

TRAVEL

Lured to Lesotho

Last week Prince Harry launched a charity to help children in Lesotho orphaned by AIDS. **Stephen Scourfield** visits the African mountain kingdom, keeping a promise he made to himself almost four decades ago.



As a nine-year-old, I promised myself I would go to Lesotho one day — a wild and romantic pledge by a little boy in England, to himself, to visit the high, poor, remote mountains and villages of the only country on the planet completely surrounded by one other country. An island and outpost surrounded by South Africa. Today, thirty-seven years later, is that day.

But as we approach from the west, from KwaZulu-Natal province, the heavens suddenly open. The temperature drops by 4C in two minutes, then another two, and another two, and, in minutes, it is 10C lower than it started and the firehose rain cuts deep channels down and across the dirt road.

And we haven't even got to the infamous Sani Pass — the "Pass of the San people" — an 8km climb up rocky switchbacks to 2840m in the no-man's-land between South Africa's border at the base of the Drakensbergs and the mountain kingdom of Lesotho at the top. For a few minutes, it looks as if the road might quickly become impassable, with clay being washed away and turned to slip second by second.

But Greg Garson has climbed the Sani Pass many times, to a place that also holds a precious place in his heart. As a nationally accredited South African guide, he has been taking people to Lesotho longer than any other. Greg and I met in Perth when he came to talk about the trip that (Garsons Expeditions) is offering ... starting in Durban, where he lives.

I told Greg that I had been inspired by meeting Archbishop Trevor Huddleston. To me, as a boy, he was gentle, powerful, mesmerising. My mother and I went to a talk he was giving and he planted indelibly in me a love of Lesotho.

My mother and I ran stalls at fetes, raising money for projects in Lesotho. The work in schools and hospitals seemed almost constantly in my thoughts.

"Father Trevor?" Greg knew of him. Archbishop Huddleston died in 1998 but lived in Africa much of his life and led the British campaign to end apartheid in South Africa. At his memorial service, then president Nelson Mandela said Archbishop Huddleston had touched the hearts of millions of South Africans.

“I will take you to Lesotho,” said Greg. “I would like to do that for you.”

And here we are now, just a stone’s throw away, with the temperature still dropping and the rain cascading from the sky, and me thinking that maybe it is not meant to be after all. A divine intervention, perhaps. All manner of reasons for me not being allowed on to the rooftop of Africa are swirling around inside me.

“If we can’t make it, we can’t make it,” I say to Greg. “Five minutes and everything changes in the mountains,” says Greg.

And then we round a bend, and the sun is out and there is no rain.

Two more bends and we are in sweet alpine meadows, the earth and rock track completely dry. The yellow of euprops, southerlandia, and then the distinctive Lesotho poker. A suicide gladiolus. Endemic watsonia, precious to South Africans, at 3000m. Leucosidae seracie, locally called ouhout, which Basutho, the people of Lesotho, infused into tea to treat eye infections.

More bends and Greg pulls the Land Rover over on to the one place in this no-man’s-land where you can stop. “A little time for the little boy in you,” he says. And I jump out, and he purposely stays in the vehicle. Out on a spur, I can wheel around the 360 degrees of sheer mountain landscape, sucking in the clear cold air and looking up the green skirts of the steep sides to the eyrie of Lesotho above, somewhere over the black basalt ramparts, lost in a white blanket of cloud. Sitting at more than 3000m.

The Roof of Africa.

And then, there we are, past the barrier and in Lesotho. We pull in to Jonathan and Sylvia Aldous’ Sani Top Chalet, “the highest pub in Africa”, and file past a rack of old skis, faded photographs of Lesotho in the snow and its famous horsemen sitting wrapped, equally as famously, in colourful ceremonial blankets.

And I sit now in my room with wind and rain beating on the same metal lattice windows as my grandmother’s house, staring out at the cloud, just as I did in her hilltop cottage in England when I was studying maps of Lesotho, making myself a promise. The nine-year-old would never have dreamt that he would come here as an Australian and see a Basutho thumb through a passport with a kangaroo and emu on the front, filled with the stamps of the world. I am so humbled to be visiting Lesotho, and to revisit the boy I was.

I am overwhelmed to be here. I am overwhelmed to have greeted myself as a boy and felt all I felt then. Even the shape of the word, Lesotho, means so much to me that to see it worked into the tapestry on the wall makes me feel as if I have always belonged here, just never arrived.

All night long, the windows are lashed by wind and rain (as they should be in a romantic odyssey) and I am warm in the reminiscent texture of flannelette sheets, under tigtucked, old-fashioned blankets. I lie awake

through the night and savour it, and let the feelings of childhood back in.

We set out early. It is damp and misty outside. We are living in the clouds.

Basutho are excellent mountain horsemen and they, and their Lesotho mountain ponies, are revered.

Basutho also are known for wearing big blankets wrapped hard around themselves and, slightly less famously, for their accompanying gumboots.

Lesotho’s ponies are renowned for being hardy. Their riders are also renowned for their skill.

For each white confetti of sheep there seems a shepherd. In gumboots and blankets, they watch for the jackal buzzards. Grazing is an important industry, Lesotho making income from the sale of mohair as much as through its labour for the gold mines of neighbouring countries.

Opposite the two government shearing sheds, to which flocks are brought to have their high-quality mohair and merino fleeces removed, is a small village; a cluster of round huts with thatched roofs. There are 70 or so people in the village, 20 of them children.

Flags fly above some — white meaning beer has been made and is for sale, green for vegetables, red for meat. There is a blue flag but when you ask what this is for, you get only mysterious answers.

“They come for the shearing and we make the food for them,” says Aleni Sebilo, in her little hut, which took a year to build.

The hut has a single door much less than 2m tall, facing north. The prevailing wind is from the south and the light from the north. The weather can be savage, at this altitude, living in the clouds. Winter, spring, autumn, and even summer, can see the land quickly covered in snow. The temperature can plunge to minus 14C, plus windchill factor.

When we return to the border, I hold out my passport and a young man takes it, snorts at the photograph, casts a glance at the soccer on the TV, eventually turns back to the little blue book, and stamps it. It clearly is irrelevant to him who I am, what I think about Lesotho, what it means to me, or that I am now leaving, 24 hours after entering. And that, I reflect, is probably how it should be. It is his reality, my dream, and it was my promise.

- My thanks to Greg Garson for helping me to keep a promise and for his informed, educational, amusing and cheerful company.

To travel to Lesotho, or anywhere in South Africa, with Greg Garson, call Garsons Expeditions at 027 (0)31 561 1314 or email infol@garsons.co.za.

For South African Airlines flights, contact www.flysaa.com

Killers in the mountain kingdom

Lesotho is rated as the third poorest country in the world. It has a population of 1.8 to 2.2 million — no one is quite sure, for various reasons.

It is estimated that between 70 and 100 people die every day in Lesotho as a result of HIV/AIDS and poverty.

The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel — an Anglican organisation, but with the mandate to “enable people to grow spiritually, to thrive physically and to have a voice in an unjust world” — has long been working in Lesotho. It was to them that mother and I sent money.

It says it works alongside churches and communities around the world, providing the resources that they define as necessary to meet local needs. “Our work involves pastoral care, social action and supporting training programs.”

Colin Sillett has been employed by the Diocese of Lesotho to develop HIV/AIDS awareness programs and a primary school

education program. He has helped to set up an HIV/AIDS Peer Educators program in high schools in Lesotho, which urges young students to change their behaviour and cultural traditions to avoid the virus.

Colin says: “We are teaching the children to look for solutions and choices from within themselves and not to rely on miracle cures or instant fixes. Younger adults, not set in their ways, benefit more than older clients.”

He is also co-ordinating training in AIDS counselling for teachers, and developing basic mathematics and English courses for children.

“This society amazes me with its positive, friendly and grateful temperament despite enormous daily adversities.”

The backdrop to his work is disease, leading to a declining population.

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD