to their old home, the first returning in 2004, thirty-eight years after the removal process began. The reconciliation of past wrongs is a major theme in South Africa's post-apartheid history, and we talked a lot about this idea during and after our visit to District Six.

Our visit to Robben Island, located in Table Bay and accessible by ferry from the pleasant but rather touristy

Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, was a somber and meaningful experience. Our group was guided by a former prisoner who provided us with an intimate history of both his activism and his life on the island prison. In addition to learning the history of the island—which, throughout its long history, served as a prison, leper colony, and animal quarantine station—we visited the lime quarry where Nelson Mandela and other liberation leaders not only broke rocks under the hot African sun, but also politicized the non-political prisoners with daily lessons on history, politics, and philosophy in a small cavern at the rear of the quarry. The visit culminated with a walk through the maximum-security wing and a brief glimpse into the eight-by-seven-foot cell where Mandela spent 18 of his 27 years in prison. After the visit to Robben Island we gathered to discuss Mandela's autobiography, which was made even more poignant by our visit to the prison. My students were most impressed by Mandela's commitment to a righteous cause and his willingness to sacrifice his family, his freedom, and even his life for the ideals of non-racialism and democracy.

Another favorite excursion was our tour through Cape Town's Bo Kaap district, a community of hilly streets and brilliant pastel houses, where the Cape Malay population resides. The Cape Malays are descendants of the first slaves brought to the Cape Colony by the Dutch East India Company from its colony in Java. They were the first people to bring Islam to South Africa. We visited a mosque (we also visited a synagogue and a Christian church during our trip) and discussed the importance of religion within South African society (Afrikaners were and remain a deeply religious people). Our day culminated with our group making a lunch from scratch with two local families, and as we ate our delicious meals, we talked history and politics with our gregarious guide, who remained hopeful for a better future for all South Africans.

Our visit to the Houses of Parliament, located in the Company's Gardens in a beautiful nineteenth-century building featuring a central dome, Corinthian porticos, and pavilions, spurred stark comparisons between democracy in the United States and South Africa. Having lived in a nation that has remained basically evenly split politically for decades, my students found the dominance of the African National Congress to be both fascinating and troubling. The ANC controls 66 percent of the seats in Parliament, with the Democratic Alliance and the Congress of the People holding 17 and 7 percent, respectively. Such dominating numbers prompted my students to talk about what democracy means as well as to think about the consequences of a political party with little true opposition. They were also surprised to learn that South Africans do not have direct elective representation. South Africans vote by party, whose leaders then choose who to send to both the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces. For all the United States' political challenges, my students were comforted to know that they still had representatives who were responsible to them and whom they could contact directly on issues they felt strongly about.

The highlight of the trip for almost all of my students was our visit to Langa, a township just outside Cape Town. Created in 1927, Langa was designated a black township as part of the Urban Areas Act, which began to regulate black travel in and out of cities as whites feared becoming outnumbered in South Africa's large urban centers. Within the township, whose population is around 50,000, we interacted with black South Africans of varying economic classes in a vibrant environment, though it was the poorest sections of the township that were most eye-opening to my students. We visited one woman's home, a shipping container no larger than seven feet by seven feet, that contained a single bed for a family of five. We

also visited a hostel that housed several families within a few sparse and crowded rooms; they paid for electricity by depositing coins into a box on the wall.

Yet not all of Langa is poor. My students were surprised to learn that South African townships, like most cities in the United States, vary in terms of their socio-economic make-ups. While we saw many tin shacks and dilapidated structures, we also visited parts of the township that were home to the more educated and professional township residents such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers and featured houses that would fit in seamlessly into suburban America. My students were also surprised to learn that, despite the repeal of all apartheid's restrictive laws from 1990 to 1994, township residents rarely move, self-segregating themselves for social reasons. Another surprise was the role played by women in the township. We visited a shebeen, a drinking establishment, where we shared tasty homemade beer from a large tin bucket. We learned that shebeens have historically been operated by women, and that even in modern South Africa, township women are seen as more enterprising and hardworking than men, who continue to struggle with little education and few economic opportunities.

Despite the poverty that my students witnessed, they were pleasantly surprised at the warmth and happiness of Langa's residents. Everywhere we went in Langa, children swarmed my students, who had brought candy to pass out to the seemingly endless stream of kids. There was nowhere near enough candy, but the youth of Langa were happy to have us visit. Our guide for the day, Chippa, founded a non-profit organization called Happy Feet to provide township youth with an alternative to street life and crime; it focused on promoting the wildly entertaining dancing style called gumboots, a high-intensity routine featuring dancers clad in oversized wellington boots. Our day in the township ended with a rousing performance by the Happy Feet children. We then went to a local barbeque establishment, where we dined on tasty pap (a traditional African porridge), chicken, and sausage, and drank cold Castle lager while chatting to locals.

By far the most difficult challenge for my students was dealing with the poverty they saw throughout Cape Town and Langa. As we drove in from the airport, my students saw townships and shanties for the first time, but seeing them up close in Langa was a humbling experience. As they wandered the streets of Cape Town, they were constantly confronted by panhandlers. South Africa's official unemployment rate hovers around twenty-five percent, and unemployment affects the black population far more than others, although a growing segment of Afrikaner



UWGB Students and Township Children in Langa

farmers are becoming increasingly impoverished. Economic opportunities for poor black South Africans remain limited, as a solid black middle class has not yet been established. Some of my students were shocked at the amount of begging they experienced, and others felt guilty about their relative wealth compared to the poor they saw on the streets. A few students engaged in conversations with these beggars, and one even took a few out for meals. The end of apartheid, my students came to realize, did not mean true equality and the end of economic hardship for all.

Our conversations on apartheid inevitably led to discussions on the role of the United States and its citizens during South Africa's darkest era. I discussed citizen activism and the global anti-apartheid movement, which led to further questions and discussions on the role that normal citizens can and should play in both U.S. foreign policy and international relations. Many of my students were inspired by the story of divestment movements on U.S. college and university campuses in the 1970s and 1980s, and expressed regret that similar movements do not exist today. I told them that activism is alive and well, though clearly apartheid had united a certain segment of Americans in the 1970s and 1980s more than nearly any other international issue of the era. By the end of the course my students clearly had a much better understanding of both apartheid and South African history than when they began, though they were also left with many questions and doubts, particularly concerning South Africa's future.

My travel course to Cape Town changed me profoundly. Escaping the confines of the traditional classroom, I learned that there is no greater way to reach students than through experiential learning. Watching my students make connections between the stories from Mandela's autobiography and their visit to Robben Island itself was tremendously fulfilling. Observing them interacting with local South Africans of all races, engaging in conversations about politics, culture, and society, was thoroughly satisfying. South Africa became a part of them and a part of us and would be difficult to let go of. Watching my students grow, even in such a short period of time, made me wish we could have stayed and learned for much longer than we did. In many ways the course was too short and too intense, and I understood that it would take weeks or months for much of what my students experienced to make sense to them.

In truth my students went to South Africa for different reasons. Some went for an exotic vacation, others to soak up the vibrant Cape Town nightlife or to escape the harsh Wisconsin winter for the warmth of the bright African sun. Others went because they had taken classes with me, in-

cluding my history of South Africa course, and wanted to see with their own eyes the country they had read about. Most went to learn, to experience a place far removed from their own experiences in Wisconsin, to see the world differently and to come back to the United States with a stronger appreciation for a place that, as Robert Kennedy noted, was in many ways so similar to the United States in its struggles for democracy, justice, and equality. Some students were inspired to return to South Africa in the future, and several hoped to make some kind of contribution to helping South Africa become a better country, a noble goal that I encouraged.

Ultimately, my travel course was the pinnacle of my professional career thus far. I can never forget the images of children in Langa rushing into the arms of my overwhelmed students, or the solemn and introspective looks on their faces as they walked by Nelson Mandela's cell on Robben Island. I have always believed that teaching is the most important thing we do as academics, and my travel course to Cape Town confirmed this belief. I know my students were changed by this experience, and that is all an educator can really wish for. As one of my students reflected:

My worldview has been forever altered by the few short weeks I was able to spend with the South African people. Their unbridled happiness and love for life was evident everywhere I went, even when I found myself face-to-face with some of the harshest poverty on the planet. Whether it was from the people I met in Langa, or the stories of Soweto and Alexandra, I was taught a lesson about materialism, happiness, and what it means to be successful in one's lifetime.

I can only hope to continue to be able to offer such opportunities to future students, to introduce them to a world that is endlessly fascinating and full of possibility.

Note:

1. Robert F. Kennedy, "Day of Affirmation - South Africa," 6 June 1966, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights, <http://rfkcenter.org/day-of-affirmation-south-africa>. For an excellent chronicle of Kennedy's 1966 visit to South Africa, see the PBS film *RFK in the Land of Apartheid: A Ripple of Hope*, directed by Tami Gold & Larry Shore. Available on DVD at <http://www.videoproject.com/rfk1073di.html>.