



## A Little Africa in Oz

‘An African market! Sue, you have to come with me, I’m desperate for street art – I’ve been starved of creativity!’ I bellow to a long-suffering Cape Town friend. Sue has been a friend since Junior school and is now a respected political journalist based in Cape Town. We have just met up again after several years and she feels obliged to play tourist guide to her annoyingly curio-mad friend.

I am feeling euphoric at the endless stalls stretching out before me. There are carved little colonial men from Central Africa, women with beaded head-dresses, exquisite table cloths . . . I hurry from one crammed aisle to

another, breathlessly taking in the sights. Store-holders rub their hands in glee and up the price as soon as they sense my touristy enthusiasm.

I grab a carved ebony African woman with beaded head dress and skirt and ask for Sue's approval. 'What do you think?' She looks at me as though I've finally lost the last vestige of good taste.

'Lois, I will not let you buy that and personally would not allow one of those into my home if I were dead!' she says firmly.

'Oh,' I answer, slightly deflated, but coming to my senses. Perhaps I could start a new look – sort of ethnic shabby chic fusion.

I move on. 'How about the guy in the pith helmet?' I ask my style gauge. She wants to escape this market as fast as she can and reluctantly relents.

'Ok, I'll buy you one too, it's your going home present,' she snarls.

I leave, delighted with my further purchase of two sandstone rhino's and another carved African colonial with pith helmet.

What Sue doesn't understand is that so much creativity in one spot is too overwhelming for an expat to handle. While living in South Africa, one takes the ethnic art on every street corner completely for granted. The unbridled creativity is something to behold. There is always someone selling something – everywhere! While living in SA,

there might be the addition of the odd piece of local art into one's home, but generally, it's incorporated rather sparingly. Give a South African a few years away from their country of birth, however, and French Provencale doesn't have a proverbial chance – it's ethnic all the way.

Good taste flies out of the window when confronted by yet another street seller. That, coupled with a desire to buy from every individual selling anything at all (I drew the line at plastic coat-hangers) means that one can return to Oz with a scary assortment of curios.

Personal good taste glitches include a doll made out of wash cloths which looks as though it was used in a voodoo ceremony.

'Do you like it?' I asked my daughter when I fished it out of my suitcase on arrival back home.

'Um, yes, what is it?' she politely asked.

My youngest son had to contend with a clay springbok which resembled a Disney cartoon character rather than an African work of art. It lost an ear and a foot on the way over, so was sadly destined for the bin. He showed slightly more enthusiasm for the wire windmill while the eldest looked bemused by his tin can Volkswagen.

Once ensconced in Australia, many South African homes can look more African than Africa. Visit most immigrants of six years or more and you will see at least one or all of the following incorporated into their décor: Ikubra cloth, several beaded critters, wooden guinea fowl,

African masks, an African headdress, a soapstone carved head of an unknown African man or woman, African pots (a feat to find them uncracked on arrival in Oz), woven basketware (not confiscated by Customs), a painting of the Drakensberg Mountains or a Cape Dutch cottage scene, a wooden hippo, ostrich egg, a Nelson Mandela salt shaker, conglomeration of wooden carvings, wire artworks or the *pièce de résistance* (and the cause of many an air steward's headache) a giant, six-foot wooden giraffe.

Check out the book shelves and you are bound to discover Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* and the coffee table book, simply entitled *Mandela, The Authorised Portrait*.

There is also at least one item from pewter queen, Carrol Boyes when, in a last flurry of pre-emigration shopping activity, homesick immigrants grab whatever they can squash into a 20-ft container.

Taken to the extreme, I have even seen Big Five animal print curtains teamed with leopard print cushions. Now that was one homesick immigrant.

There are also several items of nostalgia that family press tearfully into one's hands on departure. This could be a family heirloom silver cup awarded to granddad for the high jump in 1910, or a range of silverware that will sadly remain unbuffered for the remainder of its Aussie life. Among my most precious possessions are my two antique Cape Dutch riempie chairs which would definitely be on

the list of household items I would rescue in the event of a fire.

While some are delighted to part with Aunty Jane's ornate dining room table (it didn't fit in the container, Aunty), others, like myself, hoard every familiar old item that can squash into a suitcase. It might remain forever embedded in a box somewhere in the dusty confines of a garage, but it's a nostalgic reminder of a lost history.

Another absolutely essential item if one has children, is a BP black plastic push bike. The reason for its popularity 'back home' was that it was toddler-proof and much more robust than the local cheap and nasty imports.

My children careered recklessly down hills for years until the wheels completely gave in and we were sadly forced to throw them away. They were worth their weight in gold even though they caused my long-suffering father endless headaches when they free-wheeled off the luggage escalator on their journey over.

A 'potjie' pot (cast-iron African pot used for slow-cooking over a fire), is one bit of Africa that can come in handy. It not only allows one to entertain vast numbers of people (all those owed a dinner) at one sitting, but best of all, there is only one pot to clean. A friend recently cooked a delectable reindeer 'potjie' courtesy of an elderly gentleman with a penchant for hunting. Once I got over the idea of actually eating 'Rudolph', I tucked into the tasty slow-cooked, wine-soaked feast with gusto. I felt so

much better after reading that ‘Rudolph’ was actually a Red Deer – identified on the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Invasive Specialist Group’s list of the 100 worst invasive species. Bring on the deer ‘potjie’!

Also of culinary assistance is a ‘skottel braai’ – a large barbeque plate connected to a gas bottle – which would alleviate my having to cook ‘boerie’ in front of large numbers of wide-eyed campers at communal barbeques. I don’t own a ‘potjie’ or a ‘skottel’ but had I realised their versatility, I would have left the fridge full of maggots and packed the cooking necessities instead.