



Admittedly I had little clue about mountain biking before boarding a flight to Cape Town alongside other passionate cyclists, my new bike proudly stowed in the hold. Full of bravado and bluster as I was, my lack of experience did little to restrain my excitement at two tantalising weeks riding some of South Africa's most spectacular countryside. No matter that I'd actually signed up for an event called Sani2c — a three-day, two-man stage race over almost 300km. Nor that I'd barely ridden my bike since wheeling it out of the bike shop a month before crossing the Indian Ocean. I'd been training for a marathon most of the year, so I wasn't concerned about my fitness, but technical skills were in short supply.

Kind, charitable hearts were not, however. South African charity Hearts of Hope, which runs a couple of intimate care homes for some of the 2.1 million abandoned or orphaned children who have HIV/AIDS, was our cycling group's main motivation for visiting South Africa. The funds raised — close to AU\$50,000 — would help pay for new buildings at Emseni School in KwaZulu-Natal province, and our group would help paint them on arrival.

Charitable works aside, South Africa's extensive network of groomed off-road trails lures riders from all over the world. South African Airways is bicycle friendly if you want to take your own bike (pack it in a bike bag, which can be hired or bought from most bike shops). Although, if you don't want the extra luggage hassle, most of the places we visited had quality bikes (including safety gear) for hire.

DRAKENSBERG MOUNTAINS

Rising up to 3000 metres above the rift valley, the basaltic buttresses of the Drakensberg Mountains form part of the Great Escarpment dominating

much of South Africa's landscape. In Afrikaans *Drakensberg* means Dragon Mountain, so named after the ranges' steep-sided, squarish peaks resembling dragons' teeth. During this late-autumn visit, a persistent cover of snow sits atop flat-top pinnacles while the lower flanks are bathed in warm sunshine.

Montusi Mountain Lodge, midway between Johannesburg and Durban, sits on the northern rim of around

100km of trails carved into rolling hills shadowed by mountains. It reigns over former farmland, the earth stripped of nutrients, and the Carte family have spent 14 years revegetating this infertile wasteland with indigenous plants. The result is the return of native birdlife and wildlife, including reedbuck, bushbuck and the elusive eland. It's not unusual to spot shy, flighty antelopes while riding the trails branching out from the lodge's 1000ha estate.

Have two wheels, will travel

Cycling is a wonderful way to experience the beauty of South Africa, from its dragon-toothed mountains to its sun-drenched oceans and every bit in between.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY / FIONA HARPER

The rivers, valleys and gorges of this area are sprinkled with challenging ascents and exhilarating descents, their snaky single tracks and wide dirt trails offering options for all levels of rider, whether new to the sport or serious adrenalin junkies. The Drakensberg Trail System is purpose-designed for recreational mountain bikers. Trails are graded easy, moderate or difficult and all routes are mapped in detail and well signposted. Trail names like Waterfall Challenge, Secret Pass and Twisties offer some indication of the terrain, but there are plenty of easy routes suitable for beginners or families with children.

The area is rideable year round (though it does get cold in winter: remember that snow I mentioned earlier?) with trail passes costing around AU\$20 for five days. Resorts like Montusi hire bikes out but they also cater extremely well for riders bringing their own. The owners are keen riders themselves, so can also assist if you need any help with repair work or purchasing forgotten equipment. They'll also share their tips on favourite trails.

RIDING EVENTS

Mountain biking is almost a national sport in South Africa, as evidenced by the number of riders who sign up for multi-day events. Some events,



Riding the trails outside the town of Franschhoek. Main: Sun sets over the plains of Nambiti Game Reserve.

like world-renowned stage races Sani2c and joBerg2c, are hotly contested, with entrants often going on waiting lists to enter. Others, like Rovos Rail Ride, are more indulgent, incorporating luxurious rail travel between Pretoria and Livingstone in Zambia, interspersed with rides each day at various stops along the railway line.

The Cape Epic covers a leg-aching 700km over eight days and finishes among the vines of Western Cape Winelands, a just reward for eight days in the saddle. South African wines are high quality and very reasonably priced with the favourable exchange rate.

FRANSCHHOEK

Wine and riding come together in a beguiling mix of grapes and gravel a couple of hours east of Cape Town. On a valley floor surrounded by a mountainous nature reserve, Franschhoek is the food and wine heartland of South Africa. It's also a splendid area to combine easy rides with long, leisurely cellar-door lunches.

Hard-core mountain bikers won't be disappointed: there are plenty of challenging single-track trails forged by local riders. But, for most, this area's more about soaking up the sun-drenched Mediterranean-like climate with an African twist.

South Africa's extensive network of groomed off-road trails lures riders from all over the world.



TRAVEL CYCLING SOUTH AFRICA

Affable outdoorsman Geddan Ruddock set up Franschhoek Cycles as a way to encourage visitors and locals to explore the region on two wheels. A former cross-country world champion, he's the go-to man for all things cycling around Franschhoek. If you want to rent a bike, have your own bike cleaned or serviced, or hire a guide to enjoy 60km of spectacular trails without seeing another soul, he's your man.

Meeting us one morning at bike-friendly and über elegant Le Franschhoek Hotel & Spa, Geddan takes us on a rambling ride that gradually ascends onto a ridgeline that wraps around a conical-shaped summit above Berg River Dam. We linger to take photos of mountains reflected in tranquil waters; the air is still, the silence absolute. This entire place is for us alone, it seems. We ride slowly



It seems a shame to leave the mountains ... but lunch beckons on the food and wine trail.



Top to bottom: Riding outside of Franschhoek; Cape Town and Table Mountain, viewed from a helicopter joyride; cellar door at Haute Cabrière winery, Franschhoek.



enough to take in the view of mountains and lake to one side, while maintaining enough speed to avoid losing our momentum on a loose gravel trail.

It seems a shame to leave the mountains behind as we descend into the pretty village of Franschhoek with its ravishing Cape Dutch architecture. But lunch beckons on the food and wine trail, and riding builds up an appetite.

There are almost 50 vineyards across the valley and we spend a leisurely few hours on a verandah bathed in sunshine at Solms-Delta enjoying a delectable lunch. We sample temptations such as biltong and blue cheese pâté, followed by lamb loin stuffed with wild herbs and garlic, rosemary-braised onions and fennel, baby potatoes drizzled with a Cape Jazz Shiraz jus, all accompanied by lashings of crisp rosé blend seasoned in oak. It's easy to see the attraction of the Cape Winelands. A favourable exchange rate between the Australian dollar and South African rand means it's almost embarrassingly cheap, too.

Rickety Bridge Wine Estate is another spot worthy of lingering over a fine alfresco lunch, attended by friendly staff who know how to match a remarkable menu with exceptional wines. A perfect Franschhoek day easily evolves from a morning ride and rejuvenating lunch to shopping for trinkets in bespoke boutiques in the village and an indulgent spa treatment back at the hotel before dinner at yet another exquisite restaurant.

It's quite a contrast to the conditions Nelson Mandela experienced nearby during his own time in Franschhoek Valley. His long walk to freedom culminated in his 1990 release from the region's Drakenstein Prison, an event since commemorated in a larger-than-life bronze statue outside the prison gates.

CAPE TOWN

While spending a few days in Cape Town, we take the opportunity to visit Robben Island where Mandela was incarcerated for 18 years during the apartheid era. A small oval-shaped island some kilometres offshore from downtown Cape Town, it's a stark reminder of a disgraceful time when South Africa was less convivial than it is now. With its prisoners permitted just one visitor a year for no more than 30 minutes, misery and hardship hovers over the island. One imagines a harrowing experience, one that would eventually transform Mandela into a revered leader



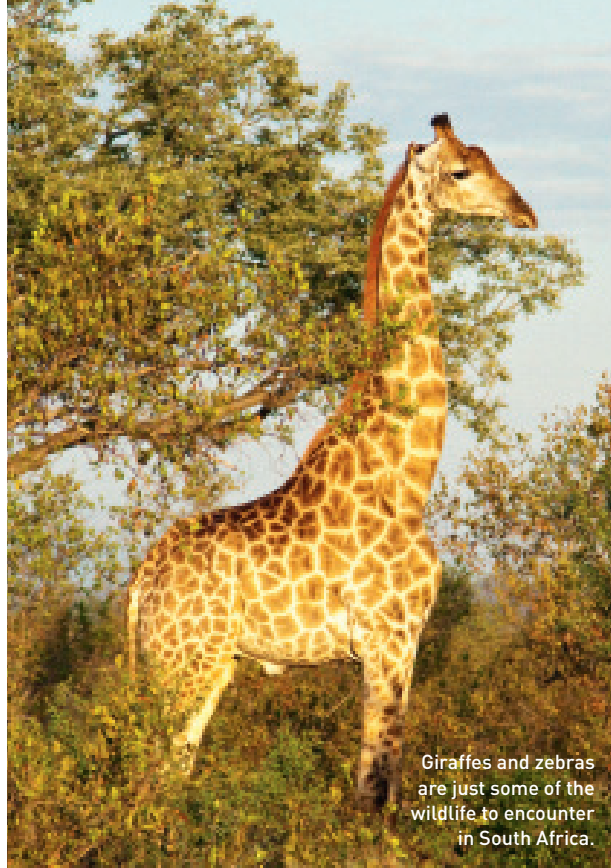
TRAVEL CYCLING SOUTH AFRICA

through his dignified defiance, wisdom and strength of character.

It's not hard to think about Mandela's significant influence wherever you venture in Cape Town. His distinctive face is everywhere, smiling dark eyes crinkling at the corners. His legend grows with his presence on cheap souvenirs right through to sculpted artworks exhibited in exclusive waterfront galleries. But the real star of Cape Town is the vertical escarpment of Table Mountain, surely one of the most recognisable natural landmarks on the globe. Sometimes moodily concealed beneath a "tablecloth" cloud or cloaked in thick rivers of water tumbling down near-vertical sides, on a sparkling sunny day Table Mountain exudes a palpable energy that shouts, "Look at me!" Whether viewed from afar on Robben Island, at eye level during a helicopter joyride or beyond the handlebars of a mountain bike, it's one extraordinary mountain.

The easy way to get to the summit is to take the Aerial Cableway, a 10-minute ride in circular cable cars that pivot through 360 degrees, ensuring everyone gets their share of the view. You could also hike via challenging Platteklip Gorge. Once you reach the flat summit, walking trails and viewing platforms are dotted with interesting facts about the landscape and city far below. There's also a restaurant at the cable station. But a far more enjoyable way to enjoy the mountain's lower flanks is to ride them.

Guided tours of the trails are available through Downhill Adventures, which can provide bikes as well as all safety gear. If you have your own bikes like we did, it's easy to arrange for bikes and riders to be dropped off halfway up the mountain, avoiding a pesky, heart-burning uphill climb. Instead, riders are rewarded with distracting views over the city to a coastline studded with glistening sandy beaches and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. Fire trails are wide and sweeping but are gravelly and slippery under-wheel, an experience that requires focused concentration; not easy when one of the world's prettiest cities lies beyond your handlebars. If that's not exhilarating enough, you can try an abseiling and mountain biking combo that gets you



Giraffes and zebras are just some of the wildlife to encounter in South Africa.



halfway down the mountain belayed on a rope, the other half on a freewheeling bike ride all the way to sea level.

The hub of Cape Town revolves around the historical Victoria and Albert Waterfront. A bicycle-friendly city with a network of cycle paths, it makes getting around by bike relatively easy and safe when you take the usual precautions. Hotels like the Table Bay Hotel are accustomed to travellers with bikes and porters barely bat an eyelid when our group descends with 14 oversized bike bags.

Named after Prince Alfred, son of Queen Victoria, V&A Waterfront started life as an insignificant jetty in the mid-1600s, a stopover for Dutch East India Company ships *en route* to the Far East. These days it's a hub of activity for visitors, with a buzzing vibe. Restaurants, bars, cafes and outdoor food markets vie with gift shops and galleries for waterfront space. Make time to linger in the African Trading Port, more like an antiquities museum than a store, with

its extraordinary collection of authentic African memorabilia as well as the usual souvenirs.

AFRICAN SAFARI

No trip to South Africa would be complete without visiting a game reserve for a few days. But you're best to leave your bike firmly zipped in its bag for this part of your adventure. Though there are some game parks that offer guided walks (Tanda Tula Tented Safari Camp is one of them), most exploring is done in open-sided four-wheel-drive jeeps. With a driver and tracker on board, game drives set out pre-dawn and dusk (when wildlife are best spotted), allowing you to tick off sightings of the Big Five (elephant, lion, leopard, rhinoceros and buffalo) if you're lucky.

Parks like Nambiti and Timbavati Game Reserves offer extraordinary lodgings, from tented camps through to luxury lodges. Karkloof Safari Spa manages to successfully combine wellness with wilderness in a multi-award-winning adults-only retreat west of Durban. What most safari lodges have in common is twice-daily adventures with knowledgeable conservation-minded rangers. Most game drives will also have diversions mid-safari for sunset cocktails

beneath scarlet skies or a bush-cooked breakfast post-safari.

Beneath endless African skies, this is where you'll find South Africa's true heart. In these vast open spaces that rumble to the rhythm of the bush, you'll meet soulful South Africans with an intrinsic affinity with the land. And cycling, taking the slow road, offers the perfect pace to feel the country's pulse. It doesn't matter whether you've been riding all your life or haven't mounted a bike since leaving primary school. South Africa doesn't care. She's likely seduce you with her charm regardless. 🍷

MORE INFORMATION

- **South African Tourism**, southafrica.net
- **Sani2c**, sani2c.co.za
- **Hearts of Hope**, heartsofhope.org.za

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