



Diving Into Cape Town

Between Table Mountain and beaches, South Africa's Mother City shows off some of the world's most spectacular urban scenery. Here's how to take it all in by land, sea and air

BY LYNN FREEHILL-MAYE

Two men strap bulky gear and a horizontal sail on my back. They point over the edge of a ridge. A swath of Cape Town buildings sits 1,500 feet below. Beyond them lies South Africa's Atlantic coast. I'll have to miss the buildings and land on a grass patch just before the ocean. "Just run," the guys advise. "Don't sit back, and don't stop."

In seconds, I am pumping my legs off the ridge. Then—whoosh—I am flying motorless in a rush of wind. Briny sea air floods my nostrils. Ruddy-faced Wayne Heuer is strapped on behind me. I'd had no time before takeoff to ask about my paragliding instructor's experience. "How long have you been doing this?" I shout.

"Twenty years!" Heuer calls back. Whew! I can sit back, mouth open in joy, during eight minutes

soaring over South Africa's Mother City.

Cape Town is world famous for Table Mountain. But, as I am seeing, even more drama is evident among the urban landscape. Two sharper shapes, Devil's Peak and Lion's Head, frame the towering plateau. The ridge I'd just run off was another city divider called Signal Hill.

On the other side of Signal Hill is ocean. These Atlantic waters have seen all human vicissitudes, from beauty to injustice. Stars vacation on ritzy Camps Bay beach, and Nelson Mandela was held at Robben Island, which floats eight miles offshore, incongruously appear-

ing. Sir Francis Drake called this "the fairest Cape of them all." I'm ready to dive into this spectacular geography by air, land and water.

First, though, I need to get my feet back on the ground. We clear the buildings and just have to hit that grass strip. No problem, right? That's when Heuer starts doing curlicues over the ocean. Seeing the Atlantic waves hit rocks from jagged angles causes my stomach to drop before I do, but we float to the grass and land easily. "This is a unique setup (for paragliding) in all the world," Heuer says.

Having survived this "unique setup," the top of Table Mountain



(Opposite page, from top) A cable car takes visitors up Table Mountain for spectacular views; the entrance to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 18 years. (This page, from top) Dassies, or African badgers, live among the rocks and foliage of Table Mountain; the view of Lion's Head, from Table Mountain.

commands my attention next. Climbing its 3,558 feet is possible, but an aerial cable car glides visitors to the top for just around \$20. As tourists babble around me, I gaze out at the 800-million-year-old rock formation (and in the car, at a garish advertisement for a credit card). But the top offers a surprise. Rather than

the cheesy feel of a skyscraper observation deck, Table Mountain is a wide-open natural space, with stony trails across.

In the foreground, plump brown dassies loll on fence posts, looking like guinea pigs. I'm astonished to learn they're actually related to African elephants. Moist foot tissue helps them stick to steep rock faces, a sign explains.

Come evening, I set off on a somewhat challenging sunset hike up and around Lion's Head with a parade of trekkers who ascend the dirt trail every full moon. On the way up, rose-hued light covers Camps Bay, and the sun drifts into the Atlantic. Apart from occasional dog barks, dusk in this city of 3.7 million is quiet.

FLY Getting to Cape Town is not easy—expect at least one stop in North America and another in Europe before you arrive as many as 40 hours after leaving San Antonio. KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, British Airways and Delta all offer service to Cape Town.

STAY Tom's Guest House has inviting perks, from welcome drinks to a plunge pool. tom-kapstadt.de

EAT Keep drinking in stellar views over a gourmet meal at the historic Roundhouse. theroundhouserestaurant.com

DO Soar from Signal Hill, a portion of Table Mountain National Park, with instructor Wayne Heuer of Paraglide South Africa. paraglide-south-africa.com

is impossible, but one thing is certain: rarely has a single hike offered two such sensational vistas. A pilgrimage to Robben Island is a near-mandatory day trip for Cape Town visitors. Beyond Mandela's 8-foot by 8-foot cell, I am most affected by the limestone quarry, where the inmates were forced into rock-breaking labor. The sulfuric fumes that surely choked Mandela have blown away, yet the limestone is still blinding. It damaged the



world leader's eyesight and tear ducts. In later years, the tour guide explains, Mandela could not cry.

The Robben Island ferry ride affords more Cape Town views, all the more poignant for knowing how vibrant the city looked to the prisoners. One of the most powerful images is a mural along the dock, with Table Mountain behind, declaring in block letters: "Freedom Cannot be Manacled."

I view it all again from above on a charter flight. Morten Hibbin, the brother of a Texas friend of mine, is the flight instructor. He pulls a four-seat Piper Warrior, sporty with blue stripes, into place with two hands. Its light weight unnerves me, but its new-car smell reassures. We put on chunky Stra-

tomaster headphones and hear the engine churn.

Swiftly, we are 4,000 feet up. I see my paragliding jump-off point, Signal Hill, and the tiny hiking path of suddenly short Lion's Head. We fly out over Robben Island and take in the uniform gray lines of the prison barracks, the cream wall of the limestone quarry. Making a 100-mile loop, we see some of Cape Town's contrasts farther afield, from graceful vineyards to shack settlements.

I'd surveyed the city from many angles, but having Table Mountain in the middle of so many peaks, ridges, valleys and coastlines makes for complex geography. From the air, I could finally see how, somehow, every feature fits together around this city. ★