

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Master Builders director Michael McLean recently visited South Africa, which is over 8000km from Perth. Michael reports on how life in South Africa compares to Australia.

HAVING travelled a lot over the years, I now understand why my mother believed travel was the best form of education. My visit to South Africa certainly enlightened me about apartheid, which only ended in 1994 when Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected Prime Minister of South Africa.

Of South Africa's 55 million people, less than 10 per cent are white. Unemployment is between 27-30 per cent, while youth unemployment is over 50 per cent. The minimum wage is low, around \$350 per month.

There is a huge discrepancy in the standard of housing people occupy in South Africa – from walled luxury homes to shanty towns comprising tens of thousands of residents. It was a shock to see the range of recycled building materials like corrugated iron sheets, concrete blocks and timber posts that were used to build a home. Most of the homes in the shanty towns didn't have electricity or water – the latter was provided in communal facilities. The residents, however, were happy enough with their lot in life and in many cases were trying to earn a living to survive or to improve their location and housing.

Many of the shanty town folk were entrepreneurial, utilising their own skills within their home to earn a living. Examples included hairdressing, mechanical maintenance, cooking, teaching, cleaning or building maintenance.

In other areas of the country there were many incomplete shells of houses due to the owner not having the funds to complete the construction program. Most of these

homes were being built over three to five years and comprised brick block structures with rendered external walls and thatched or tiled roofs. With low wage rates and interest rates between 15-19 per cent, it was not surprising first homebuyers, in particular, were struggling unless helped by other family members.

What was noticeable throughout most of South Africa, even in the Zulu areas where mud or straw huts existed, was the pride homeowners displayed in maintaining their houses and outdoor areas in a clean and tidy condition.

The South African Government is very committed to an extensive social/welfare housing program, having built over 500 homes per day over the last 30 years. With social security payments being extremely low – less than \$200 per month – and unemployment benefits being non-existent, the role of government in providing some form of minimum housing for its residents has assumed a high priority.

Other observations were the use of nuclear power in Cape Town, the growing use of solar power, the popularity of sea-container homes, the prevalence of tolls on freeways and the existence of Airbnb. Electrified fences and security guards were common features throughout the tourist and hospitality areas.

Now known as the 'Rainbow Nation', South Africa is definitely worth a visit, especially if you want to experience wildlife safaris and see some beautiful animals up close and personal. However, Australians are very fortunate to have one of the highest standards of living in the world, which is reflected in the quality of our housing.

