

TRAVEL Stephen Scourfield

Far from black and white

South Africa has seen many changes — socially, politically and economically — since European contact two centuries ago but, as Stephen Scourfield discovers, it remains an enigma



“I have no fears for the future of this country. None whatsoever. We are a country under construction, physically and politically. We are remaking it. We are living history.” Greg Garson, of Garsons Expeditions, is passionately immersed in the past and the future of South Africa in general, and the province of KwaZulu-Natal, on its eastern side, in particular. “Living in these times, every day is different here. You have to re-look, rethink. People are adapting to this.”

I see it over and over in nine days and 3000km on the road with Mr Garson, peeling off the layers of a complicated, layered history.

“It’s complex and not just one story,” he says, and I should have taken it as a warning. I love writing but have been worried about writing this. How to explain it in a thousand words of newsprint?

The emergence of homo sapiens — modern humans — the rise of tribes and takeover of the Zulus under the military genius of King Shaka. The Dutch trekking across from the Cape, the takeover of the British, agriculture and sugar cane, and the Zulu wars, the enforced labour of Indians when the British failed to get Zulus to work in the cane fields, minority rule and the end of apartheid in 1994.

“It is a ‘young country’ if you restrict yourself to European history,” says Mr Garson. “The English pushed the Dutch out and held sway for 200 years. “But in reality this is really, really ancient. This is where we see the emergence of modern man on our border 2.3-2.5 million years ago.” (And here he pays tribute to the work of scientist Richard Leakey.) “Modern man mastered the art of fire and from them emerges our Koi San, the hunter

gatherer. Then the tall, black iron-age people came down through southern Africa.”

Modern history was starting to brew. In the 1800s, the Dutch had settled the Cape region, in the west, as a refuelling station for ships and sailors on the way to the Indies. The Calvinist population was growing crops before the British pushed them out and, in 1836, they left for Natal.

A recognisance party crossed the Drakensberg dividing range in 1838 and reported that it was a land of milk and honey but it had bees too — the Zulu nation. Through these movements, we see the build-up to the wars the Zulu tribe waged on other tribes, and the war it would eventually, and famously, fight with Europeans.

But now, for all the battles it has seen, this country is fighting the biggest war in its history, Mr Garson agrees.

In a country of an estimated 46 million people, 6.2 million have HIV/AIDS. In some villages, one in three people is infected.

Down at the waterfront redevelopment of fancy apartments in Durban, I get a glimpse of the fast emerging black middle-class as they cruise the site looking for the best view over the harbour from their balcony.

Business is going well, the economy is improving. Toyota has a big assembly plant here, and BMWs, Fords and Mercedes-Benz are also made.

Component factories have spun off this industry. But there is a massive movement from rural regions to the towns and cities and the region has what Greg Garson calls “porous borders”. The big township of KwaMashu sprawls over undulations. The speed of change is too slow for some but enormously fast. “I have seen this myself,” says

Mr Garson, “a father who has never sat in a vehicle and a son with an MBA driving a BMW.” I see and sense nothing of crime. I walk around markets with camera bags, exercising only the usual care I would anywhere. I smile and pass pleasantries with people. Unlike on our own highways, the vast majority of people passed wave and smile. Thousands of greetings a day to the two white guys in the expensive Land Rover. I am conscious that I had Greg Garson with me, of course — a local who knows how the place works. But I have a practised sense of when “not to be here”, and never once felt any sense of it. Quite the opposite. Handshakes from strangers in the street, or respectfully ignored, except in response to my own greeting.

At Rorke’s Drift, of the most famous sites of the Anglo-Zulu wars, David Rattray — internationally renowned for his knowledge of the subject, and an excellent storyteller — concurs with Mr Garson. And he does so against an explicit history, as it was here, in 1879, that first King Cetshwayo’s mighty army massacred the British at Isandlwana and then, over that night, 100 mainly Welsh soldiers withstood the might of 4500 Zulu warriors at Rorke’s Drift, nearby.

Events which set the scene for the history that would follow.

“I have sat on these battlefields with more than 55,000 people,” says Mr Rattray. “When I started doing this in 1989 it was such a different country and it’s been such a privilege to be in South Africa for those 17 years.

“In 1989 there was no tourism here at all. Zero. In 1989, Nelson Mandela was still in prison and one wondered what would happen. But we were optimistic for South Africa because we had had a lot to do with black people.”

Since the first free vote in 1994, things have changed more dramatically than perhaps someone living here might feel. As an outsider you see it. Certainly tourism is growing — as is, specifically, interest in the battlefields. “My fear for this area now is a fear of development,” says Mr Rattray. “We have to make sure, particularly at Isandlwana that it remains one of the great, emotive places.” But set against that fear are the opportunities that today’s South Africa, and the world’s interest in it, offers the people there. “But if we fail to put eloquent people in the frontline of these talks, then we truly have failed,” says Mr Rattray, conscious of balancing British and Zulu sides of these stories.

“These young black people that we are taking onboard are very important to me and very important to the people of this area.” And important to the new South Africa.

“What happened in the Anglo-Zulu battles is not just a story of war,” Mr Rattray points out. “It is a story of reconciliation. Our story has a relevance for the world.

“I wish the world would sit up and look at what we did in this country — and what we are doing in this country.”

FACT FILE

- Garsons Expeditions has a 15-day, 14-night tour of KwaZulu-Natal province in eastern South Africa, which ... explores the Durban region with national guide Greg Garson. It includes three nights at a private game lodge famous for the “big five” African animals, two at the battlefields, hearing about the Anglo-Zulu war. This exclusive tour ... then continues to the Drakensberg Mountains for two nights. Details: Contact Greg Garson, call Garsons Expeditions at +27(0) 84 491 0811 or email info@garsons.co.za
- South African Airways flies with easy connections all over South Africa, and other parts of the African continent. It is an easy trip and South African Airways offers comfortable flying. Details: www.flysaa.com

Valley of a thousand smiles

Immaculate in her neat lime-green suit, the woman climbs into the back of the car, grateful for a ride home after work. She has been cleaning rooms at a tourist place in Botha’s Hill, just north of Durban. She is heading home to Fredville, in the Valley of a Thousand Hills, where her four grandchildren are waiting for her.

Her daughter died last year, their father in 2000, clearly from HIV/AIDS, though she doesn’t use the words.

She is old, says the 58-year-old, and she has already brought up her own four children, now she has to bring up her grandchildren. There are eight in her household, and she is the only one working, bringing home 275 rand (about \$62) a week. For the children, she will get a few dollars a week. “But it takes time,” she says.

They are good kids, focused on school and keen to make lives for themselves. Her son is at home, not working, and so is a daughter.

Other children in the settlement are going to the new Islamic school, where there is good education, and food. Some just go to learn and eat, some convert to Islam, she says. Islam is said to be the fastest growing religion in Africa.

We drop her off at her house, turn and drive away, she with a proud wave and smile.

And then we drive on through the settlement, windows open in the warm, humid air. Children wave, a big woman sitting outside her shop shouts a greeting, athletic boys return surreptitious nods, grinning. Everyone smiles and greets us as people, regardless of our fancy car.

Stephen Scourfield