

# Inside rainbow nation: Cape Town, South Africa

text and pictures by Wong Zijia



I was chatting up a sweet Taiwanese grandmother on transit to Johannesburg as Mr Lim from Chongqing, China, inundated me with trivia about Cape Town where he had been living for the past four years. Another Chinese businessman from Henan taught me how to spot who is spotting a wig – wigs are big in South Africa. A moment of doubt crossed my mind: was I really heading for Cape Town?

Thus it was a surprise that I often found myself the only Asian but I was never made to feel like a stranger. Warm and effusive, Cape Towners would initiate conversations with me, often while waiting in the traffic. During these exchanges – be it the neighbouring driver who yelled “Do you like my city?”, the traffic marshal teaching me Xhosa, or Vicky who runs a hostel in Langa township – there was an unmistakable sense of pride in their voices.

The minute I left the Cape Town International Airport, I immediately understood the magnetic pull the city had over tourists; and for the first time, I understood the meaning of “love at first sight”.

Blessed with intensely blue skies and luxuriant vegetation smugly decked out in rich colours, Cape Town is a city for nature lovers. Home to over 8,500 species of plants, of which 6,000 are endemic, the roads are lined with beautiful fynbos, or fine bush. Near Kirstenbosch, which is only 15 minutes away from the city centre, I even spotted a herd of deer basking in the dying embers of the sunlight at dusk just before the car swerved round the corner and the majestic Table Mountain came into view. To just talk about it would be microscopic as Cape Town is also blessed with other impressive, though lesser-known hills such as the Devil’s Peak and Lion’s Head. Meanwhile, the Twelve Apostles flank a side of Table Mountain as they guard against the Atlantic Ocean.



There is something poetic about being where the Atlantic and Indian oceans crash into each other. Not only can you get to swim at Bordjiesrif and Buffel Bay tidal pools, you can even spot dolphins, penguins and whales.

Meanwhile, the city centre is a cosmopolitan hub dotted by high-rise blocks and quaint buildings that are infused with Dutch and British influences. Often compared to San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, the Victoria and Albert Waterfront is parked with yachts, and cruise boats line the largest crafts market in South Africa with world class restaurants and even a maritime museum. Come night time, Camps Bay, Long Street and Greenpoint burst into life with a mosaic array of trendy bars, pubs and cafes.

However, you are never going to walk away thinking this is San Francisco displaced to another continent. Minutes away from the whimsical dollhouse façade of the city centre are townships or shanty towns blanketed in corrugated tin roofs. Initially designed to limit the spread of disease, the townships also helped to segregate the residential areas of the whites from the coloureds and the blacks. Acting as physical mementos, the townships, for better and worse, help to remind South Africans of the apartheid past they do not want to revisit.

While Cape Town is working diligently towards being the "rainbow nation" that was envisioned by then Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, there is still a whiff of tension. A local revealed that some whites now cry "reverse racism" in light of the Affirmative Action policy, or South Africa's anti-discriminatory policies. However going by my interaction with the locals, tour to the townships and the District Six Museum, Cape Town seems determined to face up to its past. It knows that courage, not amnesia, is needed to change things.

Unlike our *ish* editor who has the most number of allergies I have ever heard of, I can eat just about anything – which is what I did. For four days, I morphed into a full-blown carnivore, indulging in Cape Town's abundance of fresh seafood and ostrich, kudu and other animals.

## HARBOUR HOUSE

*Kalk Bay Harbour, Kalk Bay; Tel: (27) 0217 8841 33*

Try not to get distracted from your West Coast mussels or the famous tuna and goat's cheese tartar tower, by your view. Overlooking False Bay, Harbour House gives you the chance to spot dolphins, whales or Cape fur seals – and a delectable dinner.

## MOYO

*Spier, Stellenbosch; Tel: (27) 0218 0911 33*

A pastiche of everything African, this sophisticated outfit near the wine estates have been touted as "an African Disneyland", as I overheard local guests remarking. It comes complete with Bedouin tents and gazebos, and Zulu and Xhosa performers who will do traditional face painting or treat you to a song and dance. Entertainment aside, the food is worth every Rand. The dishes, such as chicken yassa (chicken fillet marinated Senegalese-style with lemons and paprika), calamari and potjies are done up to perfection.

## RESTAURANT THIRTY 7

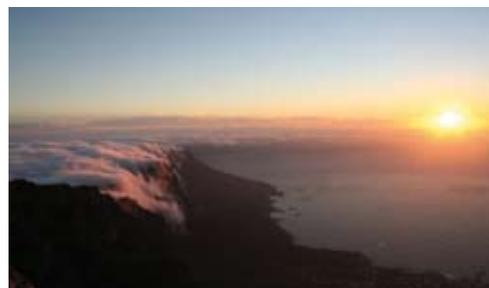
*Coen Steytler Avenue, Foreshore; Tel: (27) 0214 1280 70*

A crowd-puller at the Arabella Sheraton Grand Hotel, this chic and sleek restaurant boasts of a snazzy show-kitchen where you can monitor your dinner being done. The favourite haunt of local personalities, the restaurant serves an array of Asian and Mediterranean dishes, with jazz on the side.

## THE OLD STONE BALCONY

*Table Mountain top; Tel: (27) 0214 2400 15*

You can abseil, cycle or walk down from the mountain. I took the revolving cable car. However you decide to scale up or down the majestic mountain, you might want to take a breather at this cosy restaurant where you can admire the 'table cloth' (the cloud cover over the plateau) unfolding towards the city at the foot. It is best to call before arrival, as bad weather means all facilities will be closed for the day.



While watching Design Indaba speakers debate about design and life over drinks, I also checked out the hottest dancefloors in town.

## RHODES HOUSE

*60 Queen Victoria Street; Tel: (27) 0214 2488 44*

Described as a cross between a gentleman's club and a boutique hotel, this 19<sup>th</sup> Century colonial-style building is a National Monument, housing one of Cape Town's most happening nightspots. There are seven bars and a courtyard where the deejays spin on special occasions.

## OPIUM

*6 Dixon Street, De Waterkant; Tel: (27) 0214 2540 10*

This immense club is the place to be if you want to spot the most beautiful people in Cape Town. A lavish statement of opulence and funk, Opium plays a spectrum of music genres in various parts of the club, such as progressive house and R&B.

## MERCURY LIVE

*43 De Villiers Street, Zonnebloem; Tel: (27) 0214 6521 06*

Mercury Live is reputed to be one of the first few places South African bands will visit whenever they are in Cape Town. It plays a specific music type on certain days, such as homegrown drum and bass, or music from the eighties.



## iSh cafes

A weird name or a good song list is all it takes for me to be seduced. The menu is secondary.

### NAKED

51 Kloof Street; Tel: (27) 0214 2203 51

With flashing lightbulbs spelling 'naked', I had to check out what the shop contained. Unfortunately it serves only nutritious food such as "dolphin-friendly" wraps, "tickled pink salads" and "tofu Buddhist wraps" – even the drinks are "Virgin Naked". The owner said he named the café as such because the healthy food would get you slim, trim – and naked.



### YUSRA'S KITCHEN

3 Anchor Bay, Sea Point; Tel: (27) 0214 3948 83

Declaring to be "your salomi and Gatsby specialist", this tiny outfit features a range of halal dishes. I took the owner at his word and tried the steak salomi, which was roti with thick curry. Yusra is the shopowner's little girl.



### MAMA AFRICA

178 Long Street; Tel: (27) 0214 2610 17

Opened till late from Monday to Saturday, the wildly colourful façade literally screams "Get in here now!" The place is always buzzing with backpackers and locals who want to dig into African goodies like bobotie, kudu and crocodile dishes.

### COOL RUNNINGS

227 Long Street; Tel: (27) 0214 2605 84

Decked out in full rasta colours, this looks like the perfect antidote for those suffering from reggae withdrawal. At night, the place comes alive with hip-hop music and young people packing the dance floor.



## iSh shops

Like for most business trips, I did the bulk of my shopping at the airport but I would do better than to introduce the best airport shops.

### SECOND TIME AROUND

196 Long Street; Tel: (27) 0214 2316 74

Featuring vintage products and antiques, the modest-looking shop is tucked into the long line of shops down, well, Long Street. Keep your eyes wide open for it.



### AFRICAN MARKET

34 Shortmarket Street, Greenmarket Square; Tel: (27) 0214 2248 53

Greenmarket Square is a pocket of craft shops in the city centre. You can get the quintessential mask, drum or jewellery to show that you have been to Africa.

### JEWEL AFRICA

170 Buitengracht Street; Tel: (27) 0214 2451 41

The art deco showroom not only showcases jewellery, gemstones and diamonds, it also allows you to watch the masters cut diamonds and produce gold chains as well. A custom-made piece can be completed within 24 hours.



## DADDY LONG LEGS

263 Long Street; Tel: (27) 0214 2414 03

Lodged between pubs and cafés, Daddy Long Legs is a surefire way to max out your nightlife and credit card here. The hostel has five fully-furnished apartments that are stylishly done up with brick walls and wooden floors. Each apartment can accommodate four people and comes with a kitchen, dining room and lounge. Get the front apartment that has French doors opening up onto Long Street so you can indulge in beer as you watch the world go by.

## ARABELLASHERATON GRAND HOTEL

Convention Square, Lower Long Street;  
Tel: (27) 0214 1299 99

One of the largest hotels in the city centre, this large hotel is often packed to maximum capacity by guests attending events in the facing Cape Town International Convention Centre.



## HÔTEL LE VENDÔME

20 London Road, Sea Point; Tel: (27) 0214 3012 00

Emanating French old world charm, the luxurious hotel comes complete with an effusive owner, Maurice Danon, who will be glad to share his views about his contractors and Cape Town, if he is not busy greeting his guests at breakfast. Though small, the hotel is self-sufficient with a 24-hour business centre and a dainty-sized pool.



# iSh top 3 best-kept secrets of Cape Town

Do not let Cape Town's dazzling nightlife and shopping opportunities draw you away from its fascinating culture



## 1

Aside from taking the usual trips up Table Mountain or down to False Bay for a *March of the Penguins*, try a township tour. It turned out to be an intensive introduction to local culture and history for me and six other tourists. My incredibly knowledgeable tour guide, a resident of Langa township, took us to seven townships including Guguletu and Bonteheuwel. We visited the local crafts market, shebeen (pub) and a Sangoma (traditional healer) in Langa, the oldest township, and Kayalitsha, one of the most rapidly expanding townships, and drove through the rest. I found out that there is even a 'township music tour' where you can experience jazz, rap, reggae and the local kwaito. Africa Window Tours ([www.africawindowtours.com](http://www.africawindowtours.com)) is one such operator.

## 2

Having tasted the local wine and champagne, I cannot wait to get more of the Winelands now. If you have fantasies of making wine for your own consumption, there is a winemaking course for people like us. The course lasts for either three or five days and will have you de-stemming, crushing, pressing and fermenting like a pro. Visit [www.fynbosestate.co.za](http://www.fynbosestate.co.za) for more information.

## 3

Known as 'apartheid's Alcatraz', Robben Island now has tours to Cell 5, where Nelson Mandela was holed up for nearly three decades. Former inmates and wardens conduct the tours which lasts for about four hours each. You have to leave by ferry from the V&A Waterfront for Robben Island, which is a tiny island surrounded by shark-infested waters. Check out [www.go2africa.com](http://www.go2africa.com) for more information.

## AIRLINES

Malaysia Airlines, S\$1,730, inclusive of taxes  
[www.malaysiaairlines.com.sg](http://www.malaysiaairlines.com.sg)

- You will fly to Kuala Lumpur and catch a connecting flight to Johannesburg; after which you will embark on a domestic flight to Cape Town.
- The flight from Kuala Lumpur to Johannesburg takes place every Friday.
- Ticket is valid for nine months.

Singapore Airlines, S\$1,920, inclusive of taxes  
[www.singaporeair.com.sg](http://www.singaporeair.com.sg)

- This direct flight to Cape Town is available every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.
- Ticket is valid for one month.

South African Airways, S\$2,328, inclusive of taxes  
[www.flysaa.com](http://www.flysaa.com)

- You will depart for Hong Kong and catch a connecting flight to Johannesburg before transferring to Cape Town.
- Ticket is valid for four months.

All prices are accurate at time of publishing; prices are subject to change depending on availability, ticket type and airlines. Please check respective website for latest updates.

## EXCHANGE RATE

(accurate at time of publishing; rates are subject to fluctuations)

SGD\$1 approximately equals 0.2701 Rands

USD\$1 approximately equals 6.03 Rands

## TRANSPORT

The Metro Rail system is a convenient way to get around as it connects the city centre to the Cape Flats, northern areas and suburbs. Buses run at 15-minute intervals and costs R3 per trip and R2.50 if you are using multi-journey smart cards. Of course the fastest way to get around is by taxis, although they may get pricey.

Dial-a-ride is a service for those with special needs and are unable to use the usual public transport system. Designed for wheelchair users and those with severe sight impairment, the 'Dial-a-Ride' service consists of 17 mini-buses that operate throughout the Cape metropolitan area from 6am to 7pm, Monday to Friday.



*ish* highly-recommended place

# HÔTEL LE VENDÔME

For a hotel that most taxi drivers are not aware of, and that is sandwiched between modest-looking apartments and tiny neighbourhood shops, I did not have high expectations of it.

Thus, the excellent service and facilities of Hôtel Le Vendôme came as a surprise. Fashioned like a French chateau, the hotel boasts of elegant columns and arches, chandeliers, and 143 suites and rooms that make you feel as though you have just stumbled onto the set of *Dangerous Liaisons*. At Le Cygne restaurant, you can watch swimmers doing their rounds in an elliptical pool. Old world does not mean old school. For those who miss checking their office emails, there is a 24-hour business centre. The hotel, which was abuzz with delegates when I was there, is also known for its conference facilities and a range of videoconferencing equipment.

The staff were unfailingly polite and warm, unlike that of the five-star hotel I visited earlier. In fact, I was greeted with a personalised welcome message on my television screen and a letter on my pillow when I first checked into my room, personal touches that banished the weariness from my 18-hour-too-long flight. I later learnt from Danon that he signs a letter for all guests. He emphasised again, "The feeling I wanted to create was of a home away from home, which in fact is real hospitality."

And all this from a man who confessed, "I've never built a hotel in my life". Unabashed to admit that he is a control freak ("I'm demanding for my guests."), Danon had fired three architects and three interior designers who were not able to deliver what he wanted on time. The former broker, whose only brush with tourism and interior design came from his own travel experience, was very clear about what he wanted and refused to compromise. He quickly got down to business, visiting Spain for handsome furniture and lighting, and when they were not to his liking, he had them made. He revealed how he conceptualised and helped to design the ornate chandelier illuminating the lobby – among other pieces.

The 64-year-old thinks that the hotel was the first of its kind in Cape Town when it was launched in 1998, but he concedes that the small luxury hotel concept is now a fad "because the traveller would want to feel associated with a small hotel where he feels taken care of."

When local hoteliers scoffed at him, Danon remained unaffected. He got the last laugh. Today, Hôtel Le Vendôme has seen the likes of the presidents of South Africa, Namibia and Rwanda within its interiors. ■



LOW SEASON (in Rands)		
ROOM TYPE	SINGLE	DOUBLE
Standard Room	2,236	2,660
Classic Room	2,700	2,980
Luxury Classic Room	3,090	3,410
Luxury Suite	6,100	6,100
Deluxe Suite	8,530	8,530
Presidential Suite	12,300	12,300

PEAK SEASON (in Rands)		
ROOM TYPE	SINGLE	DOUBLE
Standard Room	2,100	2,380
Classic Room	2,295	2,530
Luxury Classic Room	2,630	2,900
Luxury Suite	5,185	5,185
Deluxe Suite	7,250	7,250
Presidential Suite	10,455	10,455

**HÔTEL LE VENDÔME**  
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 or visit [www.le-vendrome.co.za](http://www.le-vendrome.co.za)

