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Cape Town's beauty can shroud its history

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After a recent trip to Cape Town, I'm left wondering whether the memory of apartheid is still a deep wound or whether it has progressed to an ugly scar.

If the race laws and all that went with them had never occurred, surely Cape Town would be among the very top cities of the world.

To begin with, Cape Town's beauty is unparalleled. Its gorgeous crescent harbor sits close by the intersection of two great oceans. A few miles inland is Table Mountain, a striking sheer cliff 3,500 feet high with a flat top. It is easily accessible by aerial cableway and is a bona fide "worth the journey" attraction. Between and around the mountain and the harbor is a gleaming metropolis of 3.5 million people.

Cape Town enjoys nearly as much sun as Miami, with seasonal temperatures close to those of San Francisco. Its beaches are long and wide, with beautiful fine sand. The hillsides are like the French

Riviera's, as is the vegetation. Behind the hills are renowned vineyards.

But human history has gotten in the way of what nature has offered. Unwilling to give up control, the white government did everything imaginable to hold on, until in the early 1990s the world's epidemic of freedom reached South Africa.

Apartheid's end is so fresh that everywhere there are markers of what was. At Robben Island, the Alcatraz-like plot of land in the harbor, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 18 years, a former inmate gives the tour. With pain in his eyes, he urges his audience to travel to the mines and the farms and "engage" with the people.

At the South African Jewish Museum, Mandela appears on film to tell us that the Jewish community did much to liberate the country. But Mandela's legendary graciousness masks a more ambiguous history. While it's true that some Jews fought against apartheid in the courts, the legislature, and the streets, the national Jewish Board of

Deputies did not resolve to oppose apartheid until 1985. The words on the museum wall are self-incriminating: until then "most Jews accommodated themselves to segregation and apartheid."

Cape Town has been painfully slow to enter the 21st century. There was no television until 1975. There was no McDonald's until 1995. Wifi has been provided in hotels for only the last year or so. There still isn't a Starbucks. No wonder the American singer Rodriguez could be a rock star in South Africa for decades but not know it; the nation was geographically and culturally isolated.

A shocking one-seventh of the nation's population has AIDS. The economic condition of a large percentage of blacks is not much better than it was under white rule. Twenty percent of Cape Town households are tin shacks. They line major thoroughfares, including the road to the airport, and are supplied by dangerous, makeshift, and illegal electrical connections to public power poles.



Table Mountain, a striking sheer cliff 3,500 feet high with a flat top, is a spot of beauty. But Cape Town has been painfully slow to enter the 21st century. SCHALK VAN ZUYDAM / AP

But there are green shoots, too. In the ghetto township of Khayelitsha, which is close to central Cape Town, Rosa Mashale runs an orphanage, soup kitchen, day care center, and hospice. Like Sister Mary Scullion in Philadelphia, Mashale is a dynamo who raises public and private money to provide a haven for the needy in an otherwise desperate place.

The end of apartheid did more than end forced segregation. It paved the way to a genuinely free society. The first message you see on arrival before clearing customs is a Photoshopped poster of a gun, a lion, and President

Jacob Zuma with the message: "Our lions are being slaughtered to make bogus sex potions for Asia. Will President Zuma save them?" That's the same unpopular president who was booed at Mandela's funeral.

But vigorous public dissent is a reassuring marker of pluralism. So, too, efforts to honor and preserve the environment are everywhere. Gay marriage is an undebated civil right. While the shanty towns are a disgrace, they are being replaced with public housing.

Cape Town is maybe the only place I've been in the last 25 years with a favorable exchange rate. Goods

and services average about half the price of Philadelphia's. Real estate and rents are very reasonable. While the overall economy in South Africa is poor, with 25 percent unemployment, the gross national product has expanded about twice as rapidly since apartheid ended.

Sixty percent of the middle class in Cape Town is black. That's a good sign that the "rainbow nation" of which Mandela spoke can be peaceful and prosper as it slowly enters the 21st century.

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