



I'm not generalising, but...

It's normal to think you're normal, but does the rest of the world agree? **Nick Dall** asks the hard questions.

ILLUSTRATIONS **NICOLENE LOUW**

If you're a white South African and you've spent any time abroad, you've probably heard this line: "But if you're from Africa, why aren't you black?" This is just the tip of the iceberg. Visit a few more countries and you'll soon realise how little the rest of the world knows about South Africa – whatever the colour of your skin.

Let's start with Americans. Broadly speaking, they fall into three camps. There are the liberals who know all about Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko and the Freedom Charter. These are usually the same people who proclaim, "South African is,

like, my second-favourite accent!" Then there are the hunters who know all about the different animals they want to shoot, and what they need to do to get their arsenal of rifles through customs at OR Tambo. And finally there are those who ask the "Why aren't you black?" question. This last group can quite easily be convinced that we commute to work on elephants. Try it – it works!

When dealing with this last group of Americans, you could be more diplomatic and attempt to cure them of their ignorance through education, but in my experience this is fraught with

danger. Suggest that Jan van Riebeeck played a similar role to the Pilgrim Fathers and they'll take offence. Mention that we have 11 official languages and they'll imagine a modern-day Tower of Babel. Explain that South Africa is actually the name of our country, not a description of where it is, and they'll respond: "Oh yeah, like South America."

Talking about South America, the folks south of the Panama Canal aren't much better informed. The South Americans I met knew nothing about Mandela, the Big Five or Christiaan Barnard, but they did have one specific area of expertise: They could discuss at length the relative merits of Benni McCarthy's forehead, Quinton Fortune's left foot and Doctor Khumalo's six-month stint at Argentine Club Ferro Carril Oeste. And that was just the women. Just about every Latino male I met was a fount of knowledge about players far more obscure than those mentioned above. Players like Anelo Ngcongca, who plays for Racing Genk in Belgium, and Dino Ndlovu, who spent some time at Maccabi Haifa in Israel.

In India I experienced a similar sports obsession, only this time the ball in question was smaller and harder. At least one in every five people I met would ask – in all seriousness – whether I was Lance Klusener. At first I laughed it off, but after a while I started saying yes – and they believed me. Of course, this all changed when I agreed to play cricket with them. Still, after being routinely bamboozled by doosras, they were more than happy to accept that I was Lance's less-talented younger brother. If I went back now I guess I'd have to impersonate Jacques Kallis – before the hair transplants.

The only other Asian country I've spent enough time in to gauge the national psyche is Vietnam. Most Vietnamese know next to nothing about the village 10km away, so to expect them to be clued up on South Africa was a step too far. The city dwellers at least were able to comprehend the concept of "Africa", which they usually associated with Bushmen and camels.

As an English teacher at an expensive private school, I rubbed shoulders with the country's young elite and even they didn't believe that English was my mother tongue because "they speak French in Africa".

My wife once had a showdown about the pronunciation of "mirror" with an eight-year-old boy who explained to his gullible classmates that, "Teacher doesn't know how to say it because she's from Africa."

But enough of uncouth Asia, Latin America and the US. Surely Europe, the seat of civilisation and culture, has a more refined opinion of us? Not so fast. Most of my contact with continental Europeans has involved culinary snobbery. Italians can't believe how much butter we use, and spend most of their time in South Africa

grimacing and asking for directions to the bathroom.

The French get just as worked up about the fact that we don't use nearly *enough* butter and end up vying for the loo with the Italians.

And the Germans? Well, they go into a deep fog every time they spy a sandwich loaf, and promise to one day "bring the real bread, the *heavy* bread to South Africa".

Okay, so the Europeans don't think much of us, but surely the English should feel some sort of fraternal bond? Sorry. Negative. Many people might think this has something to do with Afrikaner nationalism, James Dalton or Oscar Pistorius, but it actually comes down to language. Poms view us as inferior because of the way we speak. But consider this: No matter how irritating a "naan to faav" Joburg accent may be, or how jarring it might be to hear "think" pronounced as "fink", the fact that *Trainspotting* was shown with subtitles in the US must mean that not all Brits speak the Queen's English.

Despite the Brits butchering ever grammar rule ever made ("I was sat on the bench." Are you serious?), this doesn't stop them from scorning South Africanisms like "robot", "howzit" and "just now".

If even the mother country doesn't have time for us, we must really be a good-for-nothing bunch of sports-mad culinary philistines, with a troubled political history and a surplus of hunting targets, who make up for not being able to speak properly by owning pet lions. Is there no hope?

There is. I've neglected to mention one, distant neck of the woods. I know they're our sworn enemies and I risk being charged with high treason for saying this, but the closest I've ever come to feeling like I belong is with Ozzies and Kiwis. There's no love lost between us on the rugby field, but when the 80 minutes are up, we actually have quite a lot in common with the folks Down Under.

Thousands of miles from the Mud Islands and in a completely different hemisphere, we are banded together by our mutual history as Her Maj's subjects. We're the poor relatives who come along every four years and snatch away the World Cup (cricket and rugby), in much the same way that we'd snatch the tongs from any Londoner attempting to host a summer barbecue. We're all used to wide open spaces, gravel roads and animals that could actually kill you. We can pitch a tent, light a fire the old-fashioned way and explain the LBW rule, without feeling the need to offer anyone tea.

But before you accuse me of getting sentimental, let me set the record straight: I'm not advocating hopping onto the next plane to Perth. What I am saying is this: There is at least one section of the globe that doesn't think we're all bad. Even if they do reckon our rugby players are the dirtiest of the lot and our government is a little gnarly...

