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Eat, Play, Shop: 48 Hours in Cape Town

by Fiona Harper

Travel writer Fiona Harper provides her top travel tips for a visit to the stunning South African city of Cape Town.

Cape Town has loomed enticingly for travellers since scurvy-riddled Spanish sailors landed at the Cape of Good Hope in the 1500's. Changing forever the equilibrium of resident indigenous nomads, the city's population today is a multi-racial melting pot drawn from countries near and far.

Protruding into the Roaring Forty latitudes of the Southern Ocean with the Atlantic and Indian Oceans west and east, the vertical escarpment of Table Mountain dominates the city. This topography means Cape Town's weather can be challenging: golden sunshine one day, screaming gales the next. But what the heck, pack clothes for all seasons and get out and explore – Cape Town is jaw-dropping beautiful regardless of her mood.

9.00 It's hard to ignore Table Mountain's look at me splendour so I suggest you make the summit your first stop. It's usually best to go in the morning before the wind has a chance to build momentum. The flat topped (cleverly named!) summit is often shrouded in mist, creating a white 'tablecloth' that drapes down a near vertical bluff.

There are countless ways to explore the mountain, active or passive it's up to you. Adventurous rock climbers clamber up quartzite and sandstone vertical cliffs before abseiling on the return journey. Hikers take an easier route via the trail through Platteklip Gorge which passes through fields of indigenous wildflowers, while mountain bikers revel in exhilarating single track downhill descents on her lower flanks. But by far the easiest method is to take the revolving cable car which deposits up to 65 passengers on the summit every 3 minutes.

11.00 Board a helicopter and fly down to the Cape of Good Hope. Flying low enough to glean a close-up peek at Devils' Peak and Lion's Head which flank Table Mountain, white sandy beaches give way to cobalt blue ocean below. Keep an eye out for migrating whales between May and September.

12.00 Dipping its hat to slave trading with tendrils reaching into Madagascar, Malaya, India, Madagascar and West African nations, combined with European influences, Cape Cuisine has evolved from this confluence of cultures. Alongside the canals of historic V & A Waterfront, a sustainable organic food market powered by aquaponics and solar energy is styled on an African souk: casual dining at its eco-friendly best.

1.00 District Six Museum offers a snapshot into the apartheid era Group Areas Act. Formerly an energetic multi-racial inner city precinct populated by freed slaves, immigrants and merchants, in 1966 District Six was declared 'whites only'. 60,000 people were forcibly removed, their homes bulldozed, a community destroyed.

4.00 Devour delightful delicacies at High Tea at The Lounge at Table Bay Hotel overlooking the docked boats in the foreground against a Table Mountain backdrop.

6.00 Beneath an African sky morphing from day to night reflected in the water of Victoria Basin, sip pre-dinner cocktails on the upstairs deck at Alba Lounge before heading downstairs to Hildebrand Ristorante – try the springbok shank.

10.00 Bed down at Sun International's Table Bay Hotel in a mountain-view room: sleep with drapes open and admire the 'in your face' mountain view come dawn.

8.00 Breakfast in the light-bathed Conservatory restaurant as a tuxedo-clad pianist tinkles his grand piano ivories. Countless staff soundlessly replenish an extraordinary buffet offering breakfast cuisine from across the globe. Become a morning person and linger over an indulgent breakfast that doesn't finish until 10.30.

10.00 11km to the west lies Robben Island, Pretoria's international dumping ground for political prisoners during apartheid. Recently celebrating his 90'th birthday, Nelson Mandela was the prison's most famous inmate. Later to become South Africa's first black President, Mandela spent 18 years incarcerated on the island after being sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964 for alleged sabotage and provoking a revolution. www.robben-island.org.za.

1.00 If the sun is shining pop into Ferrymans Tavern, for lunch in the cobblestone outdoor courtyard. If Cape Town is showing her dark side, head indoors where quarried bluestone walls, Oregon beams, brick-paved floor and stone fireplace create a warm convivial atmosphere.

3.00 Africa Trading Port, housed in an historic Port Captains Building, has three floors crammed with artefacts, antiquities and artworks. From giraffe hide wall hangings to a Mandela sculpture cleverly crafted from chicken wire, the store is more akin to a museum or gallery. Nearby, V&A; Market on the Wharf is fascinating for those curious about what tickles local tastebuds.

7.00 Slip into something slinky and sashay down to the Shimmy Beach Club for funky 'sand between your toes' vibes along with a seafood influenced menu. Too tired to walk home after dinner and dancing? Call a chopper or a boat to whisk you back to Table Bay Hotel.

11.00 Pop into the Union Bar for a nightcap before resting your weary head on Table Bay Hotel's down-filled pillow.

Fiona Harper travelled as a guest of South Africa Tourism www.southafrica.net

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