

Travel My Story

HOMIE FREE IN SOUTH AFRICA



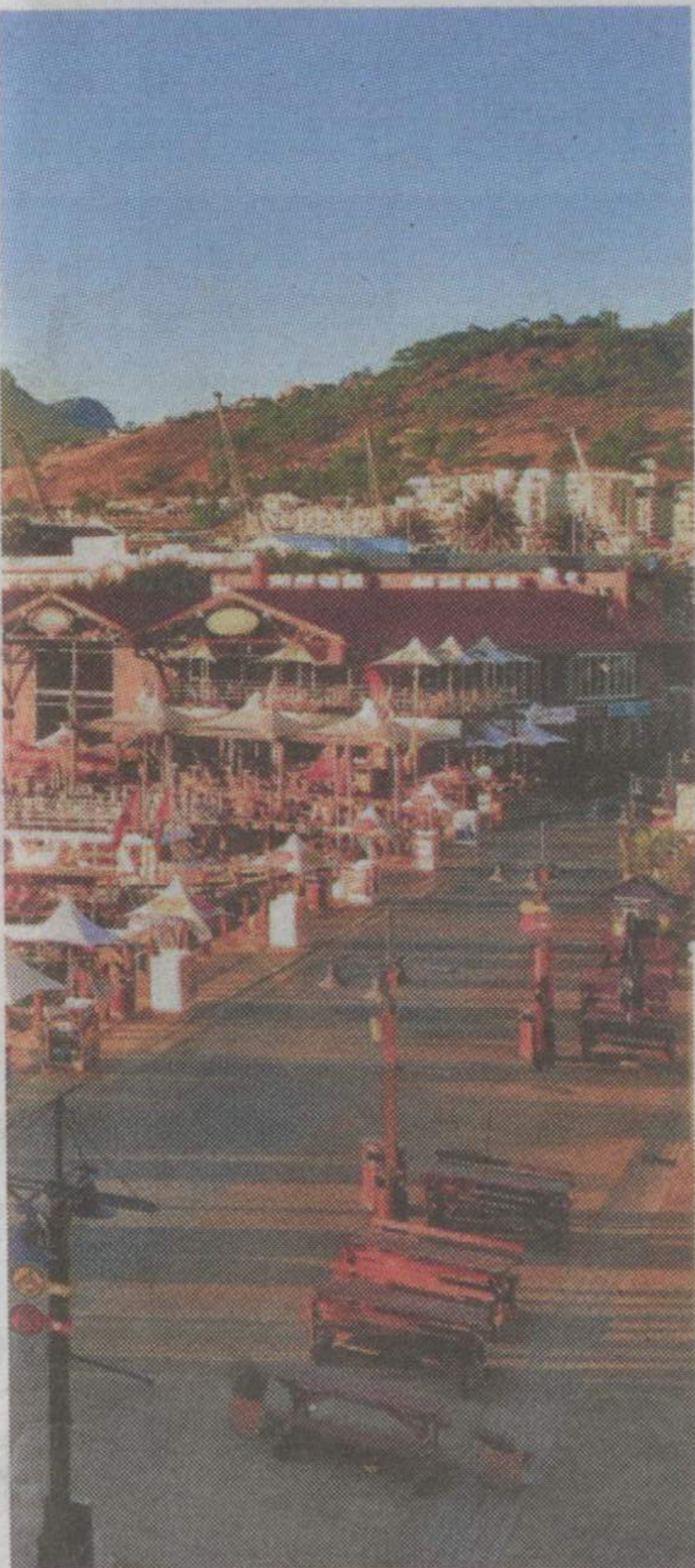
Steven, far right, with Suzanne, Tallulah and his wife, Isabel

Family holidays can be fraught, but when a member of your group once fled the country you're visiting as a political asylum seeker, it takes things to a whole new level. My husband's father left South Africa for the UK in 1966 after spending six months in prison in Pretoria for opposing apartheid. Now, three generations of us were returning: Steven himself, and his wife, Isabel; my husband, Andy, and I; and our 10-year-old, Tallulah.

The excuse was to mark their 75th birthdays and 50th



Suzanne Duckett joins her freedom-fighter father-in-law on an emotional return to the country he was forced to flee during apartheid



GETTY

UNDER THE TABLE Cape Town. Right, spot leopards

open up about growing up in the old South Africa, where, only 25 years ago, the majority of the population were still deprived of basic human rights. My daughter, brought up in multicultural London, was soon wrestling with the idea that apartheid actually happened at all, never mind in the lifetime of her parents.

“South Africa at that time was a cruel and profoundly unequal society,” Steven recalled. “From meeting other ethnic groups, particularly at university, I became more aware of its injustices and the possible contribution I could make to rid the country of the scourge of apartheid.”

From here, we flew to the Madikwe Game Reserve, a vast expanse of grassy plains, woodlands, rocky outcrops and mountains northwest of Johannesburg. The reserve has a strong conservation ethos and is more concerned with getting you out to see the game than with serving Michelin-star meals in the bush. The variety of wildlife there stopped us in our tracks.

That night, as the first day’s excitement started to subside and the staff had sung soothing gospel songs, Steven finally felt able to tell us how he had ended up in prison.

Unknown to him, the flatmate of a friend was a

trackers on the ground. Andy and I sat in a chopper hovering above as the conservation team darted the baby, then worked quickly to check her health before reuniting her with her mother, hiding in scrubland. It was an extraordinary end to an unforgettable trip.

I learnt more about my father-in-law and his family history in those 10 days than I had in the past 17 years, and I know my husband did, too. Much was experienced that brought us all closer: my

daughter and I meeting family members for the first time; seeing the big five and massaging the gums of a sedated baby rhino; and understanding why Steven can recite so much poetry and prose (one of the few upsides of solitary confinement).

For Steven, it was deeply satisfying to see how South African society had changed, with all races proudly expressing themselves. “The result took years of bitter struggle,” he said. “But it was absolutely worth it.”

Africa Travel has a four-night stay at Rhulani Safari Lodge, in Madikwe, from £2,850 per adult and £1,895 per child, full-board, including flights (africatravel.co.uk).

Babylonstoren has farmhouse suites from £368 a night, B&B (babylonstoren.com)



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**NORWAY'S
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wedding anniversary, as well as to experience a safari. But the trip was also intended to help us understand how Steven had come to spend six months of his early life in solitary confinement.

First up was cool, cultured Cape Town, where our central Airbnb let us be flexible as relatives dropped in and out. It also meant we could blow

But before that came
nights at Babylonstoren, about



Steven and half a dozen of his friends were arrested and imprisoned for six months without charge or trial



an hour's drive into the Winelands. One of the oldest Dutch farms in the Cape, dating back to 1692, it's centred on an 18th-century manor house that sleeps up to 10. There we took a tour of the gardens, patted friendly donkeys, cooed at plants and insects, collected the eggs for breakfast, hung out in the new spa and got on all fours to study giant tortoises.

In the evenings we gathered round the dinner table, and it was here, perhaps mellowed by the delicious food and wine, that Steven began to

Branch, whose activities included arresting political activists. Steven and half a dozen of his friends were arrested and imprisoned for six months without charge or trial. They endured protracted interrogation, often through the night, and were denied legal representation.

Although Steven had distributed anti-apartheid leaflets and assisted a person who had gone underground, none of this emerged, and after six months he was released. His passport had been confiscated, so he emigrated to the UK on a one-way exit permit.

After an emotional night, next morning we got up at the crack of dawn, had some strong coffee and joined Rian – our no-nonsense guide – on a game drive. During our stay, we learnt to keep sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat with us at all times should a stellar spotting suddenly be radioed in. One poolside snooze was interrupted to track a pair of young leopards.

After ticking off the “big five” came rhino-notching. This is where the animal is tranquillised, a DNA sample taken, a microchip inserted into the horn and the ears notched so that the tagged rhino is identifiable to park rangers. This meant a full day journeying through rain and sun towards the Botswana border, where a mother and daughter had been spotted by

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