

### South Africa Part 3

by Dianne Boate

#### Soweto

The temperature had dropped down from the high 90s, so we didn't get the full benefit of South African summer weather in a shack made of corrugated iron, boasting one door and one small window that remained open only during daylight hours, never at night.

If you took three closet doors and laid them down in a U shape this would approximate the shape of this particular shack and tell you something of its size. It was very dark inside and smelled of kerosene. I sat with Robert, my traveling companion, and our hostess, around a small round table. With the U shape configuration, Robert was in the bedroom, I was in the living room and she was in the kitchen. Stacked mattresses with blankets and clothes strewn on them, piles of boxes with pots and pans and dishes, and a big stove that was no longer working was our view inside. Right in front of me on the table was an old sewing machine with a foot pedal to operate it. Good thing, because there is no electricity and no running water, either. A wood or coal burning stove that does not work any more doesn't make sense to me, but this is why we sat gagging on the stale kerosene air. Kerosene was fuel for the cooking unit on top of the stove.

There was a pull between good manners and self preservation, with the former winning, as we talked with the occupant, a single woman grandparent. Her name is Ivy. She is a large lady with a broad kindly face. A beige crochet hat with some stitches unraveled sat upon her head in spite of the heat. She was proud of herself because she could speak to us in English. She is surrounded by literally thousands of neighbors whose language she does not always understand. If you could start from where I was seated and zoom up to the 10th degree and take a photograph you could understand my panic. There are 4 million people in the South Western Township called SoWeTo and we were smack dab in the middle somewhere. As we talked, woman to woman, brown eyes meeting blue eyes sincerely, we learned about each other's lives. She tries to earn money with sewing, raise a grandchild, and stay out of the way of things that happen in the night. I told her about the homeless living on city streets so she would know we have bad conditions to take care of, too. There is a big difference between empathy and pity but these got very mixed up. It upset me to know that I would walk out of there and go take a swim in a pool that was larger than her house and she had to stay there.

We were down to the last three days of our trip, houseguests in a suburb of Johannesburg. Our hostess suggested this tour and made the arrangements. The township tours are new. According to Jurgen Wessels, the local people saw a tourism opportunity, and I ask you, Why Not? It puts money into an area where the effects of unemployment would make you cry.

Our guide lives in Soweto and took us to his house. This was more of a real house with real rooms. In being introduced to his mother, named Tiny, she took one look at me and exclaimed "Why I just love you!"

Imagine: On one street of this infamous township, two Nobel Peace Prize winners lived: Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu. Nelson Mandela's house is now a museum. Stepping inside, moving quickly because there were 15 French people behind me. I wanted the experience to myself. Mr. Mandela left something of himself in that house. Faith, hope, despair and dreams are lodged in the walls, coming out in the atmosphere letting their presence be known.

Finally we visited an area where some very rich locals have built themselves houses that are testimonies to their success. As my father would say, "Everything is different and nothing is changed."

It was getting late. Our guide needed to be back at home before dark. Dark is dangerous. He scrawled his name and address for me and then wrote, "It will be my pleasure to receive a book on American History. Thanks."