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W TRAVEL



Cape Expectations

You can't blame Capetonians for being a little wound up these days. In the past few years, the Mother City has endured the mother of all makeovers as the gears up to host the first ever World Cup held in Africa. Yellow cranes became a permanent fixture on the skyline. Roads were closed and ripped up, temporary walkways snaked around the city and the airport was virtually reduced to rubble as its new terminal was constructed.

But their patience has paid off. Today, the digital clocks that hang from billboards around the city counting down to sport's biggest showcase will beam out 34 days to go. The dust has settled, the scaffolding is coming down and Africa's most photogenic city is more gorgeous than ever, a gleaming supermodel of the southern hemisphere. So smitten were the BBC with her stunning looks, they snubbed the World Cup hub Johannesburg and built a lavish £1m (£1.15m) World Cup studio at the foot of Table Mountain.

When we arrived on a spring morning last month, downtown was buzzing with football fever as we drove to the sultry seaside suburb of Camps Bay, 10 minutes out of the city. Summer was fading into autumn but the days were still gloriously warm, fanned by the Cape Doctor, the south-easterly wind that gusts through the city at this time of year.

At weekends, this oceanside idyll is swamped with beautiful people escaping the city to unwind in its glamorous bars and restaurants. But beyond the ultra-cool seafront, leafy suburban avenues house a low-key residential community of wealthy locals who crave the quiet life.

A swooping journey down the sun-drenched cornice took us to Tree Villa, the house we had booked on a hilly tree-lined road overlooking the bay. Electronic gates swung back to reveal a shaded courtyard

fragrant with clusters of frangipani and bougainvillea, and beyond a rambling white house which was far grander than we'd expected.

We walked mesmerised through the gleaming hallway towards an ocean view that was worth the trip

alone: our very own private canvas framing miles and miles of dazzling blue stretching down to Antarctica.

We threw open the glass doors, filling the house with the smell of sea and sunshine. Beneath the terrace, the laid-back glamour of Camps Bay was palpable in the early evening heat. Bronzeed locals walked cream Labradors along the



EPIC TRIP: The end point of Gemma's spectacular coastal drive

white sand. Chic cocktail bars buzzed with the hum of gossip as Chanel-wearing city-slickers gathered for sundowners. Vespa scooters and convertibles weaved up and down the stylish strip.

Before dinner, we ventured on a tour of the house like a pair of excited children exploring a toy shop. Peeping behind doors, we found room after room of breezy, under-

stated luxury, and deep in the basement, a vast suite all on its own with a king-size bed and en-suite bathroom for overflow guests.

Two flights up, three light-filled bedrooms with floral curtains and simple furnishings led off the oval corridor. Our favourite, conveniently, was the master with its wrap-around veranda, the biggest bed we've ever slept in and an enormous en suite bathroom-cum-walk-in-closet.

One of the quirkiest joys of the house was a chute leading down from an upstairs wardrobe to the state-of-the-art laundry room in the ground floor.

Downstairs, a well-equipped kitchen and dining room led on to a terrace with a lawn, small pool and outdoor family area.

But the real appeal of Tree Villa was its privacy and silence. We weren't disturbed by another soul the whole time we were there, except on our first morning when we awoke to the ring of the door-bell.



LAND OF CONTRASTS: Camps Bay, left, is the playground of the wealthy; beach huts in Cape Town, above, and below, the township of Langa, in the shadow of Table Mountain, home to the city's poorest people



Knowing we'd be tired after our long flight, the villa rental office had sent a pair of local chefs to make breakfast. Laden down with cold boxes, Jerome and Jeremy conjured up a feast of fresh croissants, mango, guava and strawberry salad, crunchy granola, smoked ham and creamy brie.

Our hunger satisfied, we left our pleasure palace feeling like royalty and set off on a drive down the Cape Peninsula, one of the world's epic roads. This spectacular stretch of highway winds all the way down to the Cape of Good Hope, Africa's most south-westerly point. Twisting high above the Atlantic Ocean, it makes for exhilarating driving with view after view of crashing waves, glorious beaches and cliffs.

You can round the Cape in less than two hours but we decided to spend the day exploring the pretty towns and fishing villages along the way.

We stopped for lunch in Simon's Town, a genteel old naval town with antique shops and trendy cafés, and continued south to the point on the shoreline where the Atlantic meets the Indian Ocean.

On the way, we dropped in for a swim in the cool waters of Boulder's beach, famous for its 2,000-strong colony of African penguins who spend their days splashing about and staring at tourists staring at them.

Before long, we had our own laidback daily rhythm. Morning walks on empty beaches, afternoon

drives through coastal villages, sublime lunches of fresh crayfish and local whites, evenings spent finding the perfect perch to watch spectacular African sunsets.

One of our favourite beaches was Llandudno, a glorious stretch of sand at the bottom of a winding road near Camps Bay. During the day, the sun was too strong to sit here for long, but towards dusk, we'd pack a picnic and go down to watch Cape Town at play.

On a midweek morning, we meandered into the fabled winelands around Stellenbosch and Franschhoek, South Africa's most sophisticated small towns. Even though we intended to spit rather than swallow, we thought it advisable to join up with Roland Pickup, a local chap who runs a tour guide service and knows every nook and cranny of the region.

Driving deep into the Blaauwklippen Valley, our first stop was the Waterford Winery, an enchanting country property hidden among ancient citrus groves, lavender beds and sweeping mountains. For an entry fee of about €3 you can pretty much put in a morning here, sampling their acclaimed wines and relaxing in the shady vineyard.

Keep your appetite for lunch in the locally beloved Bread and Wine, on the road to Franschhoek. It's run by English woman Tina Jewell and her chef husband Neil, who trained under Richard Corrigan, and serves some of the best food in the region. The house speciality is Neil's char-

cutterie, a mouth-watering array of salami, ham and chorizo, prepared and cured on site, served with bruschetta and tapenades.

But Cape Town isn't all about rich food and easy living. From the moment you leave the airport for the city, its sprawling tin-roofed townships come into view along the side of the motorway.

We had misgivings about whether to visit one, feeling it would be voyeuristic to pry into the lives of the city's poorest people. But we left our politically correct hang-ups behind and spent a day in the densely packed community of Langa, where the matchbox houses are made of tin, plastic sheeting and leftover planks. The people, however, are so welcoming of strangers and grateful for the cash they bring in.

Far from feeling depressed, we were uplifted by the upbeat community spirit and the tangible feeling of pride we encountered there.

Amid the freight containers that serve as hair salons and taxi offices, and the tiny vegetable plots where banana trees are carefully nurtured, there is a wealth of enterprise at work by a people determined to lift themselves out of poverty and give their children a share in the success of Africa's richest nation.

A trip to Robben Island, a 30-minute ferry trip from the Cape Town waterfront, sealed off an emotional day. The guides that take you through the maximum-security prison, where Nelson Mandela

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Africa Sky (01 807 7996; africasky.ie) has a seven-night city break in Cape Town for €1,099 per person in June. This includes flights from Dublin via Amsterdam, bed and breakfast and taxes.

Virgin Atlantic (0044 844 209 7777; virginatlantic.com) have winter fares from Dublin via London from €729 return.

STAYING THERE

Coastal rentals are a wise bet in Cape Town right now as hotels have racked up their prices in advance of the World Cup. If you choose wisely, you can pick up your very own mansion for less than €50 per person a night. We booked ours through local agency Cape Portfolios (00 27 21 438 3416; capeportfolios.com). Summer rates at Tree Villa, which sleeps eight, cost €5,500 (€559) per night or €69 per person. This falls to €3,500 per night (€348) or €43 per person in winter. This rate includes a housekeeper, gardener and security. Cape Portfolios will also organise day-trips, child-minders, car hire and provide tips on Cape Town's hidden secrets.

SAFETY

Walking after dark is not recommended in Cape Town and the seaside suburbs. Avoid carrying cameras in the street and make sure to hire official taxis.

ESSENTIALS

If you want to stay in but don't feel like cooking, chef



Jeremy Vermaak and his team will conjure up a feast and even do the washing up. See capetownchef.com.

For day-trips and airport transfers, Rowland at Pickup Tourism services is contactable at rowland@pickuptourism.co.za.

FIVE GREAT THINGS TO DO

- Wander barefoot along the white-sand beaches of Camps Bay and Llandudno.
- Take a tour of Greenpoint Stadium, a sporting colossus on the Atlantic coast which will stage eight World Cup matches, including a semi-final.
- Have an al fresco lunch at the charming Bread and Wine Restaurant (00 27 21 876 3692; moreson.co.za/the-restaurant) near Franschhoek.
- Drive to the south-western tip of Africa — the Cape of Good Hope — and look out for migrating whales.
- Join the locals for a Sunday-morning stroll on Lion's Head and build up an appetite for brunch in Camps Bay.



spent 27 years, are former inmates. They lead you down grey corridors lit with bare bulbs and tiny windows, telling stories of their life inside and the role they played in dismantling apartheid.

Our guide recalled how he had hidden notes written by Mandela about his vision for a new South Africa inside tennis balls that were thrown over the high walls of the

prison into the hands of the outside world. The guards never suspected a thing.

Later that night, looking down on the city's fabulous new stadium from the top of Table Mountain, we said goodbye to the Rainbow Nation, confident that while her dreams are still far from complete, she's surely heading in the right direction. □