

# The Mother of all extremes

Capetonians proudly tell visitors not to be surprised if, whilst in their beloved 'Mother City', they experience four seasons in one day; thunderstorms in the morning, sizzling heat and blindingly blue skies in the afternoon. And this climatic versatility pretty much sets the pace of Cape Town. Dramatic scenery, a unique history and a heritage as rich and diverse as its native population, in this ever-changing city a surprise awaits around every corner.

It is a place where you can do as much or as little as you like, whatever your ideal break. Whether it is savouring good food, relaxing on a beach, being a little more adventurous or even trying something radical, Cape Town has something for everyone.

My journey started in Lisbon, Portugal; a 20-hour journey that would lead me to one of the most

eye-opening places a travel-enthusiast could ever hope to visit. The longest leg of the journey - the 11-hour flight from Frankfurt to Cape Town spent jammed in economy - was actually a small price to pay for what was awaiting at the other end.

Flying into 'The Mother City' is an experience in itself, a rather poignant introduction to South

Africa. The first glimpse of Table Mountain is a moment that will be forever engraved on my mind. After seeing the landmark marvel of nature on TV and in brochures so many times, to actually stand in front of it and take in its grandeur is actually quite remarkable.

Wherever you go in Cape Town's 'City Bowl' (the main heart of the city embraced by the mountain) Table Mountain provides a stunning backdrop. Throughout the day, swathes of cloud form on top of the mountain, which the locals affectionately call its 'Table Cloth'. Ever-changing, this natural wonder won't fail to capture visitor's attention.

Getting to the top of Table Mountain is not for the faint-hearted. The most common form of transportation, by cable car, is quite an experience. The circular vehicle suspends high above the ground and rotates all the way up; the views alone are well worth the minimal fee, palpitating heart and clammy palms!

Organised walking and even mounting-scaling tours are another option, but be warned, this is not recommended for solo-travellers or the less experienced. Cloud formations come in quick and often leave mountaineers disorientated or stranded.

Getting down is another story. For those who are downright 'brave', abseiling is challenging alternative, and, as I was told, free of charge for anyone who would like to attempt it topless! Hence my recommendation of carrying sun cream everywhere. Despite the refreshing breeze that blows



in off the Atlantic, the sun's rays are strong and will burn.

An ideal way to explore the City Bowl and all of its museums is on the open-top hop-on, hop-off bus, which for around €15 will give you regular transportation to all its main attractions, as well as a guided tour, history and quirky insights. It is worth making time

to see the National South African Heritage museum, the Jewish heritage museum, the Malay quarters, and District Six - the last quarter in the city to be declared a 'whites only' area. All of its inhabitants were forced to relocate out of the city centre; though they made a vow that when apartheid was lifted they would return and

put all their possessions back where they belonged. Most of these possessions can once again be seen in the District Six museum.

One of Cape Town's other major attractions, is the legendary wine route. Set a full day, or two, aside to explore this enchanting region. Leisurely explore the panoramic routes and make a stop at



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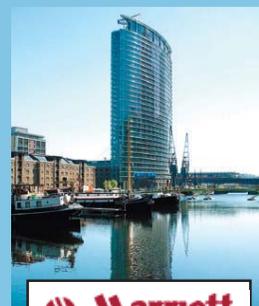
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the numerous wine farms. Sample a tittle that is relatively new to the international market whilst drinking in the scenic beauty for which Stellenbosch, Paarl and Franschhoek are renowned.

Passing through the region's charming villages you will be forgiven for thinking you have gone back in time, with old colonial-style houses and picket fences lining the quaint streets that are shaded with trees. A good tip is to take a guided tour - not only will you get a wealth of information you will also be able to enjoy a few drinks without the worry of driving.

And whilst on the topic, to those who choose to drive in Cape



Town, you are brave people. Lisbon taxi drivers are actually tame compared to the majority of South African motorists. You would be forgiven for thinking there are actually no laws or limitations, but there are.

South Africans are very proud of their country and their past and when you take into account its turbulent history, political struggles and breathtaking beauty; it is not hard to understand why. But even the most dedicated patriot will admit Cape Town is a world unto itself. More commonly known for being 'the safer part' of SA, the 'Mother City' is in fact the birthplace of South African heritage.

Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Dias first discovered it in 1488, albeit accidentally, after being embroiled in raging storms whilst on his way to India. Bartholomew spent a month anchored at sea; drawing maps of the



land he had sighted and initially named it the Cape of Storms, now known as the Cape of Good Hope, where the Atlantic and Indian oceans merge.

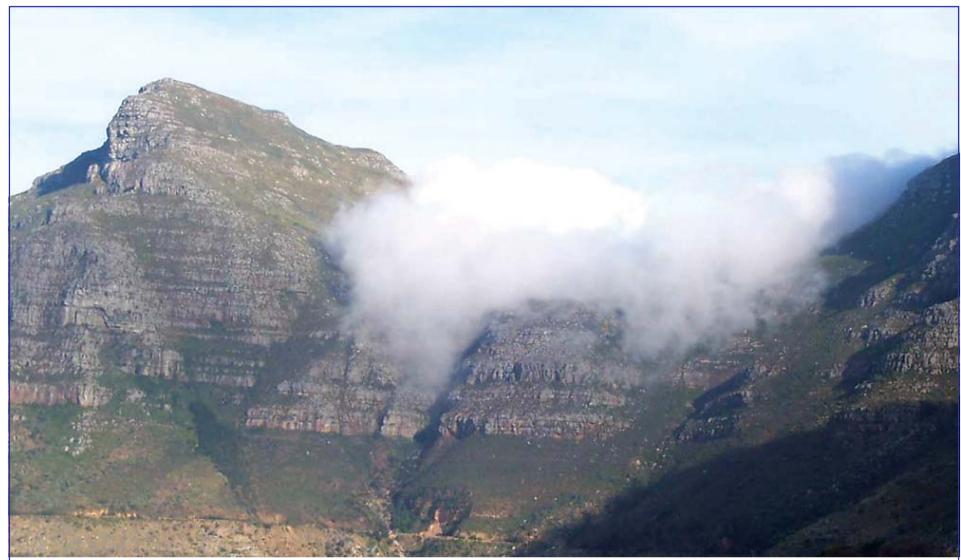
Excursions to the Cape of Good Hope are also widely available, many incorporating a stop at the Kirstenbosch National botanical gardens. But it has to be said, if you are a serious flora aficionado, the short time allocated for the stop-

off at Kirstenbosch will leave you sorely disappointed.

Situated just a short journey out of the city itself, these gardens, which are actually a world heritage site, are absolutely beautiful and completely enchanting. Home to the South African Protea (in layman's terms, 'the flower on the official national rugby shirt') the Kirstenbosch National gardens are the world's first indigenous botanical gardens. Spreading over 528 hectares they host numerous musical events every year, which in the past have featured greats from Pavarotti to Michael Bubblé. If the weather is nice, pack a picnic and spend a good part of the day just strolling and relaxing in this breathtaking part of planet earth.

Accommodation in Cape Town is generally easy to find and pleasingly affordable. It is, however, wise to book well in advance if planning to visit Cape Town over the Christmas holidays, which are effectively South Africa's high season - Europe's summer. There are many high quality B&Bs to choose from, which offer a more cosy, family-orientated service to the standard hotel.

We stayed in the Atlantic Beach Villa, Sunset Beach, a newly-built, up-and-coming neighbourhood with its own private 24-hour security patrol. It was the perfect location, being just 15 minute's drive from Cape Town's city centre, and, in the opposite direction, five minutes to popular tourist resort Bloubergstrand. More a quaint 'boutique hotel' than a mere B&B, the Atlantic Beach Villa offered more comfort and attention to detail that what was anticipated, given its reasonable price, but in Cape Town, this is the case with many little luxuries.



Pictured above: Table Mountain with its 'tablecloth' of clouds; left: A cable car takes you to the top of Table Mountain; bottom: Cape of Good Hope, where two oceans merge. Opposite page - top right: Aerial view of the City Bowl; left: Gateway to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was held for almost 20yrs; right: Cape Town - the statue of Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Dias; and bottom right; a Jackass Penguin on Penguin Beach. (Photos: Carrie-Marie Bratley)

Eating out and treats like massages, manicures, etc, are all cheaper than in most main European countries. Renting a car is reasonable, as are taxi fares.

If you do decide to visit South Africa one place that has to be on your itinerary (and, if possible, booked well in advance) is a trip to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated for nearly two decades. Waiting lists are long for this very popular excursion, but it is easy to understand why. Robben Island is living history. Inhabited to this very day, the guided tours round the former Leper colony and, more recently, a prison, are conducted by ex-inmates. They offer a first-person account of daily life on the island, telling of how Nelson Mandela and his fellow prisoners survived the odds and lived to tell their sto-

ries. It is, quite simply, incredible. Despite its negative connotations regarding safety, Cape Town is one of South Africa's most secure destinations.

Even so, walking the streets after dark, wandering off the beaten track and exploring areas like the expansive informal settlements are strongly discouraged, unless with an experienced guide, known to the local community. But as in any big city, it pays to be street-and-travel wise.

Carrie-Marie Bratley  
TRAVEL DETAILS: Carrie flew Lufthansa (www.lufthansa.com)

to Cape Town from Lisbon via Frankfurt. Return economy flight in December (high season) costs €900 - €1300. (Flights should be booked well in advance.) A twin room with en-suite bathroom at Atlantic Beach Villa, Sunset Beach costs around €28pp (R300 high season), per night, includes a full breakfast. See: www.wheretostay.co.za/atlanticbeachvilla.

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