

WHERE OCEANS MEET

72 HOURS IN CAPE TOWN

Julia Reich spends three days in Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula, and explores the famous Stellenbosch vineyards — and the infamous Robben Island.



It is astonishing to reflect that barely more than two decades ago South Africa was a virtual no-go area for visitors. With the death of apartheid in 1991 the area's potential exploded, and today the Cape Peninsula with its good climate, natural setting, and well-developed infrastructure, is one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, welcoming almost six million visitors annually. The geography, flora and fauna offer a treasure trove of interest from the beauty of soaring Table Mountain to the golden shores to the gentle and beguiling penguins of coastal Simon's Town. It is a common misconception that Cape Point is the meeting point of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, and the southernmost tip of Africa. In fact, the oceans meet at the actual southernmost tip, Cape Agulhas, approximately 93 miles (150 kilometers) to the south east.

Day 1: The Cape Peninsula

A drive around the Cape Peninsula from Cape Town stopping en route takes a full day, but if you have the time, you could easily devote a week to the tour. The peninsula is a rocky outcrop formation jutting into the Atlantic Ocean with

Cape Point and the Cape of Good Hope at its southern extent, and to the north Table Mountain overlooking Cape Town itself, also known as the Mother City. The Cape of Good Hope is often cited as the treacherous meeting point of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, famous for heavy seas, though Cape Town itself is not geographically the true southern meeting point.

Founded 1652, Cape Town is Southern Africa's most visited city. You really can't overstate the case for visiting. Cradled beneath soaring Table Mountain, the city itself is a multicultural, vibrant, foodie's paradise. It was designated World Design Capital in 2014, and hosts international sporting events in the Green Point Stadium, which has a capacity of 70,000 and was built for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The stunning beauty of a Table Mountain dropping to a shimmering sea, its flanks covered in the greens and delicate florals known as the Cape Floral Kingdom, which has the highest known concentration of plant species in the world. With its diverse habitat, ranging from rocky mountain tops to beaches and open sea, the Cape is home to at least 250 species of birds including one of the two mainland colonies of African

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penguins. In addition, there are Cape mountain zebra, several species of antelope, and a wealth of small animals such as lizards, snakes, tortoises and insects. Small mammals include rock hyrax or dassie, four-striped grass mouse, water mongoose, Cape clawless otter and fallow deer.

The area offers excellent vantage points for whale watching. The southern right whale is the species most likely to be seen in False Bay between June and November. Other species are the humpback whale and Bryde's whale. Seals, dusky dolphins and killer whales have also been seen. The position of the Cape of Good Hope between two major ocean currents, ensures a rich diversity of marine life. There is a difference between the sea life west of Cape Point and that to the east due to the markedly differing sea temperatures.

The lower slopes of Table Mountain divide the city below into distinct zones with public gardens, wilderness, forests and vineyards. A cable car ride up the Mountain offers a giddy northern vista of the distant city center and to the west the grand sweep of the mountainous Twelve Apostles. On top of the Mountain the drop seems sheer and the eye sweeps across Africa's most expensive real estate, clinging to the slopes along the spectacular Atlantic Seaboard. Capetonians make full use of this land of outdoor adventure and hiking and mountain biking are very popular. There's also excellent windsurfing at Temple Bay, whilst the brave and foolish launch from Lion's Head to paraglide to the Clifton beachfront.

Day 2: The Stellenbosch vineyards

Stellenbosch is situated about 31 miles (50 kilometers) east of Cape Town, along the banks of the Eerste River at the foot of the Stellenbosch Mountain. It is the second oldest European settlement in the province, after Cape Town. The name Stellenbosch is famous worldwide as the regional hub of top class South African wine, synonymous with wine production and perhaps the most famous wine-producing region in South Africa. Stellenbosch town was settled originally nearly three hundred years ago by French Huguenots who quickly recognized the potential of the areas almost Mediterranean microclimate and soil structures. Stellenbosch wine tours have become something of a pilgrimage for those fascinated by viticulture.



The cable car ascent is a five-minute scenic ride. The more adventurous may climb the mountain using established hiking trails. Visitors discover a World Heritage Site of rich biodiversity, rare and endangered species, including the rather cute rodent-like Dassie, purportedly the smallest living relative to the African elephant. Dassie are famously docile, love to sunbathe, and can often be seen loitering around the cable car restaurant, a charming first sighting of local fauna for visitors.



The high clay content of the granite and sandstone soils found throughout Stellenbosch means that they are both free draining and have excellent water-retention properties. Sufficient rainfall in winter allows growers to keep irrigation to a minimum. The region also benefits from the maritime influence of False Bay in the south with cooling breezes refreshing the grapes after the morning's hot sun. As a result Stellenbosch now boasts seven wards recognized with Wine of Origin status, while the areas of Helderberg and Stellenboschkloof have developed their own distinctive wine styles. Several specialist operators offer Stellenbosch guided wine tours of the more than 150 wine farms and estates. Many of the areas best restaurants are located on vineyards, providing diners with the opportunity to enjoy their meals along with wonderful wine and breathtaking views of mountains jutting into the horizon.

Day 3: Robben Island

Robben Island — the name is from the Dutch for ‘Seal Island’ — lies 4.25 miles (6.9 km) west of coastal Cape Town. Roughly oval in shape and comprising just over 3 miles (5 km) square, it gained worldwide infamy for the incarceration of Nelson Mandela and the leaders of the African National Congress under the apartheid regime. However, the amazing history of this island reaches back centuries further. Its first known inmate was a Dutch trader and interpreter named Autshumato, imprisoned for one and a half years for offending the authorities. He lays claim to being the first escapee from the island, though others have not been so lucky. After a failed uprising at Grahamstown in 1819, the colonial government sentenced Xhosa leader Makhandu Nxele to life imprisonment on the island. The following year Makhandu escaped along with 30 other prisoners. Although several survived, Makhandu drowned. Since he had promised his people he would never abandon them, they continued to hope for his return for



another 50 years before funeral rites were observed. The Island also includes a sacred Muslim site, Moturu Kramat, built to commemorate the first imam of Cape Town imprisoned on the island and perishing there in 1754. The island was employed as a leper colony from 1845, initially on a voluntary basis, but subsequently with a Leprosy Repression Act in 1892 lepers were effectively imprisoned. That colony subsisted until 1931, following which the island was employed for whaling, and during the Second World War for military defense with heavy guns installed as part of the defenses for Cape Town. From 1961 the island held political prisoners, which is where Nelson Mandela takes his place. But history has moved on for Robben Island. It closed as a maximum-security prison in 1991 with the collapse of apartheid. Now it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site managed as a living museum where visitors can tour the island and prison, and see the place where Mandela almost lost his sight breaking white rocks in the midday sun. The Island is open all year round, weather permitting. Take the ferry from the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront.

Time and again the Mother City has topped global travel lists for its dramatic geography, floral beauty, and cultural vibrancy, making it a great destination any time of year. But the best times to visit Cape Town are from March to May and from September to November. You'll find enviable weather,

fewer crowds, and lower prices. When planning your trip, it's important to note that the seasons here are reversed: South Africa's summer corresponds with the northern hemisphere's winter, and vice versa. That said, Cape Town's summer is the most popular (and most expensive) time to visit. Hotels and attractions are usually overflowing with travelers. Meanwhile, the Mother City clears out between June and August, which can be wet, but this is when the Cape flora bursts into life, the beaches are relatively empty, and great holiday bargains can be found.

