

From Cape to Kruger

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Taking the slow road gets Jane-Anne Lee to the heart of South Africa.

A mongoose darts in front of our car. Minutes later, a donkey cart takes advantage of a break in the traffic. Baboons, young and old, are also risking their lives on this stretch of South African highway.

The best thing about a self-drive holiday in South Africa is the diversity - and not just from the different types of animals taking their chances.

In less than a day, you can venture from cosmopolitan Cape Town to the southernmost tip of the continent, where the Atlantic and Indian oceans clash in a swirling sea of foam, then sip fine wine surrounded by snow-capped mountains in the acclaimed Winelands region.

And that's just for starters. During our three-week sojourn in South Africa, driving from Cape Town to Kruger National Park, we covered more than 3000 kilometres. There were long days at the wheel but the scenery was always rich, taking in dramatic mountain passes, rustic villages, bustling market towns, lush forests and white sand beaches. And, of course, the wildlife. Our days were crowded with so much to absorb.

The country has almost 600 national parks and reserves, with several showcasing the big five - buffalo, rhino, elephant, lion and leopard - but there is plenty to see along the mostly fenceless highways, with a procession of animals crossing by day and night.

Initially, we planned to collect our car, booked via the internet in Australia, at Cape Town airport. Instead, we opt to explore the country's legislative capital by foot and taxi for five days and have the car delivered to our guesthouse on the day of our departure.

It proves to be a sound decision. We not only save money - albeit a small amount, as car hire is cheap, with deals from as low as \$35 a day - but Cape Town is an easy city to walk around. Cheap taxis and popular City Sightseeing tourist buses take you to the lively Waterfront; the cable car to Table Mountain, where there are stunning views and walking trails; Camps Bay, one of the city's most popular local beaches, with the Twelve Apostles of Table Mountain as its backdrop; the Sea Point promenade; museums, galleries and restaurants; and the 528-hectare Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens.

When our rental car arrives, it is not what we ordered. The requested Golf has been replaced by a Toyota Yaris, which just fits our luggage. It is also sans air-conditioning, something we regret as the mercury mounts the further north we head. After warnings from friends about inadequate insurance cover, we read the fine print, take out the most comprehensive policy and hit the road to the Cape of Good Hope. We can't wait to be at the southernmost tip of this vast continent. And within 45 minutes, we are marvelling at the sight of the meeting of the oceans.

On the way back to Cape Town, we stop at Boulders to view a colony of endangered African penguins braying on the beach and around their burrows, then continue on to the fishing village of Kalk Bay for lunch.

Our next destination is Franschhoek in the heart of South Africa's Winelands region, about an hour from Cape Town. On the way, we pass the sprawling townships of Cape Flats, a harsh reminder of the job ahead to achieve more equitable living standards.

In stark contrast, Franschhoek is almost Disney-like, with immaculate, white-washed, scalloped Cape Dutch architecture, vineyards old and new, art galleries, boutiques, fine restaurants, smart guesthouses and mountain vistas. The view from Franschhoek Pass is not to be missed. The town is also a good base to explore the nearby wine destinations of Stellenbosch and Paarl.

We hire bikes to do a back-roads tour of the vineyards, recommended by our guesthouse owner. We sample sparkling wines, the popular white variety chenin blanc and full-bodied reds. A friendly family who run a vineyard kindly offer to drop off our purchases at our guesthouse.

After three nights in the Winelands, we head off on a solid eight-hour drive to the international surfing mecca of Jeffreys Bay, affectionately known as J-Bay. Route 62, a winding hinterland alternative to the main road, crosses more vigneron, mountain passes and the stunning Breede River Valley on the way to Montagu, a



Under African skies ... a traditional Zulu hut. Photo: AFP

sleepy colony for artists.

While accommodation, food, wine and restaurants are much cheaper in South Africa, petrol costs up to 50 per cent more. Strangely, you can't pay for fuel with a credit card. But there are ATMs at most petrol stations.

While many travellers to South Africa opt for a guided tour, a self-drive holiday, usually on excellent roads, is a good option. Despite warnings of car jacking, road ambushes and theft through open car windows, we encounter no problems. But we take local advice and try not to drive at night, nor leave the car unattended in transit. The latter is easy, as most town supermarkets have a guarded, open car park. Each time, we tip the security guard.

From Route 62, we join the famed Garden Route. Inland are wonderful walking trails in the Tsitsikamma Ranges, where rivers have carved deep gorges through old-growth forests. The park is home to the Cape clawless otter.

On the coast, the route offers great views of beaches, turquoise water, sand dunes and lagoons, ideal for canoeing - if only we had time to stop. There are beautiful wildflowers and giant yellowwood trees. We keep driving, fail to make J-Bay before nightfall and arrive about 8pm. Decent accommodation is found easily in the off-season and we grab some dinner and set the alarm clock to watch the waves.

After the worst storm in a decade, the swell is pumping at Supertubes, with perfect, three-metre barrels. The well-developed town is dominated by big-name surf shops, apartments and surfers.

Our next night is undecided. We study the map

and determine our best bet is Kokstad, even though the guide book says the best hotel is at the rear of a service station. The drive there is fascinating. The going is slow, as just about every town has a busy market day with people and produce spilling on to the road. We pass through the lively small city of Mthatha, home of the Nelson Mandela Museum. During apartheid, it was the capital of the largest black homeland, known as the Transkei. The former president grew up in the small town of Qunu, about 30 kilometres south. Peppered through the countryside are villages with round, thatched, spearmint-coloured homes, typical of the region.

The following day's drive is just four hours to the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg range for some hiking in Royal Natal Park. The paths cover 243,000 hectares, were granted World Heritage status in 2000 and feature basalt plateaus, impressive gorges and traditional San rock art sites that bear similarities to Aboriginal rock art.

The San, or Bushmen, once occupied the region, now home to Zulu-speaking people. We hike 14 kilometres through the spectacular Tugela Gorge, regarded as the best one-day hike in South Africa, then the next day climb the four-kilometre-wide Amphitheatre.

Our hiking continues in the 96,000-hectare Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park, whose claim to fame is saving the white rhino. The seven-hour drive to South Africa's oldest game reserve passes through a poverty-stricken landscape where villagers, living without power, lug water from wells in steamy 30-degree heat.

On arrival at the park, we quickly see zebra on the roadside, warthogs busy grazing and a herd of wildebeest and buffalo. The next day we head off early and soon observe a pride of eight lions

along a riverbank. Later that day, we set off on a three-day guided hike to witness wildlife - from rhinos and giraffe to hyenas and elephants - beyond the confines of a vehicle.

By now, we have the wildlife bug and can't wait to visit the 35-kilometre-long Kruger National Park, another seven hours away. We drive slowly over a mountain pass so misty it's a white-out. At last, after driving along an isolated stretch - with a sign declaring: "High crime area" - we arrive at the town of Malelane, staying close to the park's southern gates so we can make an early start.

Once again, we see so much in a short time, especially in the arid, scrubby grasses: lion, buffalo, leopard and hippo. And more in the following days. I recall a friend recommended spending just two days in a game park. Make that two weeks. And make it self-drive.