

During the vacation, The Bishop Anstey High School Senior Choir and Steel Ensemble was a part of the Ihlombe! South African Choral Festival. The festival showcased 6 international choirs and 14 South African choirs. We toured Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town during their winter and were definitely surprised at the three degree weather we met! After all, one doesn't usually picture Africa as a cold place. As a choir, travelling across the globe to South Africa has been an unforgettable and magical experience. This once in a life time opportunity was organised by our choir mistress Lorraine Granderson and other parents who have supported us every day and night of practice to prepare for the international stage.

We experienced different cultures, food, people and most importantly, music. Their love for music was a force so soul-shaking that it still resonates in our very beings today. We loved South Africa. We loved performing in South Africa and they loved us just as much. There was just something about their culture that we could relate to, such as their dancing and drum beats, but then there were also some intriguing aspects such as their incapability to be a passive audience and the 'animal' noises which they made when a song just spoke to them. It was truly amazing and we will never forget it.

There were many challenges at each step of our journey, but nothing that our wits could not overcome. Ms Granderson even acquired the nickname 'Mama Lorraine' from one of our tour guides, Jennifer, as she found that Ms Granderson treated the choir as she would her own children and if you know Ms Granderson personally you would know that this is very true. Our love as a choir grew tremendously as we became ambassadors for our country.

It would be remiss to say we didn't add a special touch to each concert. We showed South Africans (and the other choirs from USA, Canada and Australia) what it truly meant to be a "Trini" and gave them a taste of our own culture and music. We showed our talent ranging from Gospel to Calypso favourites and even classical music from our favourite selection of Antonio Vivaldi. Our steelband was definitely a hit with the South African people as well as the other International choirs. Even our own girls enjoyed hearing the steelpans at the concerts. The steelband showed off their diversity in playing classical songs, calypso and even a traditional South African song called *Grazing in the Grass* by Hugh Massikela, which was specifically requested by an enthusiastic South African member of the audience.

Lucky for us, this trip was not only about work but also a chance to visit the most beautiful and breath-taking tourist attractions. Our favourite was the Table Mountain trip in Cape Town. Not many people we know of can say that they have been to one of the New 7 Wonders of Nature, so this was definitely a treat, although as you can well imagine being 3559ft above sea level in freezing weather was not exactly the nicest feeling. We were amazed by the splendour and scenery that South Africa had and at many times we were too awestruck to believe that we were actually in Africa experiencing these things. Another one of the highlights was our first night staying at the Heia Safari Ranch, sleeping in huts and walking among the animals. We were among giraffes, zebras, a donkey, a zebrokey (often called a zonkey, it is a cross between a zebra and a donkey)

and many other animals. Although it was slightly intimidating, we came to enjoy being around them.

From Safari rides that were way too cold, to seeing African Penguins on a beach cuddling to keep warm, South Africa was the perfect place to nurture the choir's younger members. The Hector Pieterse Museum, singing to Mandela outside of the hospital where he was housed, visiting the infamous Robben Island where Nelson Mandela spent 18 years of his imprisoned life and Mandela House gave the choir's older members a sense of reality as we saw the re-enactments from South Africa's movement to freedom with Mandela's leadership, something that most of us did not quite understand before this trip. This trip gave a better understanding of what Apartheid entailed and some inkling of what it meant for the South African people. It was more than just separation based on race but things were rooted so much deeper...

They call him 'Tata Madiba'; Tata meaning old man or father for which they call him affectionately as he is seen as the father of the nation and Madiba being his Xhosa clan name, which is seen as more important than a surname and is used to pay respects to him for all he has done for the country. This trip was meaningful not only as a choir but as individuals, helping to shape us to the young women that we will soon be and giving us a broader sense of the world not in the eyes of the outsider but rather in the eyes of the people.

In keeping with this point, last but not least, we would like to share a little snippet of our experience with the Amy Biehl Foundation at the Bongolethu Primary School, in the township of Gugulethu. Here we saw many young South Africans who could probably barely afford to go to school getting the opportunity to engage in various activities. They were provided with instruments and teachers and these children played brass instruments, drums and percussion for us, they danced in a style that we would consider stepping while using sticks and cans, and they put on a short type of musical production which blew us away. It was not only that these children had the opportunity to do these things, it was that besides all their hardships in living in the ghetto and being poor, they found ways to be happy, they were always smiling, sending us kisses and even ran after our bus as we were leaving. These small things touched our hearts and it reminded us that you can be happy no matter who you are and you must always be gracious for what you have.

The Bishop Anstey High School Choir and Steel Ensemble was reinforced as ambassadors for our country on the world stage and kept the Flag of Trinidad and Tobago high in South Africa, as we saw when we visited the Trinidad and Tobago house, the residence of the Trinidad and Tobago High Commissioner in South Africa.