African Skies

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The Changing Face of South Africa

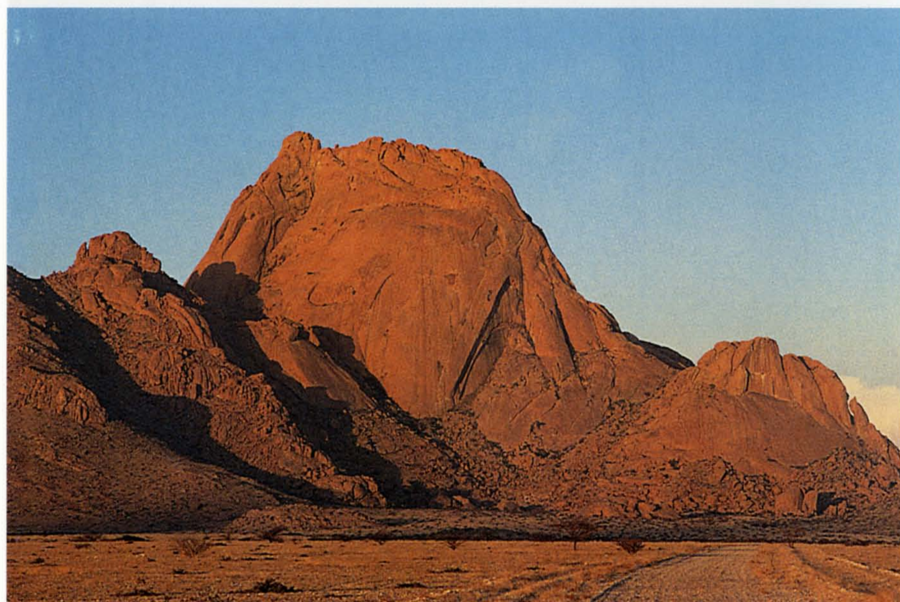
(*Plates 23–26*)

Two reebok looked up, nostrils flaring, as we strode across the hard earth, our legs rustling the brittle shrubs. The land was still dessicated after the long dry winter season, burnt brown and ochre under a hot white sky. But soon we came to a cluster of boulders guarding a green trough and suddenly we were in Eden, descending into a world of gnarled figs and mosses and lichens and luxuriant tree ferns, dappling crystal pools in the cool bed of the gorge. Sun birds flashed turquoise in the dark canopy and monkeys scampered through the undergrowth. As we continued down the gorge, the sky narrowed to a distant slot, glimpsed between towering walls of orange and silver quartzite that formed the sides of the kloof, one of a maze of deep fissures eroded into the ancient Magaliesberg mountains of South Africa.

I never really meant to go to South Africa. Patagonia, California, the Himalaya – they were the obvious places to dream about, but Africa? Then, suddenly in 1991, there was an invitation to be guest of honour at the Mountain Club of South Africa centenary dinner. They wanted a British Everester, Bonington and Scott were both busy, and I was next on the list. The bad news was that I would have to make an after-dinner speech; the good news was that I could also give some paid lectures, justifying my sudden departure from wife and three-month-old on the eve of a Himalayan expedition. It would have to be a whirlwind nine-day tour, but on the basis that opportunities should be grabbed and that South African climbing might actually be rather special, I accepted the invitation gratefully.

It was obvious, from that first morning in the Magaliesberg, just north of Johannesburg, that I had made the right decision. Not only was the climbing beautiful, but my hosts throughout the trip gave me a fantastic welcome and invited me back three years later for a second tour. With South Africa only just opening up after years of ostracism, Mountain Club members, like everyone else in the country, had a thirst for new stimuli and were keen to hear about the unrestricted travels of an English Himalayan climber; in return they shared their huge enthusiasm for the mountains and crags of their own country. Americans might perhaps not find it so special, but for me, reared on a damp overcrowded European island, the feeling of light and space and colour was intoxicating. South Africa seems to have limitless quantities of rock and there is still an almost naive pioneering spirit which we have lost in Europe.

23. Paul Fatti on *Last Moon*, Blouberg, in South Africa's Northern Transvaal. (*Stephen Venables*) (p111)



24. The West Face of Spitzkoppe at sunset, Namibia. The route, *INXS*, takes the waterstreak right up the centre of the huge slab. (*Stephen Venables*) (p111)

My first trip was hosted initially by Russell Dodding, a British expatriate with an intriguing Yorkshire-Afrikaans accent, and Paul Fatti, 47-year-old professor of statistics and Mountain Club president, who looks barely thirty and exudes boundless energy. It was they who took me down that first kloof to try *Boggle*. The route was the creation of an expatriate predecessor of Russell's – another Yorkshireman, Tony Barley, who with his brother Robin climbed *Carnage* at Malham Cove. I should have known better than to ask to lead the crux pitch. It was an awkward overhanging crack and it was mind-boggling, hanging out in space, far above the kloof bed, where monkeys were now mocking the Englishman's struggle as they rummaged through his rucksack, sniffing out the sandwiches. After a few jibbering attempts I retreated to the belay and handed over to Russell, who made quick work of the pitch and brought me and Paul up to the top. A wild 50 metre rappel through space got us back down to scrambling terrain, and soon we were back at the rucksacks sharing the few sandwiches the monkeys had refused.

Boggle dented my ego, but I was used to that sort of thing and soon forgot my humiliation in the sheer beauty of the kloof, as we hopped from boulder to boulder, making our way down to the intersection with the popular Tonquani kloof and another, gentler, route. Being a Saturday, there were quite a few people around, but nothing like the crowds one would expect if this were a weekend crag in Britain. Paul explained that numbers are actually limited by permits, controlled by the Mountain Club, which owns the kloof. Access to South Africa's mainly private wilderness is a delicate business, often relying on sensitive and diplomatic negotiation by the club's impressive network of volunteers. In the case of Tonquani, access has been guaranteed in perpetuity by actually buying the land. What impressed me was the way the club handles this ownership, nurturing the fragile kloof terrain with a sensitivity rare amongst climbers. Numbers are limited by quota and camping is only permitted at a specific site, away from the delicate bed of the kloof. As soon as one site starts to show signs of erosion, it is left to recover while another is used.

Some people might find that kind of control unacceptably authoritarian but I, coming from a climbing community that prides itself on its 'anarchy', found it rather refreshing. In Britain there is a tendency for climbers just to pay lip service to conservation; in South Africa they seem to know and respect their land more fully – not just the rocks but, in the case of the Magaliesberg, a whole rich, unique, ecosystem potentially threatened by Johannesburg's advancing sprawl.

Three years later I visited some of the other Magaliesberg kloofs with Mark Blithenthall and Alex Harris, a keen young mountaineer who had just returned from the Pamirs and was nurturing ambitions for Everest. Particularly memorable was a day in Groot Kloof, where we did a couple of rock climbs, then, instead of walking mundanely back to the car over the top, decided to descend the kloof itself. They call it 'kloofing' and it is

wonderful sport similar to canyoning in France. The highlight on this one was rappelling off the lip of a gigantic chockstone, through a waterfall, into a deep pool where you swim pushing your rucksack in front. Yes, loaded rucksacks really do float! The other special feature was the slide – a shiny smooth quartzite scoop which ejects you, flying through the air, into another pool. Two hours after wading naked out of the last pool I was back in Johannesburg, a picture of bourgeois respectability in my suit, setting up the projector for my evening lecture at the Johannesburg Country Club.

It was delightful to discover more of the Magaliesberg, but the big treat in 1994 was my trip to Blouberg – the Blue Mountain of the northern Transvaal. I had heard so much about this huge remote escarpment on the previous visit and put in a special request to President Fatti. So Paul, barely returned from a UIAA conference, drove me north with his old friend Gordon Ehrens, across the endless brown veld, punctuated by the abrupt ranges of the Magaliesberg, then the Wartberg and finally the great bulk of Blouberg. The Fattimobile, a faithful old Citroen shooting brake, swept through the last village in a cloud of red dust, and we stopped at the kraal of Frans, the village elder who guards climbers' cars for a small fee. Local barefoot children crowded round, curious, eager, alert for sweets, recalling so many similar encounters in India, Nepal, Pakistan – other countries with the same huge discrepancies of wealth and culture.

The walk-in to Blouberg takes three hours with a weekend's rucksack load. It was my first mountain expedition since smashing both legs in a Himalayan accident two and a half years earlier, so I was relieved to discover that the reassembled knee and ankle were up to the job. Scraggy thorn bushes gave way to a lush forest of yellow-woods, where young girls, aged perhaps ten, already in training for a life of hard graft, were filling water buckets at 'The Drip', half an hour's climb from their village. Later we emerged from the forest on to a high plain where baboons barked amongst a maze of boulders.

It was wonderful to be back in the mountains, relishing that sensation of tired contentment as we settled down for a tranquil bivouac at The Cave. While Gordon made tea, I leafed through the guidebook written by one of South Africa's most talented rock climbers, Mike Cartwright. 'Remember, this is Africa,' warned the introduction, with talk of searing heat. 'This is Africa' became our mantra, intoned by numb lips as we shivered our way up a wind-blasted evening climb, then huddled in the cave, deafened by thunder, retreating into the furthest recess to escape the falling sheets of rain.

On Saturday we woke to thick fog and dripping trees. I had been waiting three years for this day and I might as well have been back in Scotland. I cursed my miserable fate, hunched morosely in my sleeping bag. Gordon cheered things up with a mug of steaming coffee. Then Paul, the great optimist, suggested that we walk up to the main cliff, just to have a look. It was gloriously surreal, groping through the fog to The Glade, the grass from where you drop down onto the main escarpment. Mother Nature has

provided a great ramp, perfectly designed for climbers, cutting right down across the cliffs to the start of the climbs. And as we descended the ramp, the clouds parted just enough to give a glimpse of beetling red walls.

Paul suggested one of the shorter routes off the ramp and we scrambled up to Lost Tribe Ledge, where shards of pottery lie scattered around old cooking hearths, left by some long forgotten outcasts. A cool breeze was now drying the rock so I set off up the first grade 19 pitch of *Lost Tribe.* Paul led the 21 crux, a fingery heel-hooking overhang, while Gordon and I jumped up and down to keep warm, muttering, 'This Is Africa'. Then an easier traverse led to the final pitch of 20 up a sensationally exposed crack. Succumbing gratefully to the modern tendency, we rapped off from Mike Cartwright's two bolt anchors, spinning giddily back down to the ledge, then groping back through the darkness to The Cave for a heartwarming meal of venison sausages washed down with sherry.

On Sunday the weather was kind. This time Paul took me down to the bottom of the ramp and across beneath the immense main cliff. He pointed out a Bequartodendron tree, enmeshed in a Strangler Fig which he had watched grow since he first came here in 1962. His first new route was the big corner of *Moonlight,* climbed in 1965 with just pegs, slings and drilled out machine nuts for protection in the quartzite cracks. He also pointed out Andy de Klerk's *Wall of White Light* (24/A3) and the equally imposing *Delicate Sound of Thunder* (25/A3) created by Mike Cartwright and Cathy O'Dowd in 1990. And he told me about the famous record of five Blouberg routes in a day, totalling 5000ft, raced by Kevin Smith and the other Mallory grandson, George. The following day, at my lecture in Pretoria, I met their father John, now well into his seventies, who also looks uncannily similar to the famous Everest climber.

We settled that Sunday for just one route, *Last Moon,* pioneered in 1978 by Paul with Art McGarr, who now lives in America. That first ascent, achieved over one and a half days on sight, was a triumph of route-finding and, sixteen years later, it was a great treat to be guided up the route's improbable weavings by one of its creators. With some straightening out to take in sections of the more recent *Moonraker,* it was a continuous delight, with a hint of sunshine warming the rock. The pitches varied from off-width chimneys, to finger cracks, to rough red walls, nobbled with a thousand chicken heads. Time after time one stared up at some apparently horrendous roof, only to discover gigantic holds appearing in the most outrageous places. As Paul followed me over one particularly fine overhang, clutching fist-sized horns, he remembered Art McGarr's comments at this point on the first ascent: 'This is one hell of a piece of real estate.'

The real estate is fantastically coloured. On the upper wall, in particular, great slices of red quartzite are speckled with chrome yellow lichen. By now the forest is a long way down, but you can still hear the dry bark of the baboons and the constant whistling and twittering of a thousand songbirds. For someone who spends his days in a birdless cat-infested English suburb,

25. Paul Fatti belays Gordon Ehrens on *Apex* in Trident Kloof, Magaliesberg. (*Stephen Venables*) (p111)

26. Rolf Persson negotiating a grass cornice on Cathkin Peak in the Drakensberg Mountains of Natal. (*Andrew Haliburton*) (p111)

that sound is one of Africa's most special gifts – that and the rich profusion of plant life and the sense of unfettered space. There is also, despite the inherent quality of the climbing, a raw, unmanicured feeling to the mountain crags and that ambience is strongest in South Africa's most famous range – the Drakensberg.

I had one unforgettable day in the Drakensberg, with Paul and Russell on my first flying visit, setting off late at night after a lecture in Johannesburg. I remember a jolt of black coffee at a filling station, then another two hours driving through the darkness, then a long switchback climb to a wire enclosure protecting a hut. The plain was now far below and just above us jagged mountain shapes pierced the starry sky. We had arrived at the great escarpment along the western frontier of Natal, enclosing the independent state of Lesotho. The Zulus call it Quathlamba – the Barrier of Spears – and this barrier is most impressive at the Amphitheatre, where water from the Lesotho plateau tumbles over immense basalt cliffs into the basin of the Tugela River. The amphitheatre rim is a gashed silhouette of chasms and monoliths and the most famous peak is the Sentinel. Paul and Russell chose it as the only climb close to a road and feasible in a day. (They were due back at work the next morning and I had two lectures booked in Natal.)

I think we had three hours' sleep at the hut before the professor woke us with coffee on Sunday morning. I cursed and moaned, then brightened with the realisation of a clear blue spring day. Just above us was the normal route up the Sentinel – an adventurous scramble to a glorious summit which remains free of the threatened cable car, thanks to the unyielding efforts of the Mountain Club and other conservation bodies. We would be coming down that way in the evening, but first we had business on the South-East Arête. To reach the arête we dropped drown from the escarpment, scrambling, then rappelling from an old bolt to a precarious grass ledge. Traversing beneath huge cliffs of blank, friable rock I realised why there are virtually no face routes in the Drakensberg. This is mountaineering country where, perforce, you follow the lines of weakness, in this case ridges and buttresses.

That spring there was a terrible drought and the whole Amphitheatre was baked tinder dry. As we roped up, the professor apologised for the poor state of the grass, for the South-East Arête is a classic mixed climb, which means not rock and ice, but rock and grass. In ideal conditions the grass is firm and juicy, rooted securely in moist earth but today the handholds would need care. Despite the brittle dryness I loved it. Tired of our obsession with immaculate rock – the sterile cult of the perfect sixty-foot wall – I revelled in the variety of texture, the frisson of uncertainty, and the generous space of this wild landscape. Of course landscape is not everything and what made this climb doubly special was the people I did it with. There is no better way to discover mountains than with the locals and I was thrilled that Paul and Russell, who had both done this route before, were prepared to repeat it and share their love of a great classic climb.

There is much talk about the looseness of Drakensberg rock. In fact, the Sentinel's South-East Ridge was quite solid and the crux pitch was a remarkably clean corner, capped by an athletic little overhang, which goes free at about grade 20 in the South African system, which is similar to Australia's. After completing the route's ten pitches, we signed the summit book and lingered a while to watch the shadows lengthen over the Lesotho plateau. Paul and Russell pointed out future plans, including the distant North Arête of Eastern Buttress. Six months later a postcard told me that they had bagged their route, similar to the Sentinel climb, but a bit harder. Then in July 1992 Paul teamed up with Mike Cartwright to climb the North-East Ridge of the Sentinel. The result, *Here Be Dragons*, was bold, sustained and exhilarating, with a poorly protected 23 crux, led by Cartwright. These two new routes were the first major new climbs in the 'Berg' for 15 years and, as Fatti wrote afterwards, they confirmed 'the tremendous potential . . . in this most spectacular range in South Africa, the surface of which we have hardly begun to scratch'.

Many years ago, in India, I was forced to go and see the Taj Mahal. I was reluctant because it seemed such a cliché and I resented the pressure to conform to the tourist stereotype. But of course the moment I saw that transluscent marble vision I realised that they had been right to force me, for the wonderful reality of the experience far exceeds any preconceptions. Cape Town was the same. It really is an idyllic place – the perfect fusion of sea, mountain and city, stunningly beautiful, rich in history and blessed with a gentle temperate climate. But, like India and many other places, it has its dark side. I only glimpsed the huge sprawling shanty towns from a speeding car, but it was enough to realize what huge pressures there are from a vast, expanding black population, desperate for some improvement after years of disenfranchisement.

I saw only a handful of black faces at my lectures and I was the pampered guest of the mainly professional, white, middle-class climbing community. On the face of it that was not very odd. After all, how many black climbers do you see at Eldorado, or Stanage, or Verdon? Climbing is an indulgent frivolity of the world's richer, predominantly white communities and, regardless of wealth, it has never been a traditional part of black culture with the possible exception of climbing walls – a recent, essentially urban, phenomenon.

In 1991 I put all this to Ed February, one of the country's most talented climbers who, under the bizarre classification system of apartheid, was 'coloured', as opposed to true 'black'. His retort was that the Mountain Club, for all its avowed policy of open membership, had never actively denounced apartheid. Nor, he claimed, had it supported him when certain Afrikaans farmers refused him access to cliffs on their private land open to white members. But then, I wondered, why didn't he join the club, forcing them to take action on his behalf? These were big issues which we only touched on, in a context of lighthearted banter, over a bottle of Bourbon,

whilst playing around one wet afternoon on some granite slabs at Lion's Head, on the edge of Cape Town. It was lighthearted but across the harbour, just two miles out to sea, was Robben Island where Nelson Mandela had until so recently slaved away his life breaking rocks.

Some white climbers did make a point of supporting Ed February, boycotting the Wolfberg crags where he had been denied access. Amongst the boycotters were the late Dave Cheesemond and Andy de Klerk, both talented, ambitious, world-class mountaineers who abandoned South Africa's stifling regime for the greater freedom – and bigger mountaineering possibilities – of North America. Now, with the apparatus of apartheid in ruins and Mandela presiding bravely over an uncertain future, things have changed and many of the young white climbers are leaving out of fear for their jobs and security.

Others, like Casper Venter, who lives in Stellenbosch, the Napa valley of the Cape, are determined to stay. In 1994, as we drove through the vineyards, spread golden around immaculate, white-washed Huguenot farmsteads dating from the sixteenth century, he explained: 'You could say that I'm a real Boer. My family has been here for hundreds of years. In the centre of Stellenbosch you could almost believe that there were no black people in South Africa. It was whiter than white. I'm really pleased that that is all changing and I'm really excited about the future. I'm an optimist – you have to be.' But a moment later he told me about his work at one of the big state hospitals in Cape Town, where he was about to qualify as a doctor; night after night of knife wounds, axe wounds, gun wounds, 'about a hundred a night, on average – trauma is costing the country millions and millions of rands!'

Casper's alternate optimism and shoulder-shrugging despair was fairly typical of feelings within the microcosm of the Mountain Club. However, the dominant emotion, on my return visit, seemed to be one of relief. Against all probability the election had run smoothly and peacefully and the new South Africa was in place. The untenable absurdity of apartheid had finally come to an end. The years of isolation were over and the outside world was no longer barred to South Africans.

When I started climbing over twenty years ago, there were certain South African names that kept cropping up in the international magazines. One was Paul Fatti, who led the first ascent, in 1974, of the stupendous East Face of the Central Tower of Paine. One of his companions on that seminal climb was Mike Scott, who at one stage had the distinction of having climbed every one of 673 routes on Table Mountain. But for my free weekend in the Cape last year he decided to take me a hundred miles north to the Cedarberg.

The mountains are named after indigenous Clanwilliam cedars, exploited by the white settlers who also drove out the bush people. The bushmen retreated to the distant sanctuary of the Kalahari; of the trees, only tough, gnarled remnants survive, nestling amongst the boulders which are the great glory of this range – a fantastic, surreal rockscape of infinite variety and

intense colour, ranging from silver to black to deep red. And here, more than anywhere else in South Africa, my English eyes, tired of dank greyness, thrilled to the brilliant luminosity.

Time as always was the tyrant but Mike and his friend Richard Behne managed to whisk me up to two of the big cliffs. On Saturday it was the Wolfberg, the privately owned crag where the farmer had turned out Ed February. As we started up the grade 21 classic *Celestial Journey*, I realized what a sacrifice those boycotters had made, for the climbing was perfect, with a stunning sequence of finger cracks, off-widths, chimneys and beautiful walls of smooth, hard, steel-grey quartzite, where you reach up and out for distant pockets and underclings, in a fingery toe-stepping dance reminiscent of limestone.

Late that evening we drove round to the east side of the range, bumping along rough tracks through remote settlements where Cape-coloured communities scrape a living from the thin stony soil. That journey brought us to Krakadouw – our Sunday crag. At Wolfberg there had been one other party. At Krakadouw we were alone. I told Mike and Richard that if this crag were in Britain it would be the finest cliff in the country and it would be crawling with people, even on a weekday. The chosen route, *Icthysaurus*, was even better than *Celestial Journey* – four long pitches of perfection. The crux was an awkward thrutchy jam-cum-layback into a soaring layback, that reminded me of photos of Yosemite. Richard led it boldly; I whimpered, hung on the rope, gawped down at the terrifying space and vowed in future to develop bigger arms and a stronger brain.

This climb too finished on a fantastically eroded summit, followed by a speleological descent down a maze of secret chimneys and tunnels. Later as we walked down through meadows of blazing red hot pokers and scarlet proteas, Richard talked about the many days he has spent wandering in the Cedarberg, climbing route after route on cliffs that have no names, exploring and searching for the Bushman rock paintings that can still be discovered in these wild hills.

There is no single motive for climbing. Whole books have been written on the subject without really getting to the heart of it. However, looking back on those two trips to South Africa, I can identify a few strong threads. There was the sheer exhilaration of finding adventure on huge, dizzily steep cliffs; the sensual delight in beautiful rock; the fingery thrill of that final wall on *Celestial Journey*. And there was the pleasure of being welcomed so warmly by a group of people whose one common link is a delight in the wild mountains of southern Africa. It is a small climbing community and there is still a pioneering spirit – a sense of discovery in a land where the cliffs are big, wild and remote, often overgrown, sometimes a bit messy, untamed. To a European these mountains have a very special magical atmosphere and that magic was strongest at my final stopover in Namibia.

They call the Spitzkoppe the Matterhorn of the desert. It is a great cone of red granite burst molten from the earth 130 million years ago. That at

any rate was the gist of it, explained to me by an assortment of English, American and New Zealand geologists who were in the party on my last night in Africa, swigging more of that excellent beer, and eating great hunks of sizzling meat. (God help vegetarians in this country.)

We had arrived at midday, to crawl under a boulder and shelter from the heat. Later we had done some slab climbing on a recent route, *Desert Rose,* tying pieces of string round the protection bolts which the first ascensionists had left without hangers. At sunset we had gazed at the huge blood-red slab of the West Face, recently climbed direct by Mike Cartwright and party. *'INXS'* used bolts to protect fiercely thin slab climbing in the Yosemite tradition. I had humbler ambitions for Sunday morning and at dawn I started up the other side of the mountain to climb the Ordinary Route with an expatriate Swiss, Roland Graf, who has done the climb several times.

Thank God for local guides. I never would have found the route on my own. A pleasant scramble zigzags through boulders, prickly Euphorbia and the surreal, fleshy Kokerboom or 'quiver' trees, whose pith was made into arrow quivers by the Bushmen. After an hour we reached a chimney where the real climbing starts. From there the route winds and weaves through a series of chimneys, one so dark and narrow that you have to take off your helmet to get your head through. At one point you have to rappel to a ledge and there you find the infamous chipped holds. Yes, chipped holds! Norman Collie did it on Scafell in 1895; Shipley, Schaff and O'Neill did it on the Spitzkoppe in 1946, deciding that 'if the mountain would not yield to ordinary methods, we would violate all the rules of mountaineering and cut our way to the top.' They did a thorough job, leaving a line of commodious bucket steps up a bulging slab. These days most people perversely avoid the steps, making some delicate free moves a few feet left. Above the slab, further wriggling and squirming lead memorably to the summit, concluding a truly unique climb.

We spent half an hour on top, sprawled indulgently on the baking granite. Other peaks, like the Pontoks and the Kleine Spitzkoppe, lay scattered around us, like dinosaurs on the prehistoric land; but this particular peak stood proud of the others, the quintessential summit thrust high above the shimmering desert. The heat was intensifying every minute and we had a long way to go. At 10.30am we started down. Twenty-four hours later, on a cold damp Monday morning, I arrived home in England.