

Sardine Run & Cage Diving **South Africa**

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Ballito Beach; Bait ball at the Wild Coast (right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Anemones and sea urchins, Partridge Bay

The world in one country is an oft-used quote to describe South Africa and is not unwarranted. Along with dramatic scenery and a rich cultural heritage, it is a nation renowned for its diversity of ecosystems and wildlife. However, its undersea environs rival the terrestrial abundance. From northern subtropical reefs to the chilly waters of the cape, South Africa offers a wealth of marine life few nations can rival.

I had a brief introduction several years earlier, visiting Aliwal Shoal and Protea Banks in KwaZulu-Natal and the Kruger National Park [see X-RAY MAG issue #46 -ed]. The diving was unlike anything I had done before not to mention challenging. And there were sharks—lots of sharks! From that moment, I planned to make a return visit.

Sardine Run

Like an aquatic version of the Serengeti's wildebeest migration, South Africa's Sardine Run is one of the world's utmost

undersea spectacles. During the winter months from May to July, a cold south to north-flowing current develops off the east coast, moving inshore and counter to the warm Agulhas current. After spawning in the cool waters of the Agulhas Bank, millions of sardines surge up from the Cape, following the current to the Transkei and KwaZulu-Natal province. The migration fuels an explosion of life, with all manner of predators partaking in the rich bounty, including dolphins, sharks, whales and seabirds. However, this is no guaranteed event; sardine numbers vary on a yearly basis and is only considered a "run" when the shoals are

large enough to be seen at the surface.

Having seen the spectacle on nature documentaries, I was eager for an up close and personal experience. When my good friend Sonja Newlands announced she would be leading a group from the United States and invited me along, how could I refuse? Factoring in time for additional activities, the biggest challenge was narrowing the options. With Sonja's help, I decided on some Zululand game reserves and Cape Town.

After a grueling trip from Toronto to Durban via London, I arrived in the morning. A recuperation day was welcome and Sonja couldn't have chosen a nicer place. An hour's drive north of Durban, the holiday town of Ballito featured green hills cascading to golden beaches reminiscent of Sydney's northern suburbs. "The Vineyard at Ballito" was a beautiful bed-and-break-

fast nestled on a hillside a short walk from the beach. For my first night, I decided to splurge with dinner and Al Pescatore, situated right across from the beach, came highly recommended.

The seafood platter was the epitome of extravagance, replete with mussels, prawns, oysters, fish and lobster. A Ballito iced tea, a concoction of ginger ale, sprite and five unknown spirits, necessitated another notch to my belt. People were very friendly, especially the owner, coming over to chat with the poor lone Canadian. If this was winter, I'll take it!

The following morning, Sonja arrived at 8:30, and it was a challenge packing all of my gear into her small car. We then headed to the airport to meet the Enfield scuba group from Connecticut. Right away, I could see it was a diverse but very nice group. With over 18 people and a ton of gear, Sonja had chartered them a bus, although two, Laura and trip leader John Langlois, rode with us.



Dinner decadence at Ballito



Fishing gannets, Wild Coast





Crashing surf (left) and the rugged landscape (above) of the Wild Coast; N'taba River Lodge (right); Wild Coast highway (center left)



ing two-laned and potholed. We soon crossed into the Eastern Cape or Transkei, which, until the early 90's, had been a separate region like Swaziland and Lesotho. Towns became fewer and further apart. The landscape was striking, with golden hills of grass dotted with numerous houses. Many were round with thatched roofs. Sonja informed us that this was deterrence against evil spirits, as they had

no corners to hide in. As the road gained elevation, the locals were bundled up in hats and heavy coats. No matter how remote, every town seemed to have a KFC.

Arriving at N'taba Lodge outside of town, we were greeted by owners Ivan and his wife, Bugs. (No, not her real name. Sonja has known her for years and *still* doesn't know it.) Situated alongside a river flanked by rugged peaks, the location was stunning. In the midst of renovations, severe floods had damaged the dining room and terrace overlooking the river four months earlier. Most of the damage was wrought by sand, but optimist Ivan regarded it as free building material.

As the mountain of gear was unloaded, we enjoyed a welcome drink. Also on hand was boat captain Ant and partner Lauren and dive guide Mike. Prior to dinner, Ant gave a briefing on what we could expect for the

ensuing week. Right away, I knew this would be no walk in the park.

By zodiac

Like most South African diving, we would journey by zodiac. Being in the middle of nowhere necessitated all gear, zodiacs included, must be brought in. With our large group, Sonja chartered two zodiacs from different operators in Umkomaas, outside of Durban. On average, we would spend six hours at sea daily, returning around 3:00. Fortunately, as the action occurs near the surface, deco issues would not be a problem. With temperatures around 15°C to 21°C, the water was warm enough for a 5mm wetsuit with boots, gloves and hood.

The sardines would not be a gigantic unbroken mass, but fragmented schools.



Ravenous for plankton, the fish converge close to shore, constrained by a preference for water temperatures of 20°C or less. Shoals may exceed 7km in length, 1.5km wide and 30m deep. To minimize chances of predation, they mass together in bait balls 10-20m in diameter. Clearly visible from the surface, they are ideal targets for bottlenose and common dolphins, Cape gannets and a range of sharks including bronze whalers, black-tips, dusky, ragged-tooth and zambezis. Even whale sharks and great whites have been observed on occasion.

Our destination was the town of Port St. John's in a region of the easterly Transkei called the Wild Coast. Here, the continental shelf plunges sharply close to shore, resulting in enormous waves and tempestuous seas. I was soon to discover the name was highly appropriate.

Travelling on the motorway, the first few hours were easy. Past Shelly Beach, the motorway ended abruptly, becom-



On the Wild Coast, diving is by zodiac



View of the Umzimvubu River; Dolphins hunting at Sardine Run (top right); Close-up of dolphins (right)

With such a big coastline, they could be anywhere. Assisting in our endeavours were ultralights conducting air searches. Dispatched almost daily, the pilots kept in close contact with the various captains by phone. While operators generally work in tandem, there is a definite “first come, first served” protocol, as latecomers must wait until the first group is finished. With the forecast sounding favourable, everyone was raring to go.

The morning was cool and grey as I geared up for our 9:00 departure. There would be seven people per boat plus dive masters and crew; I would be with Ant, Lauren and Mike. Getting aboard necessitated a slippery descent down the muddy riverbank created by the recent flooding. Overnight, the weather took a turn for the worse, with rainy, unsettled conditions in the immediate forecast. Undaunted, we set out with a palpable sense of excitement.

Translated as “Land of the Hippos”, the Umzimvubu River has fashioned a gorge of towering 300m ramparts known as the Gates of Port St. John’s. The hippos are long gone, having been eradicated back in the 50’s. On the other hand, it could be re-named river of bull sharks, as the brackish water is an important nursery for young sharks. Definitely not a place one would care to wade across!

Getting out to sea faced some navigational challenges. Along with shallow water near the river’s mouth, offshore surf was intense, with Ant timing our exit to steer clear of the cresting waves. A second attempt was necessary, but Ant was a master, getting us through with minimal discomfort.

Binoculars raised, Ant scanned for signs, with congregations of dolphins and Cape gannets harbingers of imminent action. Right away, things looked promising. A large pod of

dolphins cruised alongside us, while a distant flock of gannets circled expectantly. We were off!

We arrived to discover an avian holding pattern; some birds were diving for fish but most lounged on the surface or circled overhead. False alarm. The radio soon crackled to life—another swim-bait ball 30 minutes away. Roaring down the coast, we discovered the other group had dived it, but we were late for the party.

With sardine action still lacking on the second day, we decided to concentrate on humpback whale encounters—and there was plenty,



with many breaching or swimming past throughout the morning. This time we would be on snorkel only. Sensing our presence, the whales would make a quick detour. I wouldn’t have thought seeing something so large would be so problematic.

At the surface, my camera and



Humpback whale breaching



ANDREY BIZYUKIN



ANDREY BIZYUKIN

South Africa

Hunting gannets at Sardine Run above (lower left) and below the water (far left); Sharks also join in the fray at Sardine Run (left)

top of one.

Regrettably, we managed only one more bait ball dive, and no predators were to be seen. Although there were

nication to coordinate the assault. Their ranks perforated, the sardines regrouped in a seething panicked mass. Bronze whalers and blacktips joined the fray while Cape gannets attacked from above, zooming through the water column like feathered torpedoes. The water boiled in the onslaught.

beyond. Back at the lodge, Ivan whipped up a tasty Cape Malay/Greek fusion dish of mixed seafood in a yellow curry sauce along with BBQ ribs and vegetable curry. I hoped the next day would provide some much-needed exercise.

Changing weather

Unfortunately, conditions worsened as the week unfolded. Along with a rain and brisk wind, the roller coaster swells made snorkelling a real challenge. The sardines were around—just not where we were. Nevertheless, there was always something to see. Cape gannets put on a spectacular display, plummeting at dizzying speed before striking the water like machine gun fire. A few dead individuals indicated that not all succeeded; an erroneous trajectory could easily result in a broken neck. One unfortunate member of our group did a backwards roll right on



ANDREY BIZYUKIN



the plunge. As the whales advanced, he cast me a mischievous grin. "They are going to shit themselves!" he chuckled. Moments later, snorkels muffled delighted whoops as the whales passed to within a few metres.

The next time, I opted to go and with camera clasped to chest, did a back roll in. Scanning frantically, I wheeled to dis-

cover a humpback heading right at me. At such close range, it was enormous! Then, the unthinkable happened; my camera's autofocus ceased working. With the whale's massive head filling my

viewfinder, there were no hard edges for the focus to lock on. Seconds later, it was out of range and I missed the shot. Curses!!!! Now there is a situation one doesn't confront every day: a whale too close to photograph.

An hour later, Ant spied common dolphins gathering at the surface. We finally heard the magic words: "Bait ball!" I geared up in a flash. As this was no controlled environment, we were instructed to stick close to our buddies, staying back to back in case any sharks got over inquisitive. This would be wild and woolly!

About 4m down, we found the bait ball of sardine, and it was under attack. Like sheepdogs herding a flock, common dolphins made repeated passes, striking it with precision accuracy. I was immediately aware of their high-frequency squeaking, commu-

nication to coordinate the assault. Their ranks perforated, the sardines regrouped in a seething panicked mass. Bronze whalers and blacktips joined the fray while Cape gannets attacked from above, zooming through the water column like feathered torpedoes. The water boiled in the onslaught.

Incredible!

My elation proved short-lived. My steel tank, combined with an excessive weight belt, wreaked havoc on my buoyancy. Bobbing up and down like a yo-yo, I managed a few shots before making a hasty retreat to the boat to remove some weights. The sardines were rapidly decimated—glittering scales the only indication they had existed at all. To commemorate our first bait ball, everyone was treated to a Sardine Run tradition—a green (cream soda) lollipop. I was unsettled to learn a bronze whaler had taken interest in my erratic buoyancy.

Back on land, we headed to the airstrip atop Mount Theisger for sundowners. Despite the overcast conditions, the view was magnificent, offering a clear view of the gorge and Indian Ocean

Humpback whale, Wild Coast





White rhino (left) and giraffes (right) at Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve; Serval (far left) and cheetah (below) at Emdoneni Lodge

even allowed to pet them. The cats clearly enjoyed the attention, purring like electric motors. Without warning, one flopped over, rested its head on my foot and fell asleep.



South Africa

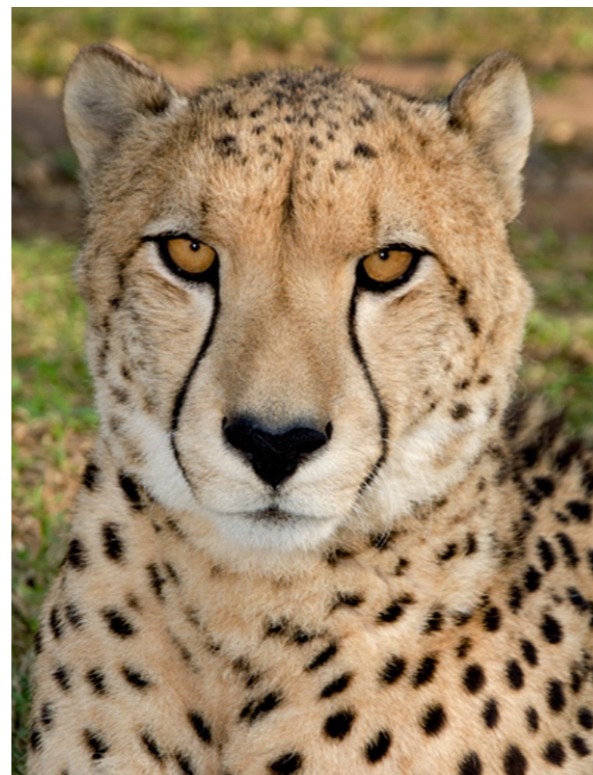
plenty of whales, we missed one notable. Measuring up to 15m, Bryde's whale is Africa's largest predator, capable of ingesting huge quantities of sardines in a single gulp. According to Ant, they have occasionally surfaced right beside the boat.

On our final morning, I nearly went out, but the prospect of a rainy, dive-free excursion didn't entice, and I opted out. Big mistake! Although no one left the zodiac, several humpbacks put on quite a show with repeated close breaches. Lesson learned: Always go! In the afternoon, everyone hiked into town

to explore the local market. We were intrigued to check out the local witch doctor until discovering the fee was \$30.00 each. Pass.

Topside activities

Before my journey to Cape Town, Sonja had arranged me a few nights at some Zululand safari lodges. After all, the very idea of visiting South Africa and not going on safari was virtually sacrilegious! Bidding the Enfield group adieu in Umkomaas, I transferred to another vehicle for the three-and-a-half-hour drive to Zululand.

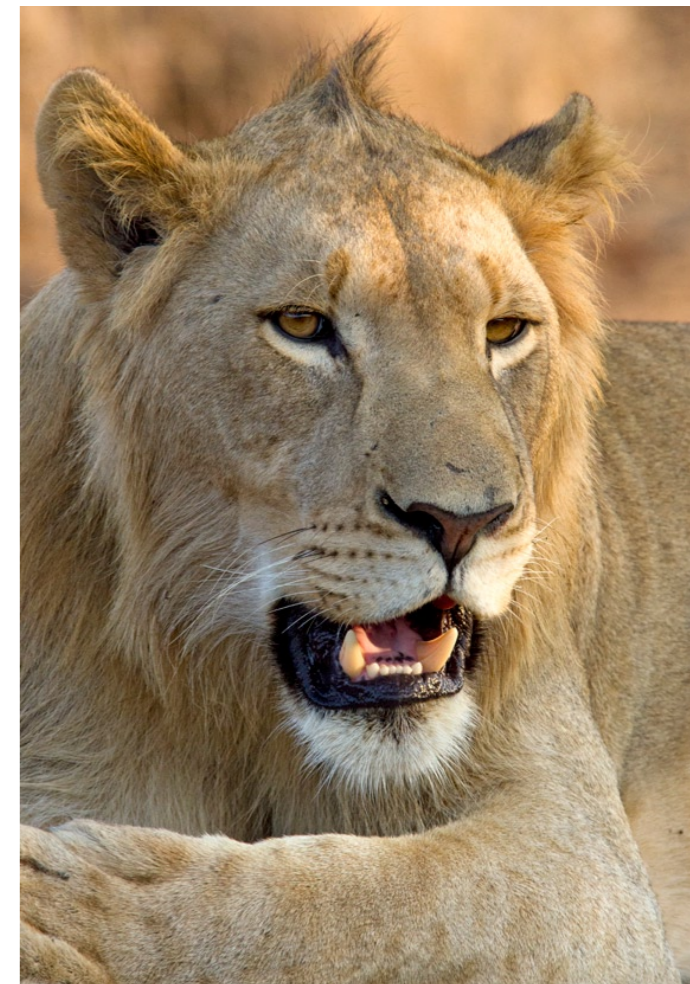


been frigid!

The next morning featured a visit to the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve, Kwazulu-Natal's oldest and largest game park and home to the Big Five (elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo and rhino). The park's northern sector, known as the Hluhluwe, features hilly topography with altitudes ranging from 80 to 540 metres, a far cry from the flat savannah one associates with Africa.

Although some of the big five remained elusive, white rhinos were highly visible as well as buffalo, impala, spotted hyena and plenty of giraffe. An afternoon drive at Falaza's private reserve yielded nyala, warthogs, impala, blue wildebeest and red duiker. The star attraction was the reserve's resident white rhino, a real bruiser that was the biggest I have ever seen.

Thanda. For my final overnight stop, Sonja saved the most luxurious for last. Located within a 14,000-hectare private reserve, the Thanda Safari Lodge proved to be a real stunner. Another big five reserve, this one was private, giving the feeling



Young male lion at Thanda



Hippos at Lake St. Lucia

Emdoneni. My first stop was Emdoneni Lodge, a private lodge famous for its cat breeding program. Four species are bred at the centre including African wildcat, caracal, serval and cheetah. On a supervised tour, it was possible to enter the enclosures, allowing for some amazing photo opportunities. The highlight was the cheetahs—two brothers long habituated to people. We were

Falaza. My next stop for two nights was at the nearby Falaza Game Reserve and Spa. An afternoon excursion visited Lake St. Lucia, part of the World Heritage iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Boat cruises are popular, and we arrived in time for the day's final cruise. Crocs and hippos were the prime attractions, with copious numbers basking on the muddy riverbank. The air was nippy on the upper deck, and I was glad to have brought my fleece jacket. The poor crocs must have





Main Street, Simon's Town (left); Boulder's Beach (right); Penguins of Simon's Town (below)

including a mother and calf. After a sundowner in the bush, spotlighting revealed seven more rhino wallowing joyfully in the mud alongside a waterhole. Back at camp, a glass of wine beside a rearing bonfire was a great prelude to a gourmet dinner. This was a safari with style.

Simon's Town

The next morning, I returned to Durban for the two-hour flight to Cape Town. Occupying a dramatic seaside posi-



of your own private wilderness. My room for the night proved jaw dropping. To call it a "tent" was akin to calling the Burj Khalifa a "building". With a verandah overlooking the distant hills, the airy rotunda interior featured a huge bed and ensuite bath. With only a one-night stop, it was a shame I wouldn't have

more time in it.

Despite only one afternoon game drive, it proved extraordinary. Within the first hour, we encountered two groups of lions, including a lioness and three cubs at a kill, my first in three Africa trips! In addition to impala, zebra, giraffe and buffalo, there were plenty of white rhino,



Simon's Town Harbour



entire area.

My final destination was Simon's Town, nestled alongside False Bay on the Cape Peninsula's eastern coast. An important naval base for more than two centuries, the town is rich in history, its main street flanked with charming Victorian architecture.

My accommodation was the Quayside Hotel, situated right on the harbour. My balcony offered superb views of the harbour and rugged coastline. Plus, how can one

fault a hotel that offers a welcome glass of sherry?

That evening, I had dinner at Bertha's, a restaurant right on the water below my room. The springbok medallions with mushroom sauce were outstanding, ensuring a return visit every night at mealtime. By week's end, the entire staff knew my name.

After breakfast the next morning, a phone call from Dave prompted a change in itinerary. "May I humbly suggest we do Table Mountain today

instead of the Cape? The afternoon weather forecast calls for clear conditions, a high of 26° and no wind." As unsettled weather can thwart a visit to Table Mountain, especially during the winter months, I readily agreed to seize the moment.

My morning free, I headed for Boulders Beach, home to view some decidedly un-African wildlife: African penguins. Arriving just after 9:30, I paid for my ticket and walked in. I wondered if something was wrong, as I seemed to be the only one there.

A sheltered cove of white sand punctuated with granite boulders, Boulders Beach is part of the Table Mountain National Park. From just two breeding pairs in 1982, the penguin population has since ballooned to 3,000. To protect both penguins and the environment, a wooden boardwalk has been erected along the beach. Close observation was not an issue, with penguins often an arm's length away. Despite their comical appearance, razor-sharp beaks are capable of inflicting a nasty bite.

I photographed in contented solitude



Crossing the peninsula, we headed for Chapman's Peak drive, touted as the country's most scenic. Hugging the vertiginous cliffs of the Constantia Mountains, the 9km road was constructed by convicts between 1915 and 1922. A series of fatal accidents involving boulders prompted a four-year closure for maintenance. The road was re-opened in 2004 as a toll road, a move deemed controversial amongst local residents.

for an hour as the birds went about their business of tending chicks, preening, waddling and squabbling. Then, a busload of tourists arrived and the viewing platform was promptly overrun. It didn't last long, and peace and quiet resumed, apart from the occasional powerful bray. It was easy to see how they received the name jackass penguin.

For lunch, I opted for a favourite South African delicacy: biltong. The local version of beef jerky, the air-dried salted meat comes in many varieties. Dave recommended a shop near my hotel called Biltong and Bake. Along with the usual beef and pork, there were plenty of exotic game versions, and I selected gemsbok, ostrich and springbok. Although initially tough, all proved delicious. Take that, beef jerky! My beverage was Iron Brew, a soft drink regarded as South Africa's favourite. How can one refuse a drink billed as "rosy vanilla, fruity flavoured"? Definitely unique!



From the lookout at Noordhoek (North Corner) Village, the impressive sweep of Long Beach stretched 6km to the 30m Slangkop Lighthouse, the highest on the South African coast. Despite the chilly Atlantic temperatures, Cape Town's beaches are thronged during the summer months. Even during my winter visit, hardy souls could be seen battling the surf on body boards. The locals call them shark biscuits!

Approaching the city proper, we passed Clifton and Bantry Bay, home to some of the country's most costly real estate. Signal Hill revealed superlative views of the city, hugging the coast below and sprawling to the north and east behind Table Mountain.

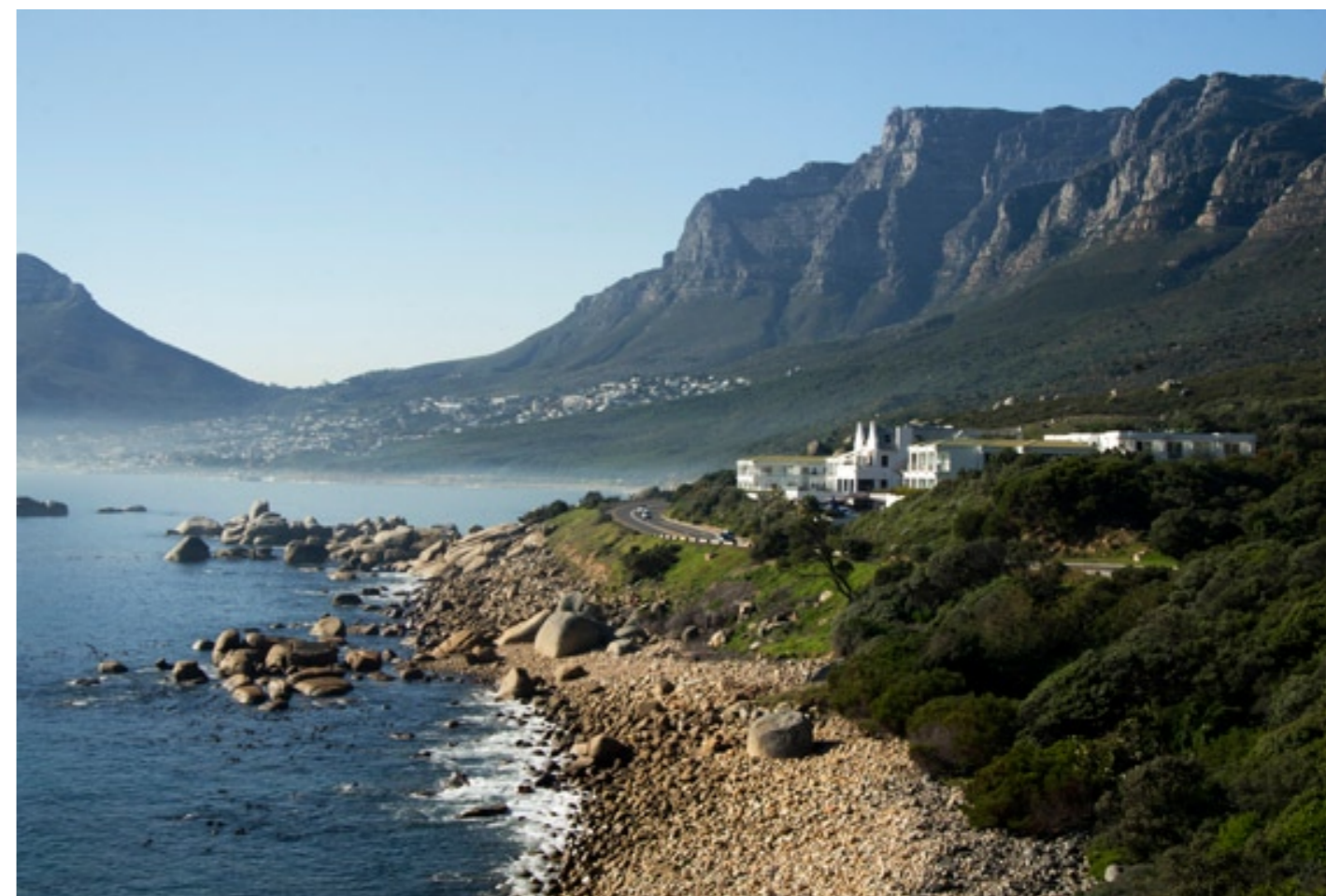
Majestic yet temperamental, Table Mountain is the city's most iconic landmark. Prior to the Cableway, the only way up involved an arduous hike of several hours. The cable car is unique as it has a 360-degree revolving floor, which allows everyone the opportunity to photograph from a couple of open windows. Not enamoured with heights, I did okay until the very last leg. Skimming a sheer rock wall provided an unwanted dose of vertigo!

A World Heritage Site, the Table Mountain National Park is part of the Cape Floristic Region, the smallest and richest of the world's

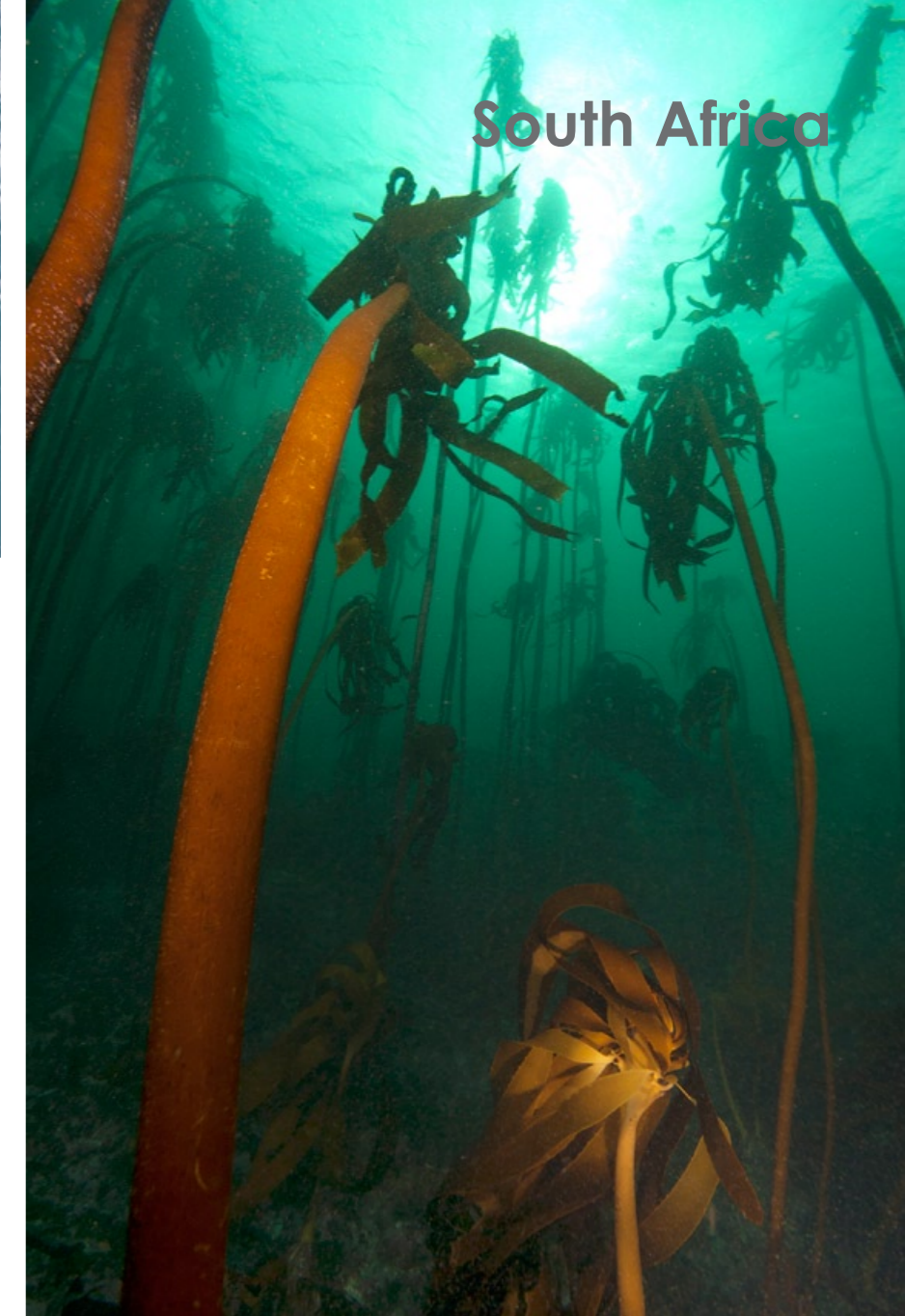
six floral kingdoms. Known as Fynbos (Fine bush), it occurs only in the Western Cape's Mediterranean-style climate. Consisting of scrubland and heath, diversity is extraordinary, with over 9,000 recognized plant species, around 6,200 of which are endemic.

I could also discern the distant silhouette of Robben Island, famous as the set-

ting of Nelson Mandela's incarceration. Although I didn't see one, the mountain's most common mammal residents are hyraxes, locally known as dassies. Incredibly, the rodent-like animals are related to elephants. An amazing day was concluded with a spectacular sunset over Table Bay from north of the city.



CLOCKWISE: Twelve Apostles; Sunset over Table Bay; Chapman's Peak Drive; Table Mountain panorama



South Africa

Breaching great white shark (left); Fur seal at False Bay (above); Kelp forest at Miller's Point (right); Author Scott Bennett armed with camera in shark cage (lower left)



Shark diving

After nearly five days, it was finally time to get wet. I would be diving with Shark Explorers, established in 2008 by Morne Hardenberg and Stephen Swanson. With the motto "Change your perspective", the company has been committed to providing visitors a positive shark experi-

ence to counter perpetual media negativity. The Cape's waters are a mecca for sharks and a number of trips are offered to see them depending on the season. My winter arrival coincided with the big boys—the great whites! In addition, excursions would be made to dive with fur seals and to kelp forests for sevengill sharks.

Arriving at the shop, I was pleasantly surprised to see a familiar face—my friend Linda Ferwerda, who was visiting from the Netherlands. Unfortunately, Morne was still at the Sardine Run, but did meet his niece Monique. Also on hand was divemaster Ernest Salima, who hails from Malawi (my next stop after South Africa). With gear sorted, it was time to head to the jetty.

water turned out to be a balmy 15°C. I was fitted with a 5mm suit along with an outer shell. Learning my lesson from the Sardine Run, I opted for fewer weights to compensate for the steel tank. There was also another South African first. We would be on a real boat, with entry via a giant stride and a ladder to get out. Sweet!

False Bay

False Bay is one of the few places in the world where it is possible to dive with sevengill sharks. An ancient species attaining lengths of 3m and weighing up to 335kg, sevengills are normally deep water residents. Opportunistic predators, they prey on everything from rays, chimaeras and bony fishes to carrion and other sharks. They are especially formidable predators of Cape fur seals, which I was hopeful they could differentiate from wetsuit-clad divers. According to Stephen, it isn't unusual to see more than ten on one dive, and being naturally curious, chum or bait isn't necessary.

The group was big, with a number of international students from an ocean studies course participating. During the

briefing, we were told visibility can range from 6-12m, so staying in close proximity to your dive buddy was essential. As Linda would be my dive buddy, her camera set-up would make her easy to spot. All was good.

Miller's Point

The boat trip to Miller's Point was short but scenic, passing alongside the Cape Peninsula's rugged coastline. Our destination was jammed



Cow shark at Miller's Point



Silhouette of cow shark at Miller's Point; Colony of seals at Seal Island (right); Red Roman at Miller's Point (lower right)



Detail of kelp at Miller's Point

with bobbing kelp, buoyed to the surface by gas-filled bladders. The largest and fastest growing of the world's seaweeds, kelp thrives on nutrients churned up by the Cape's cold, rich waters. Having never dived such an environment, I had unhappy visions of being entwined in a tangle of stems and fronds.

With Linda ready to go, we plunged in and descended to the bottom. Entanglement concerns were promptly replaced by wonder. Shafts of light flickered from above, creating the ethereal atmosphere of an underwater cathedral. Visibility was good, with the surface clearly visible from the bottom.

With everyone assembled on a sandy patch at 18m, it didn't take long to see the sharks; they soon found us! Approximately eight appeared, some coming to within an arm's length. None showed aggression, only benign curiosity. The upturned corners of their mouths gave the appearance of a goofy smile.

After watching the sharks, we spent the

remainder of the dive exploring the kelp forest. Fronds undulated in the mild surge, while red Romans made arresting photo subjects. A member of the seabream family endemic to Southern Africa, their numbers have been severely depleted due to excessive fishing.

Unfortunately, my dive was cut short when my weight belt slid off, and I shot to the surface like a rocket. Fortunately, Linda found it, the orange weights glowing like a beacon on the sandy bottom. Someone was the recipient of a well-earned beer!

Seal Island

Surface interval completed, a short boat ride brought us to Seal Island at Partridge Point. Many of the shivering students opted out, but I couldn't wait to get back in the water. The dive would be very shallow, only 6m along the island's drop-off. Before weighing anchor, a legion of brown, whiskered heads bobbed expectantly at the surface.

"Don't worry," said Ernest with a chuckle. "They will come to you."

He wasn't kidding. Descending the wall, we were immediately besieged, and the dive proved to be one of the most memorable I have ever experienced. I surmised the seals would be moving too quickly to photograph, but was pleasantly surprised. Although many zoomed past, others came in for a closer look.

Boasting big brown eyes, their playful antics reminded me of mischievous dogs. I couldn't get over their sheer grace, gliding and pirouetting while we clumsy humans were buffeted by the relentless surge. Some were real characters; looking up from my camera's viewer, I caught one chewing on the end of



one of my strobes. The mark remains to this day.

With the relentless seal action, it was easy to overlook the reef. Very different from the tropics, the rocky walls were ablaze with colour, jam-packed with star-



MORNE HARDENBERG

fish, clams and urchins. The later proved especially photogenic with hues of lavender, yellow and orange. Marveling at the array of shapes and textures, I practically ignored the seals.

Great white shark cage diving

Finally it was time for the main event: the great white cage dive! After my 5:30 wakeup call and a quick coffee, I grabbed my housed camera and headed down to the jetty for 6:00, which was already abuzz with activity, with several operators gearing up for morning



MORNE HARDENBERG

trips. Along with eight passengers, the boat had a full crew. With Stephen at the helm, along for the ride were divemasters Ernest, Corne Ligtermoet and Nina Daniels.

Departing the jetty at 6:30, we set out for Seal Island. Situated eight nautical miles from Simon's Town harbour, it is home to 70,000 furs seals, along

with cape and bank cormorants and even a few penguins. The morning's excursion would feature three distinct segments. First, we would search the bay for predations, as the majority occurs prior to sunrise. Next, a seal decoy would be towed behind the boat to entice a breach. The final stage was the cage dive.

Arriving just after 7:00, Stephen gave a briefing on shark hunting behaviour and what to expect. After weeks of feeding at sea, the seals head for home, exhausted and highly vulnerable. This

is what the sharks are waiting for and gather in large numbers during the pre-dawn hours. The seals are unable to discern the sharks below, but are highly visible to the sharks, rocketing to the surface to snatch their unsuspecting prey.

Predations can last anywhere from seconds to several minutes. While the sharks possess the brute force, agility is the seals' trump card. On many occasions, the shark will miss its mark, with a wild chase ensuing at the surface. The seal will often out maneuver the shark, tiring it to the point of giving up.

With multiple crewmembers on the lookout, all directions were covered for potential shark action, specifically, "porpoising" seals. With sinister motives, seabirds shadow their movements, anticipating leftovers from a potential attack. It didn't take long before the first breach. Then the second. Then the third. I lost count of how many times I heard "Predation, three

o'clock" and turned to discover it was all over.

One predation proved particularly gruesome. "Lots of blood," winced Ernest, as I quickly averted my eyes. The gulls descended in seconds, frantically snatching up blubber and undigested fish bits. Stephen estimated that approximately 50 great whites reside in False Bay. Judging from the number of predations, it appeared they were all around Seal Island.

Trolling with seal-lure

It was then time for stage two of our excursion, as Ernest prepared "Frank", a life-size seal mockup.



Fur seal at Partridge Bay; Great white shark attacking seal lure (left); Great white and cage divers (top)





Fur seal at Partridge Bay (left); Ostrich at the Cape of Good Hope (above); Smitswinkel Bay (right); Baboon (lower right)

viewpoint.

With everyone in position, Ernest lowered some hefty frozen fish chunks into the water. Another decoy was employed, this one a flat seal silhouette called "Susie." The action

commenced quickly, with the first shark appearing within minutes. "Okay, standby, standby...DOWN, DOWN!" commanded Stephen. Gulping a breath, I submerged to the window, frantically trying to position my camera. Glancing to the curtain of green, the unmistakable sil-

houette came into view—a great white.

Seeing this magnificent predator up close was mesmerizing. Swooping in gracefully, the great mouth opened wide, swallowing the bait in one gulp. At least seven individuals appeared during an hour, including one specimen over 5m long. Another got a bit rambunctious, thrashing the cage with its tail and soaking everyone on deck. Several other boats were in the vicinity; it seemed there were more than enough sharks to go around.

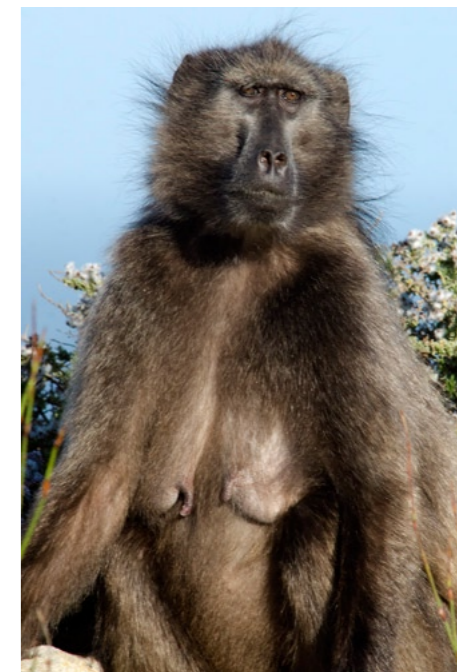
Cape of Good Hope

Unfortunately, a second trip for the following morning was cancelled due to rough conditions. Dave arrived after lunch, and we headed for the Cape of Good Hope. Famous as Africa's southernmost point and the convergence of Atlantic and Indian Oceans, in reality, it's neither. The actual meeting point fluctuates according to ocean currents, which doesn't actually happen at the Cape. As for the continent's southernmost point, that honour belongs to Cape Agulhas, a peninsula some 150 kilometers to the southeast. Just don't tell the tourist literature.

Wending curvaceously, the road

offered frequent lookouts, providing stupendous views. The beauty also bore an ominous side; a large sign emphatically proclaimed "DANGER: BABOONS." Large and aggressive, chacma baboons are a real problem in the area, attacking people and even breaking into homes causing extensive damage. Further down the road, we encountered a "baboon squad" trying to frighten some off a property by firing blanks. After that, I was afraid to get out of the car for the rest of the morning.

From the graceful sweep of Smitswinkel Bay, the road turned inland, entering the Cape National Park. Stopping to pay the entry fee, a sign announced closing



Essentially, we would troll with a seal-sized lure. "Come on Frank, give us joy!" enthused Steven. With Stephen, Ernest, Come and Nina on the lookout, all directions were covered for potential shark action. Somehow, I couldn't imagine the seals echoing his enthusiasm.

At 9am, the guys started chumming with fish oil to lure in the sharks. The moment of truth had finally arrived. It was cage time. Donning wetsuit, boots, gloves and hood, I was perplexed as to not only where the cage would be positioned but also how I would actually get in. I soon had my answer. The cage was suspended from the vessel's side, and we would step down like on a ladder. It was a lot narrower than expected, holding four people lengthwise, with barely enough room to turn around. No scuba was involved; with heads and shoulders above the water line, a window below the surface provided an unobstructed



Tourists visit the Cape of Good Hope



time was 17:54. Not 18:00, but 17:54? Windswept and carpeted by Fynbos vegetation, the landscape was stark yet beautiful. An eland bolted across the road, while along the coast, we encountered all four of the park's ostriches.

Normally associated with dry savanna, the birds made for an incongruous sight along the seashore. Seeing one relieve itself was practically awe-inspiring; the sheer force appeared capable of shattering a car windshield. Stopping for a photo at the

Cape of Good Hope, the wind actually knocked me off balance.

With daylight waning, our final stop was Cape Point Lighthouse. Not wanting to hike up in the wind (coupled with a dose of laziness), I opted for the funicular.



Painfully slow, the ascent was further impeded by the driver-in-training that stopped short of the platform, resulting in a 15-minute wait. With extreme irony, I noticed the tram's name was "Flying Dutchman." From the look-out, the views were spectacular and winds even stronger. With surf pounding below, the "Cape of Storms" certainly lived up to its name.

More seals, sharks and kelp

During my final days in Simon's Town, I managed additional seal and kelp dives along with a second shark trip that proved even more thrilling. Conditions were rougher, testing everyone's seasickness threshold. I was okay, but one poor woman vomited for the entire trip. This time I finally witnessed a full breach where the shark caught a seal. Despite having seen footage on BBC's *Planet Earth*, nothing quite prepared me for witnessing the event in person. The sheer force displayed as the sharks erupted from the surface was mind-boggling.

Stephen counted 15 predations and five fatalities. I must admit, watching the proceedings left me with decidedly mixed feelings. Although observing predations was an incredible experience, one can't help but sympathize with the seals. It was definitely exhilarating to see one escape.

Describing the experience to friends



LEFT TO RIGHT: Detail of colourful reef at Partridge Bay; Cape Point lighthouse; Fur seals at Partridge Bay

back home on Facebook, it was always the same question. "Was it scary?" Not at all. Pure exhilaration was a more apt description, with participants on both excursions utterly thrilled by their close-up encounters. Shark Explorers means to transform peoples' perception of these amazing creatures and seeing them up close in the wild is just the ticket.

Afterthoughts

During my 19 days in South Africa, the wealth of different experiences proved exhilarating. When it comes to the Sardine Run, fair weather divers beware. Truly nature in the raw, it was hard work; each evening, I could feel muscles I didn't know I had. Like anything in nature, nothing is guaranteed, with rain and rough conditions making for uncomfortable days out. However, that tantalizing glimpse of action was enough to whet my appetite for more. With so much more to explore, both under and over the water, I will definitely be back. It is the world in one country, indeed. ■

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fact file



South Africa



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM

History In 1652, Dutch traders landed at the southern tip of what is now South Africa. They established a re-supply station here at this point on the spice route to the Far East from the Netherlands. It eventually became the city of Cape Town. In 1806, the British seized the Cape of Good Hope, compelling many Dutch settlers (the Boers) to move north to establish their own republics. Diamonds and gold were discovered in 1867 and 1886 respectively, spurring immigration and wealth. As a result, subjugation of the native inhabitants intensified. British encroachments

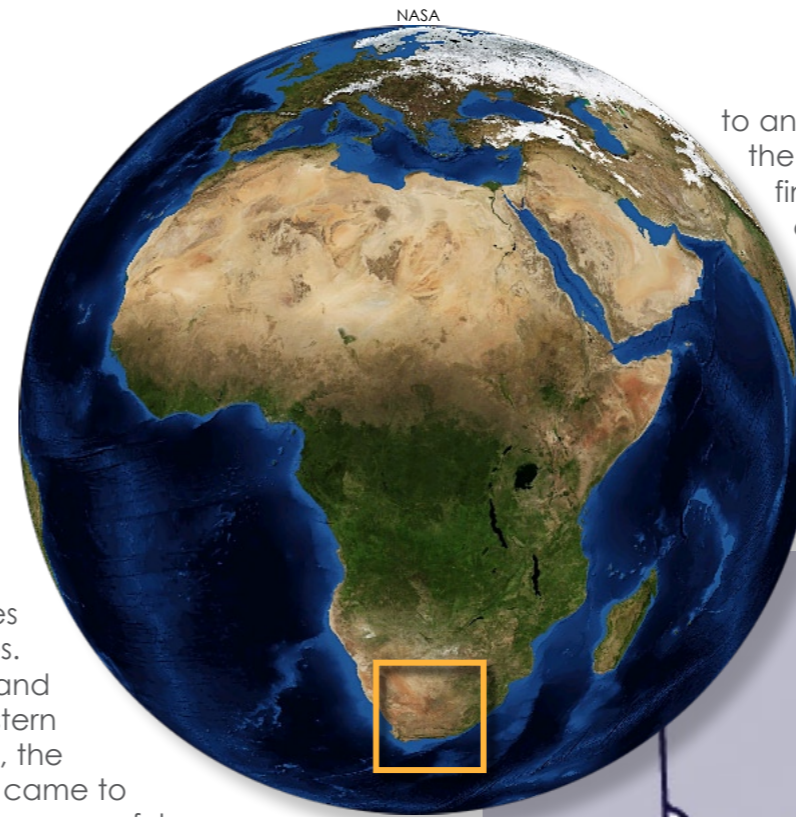
were resisted by the Boers, but they were eventually defeated in the Boer War, which took place from 1899 to 1902. But in 1910 the Boers, or Afrikaners as they came to be known, ruled together with the British under the Union of South Africa, which in 1961 became a republic after a referendum by white voters. A policy of apartheid (segregation) was instituted by the elected National Party in 1948. This policy favored the white minority over the black majority. Opposition to apartheid was led by the African National Congress (ANC) of which Nelson Mandela was a leader who was

imprisoned for decades for his political activities. After years of conflict and boycotts by some Western nations and institutions, the ruling party eventually came to the table to negotiate a peaceful transition to majority rule. The end of apartheid came in 1994, when the first multi-racial elections were held, ushering in majority rule under a government led by the ANC. The country still struggles with apartheid-era imbalances in education, health and decent housing. Infighting in the ANC has led to abrupt changes in leadership. Government: republic. Capital: Pretoria

Geography Located in Southern Africa, the country occupies the southern tip of the African continent. Terrain is comprised of a vast plateau in the interior, surrounded by rugged hills and narrow coastal plain. Coastline: 2,798km. Lowest point: Atlantic Ocean 0m. Highest point: Njesuthi 3,408m.

Climate Primarily semiarid, South African climate is subtropical along the east coast, with sunshine during the day and cool nights.

Environmental issues Extensive water conservation and control measures are required due



RIGHT: Global map with location of South Africa. LOWER RIGHT: Map of South Africa, BOTTOM LEFT: Fur seal in Partridge Bay

to the country's lack of important lakes and major rivers. Demand for water is outpacing supply. Other challenges include pollution of rivers due to urban discharge and agricultural runoff, acid rain due to air pollution, desertification and soil erosion.

Economy

A middle-income, emerging market, rich in its supply of natural resources, South Africa has well-developed sectors in finance, law, communications, energy and transportation as well as the 15th largest stock market in the world. Despite the country's modern infrastructure, which supports efficient goods distribution to major urban centers, there are obstacles that slow economic growth. In 2007, aging electrical plants led

to an electricity crisis and slowed the economy. Then the global financial crisis hit, reducing commodity prices and world demand. In 2009, GDP fell almost 2% but has since recovered. Current challenges include poverty, inequality and unemployment at nearly 25 percent of the work force. However, improvements

Currency Rand (ZAR)
Exchange rates: 1EUR=15.14ZAR, 1USD=11,16ZAR, 1GBP=18.41ZAR, 1AUD=9.80ZAR, 1SGD=8.75ZAR

Population 48,601,098 (July 2013 est.) Ethnic groups: black African 79%, white 9.6%, mixed 8.9%, Indian/Asian 2.5% (2001 census). Religions: Protestant 36.6% (Zionist Christian 11.1%, Pentecostal/Charismatic 8.2%, Methodist 6.8%, Dutch Reformed 6.7%, Anglican 3.8%), Catholic 7.1%, Muslim 1.5%, other Christian religions 36% (2001 census). Internet users: 4.42 million (2009)

Language Official languages include: IsiZulu 23.82%, IsiXhosa 17.64%, Afrikaans 13.35%, Sepedi 9.39%, English 8.2%, Setswana 8.2%, Sesotho 7.93%, Xitsonga 4.44%, siSwati 2.66%, Tshivenda 2.28%, and isiNdebele 1.59% (2001 census)

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