

LUXURY TRAVEL

See South Africa's secret coast in style

Watch whales from your bed at a gorgeous new lodge on a nature reserve in the Western Cape

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One of the lodges at Lekkerwater

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From my clifftop room, at one of the southernmost points of Africa, I can't see any sign of human settlement. In front of me the Indian Ocean rolls unimpeded towards the horizon. To my right the undulating silhouette of the coast drifts in and out of the early-

morning fog. And just below my room stretches miles of creamy beach, dotted with silvery rock pools glistening in the dawn light.

Until the conservation company Natural Selection opened Lekkerwater Beach Lodge last month, there was nowhere to stay in the 84,000-acre De Hoop Nature Reserve other than a single private luxury house and a few simple rental cottages. But then, lying 240km east of Cape Town and accessible only via dirt roads, the coastal reserve wasn't exactly a place that many people visited. With a marine conservation zone extending 5km out to sea from its shores, it was out of bounds to fishermen. Given its limited stocks of game — mainly small herds of rare bontebok, Cape zebra, chacma baboons and Cape vultures — it didn't attract many wildlife enthusiasts. And with waters teeming with some of the world's biggest sharks, it wasn't a place for swimmers or surfers.



Lekkerwater

What the area did have, the conservationist Colin Bell recognised on a helicopter trip along the coast, was one of the greatest stretches of pristine coastline in southern Africa — and a world heritage site — with an extremely rich history, in addition to fantastic flora and fauna. Unlike the Garden Route to its northeast, which has become a tapestry of golf courses and housing complexes, the huge tract of land surrounding De Hoop was set aside in 1983 by the government for the department of defence. When, a few years later, it realised that it didn't need quite as much land as it thought, 46km of coastline and 34,000 hectares were set aside and De Hoop Nature Reserve was created.

Defence departments aren't normally the heroes of conservation stories, but by setting aside such a vast stretch of coastline, the

government inadvertently created not only a pristine fynbos (shrubland) reserve containing hundreds of endemic plants, but one of the biggest marine reserves in Africa. With no diving, fishing or boats permitted in its waters for more than 30 years, the area has become a haven for marine life; in just two days there I saw hundreds of dolphins hunting in megapods, surfing waves and, in the evening, somersaulting and playing in the clear, cool waters just off the beach. Rocks teemed with seabirds, and also bristled with enormous mussels.

There's also a good reason that the popular five-day, portered hike along the coast is called the Whale Trail. Thanks to a layer of black pebbles that lies along the coast, warming the shallows, the bay is a popular spot for whales to calve between June and November. Last year 1,116 of the mammals were counted in De Hoop during the annual aerial survey – mostly southern right whales, in addition to migrating humpback whales, Bryde's and orcas.

Unlike the nearby town of Hermanus, where tens of thousands of visitors arrive between September and November to whale-watch, Lekkerwater has just seven double guest rooms, and the whole eastern portion of the reserve to explore.

The guests' lounge at Lekkerwater

The lodge, Bell explains, resembles a small, private home more than a commercial hotel, for several reasons. To comply with reserve

rules, all buildings had to fit into the footprint of a previous dwelling here: a cottage, burnt in a lightning fire in 2015, that had been used by the former president FW de Klerk as his “Camp David” during apartheid negotiations (and the place in 1993 in which he discovered that he and Nelson Mandela had won the Nobel peace prize). The lodge also needed to be as eco-friendly as possible, which is why the compact buildings, set on slender foundation pillars, are built of glass and softwoods, and floored in eco-friendly rhinowood; why the heating is solar and why water, from natural boreholes, is filtered back into the ground through high-tech systems.

From the outside the lodge resembles a bristling spine of pale boxy sheds set atop a cliff, but the interiors couldn't be more comfortable or in tune with their surroundings. The Cape Town designers Karen Lategan and Heather Bell have gone for a smart seaside look, mixing the hues of the ocean, beach and scrub with tactile woods, wools and sisals. In the single, glass-fronted living room wide beanbags are carefully arranged beside pebble-shaped tables. A dining table for 16 is hewn from a magnificent single tree trunk. Sisal baskets are filled with ink-blue blankets. Shelves are littered with

romantic lamps, nature books and earthy pottery.

The seven rooms are cosy and close to each other, but they contain everything that a guest could need. In addition to a comfortable queen-size bed and spacious solar-heated shower, there's a practical storage-cum-hanging area for clothes. The linen is crisp, the amenities made by Africology, the nature-inspired artworks commissioned from local artists, and the wood-fired stoves powered by wood from invasive species.

The Lanzerac lodge, outside Stellenbosch

Although the lodge has been built to enable guests to sit comfortably by the fire, or on the wide wooden deck, drinking fynbos-infused gin cocktails or sipping local rooibos chai lattes, a whale book in one hand and binoculars in the other, the point of visiting

this remote spot is to experience the wilderness on foot. And, even better, to experience it on foot with a woman who is not just a renowned Cape chef (more of which later), but a fynbos expert.

Before we've even left the lodge, recycled water bottles in our backpacks and snake-proof boots on our feet (the surrounding Potberg mountains are home to various snakes, including puff adders), Marieclaire Day has our group of four guests entranced by her plant knowledge. Like her mother, who she says "knows pretty much everything" about fynbos, Day has spent her life walking the Cape hills, learning about this extraordinary plant kingdom, which has about 8,500 species, 85 per cent of which are endemic to the Western Cape, and 12 of which are found only in De Hoop.

As we amble up the rocky hills, soaking in the far-reaching views of beaches and rock pools and the rumbling soundtrack of crashing waves, Day keeps stopping: to crush and sniff leaves, to examine weirdly bulbous leaves and to marvel at the plants' capacity to survive: not only in very little water and very rocky soil, but in sea air that's heavy with salt. In her company the surrounding scrubland becomes

a jigsaw of glorious smells, colours and textures. There are sweet-smelling pelargoniums, neon-coloured vygies, wild white proteas, and hundreds of strings and stars and clumps of living green and grey foliage, between which matchstick-size hummingbirds flit, sipping nectar from tiny trumpet-like flowers.

Day has another passion for which she is even better known: cooking. Before coming to run Lekkerwater with her husband, Burt (the lodge's Mr Fixit), she was the chef/owner for more than a decade of the well-regarded Barefoot Cook restaurant in Hermanus. Not only is her cuisine imaginative and fresh, but it is artistically presented: slivers of rare beef with orange honey served on dramatic black ceramics; chunks of Cape cheese, homemade bread and thyme butter with sweetened black figs on wooden boards; stewed, herbed apricots and cream in mini kilner jars.

A pool at Lanzerac

She also ensures that fridges and shelves are well stocked with fresh juices and fine local wines, and that, after long walks on the beach — stopping to look at rock pools rich with red urchins and pink starfish and to paddle in the cool waters — there's a crackling beach bonfire beside which to sip fizz, and a barbecue of homemade spicy boerewors sausage and Malay-spiced fish kebabs to awaken the tastebuds.

Although Lekkerwater is the latest lodge to rise from the ashes of a former fire, it's not the only one in the Cape. In May 2017 the main building in the historic vineyards of Lanzerac outside Stellenbosch, a pretty, three-hour drive from De Hoop, caught fire, destroying not only a building that had housed visitors from Robert Kennedy and Jean Shrimpton to Joyce Grenfell (who apparently horrified staff by removing her glass eye), but antiques from all over the world.

As I drive up the oak-lined driveway of the 1692 property, it's a relief to see that from the outside the building looks no different from the original in which my family regularly

lunched on holidays in the 1970s. While the fire destroyed the roof and interiors of the main building, its walls survived. During its 13-month closure the owners took the opportunity not only to reconstruct the main area, but also to modernise and upgrade the property significantly.

The designer, Con van der Colff (who formerly worked for the furniture company Steinhoff), has had mixed success in his attempt to recreate some of the old-style Dutch atmosphere. The Taphuis bar still, thankfully, has the informal atmosphere of an old-style pub, with log fires, wood panelling and farm-style taxidermy (unlike the main restaurant, which, with its kitsch etched black and white glass windows and sparkling new chandeliers, looks more like a corporate boardroom than a historic Cape dining room).

At the heart of the hotel lies the elegant six-bedroom 1830s Manor House for guests who want a private villa, with beautiful old bedrooms filled with Persian carpets and antiques. One, Room 302, features a wall of books. Below the Jonkershoek mountains is a contemporary duplex spa, with views from the indoor pool and outdoor loungers of the surrounding vineyards.

Set around the gardens, with views over farmland, mountains, oak trees and pools, are the beautifully refurbished bedrooms, from spacious doubles (R3,420/£186 in low season) to massive suites with private pool (R9,550). Each is decorated individually, from feminine and dusky pink, with faux French-style mirrors and chandeliers, through light and tasteful, to masculine and dark (when booking, it's probably worth specifying the style you prefer; the black pressed-metal headboard in Room 105 won't be to everyone's taste).

What people come for time and again here, however, is the South African cuisine, overseen by the Welsh chef Stephen Fraser, ranging from great platters in the wine room to rich, slow-cooked sticky-beef shortrib and the spicy springbok bobotie in the Taphuis. And, of course, the wine, which busloads of tourists come to sample.

The only slightly sour taste that arose during my stay was when I mentioned the hotel's owners in the local town of Stellenbosch. I was told that when, in 2012, the supermarket billionaire Christo Wiese sold Lanzerac for R131.9 million, it was ostensibly to Markus Jooste (the subsequently disgraced chief

executive of the furniture manufacturer Steinhoff, who was at the heart of the biggest corporate fraud in South Africa's history) and an undisclosed British investor, whom staff — and the property register — revealed was Jooste's friend, the Cirencester-based developer Malcolm King.

The publicity that surrounded the Steinhoff fraud — and the billions of rand lost by South African investors and pension funds — may explain why the bar and restaurants seemed to be more popular with foreign tourists than with locals. As one Stellenbosch businessman drily put it to me: “The fire might have been put out, but there's still smoke hanging over that place.” It's a pity, really; until those conversations, the old Lanzerac I'd loved so much as a child had smelt merely of roses.

Need to know

Lisa Grainger was a guest of Mahlatini (028 9073 6050, mahlatini.com), which can arrange a seven-night road trip from Cape Town, staying two nights' B&B at Ellerman House in Bantry Bay, two nights' full board at Lekkerwater Beach Lodge and three nights' B&B at Lanzerac, from £2,400pp, inclusive of car hire and flights from London

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