

# Fixing broken lives

*Sue Crewe* is stunned by the natural beauty of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal but shocked by the inequality that still persists

In 1969 I fell in love with my future husband when he was explaining apartheid to me and his eyes filled with tears. I was a know-nothing 19-year-old who would have been pushed to find Cape Town on the map but I was bowled over by a man who minded so much about injustice. He'd recently been banned from South Africa on account of a series of articles he wrote about apartheid for a Sunday newspaper and it was to be many years before either of us went there.

However, I've been to South Africa several times in the past 20 years – usually in a work-related capacity and each time it's stunned me with its natural beauty but saddened me with its ugly inequality. Nowhere is this more glaring than in the provinces of Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal which I have been visiting since I became involved with a small charity called ASAP, which stands for African Solutions to African Problems.

The provinces of the Eastern Cape and its northern neighbour KwaZulu-Natal were created in 1994 from some of the ten homelands that were the designated areas in which



**A village welcome for ASAP, which makes sure children receive a meal every day**

black South Africans were forced to live during the apartheid era. Nominally independent, in reality the homelands were underfunded, dumping grounds for the black population in pursuit of the minority white government's objective of total segregation. Although the homelands were abolished 24 years ago, the legacy of them still blights this part of the country, where in the rural areas there is little in the way of infrastructure – many villages have no running water, electricity, or sanitation but they do have terrible roads, terrible schools, inadequate health care and horrifyingly high incidents of HIV and TB.

Earlier this year the founder of ASAP, the indefatigable Priscilla

Higham, two benefactors and a trustee (me) set out to visit all the villages where the charity works. The plan was to pick up a 4x4 vehicle at Durban airport and drive the five hours to the small town of Matatiele where the charity's office is based and where the three full-time field staff were waiting – somewhat nervously, they later admitted – for our arrival.

We were a little nervous too, because the charity's executive director had recently caused something of a hiatus by resigning at short notice, and we weren't sure what we'd find. However, it soon became clear that we needn't have worried because the young black African staff were doing brilliantly

## South Africa



and had everything under control. Over the following days they led us bumping along those terrible roads to remote villages where ASAP is active. In a nutshell, the aim of the organisation is to assist the women of participating villages to look after the children of the community who have been orphaned or rendered vulnerable by AIDS and HIV.

To begin with children are given one nutritious meal a day, provided with shoes and uniforms so that they can attend school, and a blanket and a mattress to sleep on at night. As the relationship with the charity progresses the women receive training in gardening, account keeping, grant writing and first aid while the village will be helped to become a Community Based Organisation and thus eligible for assistance from the South African government and over time become self supporting.

Statistics make for grim reading and the hoops that charities need to go through to maintain their legitimacy and indeed the very language they use make philanthropy seem a dry old business though the reality on the ground is anything but. We'd arrive in a village and be greeted by singing and dancing and hugs. Then two dozen children would arrive at the round thatched building that was the drop-in centre and they'd line up to wash their hands under a splash of water from a bucket before collecting a plate of food which they'd take outside and eat sitting on the grass. Then because they had visitors (us) we had some more singing and dancing and then we'd all go and have a look at the water pump or the vegetable garden which frankly looked a bit dank but that was explained by the hale storm the week



**ASAP assists the women of participating villages to look after children who have been orphaned or affected by AIDS. Time out for SC at Paton's Country Narrow Gauge Railway**

before. I could believe that vegetable gardening was tricky because one late afternoon we were caught in a rainstorm of such ferocity that the dirt road was transformed into a torrent of red mud and dramatic

### Further information

- Donations to ASAP can be made at [www.africansolutions.org/donate](http://www.africansolutions.org/donate)
- Kings Grant Country Retreat [reservations@kingsgrant.co.za](mailto:reservations@kingsgrant.co.za)
- Paton's Country Narrow Gauge Railway [www.pcngr.co.za](http://www.pcngr.co.za)
- BA flies direct from London to Durban three times a week

flashes of lightning clawed at the inky sky.

The rain didn't improve the rather dreary guesthouse in which we were staying. Here supper consisted of boarding school stews keeping warm in stainless-steel bins followed by bright pink puddings. Luckily a cancelled appointment gave us a free day so we shot off in the direction of Kokstad in search of Kings Grant Country Retreat, which had been highly recommended. Before it was bought in 1996 by a local farmer and his wife, the retreat had been a monastery founded by German Trappist monks. In its latest incarnation it is the most charming and tranquil place where the cottage-style rooms are dotted within a lovely garden that slopes down to a stream and millpond. Extremely good food is served in a brasserie-style dining room or in a flower-filled courtyard.

After a deliciously comfortable night, a fellow guest suggested we join him on a visit to Paton's Country Narrow Gauge Railway in nearby Ixopo. Ixopo is the birthplace of Alan Paton, author of *Cry the Beloved Country* which opens with the line 'There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo to the hills. These hills are grass covered and rolling and they are lovely beyond any singing of it.' Elsewhere he writes of a 'small toy train' climbing up from the Umzimkulu valley 'through gum trees and stretches of natural forest'. Thanks to a dedicated steam enthusiast called Julian Pereira, who almost single handed has rescued engines, restored the track and recreated a station, that 'small toy train' still occasionally climbs up the valley. It reminded me that nothing is so abandoned and broken that it can't be mended.