

Twenty things to see and do while you're in Cape Town:

Chicago Tribune - Mary Ann Anderson - Jan 25, 2010



The view of the Cape Winelands from the Delaire Winery showcases South Africa's most beautiful scenery. (Mary Ann Anderson/MCT)

CAPE TOWN, South Africa -- Hunkering down against the wind-whipped, cloud-shrouded summit of Table Mountain, my first thought was that the bottom of Africa is pretty much the tops. The 360-degree vista of Cape Town was striking against a sky painted a rich lapis lazuli and from the pinnacle of the mountain the city quite literally seems to unfold all the way to the ends of the earth. Indeed, the closest landmass to it other than Africa is Antarctica.

Poised just at the tip of South Africa's southwesterly coast, the entire Cape Peninsula encompassing Cape Town, the Cape Winelands and the beaches of False Bay juts spectacularly into the hammering waves, where they collide at the intersection of the warm Indian Ocean and the ice-cold Atlantic.

Hands down, Cape Town is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and all eyes will be on it from June 11 to July 11, when the 2010 FIFA World Cup soccer tournament and the bend-it-like-Beckham bunch come to South Africa. The games will be played in cities all over the country, among them Johannesburg, Durban, Nelspruit and Pretoria, with several matches including the quarter-finals and semi-finals set for Cape Town.

If you've managed to, um, "score" tickets to the World Cup, here's our Cape Town Twenty -- a must-do list of places to see and things to do while you're in the city.

--Fly South African Airways from their U.S. gateways in Washington or New York. The best advice I ever heeded as a travel writer was to fly a country's flag carrier. The reasoning is simple. Asking questions of the crew gives you an immediate advantage if you've never visited that place before. South African flight attendants and gate agents will happily offer advice on the best restaurants, shops and nightspots, and can even give tips on places of which to steer clear.

--Visit the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront. The stunning architecture of Cape Town, with the V&A as its centerpiece, clearly evokes an Old World ambiance. The sun-drenched waterfront is a working harbor that basks underneath Table Mountain, and its old warehouses and docksides have been converted into a buzzing beehive of activity. Glittering hotels edge the V&A, including Victoria & Alfred, the Cape Grace, the Dock House, and the One & Only.

--Experience Robben Island. Board the Robben Island Ferry on the V&A for a fascinating tour of the desolate island prison where **Nelson Mandela** spent nearly two decades of his life fighting the good fight against apartheid. Tours are led by former political prisoners who gladly share their life stories.

--Ride the cable car to the top of Table Mountain. The view from Table Mountain's flat top -- the locals compare it to a tablecloth -- bedazzles and is perfect for watching the alchemy of the setting sun spin its rays to liquid gold across the Atlantic.

--Take in a Roots Africa Tour to understand apartheid and the African perspective. Roots Africa takes you on an extensive cultural tour of Langa and Khayelitsha Townships, the millions-strong shantytowns created by the South African government under apartheid.

--Take in the picturesque architecture of Bo-Kaap. With its cobblestone streets, vividly-colored homes and venerable mosques and minarets, Bo-Kaap's influence is Malaysian, Indonesian and Indian. Try a cooking "safari," where you actually go into a Bo-Kaap home and learn to make traditional and utterly multicultural Cape Malay dishes seasoned with spices from around the world.

--Experience a Creative Cape Town walking tour. Focusing on any number of facets including events, attractions, or food and restaurants, hoofing it is the best way to see the city.

--Romp through Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. Set on the slopes of Table Mountain, the gardens are breathtakingly smothered with indigenous flora and fauna from South Africa.

--Ramble through the Cape Winelands for wine tastings. The storybook Cape Winelands with their intoxicatingly fresh breezes are the center of South Africa's boutique wine industry. The sun shines 80 percent of the time here, so as you drift through the villages of Franschhoek, Paarl and Stellenbosch, which are the historic cradle of Afrikaans and their heavy Dutch influence, the bouquet from the vineyards is prevalent and sweet. A few premier wine estates include the Delaire, the Spier, **Ernie Els** (yes, the golfer), the Groot Constantia and the Moreson, my personal favorite with its signature "Miss Molly" wines.

--Experience the wine estates and country inns with an overnight stay. The exquisite Grande Roche in Paarl bespeaks of Dutch and French influences and houses Bosman's, an absolutely luscious restaurant. The bright and sunny LeQuartier Francais in Franschhoek has consistently been named among the top inns in the world, as has the Steenberg in Tokai. The Constantia, also in Tokai, is extravagant yet at the same time peaceful and tranquil.

--Take in the Big Five and visit Sanbona Wildlife Reserve. About three hours outside of Cape Town, Sanbona is home to a free-roaming pride of white **lions**. Their blue eyes and nearly pure white fur captures the imagination and have earned them the nickname of "angel lions." They are unlike any of the other big cats in the world. Accommodations at Sanbona include a well-appointed lodge and a luxurious tented camp, plus all the requisite elephant, cheetah, zebra and hippo are scattered about the reserve that's the size of Singapore.

--Count the **whales** along on False Bay. From June until October, have a whale of a time sighting these sleek mammals as they rise and fall with thunderous glee. Drive or stroll through the False Bay villages of Fishhoek, Muizenberg and Kalk Bay, or better yet stay at accommodations like the St. James, a luxurious yet affordable boutique hotel, where you can watch the continuous action from the comfort of your own room.

--See the Cape of Good Hope. On the southernmost tip of the Cape Peninsula is the Cape of Good Hope, once a stop on the spice routes of the early explorers as they went east to India or west to the New World. Antarctic winds and pounding surf have polished the beaches as fine as diamond dust. Surrounded by a national park and nature reserve home to eland, zebra, ostrich and baboons, the Cape is a juxtaposition of towering mountains, rolling hills, and tranquil pastures that sweep down to the ocean's edge.

--Walk among the penguins at Boulders Beach at Simons Town. There's just something too cute about the tuxedoed, diminutive African penguins waddling around Boulders Beach, a series of sea coves hidden among the boulders of the Cape Peninsula.

--Pick out the Southern Cross. Get far enough away from the lights of Cape Town -- Sanbona is the perfect place -- and do nothing but stargaze under these wide open skies. The constellations are different south of the Equator, with the Southern Cross really lighting up the sky with an ethereal glow.

--Have a sundowner. A sundowner is a drink at sundown, and it doesn't get any easier than that.

--Eat your way across Cape Town. From springbok to warthog to line fish -- that's any fish hand-caught by line -- no place on the African continent has better dining than Cape Town. From past experiences and from asking virtually everyone I know who's been to Cape Town, these are our top picks for restaurants: Salt at the Ambassador Hotel, OYO at the Victoria & Alfred Hotel, The Quarter Gourmet Bunny Chow, the Foodbarn in Noordhoek, Maze at the One & Only Cape Town, Moyo at the Spier Estate near Stellenbosch, Catharina's at the Steenberg Hotel in Tokai, Signal at Cape Grace on the waterfront, the Greenhouse Restaurant at the Cellars-Hohenort Hotel and the Harbour House in Kalk Bay.

--Shop, shop, shop. From the pedestrian malls on the V&A filled with upscale boutiques to roadside markets and souvenir stands, there is no shortage of shopping for gifts and jewelry. Tanzanite is a good buy, and so are diamonds.

--South Africa is called the Rainbow Nation for good reason. Officially there are 11 languages spoken in the country, with most everyone speaking English and Afrikaans, plus a mix of European, Arabic, and Asian tongues that keep conversations interesting. Listening to the melange of languages along the V&A is a fascinating multicultural experience unto itself.

--With so much to do, don't forget your tickets to the World Cup.