

**FOCUS ON**

## Great drives around the Fairest Cape

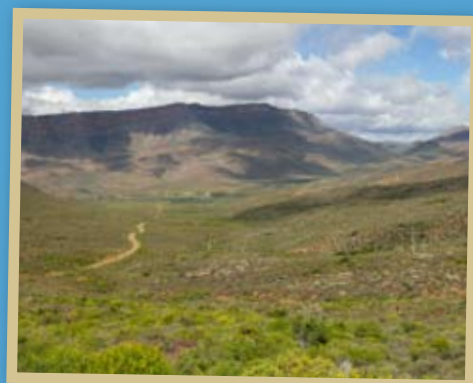
For this edition of our newsletter, we've departed from our normal focus on one of Africa's great wildlife areas to feature some great day drives around South Africa's Western Cape, the perfect destination for a break from those dull and damp northern winter days.

One of the great perks of our job is that we travel to many places, time and time again. In South Africa, this allows us to drive different routes, enhancing our knowledge of each region and enabling us to advise you on the most rewarding drives.

The first drive is a simple circumnavigation of the Cape Peninsular. Dominated in the north by Table Mountain and the vibrant city of Cape Town, the ridge of the mountain extends southwards and affords spectacular views of both the Atlantic Ocean on the west, and False Bay on the east. Starting early, head south along the western side of the mountain through the village of Camps Bay to Hout Bay. From here, the spectacular Chapmans Peak Drive hugs the mountain side as you climb out of the bay and

continue southwards to Noordhoek, with its 6 kms long pristine beach. From here, travel across the spine of the peninsular to Simonstown on the False Bay side and onto the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve from where you can walk to Cape Point to observe the meeting of the two oceanic currents which dominate South Africa's coastline - the cold Benguela coming up from the Antarctic, and the warm Mozambican/Agulhas current which descends down the east coast. Return to Simonstown, and spend some time exploring the town, home to South Africa's navy as well as being a traditional fishing village. Continuing up the False Bay side, stop for lunch at Fish Hoek, and then visit the seaside town of Muizenberg. The drive back to Cape Town is through the lovely Constantia suburb, home to a number of fine wine estates (Buiterverwachting, Klein and Groot Constantia and Constantia Uitsig to name a few), and the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens area.

We've suggested this route in an anti-clockwise direction as the photographic opportunities will be better with the sun behind you for most of the



journey. However, if you love sunsets, or wish to take advantage of the easier side to pull off the road at view points (left), do the trip in reverse and have a late lunch in Hout Bay.

Aside from atop Table Mountain, spectacular views of the peninsular can also be seen from Constantia Nek and the Silvermine Nature Reserve.

The second drive travels east from Cape Town to Somerset West, just beyond the airport. At the foot of Sir Lowry's Pass, turn south to Gordon's Bay and >>>



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continue along the coastal road, hemmed between the rugged mountains and the sea, to Betty's Bay. Stop here to view the Stoney Point penguin colony and the Harold Porter Botanical Gardens, before continuing through Kleinmond to Hermanus for lunch (a great four hour excursion). Afterwards, the most direct route to Cape Town is back over Sir Lowry's Pass, itself providing a spectacular view of the Cape Flats to the city in the distance.

Of course, a visit to the Cape would also need to include a visit to the famous Winelands 'triangle', a mere hour or so from the city of Cape Town. Here the historic towns of Stellenbosch and Paarl, and the chic village of Franschhoek, provide the 'corners' for some of the most picturesque country you'll ever visit - huge mountains and fertile valleys dotted with traditional Cape-Dutch architectural farm buildings. Aside from the numerous wine estates worth visiting, take lunch half way up the Franschhoek Pass at La Petite Ferme which has sensational views back down the valley.

Our final gem is a little more than a day trip, and to get the best out of it, you'll need to spend a night in the Clanwilliam area. The first time Bill took the route he was so awestruck he arrived three hours late at his destination. Depart early and head north from Cape Town on the main N1. Leave the valleys of Franschhoek and Paarl behind and venture through the Huguenot Tunnel and Du Toitskloof tunnel into the Slanghoekberge (snake corner mountains!). Travel up the Breede River valley to Ceres, a major fruit growing region, and from there ascend the Gydo Pass to Op Die Berg (On top of the mountain). Here the fun starts as you leave the tarred road heading for Cederberg. The next 100 kms or so will be on a gravel road, wending through spectacular rock strewn valleys, Mount Ceder (a good place to stop for a simple lunch - four hours), and via the Uitkyk and Nieuwoudt passes to Clanwilliam (a further two hours) - take your passports, as en route you'll go through Algeria too !! Wow, one of the best drives you'll do anywhere in the world (to drive back to Cape Town from Clanwilliam would be another three hours).

**Best time to travel: November to March**

Other attractions: gourmet restaurants and award-winning vineyards, golden beaches, spectacular botanical gardens, world-class golf courses, bird watching, horse riding and, of course, shopping!



## Comparing the meerkats

Movement caught our attention and we turned slowly to see a pair of inquisitive eyes peeking out at us. Then they were gone. 'They are starting to come out now' said Janine, the research student who meets and greets this particular meerkat colony each morning. Slowly but surely, more eyes and tiny ears appeared, disappeared and re-appeared until one brave soul came out entirely and adopted that classic sentry pose. Soon more followed, emerging from different burrows until 23 individuals, including youngsters, were standing to attention in photogenic lines, scanning the horizon for evidence of danger. The sight of a soaring snake eagle sent them scurrying for cover, but the eagle moved on and it was not long before the meerkats regained their confidence and began foraging.

We were sitting, cameras in hand, in the heart of the Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve in the Northern Cape region of South Africa. Originally the property of an English entrepreneur, Tswalu is now owned by the Oppenheimer family and the 100,000 hectare reserve is one of the best places in Africa to view and photograph wild meerkats.

We soon lost the foraging meerkats, or perhaps they 'lost us', but the 45 minutes or so we had spent in their company had been magical. Youngsters hugged and played, sentries stood guard and the lucky ones sunbathed, chin on chest and eyes closed, seemingly soaking up the warmth to counter the cold Kalahari winter.

Tswalu is not the only place where meerkats have been habituated to human presence. Well known



Jacks Camp, in the Makgadikgadi Pans region of Botswana, offers an equally enthralling encounter where the habituation process is more advanced and the meerkats have taken to using conveniently placed human onlookers as perfect sentry posts, seemingly unaware that our soft skin was not designed to cope with their sharp claws!

In central Namibia, on the western edge of the Kalahari dune belt, Bagatelle Kalahari Ranch has a small group of habituated meerkats, whilst outside Oudtshoorn in South Africa's Karoo, 'meerkat man' Grant M. Mc Ilrath, has for many years run early morning tours to a group on a local farm.

Meerkats can also be seen in the wild throughout the desert regions of South Africa, Botswana and Namibia. In particular, the Kgalagadi Trans-Frontier Park in South Africa, which borders both Namibia and Botswana, is an excellent venue for non-habituated meerkat viewing.

Meerkats have truly captured our imagination, and when you spend time with them in their world it is easy to understand why. Not only are they cute, but they are expressive, funny and full of character. They can also be aggressive, protective and they live and work as a team. Perhaps they, like other species of high human regard, remind us somewhat of ourselves.



## ROB EXPERIENCES

THE ULTIMATE  
FLYING SAFARI

“I had never realised the Kuiseb Canyon was so long”, I thought as we circled like a vulture and then banked low to view herds of mountain zebra grazing on the desert plains above the canyon. Having driven through part of the canyon on two previous occasions, I had never appreciated the ‘bigger picture’. Now from the air, I could see the full extent of the canyon and my eyes followed its rugged path towards the ocean. Our pilot guide explained how the canyon formed a natural barrier for the shifting sands of the Namib and, from the air, it was easy to see how the wind-blown sands fell into the canyon and ended up back in the ocean. We circled again and headed west over towering red sand dunes towards the fabled Skeleton Coast.

I had joined the Schoeman family on their unique Skeleton Coast Safari, usually a four day/three night flying safari along Namibia’s Skeleton Coast. Our pilot and guide was Bertus, the oldest of the four Schoeman brothers who between them pilot and guide all safaris. Truly a family business, which has been operating successfully since 1985 when their father, Louw, first flew guests into the relative unknown.

My travel companions were David and Barbara, from the UK, and Connie from Germany. We were blessed with perfect weather on our first

day and we flew along the coast with Bertus gently manoeuvring the aircraft to give everyone the best views. We had fantastic sightings of numerous seal colonies, with youngsters playing in the Atlantic surf and jackals waiting patiently for an easy meal. We flew over the Eduard Bohlen wreck, arguably one of the Skeleton Coast’s most impressive ‘victims’, and were mesmerised by the spectacularly beautiful Sandwich Harbour and ridiculously coloured salt flats outside Walvis Bay, both with their flocks of flamingos. Having landed at Swakopmund to re-fuel and stretch our legs, we enjoyed a modest but wholesome picnic lunch in the Crocodile Dundee-style Flying Club bar.

Looking back, the first half a day summed up the essence of this safari: top quality adventure, incredible flying experiences and the spectacular wilderness of Namibia virtually to oneself. Flashy picnic hampers, cut glass tumblers and ‘kid gloves’ were not on the menu.

The next couple of days took us northwards along the official Skeleton Coast National Park, heading inland each day to enjoy the spectacular landscapes and overnight in remote and wonderful locations. Along the Huab River in Damaraland, we thought we had landed on Mars, such were the colours and the feeling of emptiness. The next day, having flown across lava plains and lunar landscapes where you feel even Sir David Attenborough would struggle to claim ‘even here, life prevails’, we landed at Terrace Bay and ventured off road into the ‘roaring dunes’,

where the sands are so refined they resonate loudly like a tuba when disturbed. Further north, we flew low along the Hoaruseb River, searching for desert elephants, and then landed and jumped into a vehicle to get a closer look. And, of course, we were never far from the seal colonies and shipwrecks of the coastline. Our last night was spent on the rugged banks of the Kunene River, the border with Angola and a beautiful, but harsh, region which is home to nomadic Himba people whom we were privileged to meet.

On the flight back across Kaokoland and northern Damaraland, I traced routes I had driven a few years earlier, piecing together the complex jigsaw of the Namibian wilderness. From the air, everything fitted into place! As we approached civilisation again, and I considered our epic four-day adventure, and the only criticism I could muster was that for such an incredible safari, it was simply too short-lived!

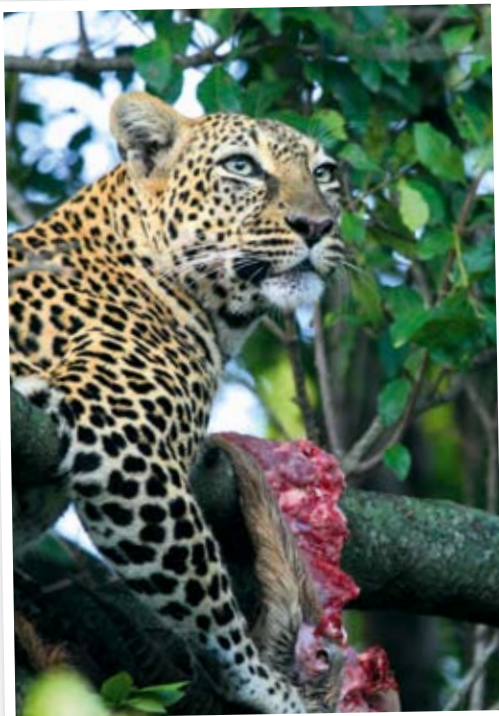
Time to travel? Available all year, but September to December is the ideal time to go.



**SAFARI SNIPPETS**

## Migration Magic

True to the fickle nature of the natural world, the wildebeest migration started arriving in Kenya's Masai Mara in June this year, around a month ahead of schedule. However, for the best migration experience we'll still be recommending the six week period around September.



### OKAVANGO FLOOD

Nature always springs a surprise, and following on from last year's excessive rains in Botswana, most people were looking forward to a 'normal' year. Indeed, the rain which fell in the country was normal, but in the Angolan highlands, the catchment area of the Okavango, Kwando and Zambezi rivers, things were a little different. This resulted in the annual flood of the Okavango being the biggest in living memory (or certainly for 50 years), and consequently a real test for those lodge and mobile camp operators.

### New bugs

Earlier this year, the Tswalu Foundation encouraged scientists from the Transvaal Museum to conduct an entomological study on the reserve where they discovered a moth that had never been seen or classified. Out of Africa, always something new.

### STAFF NEWS

A celebratory time in Great Cornard recently with Michele announcing her engagement to Garry (to be married in May 2011) and our eagerly awaiting the marriage of Josie to Gareth in September.

### Soaring vultures

A recent sighting of a tagged Lappet-faced vulture on a kill in Mana Pools, Zimbabwe, showed up some interesting results. The bird had been tagged on a nest in Namibia in October 2009. We estimate that's somewhere between 1200 and 1500 kms (crow flies!).



### LEOPARD MEALS

A recent sighting of a leopard killing a bat-eared fox in Botswana prompted some thought. After plucking the fur and taking a couple of mouthfuls, the leopard regurgitated the meal and went on her way, abandoning the carcass. Is it possible that the foxes diet of termites, other insects and scorpions, may make it unpalatable to other carnivores, or is it like lion/hyaena confrontation that the larger predator is simply trying to remove a perceived competitor?

### Summer luncheon

We held our annual luncheon on the first Saturday in August and were delighted that 136 brave souls made the journey to south Suffolk. We hope to meet more of you in the years to come.

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