

VOLKDANSFEES 1974

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A letter from a friend in Edinburgh arrived one day last April. A team of Scottish Country Dancers was being selected to tour South Africa in August. As I would be visiting Scotland at that time, would I be interested in going with them? Mina Corson was to be the leader and I already knew some of the other members of the team including one of my oldest friends in Scotland.

I was speechless! My heart skipped. So did my feet as I skip-changed and pas de basqued round the room. Here was a great opportunity for something quite different for me in Scottish Country Dancing. With perhaps a little regret plans for "A Fortnight at St. Andrews" and tour of the Continent were abandoned.

Soon a list of dances that I should know arrived together with instructions for visas and vaccinations. I sat swotting over McNab Sets and arranged little dance sessions with friends where we went through the Foursome and Reel of Tulloch.

One question still remained in my mind. For what, where and for whom were we dancing? So the answer came. This was not only a Scottish affair. This was a Volkdansfees, a Folk Dance Festival organised by the South African National Council for Folk Singing and Dancing. Besides our dancers, teams were coming from Holland, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain and Israel. Quite a gathering, and with our Volkspeler hosts we numbered over two hundred.

On the 1st August we gathered at Kempton Park on the outskirts of Johannesburg and next morning we left by bus, five luxury coaches, on a Grand Tour of South Africa.

Grand it was. In the next four weeks we were to cover over 4000 miles in those buses. Bethlehem to Pietermaritzburg then on to Durban. We gave our displays in the evening, in rugby or tennis stadiums and the crowds came. We could hardly arrive anywhere without being noticed with the dancers often wearing their national costumes. Each country had between 20-30 minutes at a performance. So we watched, compared, criticised and applauded as each group performed.

The sound of the pipes and the sight of our girls as they came out wearing tartan capes over their white frocks never failed to bring a cheer from the crowd as they stepped on to the platform with their partners in swinging kilt and Montrose jacket.

Oh those platforms! Dan, our piper, skirled his pipes, the dancers bowed and we were away to "Bonnie Anne", never quite knowing what that platform might have in store for us. At Durban it was quite good, Grahamstown was slippery and

windy, Hartenbos was indoors, but the stage was a little small, Stellenbosch was concrete, Bloemfontein had a slope, the Opera House at Welcom was superb but at Potgietersrus the platform began to disintegrate and we finished upon the grass.

The scale of the countryside was vast. For hours each day we might travel through great rolling areas of veldt. Through all the Transkei the land was sprinkled with the round thatched mud huts of the Bantu and often painted with bright geometrical designs. It was picturesque and primitive. The grand majestic Drakensberg Mountains duplicated many times the feature made famous by Table Mountain.

All the while in the coach there were friends being made with the other groups, songs to sing, and new ones to learn. Austrian or Flemish one day; perhaps Dutch or Israeli the next.

Late afternoon brought another excitement. Who was our host for the night? So we went in pairs to our billets. From Britain or Holland there were sometimes new arrivals who were often descendants of those early settlers who fought on both sides in the Boer War. Many spoke Afrikaans as their first language. Fortunately most were bilingual. But it was always the same warm welcome, and after coffee and koeksisters (an especially sticky and sweet plaited doughnut, Afrikaans style), we would be rushing away to see the local sights with our hosts before the evening meal and performance.

But it was not all travelling and work. Some days we were tourists. The Congo Caves are rivals in beauty to our own Waitomo Caves. The Austrian team went ahead of us as we entered the caves, and as we stepped into the vast central cavern they burst forth in a Tyrolean folksong. We stopped in our tracks hardly able to take in all the beauty of sight and sound in that moment.

There was an interesting and amusing visit to an ostrich farm at Outshoorn. We discovered not only the great strength of the ostrich but of the egg also, testified by our standing on them in the nest. Then came the fun as we were invited to mount an ostrich, well tethered of course. One of our girls bravely offered, but by then the bird had had enough and the next person to try was quickly tossed on his back.

The beautiful old university town of Stellenbosch lies in a great winegrowing area. There were not many days that August that we didn't enjoy the beautiful South African wines. Not far from Stellenbosch is Cape Town, a high point of the tour. We had a cloudless and windless day to make the hair-raising ride on the cableway to the top of Table Mountain. The magnitude of the sheer rock

sides took our breath away as we approached close to them. The mountain dominates the whole city, a solitary mass at the edge of a large plain, with the suburbs creeping up the gentle slopes to its very base.

On we travelled, inland this time to Worcester, through the Great Karroo with not a bend in the road for hours, staying to dance and make friends at Beaufort West, Middleburg, Aliwal North, Bloemfontein, Welcom, Potchefstroom to Pretoria, names that brought to mind an All Black Rugby Tour. Each place has its own special memories but the genuine welcome was always undoubted.

In Pretoria we were once more in R.S.C.D.S. territory and so stayed with fellow dancers. A number of them were busy preparing for Miss Milligan's visit and the first examinations to be held in South Africa.

Then it was on to Potgietersrus for a weekend's rest before one of the biggest highlights of the tour,

our visit into the Kruger National Park. Before we knew it we were back in Johannesburg and saying goodbye to our comrades of a month, though it felt like leaving life-long friends.

Now I have had time to reflect on that month and on what I took from it. I learned a few showman's tricks for the demonstration team (and a few don'ts like don't wear red underwear when you are dancing on a raised platform). I learned to eat strange things like springbok biltong and bobotie and to smother my shyness a little and talk to strangers. But most of all I learned a great lesson of international friendship. I was one New Zealander with over two hundred people from nine countries. Despite so many different languages, customs and ideas, a common bond and love of dance and music made us one. Some no doubt hated bagpipes. The continual clacking of castanets some days set our nerves on edge. But still we could say "A man's a man for a' that!"

