

## SAFARI THROUGH SOUTH AFRICA - IV

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After being with the group for a couple of weeks it is something of a relief to be on my own again and free to do whatever I want. Now my main objective is to see a Cheetah, long my favourite animal of all the African panoply, and the only one I did not see in the Kruger.

First though I take a trip down the Cape Peninsula to the legendary Cape of Good Hope. Before reaching it there is Cape Point which is one of the most magnificent promontories on earth, with a real wow factor. I take the "Flying Dutchman" funicular railway up to the top and walk around the Lighthouse, enjoying stunning views of rocks and fynbos vegetation above turquoise seas, and watching the birds nesting along the cliff edges from above.

The Cape of Good Hope was originally named Cape of Storms by the Portuguese explorer Bartholemew Diaz in 1488, a description well deserved but Good Hope has more of an air of optimism about it and the King of Portugal decided to change the name. Although it is not the southernmost point of Africa, (which is Cape Agulhas) nor the most spectacular of the Capes, it is still quite stunning. We drive past Baboons, Eland and Ostriches and a tree filled with baby monkeys, while out to sea there are plentiful seals and cormorants.

At Boulder's Rock just before Simonstown there is a large colony of Penguins and I walk along the coastal

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path to see these farcical and entertaining seabirds swaggering about in their classic black and white dress. Strictly speaking they are not birds as they cannot fly although millions of years ago they did. Now they use their "wings" (transmuted into flippers) to swim, achieving speeds of up to 25 km per hour.

Lunch is in Simonstown, a small town rich in Maritime history named for the Governor, Simon van der Stel, (also the founder of Stellenbosch) and today home to the South African Navy. An ideal natural harbour, Simonstown was commandeered as anchorage for the ships of the Dutch East India Company in 1783 until the British took it over as a Naval Base which it remained up to the 1970's and still is if necessary. A very British town, the architecture is mostly from the mid 18th and 19th centuries, with quaint colonial buildings lining the coast road against the backdrop of mountains behind. I order local oysters and a glass of white wine sitting in the sunshine on the dockside – sheer heaven!

In the main square there is a sculpture of "Just Nuisance" a Great Dane who attached himself to the Navy boys during the war years becoming a great favourite, and the only dog ever to be enlisted as an Able Seaman in the Royal Navy. He died at just seven years old and was buried on the hill above the town with full military honours.

After lunch I visit Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. These are huge gardens in the centre of Cape Town, 1,300 acres of walkways and paths, swing bridges and nature trails, planted out with all manner of trees bushes shrubs and flowers. The Gardens originally contained the Dutch settlement and a thick hedge of wild Almond trees completely surrounding it was planted in 1660 by van Riebeeck, Commander of the Cape and a Dutch East India Company man, to protect them from the local tribe (the *Khoikhoi*) stealing their cattle and livestock.



Hippo roaring at Inverdoorn

Regarded by many Afrikaans as the Founding Father of the Nation, Jan van Riebeeck was a Dutch navigator, botanist, surgeon and explorer who became Commander of the Cape in 1652, and was responsible for introducing many species of plants, mostly fruit and vegetables into Africa. The main purpose of his garden was to replenish provisions for ships of the East India Company circumnavigating the Cape. Parts of the hedge remain, although after the British handover in 1811 the land was largely left untended. It was not until Cecil Rhodes came to power in 1895 that the garden started to be laid out formally as a Botanical Garden. It was opened officially in 1913, and in 1936 part of van Riebeeck's Hedge was declared a National Monument. Today it is important for its diversity and preservation of endangered species of flora, as well as being a popular recreational venue for Cape residents especially at weekends, for parties, picnics and games or just simply walking.

Another day I take a trip to explore the renowned vineyards of Stellenbosch. Walking through the pretty town, one of the oldest in South Africa, also founded by Simon van der Stel in the 1750's, I admire the British colonial buildings and tree-lined streets, and the charming white clapboard-covered Church which reminds me of churches in New England, in east coast America.

We go on to Delheim, one of the older vineries, an attractive property with gorgeous gardens. The wine is excellent and after a tasting in the vaulted cellars, I order some of their Dessert wine for Christmas in London.

At last it is time for the Cheetahs. I am being picked up for the 4-hour drive at 6am and it is a stunning journey. We are travelling into the Western Cape, I have only been in the East so far and the landscape is completely different.

At first it is mountainous with expansive green valleys then we enter extraordinary rocky country with huge boulders lining the route and the incredible Bain's Kloof Pass which is 27 kilometres of almost impassable twists and turns, with massive monoliths overhanging the road or balancing impossibly on the verges.

Andrew Bain was a Scotsman who started the Pass in 1849. It took him 4 years using convict labour straight out of the prisons and is breathtakingly dramatic. Quite suddenly we pass into flat plains of fruit-growing orchards, peaches, apples, pears, apricots, all sorts of soft fruits. We drive through towns with names like Wellington, Wolsely, Worcester, all so English! Then through another Pass constructed by Andrew Bain's son Thomas, shorter than Bain's Kloof but also spectacular and at last we emerge into the Klein Karoo.

The Karoo National Park is a great sandy dry desert land with much "fynbos", a scrubby heathland with millions of tiny plants and small animals, and a protected area for the conservation of all these species of flora and fauna, many extinct elsewhere in the world. It has been an extraordinary drive through four entirely different types of terrain.

Finally we arrive at Inverdoorn, a Lodge camp in the centre of the Klein Karoo. As well as being a Wildlife Reserve, Inverdoorn is a Cheetah Conservancy which is what I really want to see. It is incredibly dry and hot – I love the sun but here it burns the skin right through and it is impossible to walk barefoot, I have to take refuge swimming in the pool or in the a/c coolness of my room. After lunch we rest and at 5pm there is the first Game Drive.

Our guide is Antonio, a bright cheery young man who seems to be in charge of all the jeeps going out. He laughs that we have (almost) the same name, he is South African but also an interesting mixture of Portuguese Irish and German and speaks Afrikaans and Dutch as well as English and he talks non-stop.

Immediately we see Giraffe, Rhino, Gnus (Wildebeest) and of course Cheetahs. Cheetahs are basically non aggressive, unlike the rest of the *Felinae* family, although they hunt and kill to eat. They are the only Big Cats which can be domesticated and I remember a friend of my Father used to keep two when he lived in Africa, which slept at the foot of his bed and I always thought this was wonderfully exotic, the height of romance. Sadly they are an endangered species as because they are so relatively

tame, they have been poached for years for the illegal Pet trade, and their numbers are now listed as Vulnerable. They are slim and light, with long back legs and are easily recognizable by the tearlike streaks on their faces. Built for speed, they are the fastest animals on earth and when hunting can accelerate suddenly from a normal run around 70 kmph to nearly 120 kmph over short periods.

There are 16 cheetahs here at the Conservancy, being made ready for release back into the Wild. To view them we are led up into Machans, game watchtowers on stilts. There are several cheetahs lying around waiting in the shade of a tree and they seem to know the drill as a decoy with meat is shot out of a barrel and they at once give chase with incredible speed, 0 – 120 kmph in 60 seconds! Blink and you miss them. I manage to get a few good photos but not while they are running – just a blur. Although I would have preferred to see them in the wild, they are notoriously shy, and it is still thrilling to see them here, such beautiful creatures, such inbuilt disdainful nobility.

At the end of the day we go looking for Hippos. They live in a large lake with pink Flamingos in the background, and Antonio knows all their habits. At first they are in the Lake, only coming up for air irregularly and we can hardly see them. But Antonio says “Wait!” and around 7pm, just as he predicts, they emerge from the water and start feeding on the hay left on the shore.

In this Reserve all the animals are protected, fed and looked after, not like in the Kruger where they are left to be completely wild, a very different experience. The other guests are friendly and talkative and we have a great dinner. Carpaccio of Springbok is the entree, then Ostrich steak, rare, and they are both delicious – possibly the most interesting and authentic dishes I have had during my entire stay in South Africa! After dinner I sit out on my terrace stargazing – so many brilliant stars to be seen powdering the cavernous blueblack sky, we are deep into the empty Desert countryside of the Karoo.

Next morning Antonio is waiting for us early for another Game Drive – this time he is on the hunt for Lions. We see everything – except Lions. Buffalo, Giraffe, Zebra, Rhino, plenty of Wildebeest, Springbok and Ostriches, often all herded together, which looks strange after the more natural habitat of the Kruger. Oryx, the national animal of South Africa and not easy to spot, we see far in the distance. We find Bully the Elephant, an enormous beast with huge tusks and a celebrity in the Reserve. He has had a hard life – been caged up, beaten and abused, used in films, kept in a garage when he was young, and finally rescued by the Conservancy.



The author at Cape of Good Hope

I begin to understand this is a kind of Recuperation Centre for animals, the aim to let them heal and be released back into the wild if possible, but essentially cared for as long as they need. The Rhino in this Reserve have replacement plastic horns, not real like in the Kruger, to protect them from poachers, as Rhino are often hunted down only for their horns to be ripped off and the animals simply left to die.

So now we have found everything except the Lions and Antonio is getting very agitated. He knows where they are, as apart from the Cheetahs they are the only animals segregated from the others since they are predatory, but he cannot spot them. We would like to see them but cannot quite share his total frustration.

After driving around a while he hears something on the radio and races back to the Lion enclosure. And there they are – lazily sheltering under a bushy tree, almost asleep. The big male favours us with a genteel roar, quite unthreatening. Antonio is overjoyed – mission accomplished!

On the way back to Cape Town we take the Huguenot Tunnel, bypassing the dramatic route we came through before and it is certainly much faster. I am dropped off at the Mount Nelson Hotel, one of the oldest colonial hotels in the Cape and it is truly lovely – gracious with a cultivated timeless elegance. Next day after lunching with my friends at Buitenverwachting in Constantia and sampling their delicious wines, they join me for dinner at the Hotel.

It is almost the end of my journey! It has been quite a rollercoaster ride through a spectacular and unforgettably beautiful country. On my next African journey I shall have to take in the four East Africa countries of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Botswana – but for now the Adventure is over, and happy and satisfied I return to freezing Paris. □