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## My great African love affair that has outlasted all others



"Cresting the dunes to gaze at that blue sea, I felt my heart constrict; the start of a more abiding romance" CREDIT: GETTY

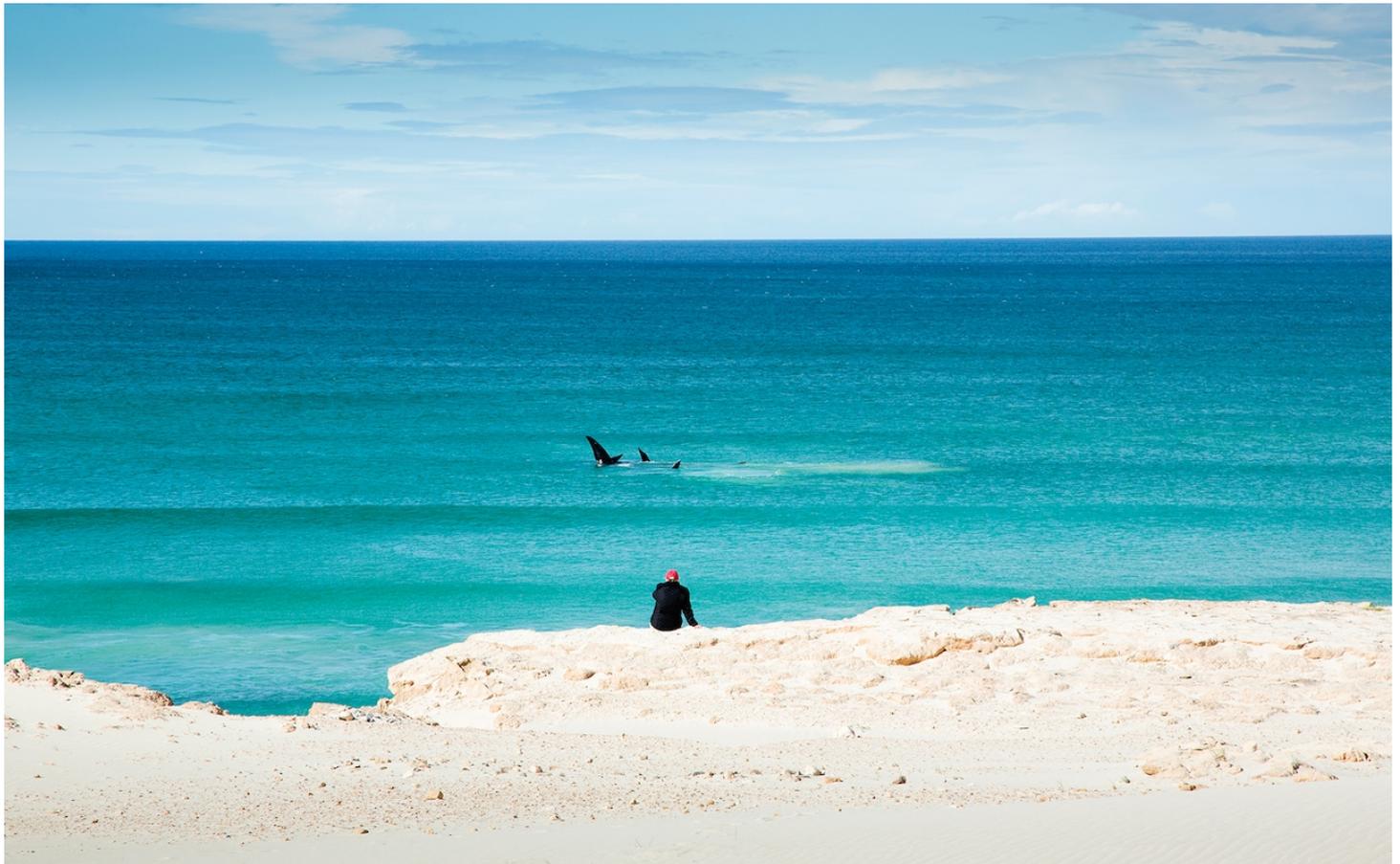
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By **Pippa de Bruyn**

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The first time is with a boy who doesn't love me. Like most visitors to De Hoop in the Nineties, we camp, erecting our tents under a gnarled milkwood overlooking the vlei, alive with birds my city tongue cannot yet name. I steal surreptitious glances at the boy; oblivious, he cranks up Jim Morrison droning "This is the end". I am only half aware of the beauty all around us: bontebok and zebra cropping the grass, stately ostriches crossing the track to where baby baboons gambol in the veld. The next day we drive to the beach. Cresting the enormous white dunes to gaze at that striated-blue sea, I feel my heart constrict; the start of a new, more abiding love affair.

A year passes before I next sign the register at De Hoop's gate, a new boy in tow, along with his crew of reprobates. This time we rent two of Cape Nature's basic little two-bedroom units, strung in a row like wallflowers at a dance, each with a large, round, stone firepit under a stumpy tree. We make big fires and drink cheap red wine. New boy was never meant to be a long-term thing, so it hardly hurts when I watch him flirt with a fresh-faced architect whom I like even more than he does. I drive alone to De Hoop's beach, the fynbos and black-tipped restios blurring into a wash of greens, my window wide open, letting the scent of hot baked soil and heath wash over me.



"Southern right whales return annually to this shoreline to nurse their young" CREDIT: GETTY

The next time I find myself careering down the dusty ribbon that winds its way to the reserve, I know the man at my side – a Wiltshire-born farmer's son called Tom – is the one, and De Hoop is part of my courtship plan. We spend two days clambering into sandy nooks embraced by limestone walls pockmarked by wind and sea; climbing into circular rock pools big enough for two. Six months later we are back, this time accompanied by our best man and his girlfriend. We climb the highest point of the white sand dunes, the best place in the Cape to count the southern right whales that return annually to this shoreline to nurse their young. Bathed in sun, the blue horizon before us, I feel overwhelmed; on the cusp of a life I had always dreamed of. On the way back to our car I pick three everlastings for my wedding bouquet, wanting to hold a piece of De Hoop close to my heart when I declare my intentions to the tall, curly-haired man beside me.

Work, birth, work, travel, work. After a happy sojourn in London, we elect to move back to the UK. I return to Cape Town to pack up, but when a girlfriend suggests a weekend in De Hoop I leapt at the chance to introduce our firstborn, now two, to its sheltered coves and rock pools. But once there, I am unable to eat or drink. Awoken by the bird chorus at dawn, the realisation hits me. Our second daughter is making her presence felt inside me, and Africa is where I want to raise her.

The next time we return is with my in-laws, flown south to meet their new grandchild. We book one of the new cottages built on a prime spot overlooking the vlei. To date facilities had been rudimentary; now bedding is supplied; the kitchen equipped. It is the first time we have lived together on neutral territory, sharing the cosy intimacy of meeting over an unfamiliar kettle in our dressing gowns.



Morukuru CREDIT: HUIS VAN MIDDENMEER

While my husband makes a fire, our eldest clammers simian-like onto her granny's lap. Watching her embrace, I wonder at the courage of mothers, the wrenching separation of lives lived on separate continents.

The third free elections in South Africa come and go; De Hoop is listed a World Heritage Site, and public-private partnerships pop up across the country. The De Hoop Collection is launched, and accommodation is now managed by Madikwe Investments. We grumble about the increase in prices, but the good news is that facilities are on fast-forward – a new restaurant, extensive renovations, a more varied accommodation portfolio. In 2016 Morukuru, owners of a clutch of luxury safari lodges in Madikwe, build a five-star eco villa on a new private concession in De Hoop. An elegant glass box, beautifully furnished, Morukuru Ocean House is the most ecologically advanced and luxurious beach house on the Cape coast, and we spend a fabulous family weekend there.

The pace of life picks up again. The girls are young adults, with social calendars that don't involve us. One leaves home, the other is in her final year of school, old enough to look after herself when the invitation arrives: a brand new lodge – still one of only two in the entire 75,000 hectare reserve – in the untouched eastern sector of De Hoop reserve.



Room with a view: Lekkerwater

Lekkerwater, a holiday farm expropriated by the apartheid government from white middle-class families in 1983, is where F W de Klerk, last president of the white minority, retreated to during the years preceding our first proper election. It's the very spot where he received the call to inform him that he and Nelson Mandela were sharing the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize. The cottage burnt down in 2015, and the fact that Natural Selection – a class-act safari outfit with a deep commitment to conservation – was tasked with rebuilding it is cause for celebration.

The team has done a stellar job, creating a modern but homely lodge on the original cottage footprint, with seven stilted timber rooms fanned out in such a way that when you lie in bed and look out through the ceiling-to-floor windows, you feel as if you are a ship at sea, anchored on a four-mile (6km) footprint-less beach. Guests are obliged to stay two nights; no day-trippers are allowed. Billy, the in-house nature guide, is exceptional, ferreting around rock pools at low tide with a running commentary that is edifying and entertaining, then walking through the delicate flora that carpets the hillside behind the lodge, pointing out the miraculous relationship between fynbos, fire and insects. That night we are led to a dressed dining table on the beach. There is an open fire under the stars, ice tinkling in my glass.

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On our last walk along the beach Tom and I contemplate the remarkable changes since we first slept here on twin beds pushed together in a cottage so basic we had to bring our own bedding. But the real luxuries remain the same.

The tide is receding, revealing the circular, sandy plunge pools typical of the De Hoop coast. With the same familiar intimacy we shared 24 years ago, we don't exchange a word, just strip down and sink into the womb-warm waters: the tanned leonine face of the man I love grinning at me, the sound of the surf pounding beyond the breakers. Home. De Hoop, the hope fulfilled.



"With the same familiar intimacy we shared 24 years ago, we don't exchange a word, just strip down and sink into the womb-warm waters" CREDIT: GETTY

## How to do it

A stay at De Hoop's new [Lekkerwater Beach Lodge](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/south-africa/hotels/lekkerwater-beach-lodge/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/south-africa/hotels/lekkerwater-beach-lodge/>) ([naturalselection.travel](http://naturalselection.travel) (<http://naturalselection.travel>)) costs from R6400 (£345) pp/night. [Morukuru Beach Lodge](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/south-africa/hotels/morukuru-beach-lodge-hotel/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/south-africa/hotels/morukuru-beach-lodge-hotel/>) costs from R5200 (£280) pp/night and four-bedroom Ocean Villa from R43,000 (£2,319); both full board ([morukuru.com](http://morukuru.com) (<http://morukuru.com>)). De Hoop Collection has a variety of self-catering cottages from R725 (£39) pp ([dehoopcollection.com](http://dehoopcollection.com) (<http://dehoopcollection.com>)).

British Airways ([ba.com](http://ba.com) (<http://ba.com>)) flies from London Heathrow to Cape Town from about £960 return. From Cape Town it's just over three hours' drive to De Hoop. Car hire offered through Bidvest ([bidvestcarrental.co.za](http://bidvestcarrental.co.za) (<http://bidvestcarrental.co.za>)).

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