

One City Has Everything

(The Third of a Three-Part Series)

By *The Honorable David E. Cain*

A great way to begin a visit to Cape Town is by taking the cableway to the top of Table Mountain. From 3,400 feet above the Atlantic Ocean stretched along the western horizon, one can frame an itinerary seeing from afar what one is bound to want to see close up.

In the basin between the mountain and the sea is the Central City – also known as the City Bowl – that for centuries has been a melting pot of people and cultures from all over the world and thereby has given Cape Town its nickname of Mother City.

To the northwest is the outline of Robben Island where former South African president Nelson Mandela was incarcerated in a prison that is now a museum and popular tourist attraction. Take a walk across the tabletop along pathways lined with wildflowers and small shrubs and one can see the layout of Kirstenbosch Gardens to the east. At 100 years of age, it is the oldest botanical garden in the world and features a number of species of flowering plantlife found nowhere else.

To the north and further east is the wine country where the wine tastings and vineyard safaris are among the best on earth. Look to the south and see the beginnings of the winding and scenic drive along Victoria Road, flanked by the Twelve Apostles mountain range (so named for its 12 peaks) on one side and the Atlantic seaboard on the other and leading some 30 miles southward to the Cape of Good Hope, the most south-westerly point of Africa.

Table Mountain has been called the Mountain in the Sea because that's where it started out about 600 million years ago when the movement of glaciers produced the flat tabletop before the mountain was thrust upwards by tectonic forces (shifting plates). Like other mountains along the cape, it is made up of granite at the base and sandstone above, has very little vegetation on the sides and rises straight up. So, the views from the top are breathtaking in more ways than one, that is beautiful scenes and drops of thousands of feet.

Table Mountain has recently been named a New Seven Wonders of Nature. The cableway could be considered a wonder of Swiss engineering. Each cable car can carry 65 people. The floor rotates so that everyone can have a 360-degree view. A car can be stabilized when windy by filling

a 4,000-liter water tank. Still, the cableway is closed due to strong winds for anything from 60 to 90 days a year.

We started our Cape Town adventure on Table Mountain because that was the recommendation of our guide, Trevor Boule. Guides don't come much better than Trevor. A native of South Africa, he is a lawyer who at one time was a tennis pro and at another the in-house counsel for an insurance broker. Now he is doing what he loves best and sometimes sounds like a history professor.

From Table Mountain, we took our chartered mini bus to the vibrant City Centre where we visited museums, markets and malls, cafes, cathedrals and castles. Most people were friendly and English speaking. They were divided into three basic races: "white, black and colored."

The Mother City has a population of about 4.5 million, Trevor said, but has unemployment of 25 percent and shantytowns that stretch for miles and miles on both sides of the freeway on the outskirts of town. The new South African constitution actually guarantees housing, he pointed out, and some 2.6 million units have been built during the past 15 years. They are not much bigger than the shanties (250 square feet) but are cleaner and sturdier (made of corrugated iron).

The Dutch came to the area in the late 1400's, Trevor noted, but the Sans people were here at least 130,000 years before that. The British put many of them in concentration camps during the Boer Wars (a struggle the British thought would last two weeks but continued from 1895-1902) and 25 to 30 percent died due to typhoid, yellow fever and dysentery. The bubonic plague in 1901 caused masses of blacks to be displaced into shanties, Trevor continued, and with the acceleration of apartheid in the 1950's displacement again occurred on a mass scale.

With all its natural resources, landscapes and cultures, the "biggest shortage in Africa is good government," he declared. And speaking of government, the legislative capital is in Cape Town (the seat of parliament) while the executive branch is located in Pretoria.

The next day we travelled south to the Cape of Good Hope (so named by the Portuguese because of optimism about the new sea route to India) and the nearby Cape Point. The trip



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of about 30 miles takes one past some of the most beautiful scenes imaginable, such as Chapman’s Peak where thousands of baskets of rocks allow the roadway to cut through the side of the mountains and Bantry Bay that features the most expensive real estate in Africa, overlooking the Clifton Beaches.

At Cape Point, an 1859 lighthouse (accessible by steps or the Flying Dutchman Funicular) offers 360-degree views of the ocean over cliffs nearly 1,000 feet high as well across False Bay (“False” because westbound sailors thought they had reached the Atlantic Ocean and turned north too soon). Baboons could be seen along the roadway, raiding trashcans or picking flies off one another. Signs warned tourists to stay away. Their claws are longer than lions, they will eat anything and have been known to snatch purses, Trevor said.

We had lunch at the Two Oceans Restaurant overlooking False Bay. The bay is shrouded by an ever-present layer of fog since it is at the junction of two of the earth’s most contrasting water masses with cold currents from the Atlantic Ocean on the west and warm currents from the Indian Ocean on the east. The strategic position also gives the cape area a striking diversity of marine life, at least 250 species of birds and a wide variety of indigenous plants. And a few miles up the west shore of False Bay is The Boulders, a world famous colony of more than 2,000 African Penguins that can be observed at close range in their natural environment.

After stopping at the nearby quaint and coastal Simon’s Town, we headed north along the backside of the mountain range to approach the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens. There, one can visit a conservatory, a garden of indigenous medicinal plants and a garden with plants that have been around more than 3 million years and then just walk along pathways lined with hundreds of species of flowering plantlife, many unique.

That evening we had “a real African feast” at the African Café. First, your face gets painted. Then, a seven-course meal of various African cuisines is served family style while staff entertain with bongos and chantings.

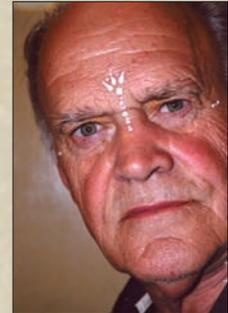
On our third day, we headed east into the wine country for tastings and tours at the foot of the smokey Helderberg Mountains. For lunch, we stopped in the City of Franschhoek, referred to as the gourmet destination of the winelands. I marveled at a tent sign displaying the menu in front of a fancy restaurant: Biltong, Beef, Springbok, Kudu, Gemsbok, Eland, Ostrich, Chilli/Plainbites, Dried Wors. I only considered the beef.

Our time in Africa was quickly running out but the list of things to do in the Cape Town area is nearly endless if one has the time. Big 5 Safaris are within two or three hours of driving, hiking and biking through the winelands and mountains are always popular. Entertainment with an

international variety is available non-stop (Bon-Jovi and Justine Bieber performed on different nights at Cape Town Stadium while we were in town). Or, one could just sit back and wait to see Table Mountain adorned with a tablecloth. When warm winds blow in from the east, moisture condenses as they hit the mountain, causing a thick layer of fog to snake across the tabletop, down through a gap and up the side of Devil’s Peak. It evaporates as it goes over the peak. And you might not have to wait too long. “We can have five seasons in an hour.” That was a common expression among the locals.



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