

ONE PERFECT DAY

TOWN OF GOOD HOPE



ONE thousand metres in the air, Table Mountain's summit of broad, ordered wilderness offers Cape Town's best view — the view. More altar-shaped than table, the mountain dominates the western side of the city. On a clear day you can see, well, everything.

Directly below is the neat capsule of central Cape Town, with its little clump of genuine skyscrapers hemmed close about by red-roofed suburbs. Beyond are the open arms of the harbour walls and the dusted blue apron of the Atlantic, punctuated by Nelson Mandela's old Robben Island prison.

The town centre is remarkably relaxed; unlike many African cities, it's easy and safe to walk around. And as locals are at pains to point out, Cape Town and Johannesburg couldn't be more different. The latter is chaotic, crowded and crime-ridden; Cape Town is smaller, more beautiful, less aggressive.

The atmosphere is an odd mix: part Western, part African. Here are well-stocked shops, museums and excellent restaurants; here also people stand in the traffic selling peaches or "50 black bin bags for R20 [\$4]", offering work or simply begging. The signs of corporate affluence taken for granted in most Western cities can disappear for blocks. Street stalls sell anything from house phones to music and supposedly local handicrafts.

Best afternoon: The Victoria and Alfred Waterfront is the historical pride of Table Bay. Unusually, the spic-and-span marina, with its airconditioned shopping mall, harbour cruises and sheaf of restaurants, coexists with a fully functioning dock. Tied up at the closest wharves is a fleet of well-maintained fishing boats, while tankers heave to not far away.

At lunch you could choose a stein of pure cold German beer at the Paulaner Brauhaus and listen to a jazz band or African singers performing in the shade of the restored clock tower. Or whack into a savoury pancake from Harrie's Pancakes next door.

Nearby, Two Oceans Aquarium features a selection of marine life from South Africa's native oceans (Indian and Atlantic). Giant spider crabs crouch in the semi-dark, arrayed in grisly alien ranks. A few steps further, thick moray eels jerk themselves from coral grottoes like fanged, queuing socks. In a two-storey tank, hound sharks describe metronomic circuits, sliding with ghostly, dulled menace across the viewing windows.

Down by the Robben Island ferry terminal, fishermen unload big tuna hand-to-hand towards bins of iced water. In the basin small black harbour seals roll torpidly under the sun, one flipper jutting straight up, like a long goodbye.

Best beach: For one type of Capetonian experience, head west for flashy Camps Bay where, as one local observes, "it's all for show". The first car I see there is a Ferrari. On the well-tended sliver of palm-stitched beach, a scattering of canted orange umbrellas shield beautiful people against the wind. No one bothers with the chilly Atlantic. Along the beach road, up-market cafes and restaurants are a civilised counterpoint to the imposing bulk of Lion's Head. Hawkers have set up stalls on the street in front of them. Roaming "stewards" offer to watch your car for a tip.

Best eats: One of the best-known restaurants here is Blues. With its elevated position and balcony, this is where those under the orange umbrellas come for an uninterrupted view of sunset over the beach. You can overhear them discussing property, fashion or business deals while

Ivan Smith finds a brighter future emerging from beautiful Cape Town's bloody past



SOUTH AFRICA



Region of contrasts: Table Mountain towers over Cape Town, main; the funicular railway at the end of the world, centre; the Dutch-influenced architecture of Stellenbosch, above

carving up the pan-seared ostrich teriyaki or Norwegian salmon blackened with cajun spice on caramelised pumpkin. At the top of the steps a bored — and armed — security guard makes sure the scene remains undisturbed.

Best history: These days, Robben Island is a bracing 40-minute catamaran ride across a beautiful bay to a World Heritage site. But for prisoners, until just 10 years ago, it was a 5km shark-plagued swim from freedom. At this jail, Mandela spent the bulk of his 27 jailed years as a category A, high-security inmate.

Ex-prisoners conduct tours, graphically describing overcrowding and oppressive

regulations, and their own stories of mistreatment. But hundreds of apartheid victims rose above it to complete an education, maintain their sanity and effect a change in the system of government that put them there.

On an anonymous row is the sad little cell, big enough for a cot, a bucket and a stool, where Mandela spent 18 years. In the eye-damaging glare of a small lime quarry beyond the prison walls, he and other political prisoners mined lime with their hands. Prison guards refused them sunglasses, ensuring that Mandela, for one, has endured cataract operations, cannot tolerate flash photography and cannot cry.

The bus tour of the island is a weird, interesting mix of beautiful vistas and landmarks of institutional suffering. With Table Mountain in the background and springbok trotting across the road, you pass the house of activist Robert Sobukwe, imprisoned here for so long without crime or charge that he went out of his mind; and the church for the old leper colony, which contains no pews, as it was too painful for worshippers to sit.

Best vineyard: Drive east of Cape Town, along the main N1, and within an hour you are surrounded by lush, fertile valleys, the gaunt, folded relief of the mountains and the irrigated grids of vineyards.

The large estates in Paarl, Franschoek, Helderberg, Wellington and Stellenbosch are justifiably famous, but the smaller ones can provide an equally fulfilling and more intimate experience.

At the lesser-known Seidelberg Estate in Paarl, for example, you are led through a tasting of six generally excellent wines by someone who knows their wines and is prepared to venture an opinion. The estate has a restaurant, De Leuwenjagt, where they will prepare you a picnic so you can eat in the shade of a tree and gaze at vine rows distantly corralled by the conspicuous uplands.

Best tour: To fully appreciate the damage done by apartheid, there are organised minibus tours of the townships. These trips, organised by people who live there, are invaluable for placing Cape Town in context, and they are very safe. See this anonymous scrubland? That's land once reserved for whites only, where it is still far too sensitive to build. How about this patch of grass and rubble? It's District Six, a once thriving coloured community, bulldozed into extinction by the apartheid regime.

The District Six Museum is a poignant attempt by an entire locality to rediscover itself. Covering the floor is a street-map of how it was; people have written their names in the spots they used to live. Lining the walls are photos, artefacts, street signs — anything that will help people remember, or not let them forget.

Best ocean drive: On a sunny day, track the mountain range south into Cape Town's hinterlands all the way to the Cape of Good Hope. Once you've manoeuvred your way out of town, the road swings right at Muizenburg and clings to the coast of False Bay, through Kalk Bay and Fish Hoek, to historic Simons Town. The latter, with its gabled whitewashed buildings and tidy row of shops, is like a self-conscious re-creation of 1950s England, albeit one buttressed against a chunk of mountainside and lashed by near-constant gales.

ON AN ANONYMOUS ROW IS THE SAD LITTLE CELL, BIG ENOUGH FOR A COT, A BUCKET AND A STOOL, WHERE MANDELA SPENT 18 YEARS

Just past town, Foxy Beach is reserved for a colony of tiny African penguins. A boardwalk takes you down to the beach where they cover the rocks and boulders like spreading ink, march purposefully up the beach to nesting sites or stand spraddle-legged in the teeth of the wind.

Best end of the world: At the tip of the continent, R30 buys you access to the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve. At half-speed you progress through a wild landscape sewn with fine, tough heather and reeds, windows rolled up against baboon burglars. These creatures sit carelessly in the road, grooming each other and showing the world their bottoms. We brake to allow the measured passage of a bulky yellow-and-black rinkhals snake.

The end of the world offers a gift shop, a funicular railway to the old lighthouse and a restaurant protected by an electrified anti-baboon fence. Outside, staff on smokes feed tame red-winged starlings and coax tiny, darting fieldmice from rock crevices with crumbs.

After lunch, skirt the funicular and try the stiff and windy climb to the lighthouse. Then, because it's there, take the path along the knobby dragon's back, where the granite cliffs give way to the sea and the Indian and Atlantic oceans finally embrace.

Checklist

Singapore Airlines flies to Cape Town (via Singapore) three times weekly ex Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. More: 131 011, www.singaporeair.com.

Malaysia Airlines flies from all state capitals to Kuala Lumpur to connect with three flights a week to Cape Town. More: www.mas.com.my.

South African Airways flies to Johannesburg four days a week ex Sydney and five ex Perth, to connect with flights to Cape Town. More: www.flysa.com.

BEST BEDS: LES CASCADES DE BANTRY BAY

MANY hotels in Cape Town will excitedly offer a "view of Table Mountain" — but don't go rushing to book yet. Seeing a mountain in the centre of town is not exactly an exclusive asset.

Situated a short drive away on the hillside below Table Mountain's next-door peak, Lions Head, Les Cascades is a luxury boutique hotel offering 10 well-appointed studio suites with ocean views and private balconies.

The suites vary in size but all are a far cry from the standard hotel accommodation in the town centre. The Balinese influence is strong, with plenty of space, colonial furnishings, lashings of dark wood and more than a hint of brown and beige. The contemporary art

is a nice touch but can scarcely compete with the stunning views from the balcony.

The hotel menu caters for a range of tastes, and breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea can be served in your room or even at the poolside. For dinner, however, one must present oneself at the intimate a la carte restaurant.

There are sundecks, three pools, easy access to the beaches at Clifton and, most important of all, shelter from Cape Town's notorious southeasterly wind — the Cape Doctor. And the relatively weak rand means that staying at this beautiful place is well within reach for those totting the mighty Aussie dollar.

More: www.lescascades.co.za.



Luxury within reach: Each suite has ocean views

TRAVEL & INDULGENCE

Editor: Susan Kurosawa (02) 9288 2464. Deputy editor (travel): Judith Elen (02) 9288 2455. Deputy editor (food and wine): Elizabeth Meryment (02) 9288 1609. Travel writer: James Jeffrey (02) 9288 2379. Tourism writer: Scott Emerson (07) 3666 7464. Editorial liaison: Jodie Minus (02) 9288 2566. Contributing writer: Christine McCabe. Production editor: Mark Butler. Layout: Mahir Ali. Advertising: Bob Rickey (02) 9288 3521.

GPO Box 4245, Sydney, NSW 2001. Please do not send email attachments or unsolicited photographs. travel@theaustralian.com.au; foodandwine@theaustralian.com.au; fax (02) 9288 2486; www.newstravel.com.au.

HI, HO, SILVER

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To arrest the progress from small passenger to lightly tethered blimp, all Silversea ships offer Cruise Lite menus of grilled fish and meat, steamed vegetables, inventive salads and sugar-free desserts that at least sound wicked. Most passengers, however, go the full hog — perhaps an appetiser of mozzarella mousse layered with a pesto emulsion and tomato essence followed by a main of orange-glazed pot roast of pork with island spices, banana basmati rice, spring onions and chilli peppers.

Evening meals sound — and are — ever so slightly over-convoluted, but buffet lunches at the Terrace Cafe (waiters to carry your trays: one never does it oneself on Planet Silversea) and poolside barbecues with local entertainment on port nights (with a nod from the kitchen to the location: nasi goreng, Malaysian fish curry and so on) are terrific.

Silversea is proud of its luxury brand associations with peers such as Venice Simplon-Orient Express and its Eastern & Oriental Express sibling (Singapore to Bangkok and return, plus Thai Explorer itineraries) for pre or post-cruise excursions. The dressing of the ships is an exercise in best branding, too — linen by Prette, silver by Christoffe, Schott Zwiesel crystal, cigars by Davidoff, 30 signature dishes created by Relais & Chateaux chefs, and house champagne by Phillipponnat.

There is also a relationship with leading resort spa operator Mandara; each Silversea ship has cool, fragrant salons on board — hot lava rock massage, Javanese honey steam-wrap, a full range of foot, face and hand pamperings, and hair wizardry for formal nights.

There is also a fitness facility, computer centre, well-stocked library and a golf professional on board who organises tee-offs at the best port courses and lessons at the on-board nets.

So there is an air of entitlement and a hint of *Great Gatsby* languor, no doubt about it, but a definite lack of snobbery. On a small ship, there is more meeting and greeting, seemingly less concern about showing off. The shuffleboard challenge on Deck 10 is a great leveller, even in Ralph Lauren Polo co-ordinates.

There are no bar boasts, no rounds of drinks to buy — only passengers who have booked a table at Le Champagne for dinner might be showing off, just a little. Our motley group soon fits in, although the Silversea elite can't believe we are on board for such a short time (neither can we, now we have a taste for it).

On our final day, as we dock overnight in Ho Chi Minh City, the dress code on board is casual. "Dresses or blouses and pants for the ladies; sports shirts and slacks for the gentlemen," advises the unceasingly polite *Silversea Chronicles* — unlike most daily shipboard newsletters, it is satisfyingly thin, free of



Serve yourself: Silversea's Terrace Cafe

rallying calls to bingo and origami lessons, tango instruction and serviette-folding classes.

I get up early as Silver Shadow eases up the long and curving Saigon River into the economic powerhouse of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh City is wreathed in pollution, with multi-storied buildings looming over long, low warehouses and the odd French colonial villa.

Along the caramel-coloured waters, commuter boats are speeding, some tightly packed with luscious bunches of flowers, others with more mercantile wares. One man's outboard motor has conked out and he sits swaying forlornly, surrounded by dozens of shiny pots and kettles. Everyone is busy — maybe it's not pollution at all, just energy emissions from 6 million entrepreneurs.

I try to work out how I could stay aboard Silver Shadow a little longer. My eccentric heiress impersonations are wearing thin. Perhaps a concealing seaweed mask from the Mandara Spa could buy me a bit of time, until someone notices my scuffed sandals and the purloined Bulgari soap sticking out of my pocket.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of British Airways and Silversea Cruises.

Checklist

British Airways Club World features upper and lower deck cabins equipped with fully flat sleeper beds. Passengers have access to BA's Terminal 4 departures and arrivals lounge at London Heathrow, which features a Molton Brown Travel Spa offering complimentary massages, facials, reflex therapies and power showers. British Airways flies daily from Sydney to Bangkok or Singapore and daily from Melbourne to Singapore. For the most up-to-date fares and special offers, call 1300 362 675 or visit www.ba.com.

Silver Cloud will visit Australia in December this year and next January. A 17-day fly-cruise package (December 21-January 7, 2005) from Singapore to Sydney, via Semarang (Indonesia), Darwin, Thursday Island, Cairns, Townsville, Hayman Island and Newcastle costs from \$13,600, including business-class air fares from Australia (or from \$11,000, cruise only, if air fares are booked separately). More: 1300 880 943; www.silversea.com.

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