



Cape Grace

# EIGHT DAYS IN SOUTH AFRICA

*By Anja Mutić*

I touched down in Johannesburg on a warm rainy evening in February. On my non-stop flight from JFK on South African Airways, the feather pillow and duvet handed out in business class ensured sweet sleep for some good 8 hours of my 14-hour flight. So tired I wasn't but I admit to feeling some apprehension about my first South African trip. I had traveled solo in many corners of the world, some with a reputation for danger, but South Africa's surpassed. Or so the story went. On the taxi drive to my residence for the night, I tried to visualize my next eight days in South Africa. I had put together the perfect itinerary for an initiate, taking in the highlights: one day in Johannesburg, four days on a safari, and three days in Cape Town. For a South Africa novice, an ideal start.

When I checked into my first hotel, the five-star retreat called The Westcliff, it was already night time. I love arriving to new destinations after dark and discovering a whole new world outside my window in the morning. I looked forward to the experience of doing so at The Westcliff, known locally as the "Pink Palace". But first, there was dinner to be savored at the hotel's La Belle Terrasse restaurant. My first meal in South Africa featured divine pan-fried ostrich and portabelini mushrooms, served with crushed sweet potatoes and spinach. It was paired with a couple of glasses of fine South African wine that would

have cost me a premium back in New York but made no real dent in my wallet here. When I retreated to my elegant junior suite in one of the nine villas on the property, I took a relaxing post-flight bath in my oversized bathroom, prepared myself some green tea from the well-stocked complimentary butler station, listened to the rain outside and peaked through the curtains at the city lights blinking below. I woke up the next morning to sunshine bathing my suite, drawing me out to my very own terrace. And wow, what a view from my classy hillside retreat, over the city's green belt of the northern suburbs.

I'm a real stickler for hotel breakfasts, not easily impressed. At The Westcliff, I wished I could have enjoyed their elaborate morning meal for a few days to come. I loved the variety of offerings – from warm pastries, fresh fruit and prime cold cuts to cook-to-order plates – but I was equally impressed with the view, stretching over the swimming pool and revealing forested panoramas below. The service was so top-notch and discreet that I could instantly see why The Westcliff is the choice hotel for celebrities visiting Johannesburg. My time there was short but sweet. I checked out that same morning, after a quick ramble through the cascading gardens and cobbled courtyards. The storied dangers of Johannesburg seemed so far away in this peaceful oasis at the heart of a busy modern metropolis.

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With only half a day in Joburg or Josi, as Johannesburg is also called, I decided to experience “the other side”. It wouldn’t have felt right to see just the wealthy northern suburbs. So I booked a half-day outing with JMT Tours, who came highly recommended by my in-the-know connections. I was picked up in The Westcliff’s lobby by TK (short for a very long African name), a gentle young man who was a well-spoken treasure trove of information about all things South Africa. We drove through Joburg’s busy downtown, with energy that reminded me of Manhattan, and on to the township of Soweto. There was no way I was going to skip this center of the black resistance movement, where the people rose and worked together against the apartheid regime in the 1970s and 1980s.

In my mind, it had always been a hotbed of revolutionary ideas and people who fought hard for equality that many of us take for granted. A lot has changed in the township since the fall of the apartheid in 1994. These days, sprawling Soweto, with its population of 4 million, has some truly posh enclaves, where gated houses sport swimming pools and manicured gardens, alongside middle-class areas and bottom-rung enclaves with humble homes known as matchbox houses.

The most memorable and disturbing stop was a visit to Hector Peterson Museum, dedicated to the 13-year-old boy who was shot by the police on June 16, 1976 during the student demonstration against the obligatory instruction of Afrikaans in the schools. It was due to this heart-wrenching event that the world finally realized what was happening in South Africa and introduced the sanctions. I walked out visibly shaken. It was soothing to have TK to talk to. Born and raised in Soweto, to parents – his father Jo and mother Sophie run JMT Tours – who were activists during the apartheid, he explained to me the many ways people have come to terms with what happened during that horrid time. We then drove down Vilakazi, the only street in the world that gave birth to two Nobel Prize winners, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. It felt like an affirmative antidote to harsh realities of this troubled area that should be a must-stop for every visitor to Johannesburg.

Later the same afternoon, I took a 50-minute South African Airways flight to Kruger Mpumalanga Airport in the town of Nelspruit. A chauffeur awaited me at the small airport and on we went for a two-hour drive to Exeter River Lodge in the 160,600-acre Sabi Sand, a private game reserve which shares unfenced borders with the world-renowned Kruger National Park. The drive was scenic enough for the first hour and a half but, frankly, I wasn’t smitten by the landscapes. As we turned off the main road onto a dirt track for the last leg of the journey, landscapes started to change from forests and meadows to the bush of Africa I had always imagined. What confirmed this was the driver pointing to something off to the side – there it was, a long gracious neck of a giraffe, just wandering about!

It was dusk when I checked into my plush suite at Exeter River Lodge, one of eight at this upscale safari retreat. I loved the ambience inside – with its natural earth tones, photos of wildlife and subtle décor, everything blended beautifully under the traditional-style thatched roof. The outside verandah showcased my very own plunge pool, overlooking a river, bush savanna, and a grove of ebony trees. I noticed a collapsed trunk right beneath the verandah, and only later learned that it was an agitated elephant who crushed the tree, due to a honeymooning couple in my suite trying to snap one too many photos. Talk about being in the wild! Upon arrival, I did what would become my nighttime ritual: a cup of tea in my lounge, with the night sounds of the bush playing the perfect lullaby behind the screen doors: the distant yipping of a jackal, nervous chuckle of a hyena, strident wail of a bush baby, and the gentle rushing of the river. I still miss those sounds.



## Africa

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I'm not a morning person. As a freelance writer working from home, I typically have the luxury of sleeping in. So when I tell you that I loved the daily 5am wake-up calls, you may not believe me. I'd then take a shower behind the glass-enclosed enclosure and see the nature slowly stirring to life. I was so excited about being in the wild that I didn't even mind being woken up at this ungodly hour! When I arrived to Exeter River, I was a safari virgin. I had explored various types of wilderness around the world and traveled to some truly remote destinations but no safari graced my travel resume. I'd heard that people get hooked. What I didn't know was that I myself would become one of these people. The sense of adventure and seeing the animals so intimately close in their natural environment – it was unlike anything I had ever experienced. What made it even more unique was the Exeter River Lodge, which helped me understand the meaning of that “sense of place” proclaimed by many hotel brochures these days.

The following three days looked something like this: As sunrise broke over the African bush, we would gather in the main lodge overlooking the river. We'd share tea, coffee, juice and biscuits while chatting to our ranger Justin about which animals we hoped to see that day. We would then set out in an open 4x4 vehicle with Justin and our tracker, Chris, who was born and raised in the area. Each drive was the ultimate in pure fun – always packed with animal sightings and entailing a scenic stop for yummy biscuits and hot drinks. Around 9am, we would return to the lodge for breakfast, which consisted of platters of fruit and cheese followed by a selection of hot dishes. What followed were a few free hours, during which I highly recommend doing an interpretative bush walk with a ranger. Buffet-style lunch was served on the open-air deck around 2.30pm. After a short siesta, it was time for late afternoon tea, followed by the evening game drive, my favorite! I loved the sundowner snacks by the lake as the sun sunk beyond the horizon, and that drive back to the lodge when night already fell and the spotlights offered a glimpse into the nocturnal bush life. Delicious dinner awaited us back “home”, either served al fresco in the bush, with torch lights surrounding the tables, on the open-air deck in the main lodge, or around the blazing fire of the boma. Service at Exeter was impeccable – everything done with a huge smile and no request a problem.



The Westcliff Hotel

Over the course of my four days at Exeter River, I was lucky enough to see four of the Big Five (rhino, lion, leopard and elephant – I only missed buffalo) as well as some treats such as a massive bull rhino blocking the road, a lioness with a playful cub, and a lion eating a wildebeest carcass. I spotted playful baboons, a family of zebras (with a baby), a young bull elephant, warthogs, plenty of elegant impala, fearful rhino, hippos lazing in a river, and even cheetah – a rare treat in Sabi Sand. But the most terrifying and electrifying experience was having a huge male leopard walk right past our vehicle, literally just steps away and looking at me in the eye! The solitary and elusive cat is the real star of the show at Sabi Sand, known for some of the best leopard sightings in Africa.

Another highlight of my stay at Exeter River was a community visit organized by &Beyond Foundation, which funds a lot of education, health care and income generating projects in the area. Lotus, our guide from the neighboring village, was an amazing source of information. We visited the high school in a village called Justicia, where we went into a few classrooms and spoke to the kids. We asked what their dreams were, who they wanted to be one day. One dreamed of becoming a social worker, another wanted to be a journalist. We spoke about America, music, and school. If you do make it to Exeter River, don't miss the community visit. And if you go, bring a few boxes of pens and pencils as a donation to the school. Each of the students gets only two per year and, if they lose one, they need to spend a premium to buy a replacement.



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## Africa

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Energized with the sights, smells and sounds of the African bush, I departed for Cape Town on the fourth morning. My Federal Air flight took me back to Johannesburg from the Ulusaba airstrip in Sabi Sand. From Joburg, I caught a connecting two-hour South African Airways flight to Cape Town. In retrospect, I would have booked a direct flight from Kruger Airport to Cape Town, which saves some time and a layover.

I arrived to Cape Town around lunchtime on a swelteringly hot day, instantly swept away by the city's spectacular setting on the Atlantic. I checked into my Cape Town home away from home, the unassumingly elegant Cape Grace on a private quay on the Victoria & Albert Waterfront. At this recently refashioned property, modern design blends seamlessly with traditional Cape culture. Even though the luxurious property has 121 rooms and suites, each individually decorated with hand-painted fabrics, custom-made metal and original antiques, it feels intimate and small. I stayed in a room with a view of the marina and Table Mountain from my balcony, bringing in a fresh breeze from the ocean. It's definitely worth paying extra for one of the rooftop terrace rooms with a full Table Mountain vista, or even splurging on a gorgeous penthouse. I loved my simple luxury room though. With a fully stocked bar, complimentary Wi-Fi, fresh flowers, tasty cookies and spacious marble bathrooms, it gave me a heavenly slice of home. Plus I had my own chauffeur who shuttled me around Cape Town in a luxury BMW. Yes, you've heard that right! There are free chauffeur transfers within a 12-mile radius of the hotel. It was a perfect hideaway for my three-day stay in Cape Town.

The following morning, I booked a tour with Roots Africa, taking me to the townships and the winelands. We started where Cape Town was born, in the colorful Bo-Kaap Malay quarters, home of the first slaves brought to South Africa by the Dutch. After roaming around these streets with pastel-colored houses backed by Table Mountain, we visited District Six. This desolate area is where a community of 60,000 was forcefully removed during the 1970s and moved out to the townships of Cape Flats. We then drove to Langa, the oldest black township in Cape Town, and on to Khayelitsha, the highest populated black shantytown in Cape Town (with 1.2 million people). Even though the poverty was clearly visible, there was hope and positive change in the air, with new housing developments and even B&Bs opening up.

After the townships, the tour took an entirely different turn, showing me the shiny side of Cape Town and its surroundings. In the picture-perfect winelands, we stopped for lunch at Spier Wine Estate and, refreshed, continued on into Stellenbosch, the second oldest city in South Africa. This pretty town struck me as so clean, orderly and lush, in stark contrast to the townships. After a stroll around and a peek into a handful of the many boutiques in Stellenbosch, our next stop was the Fairfield Wine Estate in Paarl, where I tasted some stellar goat cheese and wine. Back in town, we drove along the Seapoint – checking out the stunning beaches of Clifton and Camps Bay, jam-packed with people on that very hot day. We stopped at Maiden's Cove, a lovely spot for picnicking locals. I came

back to the hotel that night dizzy with the intense contrasts I saw in only one day, in one city.

A few more highlights stood out in Cape Town, including a cable car ride to the top of Table Mountain on a very clear afternoon, where grand vistas spread to all sides. A vivid memory of two meals still remains with me. At Bombay Brasserie, the low-lit Indian restaurant at the recently opened Taj Hotel Cape Town, I had an adventurous spice journey under the blue-glass chandeliers. I loved the spiced corn soup with turmeric popcorn, ultra-tender lamb (minced over 10 times, originally created for nobles who didn't like to chew), and the coconut prawn curry. Did I forget to mention the chai crème brulee? I had another unforgettable dinner at maze, a Gordon Ramsey restaurant at One&Only Cape Town – Cape Town's ultimate urban sanctuary – which uses the best of local organic farms, fish markets, and olive groves. The menu features specialties such as Cape Rock lobster, kudu fillet, and karoo lamb. I had grilled kingklip, a typical South African fish, and didn't regret my choice. The fish can also be sampled as a delicacy at the first Nobu in Africa, also on the premises of One&Only Cape Town, where sake roasted kingklip is served with sansho salsa.

I left South Africa feeling as if I've only scratched the surface of this diverse and dazzling country at the tip of the African continent, with contrasts as immense as the oceans that surround it. It made me want to return for more, very soon.

### IF YOU GO

**South African Airways** ([www.flysaa.com](http://www.flysaa.com); 1-800-722-9675) has frequent nonstop flights from New York to Johannesburg, with frequent connections to both Kruger/Nelspruit and Cape Town.

**The Westcliff** ([www.westcliff.co.za](http://www.westcliff.co.za); 67 Jan Smuts Avenue, Westcliff 2193, Johannesburg; 1-800-237-1236)

JMT Tours ([www.jmttours.co.za](http://www.jmttours.co.za); +27 (0)11-980-6038)

**Exeter River Lodge** ([www.andbeyondafrica.com/luxury\\_safari/south\\_africa/sabi\\_sand\\_game\\_reserve/and\\_beyond\\_exeter\\_river](http://www.andbeyondafrica.com/luxury_safari/south_africa/sabi_sand_game_reserve/and_beyond_exeter_river); 1-888-882-3742) There are two other &Beyond lodges in Sabi Sand: Leadwood, the most exclusive, has only four spacious glass-enclosed suites while the more contained, family-friendly Dulini has six suites.

**Cape Grace** ([www.capegrace.com](http://www.capegrace.com); West Quay Road, Victoria & Alfred Waterfront, Cape Town; +27 (0)21-410-7100)  
**Roots Africa** ([www.rootsafrica.co.za](http://www.rootsafrica.co.za); +27 (0)21-913-9553)

**Taj Cape Town** ([www.tajcapetown.co.za](http://www.tajcapetown.co.za); Wale Street, Cape Town; +27 (0)21-819-2000)

**One&Only Cape Town** ([www.oneandonlycapetown.com](http://www.oneandonlycapetown.com); Dock Road, Victoria & Alfred Waterfront, Cape Town; +27 (0)21-431-5888)



The Westcliff Hotel



Exeter River lodge courtesy of [www.andbeyond.com](http://www.andbeyond.com)