

The Magic of Cape Town

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OW Contributor

Cape Town is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, with the stunning Table Mountain dominating the scenery, and some of the most wonderful beaches you will see anywhere in the world. Since the collapse of Apartheid, the city has seen rapid growth in tourism, which is now the largest industry in South Africa. A drive from the airport does take you past the shanty towns which remain a blight on the overall rosy picture being painted, but as soon as you get to the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront area and the Cape Grace Hotel, you are in a sophisticated and elegant world. This is now the happening area in the city, and the 122 room hotel has won numerous awards, including the award for Best Hotel in Africa from the Conde Naste Traveler in 2005.

You will need a tour guide to drive you around Cape Town and the surrounding area because public transportation is virtually non-existent here. Our personal safari consultant, Hills of Africa Travel based in the United States, hooked us up with the best. Visit their website at www.hillsofafrica.com or call toll free 1-877-845-4802.

Bishopscourt Hotel is a small five room luxury hotel that offers a private chef for dinner, and superb views of the Kirstenbosch Mountains, home to one of the finest botanical gardens in the world. There are mountain views from all five rooms in the hotel, a private tennis court, a heated swimming pool and an in house chauffer who will take you around Cape Town with plenty of stories and suggestions. A gourmet chef is on standby to prepare the evening meal, and the secret of this place is the utter peace and relaxation you will feel at Bishopscourt Hotel. The owner/host is certainly into taking guests to some of the less traveled spots in Cape Town, including special tours of the townships, a world apart from the usual tourist spots.

No trip to Cape Town is complete without a ferry ride to Robben Island, the notorious prison where the regime kept political prisoners locked up including their most famous inmate Nelson Mandela. The island is about a 35 minute ride from the mainland in rocky waters, and once on the island which is now a museum, you get the tour which ends up in the prison itself. Ex-prisoners and guards now host the tours, and despite hearing the rather depressing facts of day to day life in the prison, it is a sobering experience. One of the highlights of the tour is the stop in the quarry, where prisoners toiled in the hot sun all day, but which in fact was the favorite place of most of them. Here they could actually talk to each other on toilet breaks, and it was here, "the most famous toilet in the world," where the ANC planned their next moves.

When you think of South Africa you have to think of wine, and there are no shortage of wineries to choose from in the whole area. I would suggest a visit to Vergelegen,

mounted on the crest of an eroded mountain and known for a crisp Sauvignon Blanc, a perfect wine to try when you are having your picnic lunch in the forest in the grounds of the winery. The expansive winery is also known for a multitextured chardonnay, and a sweet wine called Noble Late Harvest.

The drive up the coast from Cape Town is a real stunner, and town of Hermanus which is about eighty miles north is an absolute delight. The place to stay there is Royal Birkenhead, another small private hotel where the staff outnumber the guests, and where time seems to be of no importance. No wonder the place won the “best boutique hotel in South Africa” award this year, and it happens to be a sister hotel of La Residence and Royal Malewane. There is a marvelous cliff top walk from the hotel to the small town of Hermanus, which comes alive at spring break time with students, but for the rest of the year it seems like an almost perfect place to live. Whale watching is a big thing at the Royal Birkenhead, and in season (August-November) you can see them real close as you relax on the hotel patio sipping a cocktail or drinking the world famous Rooibos Tea, a must to try when you visit South Africa.

The restaurant capital of South Africa is at Franschoek, about 50 miles north of Cape Town, and if you decide to visit then consider a few days at the exclusive La Residence, another small private boutique hotel that takes relaxation to the next level. Our tour guide even had trouble finding the place since it is unmarked and located in a private estate, and the five rooms/suites are designed along the lines of a French Country Chateau. There is a private home movie room at La Residence for those of us who like to keep in touch with the outside world, and the hosts will prepare an evening meal for you if you decide to dine in for the night. Guests are provided with a private butler, private chef and a chauffeur with a car on hand.

However with such a glorious selection of gourmet restaurants in the town that get booked weeks in advance, it is probably best to mix it up a bit when you visit the area. We tried the Grand Provence restaurant a few miles down the road, and found a young woman chef trying some adventurous dishes and succeeding very well. The night we went the restaurant was about 90% full. and the winery is also home to a popular South African wine called “Angels Tears,” a very young fresh and inexpensive wine that comes in white, red and pink.

South Africa is an amazing country, and the kind of place that you will never forget, especially the charm and friendliness of the people. However there are plenty of problems as well, increasing crime and corruptions. Illegal immigration from Zimbabwe, Angola and elsewhere is out of control, and the government just does not have the time or money to build homes quickly enough for the millions still living in shanty towns. Public transport is virtually non-existent, and now the country is facing a serious fuel shortage. Time will tell how it all turns out, but with the amazing resources and natural resilience

of the people, my bet is that it will all turn out to be a smashing success story.

Fact Sheet

Tour Operator: Hills of Africa www.hillsof africa.com

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