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Exotic South Africa

I have long wanted to visit South Africa so it was a special thrill to get the opportunity though our filming of *The Gurus Explore*. Years ago, I led garden tours and, ironically, it was a tour that didn't get enough people to go that gave me my first introduction to this unique part of the world. I had done the research, interviewed prominent gardeners on radio, and was all set for the trip of a lifetime but had to cool my heels for 15 years before landing on the exotic shores of the southern tip of "darkest Africa".



Neville Passmore

Top of my list of must-see locations was, naturally enough, Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, which is tucked away behind Table Mountain in Cape Town. It is acknowledged as a jewel of botanical gardens on a world stage. The garden is nestled in the fynbos region, which contains one of the richest collections of flowering plants on the planet.

From the early 1900s, the gardens have been devoted to cultivating and showing off South Africa's unique flora, which includes the amazing prehistoric monster plants, the cycads. At the top of the gardens in the rich but free-draining soil is South Africa's best recognized family of plants – the proteas. Named after the Greek God Proteus who had a nifty trick of being able to change his form at will, the protea family includes some amazing plants.

We admired a number of these plants, including the leucadendrons which make marvellous and colourful additions to Australian home gardens. Their cut stems last many weeks in a vase, and the silver tree is a beautiful small tree not commonly grown these days but makes an eye-catching and glistening feature tree in the garden. The pincushions or leucospermums have amazing intricate flower clusters which are simply stunning and come in a range of warm and sunny hues. True proteas have dazzling flower spikes with bright colours, and some have feathered edges giving them glamorous appeal.

The deserts of South Africa have spawned a sort of copycat range of plants that mimic the cacti and agaves of South America. Aloes have a star-like shape and the quiver tree is a wonderful example; it also makes a unique addition to the landscape.

South Africa has contributed many jewels to the world of succulents. Euphorbia or spurge is a group of plants with some of the most bizarre flower colours, including a bright chromium yellow. These plants have a milky poisonous sap which is used traditionally in South Africa as medicine.

From a personal perspective, the most amazing experience in South Africa for me occurred strangely enough at a five-star resort called Grootbos. The name Grootbos is Afrikaans for "big bush" and this refers to a tree which is endangered called the milkwood.

There is no doubt of its five-star status from the moment you arrive at this resort, but this is not of itself life-changing stuff. We were welcomed to Grootbos by owner and manager Michael Lutzeyer, who sat us down over a delicious meal and proceeded to explain the ethos behind the resort.

The resort nestles into the natural landscape, but this is no ordinary bit of coastal greenery.



Table Mountain cable car and Leucadendron Gold



White rhinos, in Thanda



Zulu dance, in Thanda

Known as fynbos, this is the dominant vegetation of the Cape Floral Kingdom. Botanists have classified this region of South Africa as one of five Mediterranean biodiversity hotspots because of the richness of the species, the high proportion of endemics – plants that are not found anywhere else in the world – and the extreme threat that many plants were under. Grootbos guests can enjoy the fynbos which starts at the back door of their accommodation by taking any one of the hundreds of walking trails. Alternatively, you can take a horse.

This is an ecotourism experience, but Grootbos goes into uncharted territory they call "responsible tourism" where the resort seeks to make a meaningful and lasting improvement in the lives of those people most disadvantaged by the lingering effects of apartheid. This special work is undertaken by a foundation set up under the resort umbrella.

Grootbos resort has set up a scheme called Green Futures through their Grootbos Foundation. The scheme operates a school, and every year the school takes in students from the nearby township.

The scheme teaches the students horticultural skills, such as plant propagation, gardening and landscaping, as well as life skills such as car driving skills and accessing the Internet. In addition to the education curriculum, the scheme provides transport, meals, uniform, equipment and a basic wage for all students.

The school selects twelve students a year from around 150 applicants, and the entry criteria is quite strict and places are highly prized. The students not only gain priceless knowledge and skills, but every single graduate has found a job,

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an extraordinary success in an area with 47% unemployment. The student's weekly wage is part funded by the sale of plants from the nursery.

The 1740-hectare private nature reserve needs a lot of help and attention to keep it thriving, and the Green Futures students play an integral role in this work. Guests of the resort can contribute by planting trees to assist in the re-vegetation work. Two years ago, a wildfire decimated part of the fynbos beside the newest part of the resort. Together with all members of our film crew, I was moved to plant a tree to help in the reforestation but there is a twist. I will receive the GPS coordinates of the three trees I planted in the names of my youngest daughter and two granddaughters. As a result, we will all

be able to watch them grow via Google Earth from any place on the earth.

Guests of the resort can also go in to experience the ghetto-like townships with safety, as the guide is a student of Green Futures or an employee of the resort. Most tourists will never get to see or be moved by sights such as these.

The Grootbos Foundation does great work in the township. At the local kindergarten they set up a vegetable patch for the kids and greened the landscape using plants from the nursery. The biggest and most visionary project is the construction of a state-of-the-art artificial turf soccer pitch and sports facility with funding assistance from both international and local donors. It has been deliberately located between where the

whites, the coloureds and the black Africans live in segregated housing. The goal is to bring all three groups together on the pitch to assist in getting this divided society playing and talking together – even if it's yelling.

Grootbos also encourages guests to visit the local coastal town of Gansbaai where the economy used to be based on fishing. Today, Gansbaai is a centre of marine conservation as whale watching, shark diving and observing the hundreds of thousands of cormorants, penguins and fur seals have turned the area into a magnet for tourism.

I hope you will enjoy our South African episode of *The Gurus Explore*. What I have written of here is but a small part of the overall story, and it's a fascinating one.



Pincushion or leucospermum at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden



Grootbos resort



Grootbos field of dreams

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