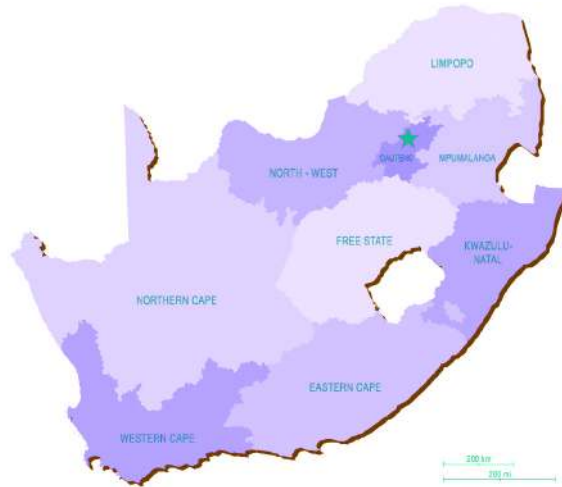


# Captivating Cape Town

BY MAGGIE MESSITT

"This cape is the most stately thing and the fairest cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earth."

— From the journal of Sir Francis Drake, on seeing the cape for the first time, 1580



## THE MAIN CHARACTER IN THE STORY OF CAPE TOWN,

South Africa, stands prominently for everyone to see. Early navigators used to search the horizon eagerly until spotting the flat silhouette of the impressive "Tafelberg," the mountain with a tabletop shape. The first man on deck to spy her was usually awarded 10 guilders and six bottles of wine. This rugged majestic block of sedimentary sandstone has been a signal, for centuries, of adventure, hope and respite for many.

The first climbing route up Table Mountain was via a huge cleft on its western face, Platteklip Gorge. For centuries, this ravine with unreliable rock remained the only route. The first recorded climb took place in 1503 and many adventurers and sea explorers followed. At the time, the route could take more than 24 hours, and paths were often blocked by impenetrable thorny bush or occupied by the now-extinct, black-maned Cape Lion. Some adventurers went up but never came down.

Today, there are 350 recognized paths to the top of Table Mountain, ranging from those for professional mountaineers to leisurely tourists. Ironically, the dangerous Platteklip Gorge is now one of the easiest routes available, ascended in just three hours. (For a less taxing

ascent, try taking the cable car, which offers a 360-degree view of Cape Town—and, if you're lucky, glimpses of the various animals, from porcupines to baboons, who call the mountain home.)

Tourists and locals alike agree that the mountain offers a welcome respite for reflection. "I have climbed [Table Mountain] from two to six times a week for the past few years," says Steven Otter, South African author and political media coordinator. "The sweeping vistas punctuated by towering cliffs and soaring eagles relaxes me before or after a long day's work and helps me put my life into perspective."

Panoramically enfolding the harbor of Cape Town and providing a magnificent backdrop for this seaside city are the massif's three peaks: Devil's Peak, The Table and Lion's Head. The flat top (The Table) on which parties and concerts have been held is just over 2 kilometers long. It is from here that you can best map out your Cape Town adventure. North. South. East. West. You can see it all.

If you turn north, you'll spy the road out of town toward Namaqualand, which famously becomes a kaleidoscope of color in spring with the arrival of "daisy sea-





Left to right: Namaqualand flowers, Muizenberg beach, Cape Point aerial, Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens.

son.” The road leads to private game reserves (which offer Big Five safaris, referring to the African lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and Cape buffalo), and West Coast National Park.

To the south sits Cape Point and The Cape of Good Hope, a beacon for sailors over centuries. In 1488, Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias originally called the peninsula Cabo das Tormentas (The Cape of Storms), aptly named for the treacherous waves, wind and rain he pushed through to reach what is now Cape Town. Later, explorers renamed it to represent the optimism that a sea route to India and the east had opened.

The land between Table Mountain’s plateau to Cape Point encompasses Table Mountain National Park. The park lies in the heart of the Cape Floral Region, a botanist hotspot. The park, with its afro-temperate forests, makes the area home to 250 bird species and

2,000 species of flora (more than what’s found in the United Kingdom). Several are endangered and endemic only to Cape Town.

The peninsula’s unparalleled biodiversity plays no small role in Cape Town’s unusual eco-urban beauty. No visitor should leave Cape Town without a road trip through the southern section of the national park and a hike to Cape Point—an area rich with tidal

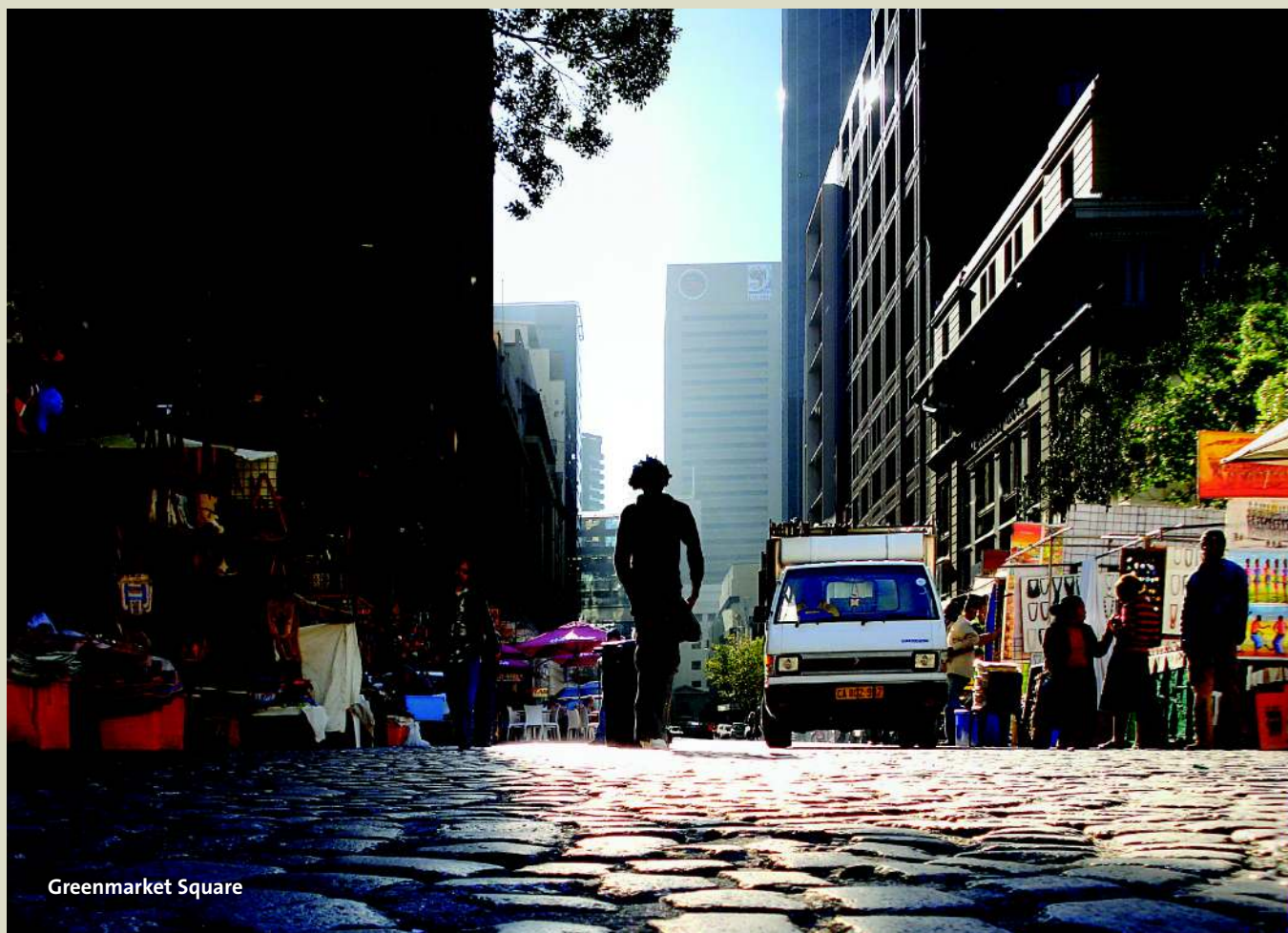
colony of African penguins and some of Cape Town’s quaint and colorful suburbs (with meandering streets, stunning seaside cottages and pedestrian-friendly shopping districts): Simonstown, Haut Bay and Muizenberg. You can also get inspired for the extremes: paragliding off Lion’s Head, bungee jumping, standup paddle lessons, kite surfing school, snorkeling with Duiker Island seals, kayaking with penguins

**Table Mountain National Park is home to 250 bird species and 2,000 species of flora.**

pools, isolated beaches, bike and foot-paths and numerous picnic spots. The park’s 34-kilometer circular route is a perfect day adventure for bikers.

Gaze east and you can see some of the city’s best surfing beaches and the road leading to the Boulder Beach

and diving face-to-face with sharks. The eastern region also offers ample opportunities to relax, with highways into the wine lands and Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens (named one of the world’s best picnic spots by *National Geographic Traveler*).



Greenmarket Square

## TRAVEL BASICS

South Africa's tourism continues to rise despite the world's lagging economy; more than 8 million foreign tourists visited in 2011, up 7.4 percent from 2010. The lack of time change for travelers from the United Kingdom and only a minor shift for most Europeans means a long flight minus jet lag. Flights from London, New York, Amsterdam, Dubai, Istanbul and Buenos Aires are frequent and often direct.

**CURRENCY** South Africa's currency is the rand. Named after Witwatersrand, where most of South Africa's gold deposits were found, its history has been less than stable. Worth \$1.40 when it was first introduced in 1961, it is currently worth 13 U.S. cents or just shy of 8 rand to the U.S. dollar. Your U.S. dollar or euro will take you far these days, so it's an ideal time to check off this African city from your bucket list!

**ACCOMMODATIONS** For a long time, accommodations in Cape Town and other regions in the country catered to five-star travelers or one-star backpackers and nothing in between. In the last decade, however, the gap has been filled by a wonderful collection of bed-and-breakfasts, guesthouses and smaller hotels offering the personal homegrown touch that makes South Africa so appealing.

Cape Town's exquisite side, often equated with the opulence of its colonial past, has much to offer. If you're seeking luxury,

look to Mount Nelson Hotel, Cape Royale, Cape Grace or the Villa Zest Boutique Hotel, recognized as the best hotel in the world by Trip Advisor voters. If you're looking for local and home-grown, stay in a guesthouse in the historic Bo-Kaap Quarter or look to Long Street's Grand Daddy Hotel and its rooftop airstream trailer park, with surprisingly stunning views of the city. But whatever you do, don't discount the smallest B&Bs that dot the city—many visitors insist this is the best way to experience Cape Town's personality and its residents.

**TRANSPORTATION** Cape Town has recently made its mark as one of the world's most bike-friendly cities, with comparisons to Berlin, Paris, Chicago and Barcelona. The city's recent creation of cycle lanes, secure bike parking stations and bike-friendly buses is paying off for both locals and tourists. As a result, bike tours and rental shops are opening up around the city. If you plan to storm the cape by bike, purchasing a city bicycle map (40 rand) beforehand is a must.

While public transportation certainly improved in preparation for the 2010 World Cup, Cape Town tourism definitely requires a rental car. If you're not eager to drive on the left side of the road, navigate the Dutch-influenced thoroughfares or deal with city traffic, there are plenty of private drivers with whom you can connect—just talk to your hotel ahead of time for recommendations.





Left to right: Bo-Kaap Quarter, South African penguin, Table Mountain in background, Rhodes Memorial.

To the west, you'll get an amazing view of the city where the Dutch East India Tea Co. first settled (see history sidebar). Centuries later, the urban center of Cape Town has settled into each nook and ridge and valley. As high up the mountain as possible. Reaching to the sea and bay.

There are too many "must visits" to count: St. George's Cathedral (South Africa's oldest building, opened in 1834); Rhodes Memorial (modeled after a Greek temple); township tours

a string of national museums; history-rich neighborhoods like Bo-Kaap; and local markets at the Old Biscuit Mill, Green Market Square and the Porter Estate Produce Market in Tokai. And, just out of view but south along the western coast of the peninsula you'll find the beaches of Clifton and Camps Bay, filled with beach chairs and umbrellas and cafes.

Robben Island—originally home to seals, birds and penguins—is located 7 kilometers from Cape Town's western

and anti-apartheid activists. Most famously, South Africa's first democratic president, Nelson Mandela, and the founding leader of the Pan Africanist Congress, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, were imprisoned on the island.

"During the many years of incarceration on Robben Island, we often looked across Table Mountain at its magnificent silhouette," Mandela has said. "To us on Robben Island, Table Mountain was a beacon of hope. It represented the mainland to which we knew we would one day return."

The prison closed in 1996 and reopened as a museum in 1997. The museum runs educational programs and conducts ongoing research related to the island. Today, several men who were once prisoners on the island return each day to guide tourists through history.

Table Mountain stands in the path of one of the strongest regular winds to blow on the African continent—the

**"To us on Robben Island, Table Mountain was a beacon of hope. It represented the mainland to which we knew we would one day return."**

—Nelson Mandela

by foot or bike; the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront (the historic heart of Cape Town's working harbor and South Africa's most visited destination); the ferry to Robben Island; Long Street's music, dining and shopping district;

coastline. First used by Europeans during the Khoikhoi-Dutch War, the island served as a political prison, isolating a diverse list of people: indigenous African leaders, Muslim leaders from the East Indies, soldiers and civilians, women

infamous South Easter. Gusts can reach 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour, pushing moisture-laden air over the table, forming a sun-kissed white tablecloth, perpetually sliding down the front and disappearing, while continuously forming from behind.

The mountain's weather is unpredictable. It can change in an instant. And for that reason, locals will tell you: Get up Table Mountain on your first day, if you can. If you can't, keep an eye on her. When she's cloudless or the winds are calm, start your trek or board the cable car. Don't miss your opportunity. Many have traveled to stand on her back and gone home disappointed.

Table Mountain, recently named one of the world's "new seven wonders of nature," is the first reason people cite for visiting South Africa's Mother City. To residents and tourists alike, this mountain helps define the place and its people: strong, diverse, shaped by time and weather, indescribably stunning, resilient and welcoming. ■

## A RICH HISTORY

For thousands of years, Cape Town was inhabited by the Khoikhoi, ancestors of Kalahari Bushmen. For an unknown period of time, the Khoikhoi traded fresh meat with sailors for tobacco, copper and iron.

Cape Town's European history began in 1652 when the Dutch East India Tea Co. decided to establish a port for its ships and eventually a trading post for other passing fleets. The first European settlers were mainly Dutch, with a small population of French Huguenots who fled France for the Netherlands for religious freedom and were then directed south to satisfy the Cape Colony's skilled labor needs. The first settlers soon explored the adjacent hinterland and founded the cities of Stellenbosch and Paarl, both located in today's wine lands. Cape Town was also the starting point for European pioneers, called Voortrekkers, to explore and settle the rest of South Africa.

The British invaded the Dutch Cape Colony in 1795 at the same time the French occupied the Dutch Republic. The British relinquished control in 1803 only to reoccupy in 1805 and establish an official British Colony via the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1814. The British de-colonized just shy of a decade later and the Union of South Africa was established in 1910. It was during this time that apartheid—the segregation of races—and its internationally controversial policies were established and enforced. Apartheid ended in 1994, after which the newly democratized Republic of South Africa was formed and its first democratically elected president was named.—MM

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