

No Sir! | Reflections on Cape Town



It was of course inevitable that my return to Austria on 21 November, with the immediate prospect of yet another lockdown the next day, would induce a fit of the blues: all the more so since I was returning from Portugal – a country with an 88% vaccination rate, a free-and-easy lifestyle with next to no Covid restrictions as a result and unseasonably wonderful weather to crown it all.

If I was not to fall prey to frustration at our continued floundering in our largely self-created Covid-related problems and our apparent inability and/or unwillingness to resolve them, I needed some distraction. Alexander Christiani's entertaining account of some of his experiences in South Africa helped me turn my attention to that country. (Referring to Alexander Christiani's ABS Blog article "South Africa at its best" from November 23rd, 2021, accessible here: <https://www.oebg.at/south-africa-at-its-best/>)

For the story I am about to tell you I have to go back some 20 years, when I was on one of several business trips to Johannesburg and Cape Town, accompanied on this occasion by a colleague from the US. Apartheid by then was over, although there was still tension to be felt (more in Johannesburg than in Cape Town), but the presence of Nelson Mandela – although he was no longer President – could be almost tangibly felt. After three days in Johannesburg – including a visit to Soweto where we were the only two white men to be seen – we flew on to Cape Town and were met there by two further colleagues, one from the Irish Republic, the other another American.

It was the Irishman who arranged a round of golf at the Royal Cape – one of the loveliest courses I have played, but one with some rules very much its own – as you will soon get to read. As we were two Europeans and two Americans, we decided to play a mini Ryder Cup – the 19th hole to be at the expense of the losers. We decided that, before going out to the first tee, we would deal with our messages and phone calls. As soon as I pulled out my cellphone I was approached by a Club official. "No Sir" he said politely but firmly, "telephoning is not permitted anywhere in the Clubhouse. May I ask you to go outside." His respectful tone made it easy for me to comply.

Phone calls done, we prepared to leave the clubhouse and make our way to the first tee but were approached by the same official. "No Sir" he said to one of the Americans in the same polite but firm tone, "only white socks are allowed on the course." We made our way to the Pro shop to correct our error. No surprise that the shop stocked socks in many shapes and sizes but – yes you've guessed it – all of them only in white. ("You can have any colour you like as long as it's white"...))

We did finally make it on to the course, taking a caddy with us – another club rule was that all flights were requested and required to take a (non-white) caddy. Ours was excellent – a fine golfer himself and full of helpful tips. He also managed with the aid of much skill and dexterity to turn his laughter at some of our attempted shots into a cough. On the 15th hole I sliced my drive into some deep rough. Being accustomed to looking for my ball in long grass, I set off in search of it, only to be stopped by the caddy. "No Sir" he said urgently while still managing to be polite, "don't go in there. Black mambas and Cape cobras down there Sir!" I needed no second bidding and we finished the round with no further mishaps.

Why is it that, twenty years later, I can remember the events of that day as clearly as if they had happened yesterday? Is it merely the memory of a great day's golf with good friends in wonderful surroundings? Or is there more to it? Yes Sir - there is: the respectful, relaxed way the Club's officials had with us – authoritative without being confrontational. I acknowledge that this is not an easy balance to find, let alone maintain. Nevertheless, I should like to see more of it these days. Or am I just getting old?

(By the way , the Europeans won that day's Ryder Cup outing)

The Austro-British Society is looking forward to your views and comments!



About the author

Ian Murdoch is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society and is a UK native. He worked for a number of international companies and corporations in the financial and professional business consulting sector and finished his career as a Senior Director of pwc-Price Waterhouse Cooper in Vienna a few years ago.

The views expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.