

# Deep sea driver

The Garden Route's pretty, but for an impressive roadtrip try the Whale Coast. There's no-one around, and the tailbacks are all in the water, says **Jill Starley-Grainger**

A slender strip of tarmac snakes along a jagged cliff in the distance, waves smash against the rocks beneath. Framed by the ocean and vertiginous slopes, it has the seductive menace of a Hitchcock set.

'Is that the Garden Route?' I ask my friend James, an architect living in Cape Town. We're 1,000m high, up on Table Mountain, from where we can just make out the road. 'No, it's over there,' he swivels and points inland.

Why would anyone choose to drive *away* from the coast? 'It's a marketing con,' he explains. 'Keeps the prettiest roads clear for locals, though, so we're not complaining.'

I was planning to spend the last week of my South African trip exploring the famous Garden Route. British friends had pronounced it 'really lovely', but now I've glimpsed the coast's dramatic scenery, 'really lovely' isn't good enough. Now I want 'epic'.

Back in the city, I unfold my map while James shows me the seaside detour, which he tells me is called the Whale Coast because of the frequency of shore-based sightings.

'You'll need two days to drive it,' he says, 'but it'll cut off the most boring stretch of the Garden Route, then you can join the other tourists for the rest of the road.'

I cruise out of the city towards Cape Point peninsula, and all signs of urbanity – whitewashed houses, cafe-lined streets, bus-stop queues – disappear as the shoreline jack-knives inward beyond the suburb of Camps Bay. Soon the crown-shaped peaks of the Twelve Apostles loom on the horizon, their sandstone slopes blanketed in ankle-high fynbos, the country's unique vegetation, hazy and low-growing like Scottish heath.

Beneath the road on my right, the Atlantic swirls milky foam into rocky coves, golden waves tumble over sandy beaches, and the wooden mast of an old shipwreck pierces the surface. Moments later the tarmac climbs dramatically, jutting over the ocean on a hair-raising cliff-top drive. Before long, the fishing village of Hout Bay appears, pastel houses and wooden jetties lining its horseshoe harbour. Lunch at Tintswalo beach restaurant (00 27 87 754 9300, [www.tintswalo.com](http://www.tintswalo.com)) calms my nerves... only for the waitress to rattle them again.

'Keep your car doors locked near Cape Point,' she warns, 'or the baboons will jump right in. And watch out for falling rocks. They've put safety nets up, but you never know.' The sedate inland scenery of the Garden Route suddenly seems much more appealing, but the promise of baboon sightings keeps me on track. Locals might have a love-hate relationship with them; mine is more love-love. >

Round the bend:  
Chapman's Peak Drive  
winds along the rocky  
coastline between Hout  
Bay and Noordhoek





Standing room only: penguins at Boulders Beach. Opposite, clockwise from top left, beach huts at Muizenberg; a rock and a soft place, between Camps Bay and Hout Bay; a southern right whale; Lion's Head from Signal Hill



The high road out of Hout Bay continues its rollercoaster course down past Noordhoek Beach, where horse-riders gallop in the shallows. Then it climbs back up, turning inland for a calming stretch through grassy flatlands to Cape Point lighthouse, where I come to the end of the road just two hours after leaving the city.

Famously known as South Africa's most southerly spot, and the place where the Indian Ocean meets the Atlantic, Cape Point is actually neither (I'm told by a group of Capetonian hikers). Both of those honours belong to Agulhas, 150km to the east. That's as may be, but it certainly feels like the end of the Earth from where I'm standing – nothing between me and the South Pole but a few rocky outcrops on the distant horizon.

Back at the car park, I'm easing into the driver's seat when I catch sight of the ugliest bottom, bulbous and angry red. I grab my camera and zoom in on the female, who's about 50m away, when a large male drops from a tree into frame, flashing a hideous grin. Baboons are certainly a triumph of brains over beauty. He races over on all fours, cheetah fast, followed by his

troop. I slam the door and hit the locks in the nick of time, but he rattles the handle with manic determination, then bangs a human-like palm against my window. It's not me he's gaping at, but the apple juice and cereal bar on the dashboard. As I back out of the parking space, the troop half-heartedly scattering, I make a note to heed the waitress's advice more carefully next time.

I could do with a dash of tranquillity – and the peninsula's east-coast route delivers, gently skirting the shorelines of False Bay for an hour, waves lapping on pebbly beaches. In the fishing village of Kalk Bay, a stroll down cobbled streets leads to the shore, where small boats bob in the water, their yellow, green and red hulls speckled with weather-beaten paint. At The Brass Bell (00 27 21 788 5455, [www.brassbell.co.za](http://www.brassbell.co.za)), a pub on the water's edge, I order a glass of Stellenbosch Chenin Blanc and a plate of Cape Malay seafood curry, and watch as a young family splashes in the tidal pool under the setting sun. I stare determinedly out over the bay, willing a tail or dorsal fin to peek above the surface. I finally call it a day when the inky black of the sky merges into

the sea, and take consolation in angry baboons and world's-end views as I climb to my room at The Inn at Castle Hill.

Surf's up the next morning at nearby Muizenberg Beach, where the sea is swarming with toned bodies riding the waves (but no whales). After splashing about in the water for a while, I climb back in the car and zip past more of the sandy shores of False Bay, some peppered with families and dog-walkers, others with flocks of seagulls and cormorants.

The road cuts inland for a few kilometres, past the Cape Flats and Khayelitsha township, its lean-tos and shacks jarring against the pristine scenery in my rear-view mirror. I briefly join the N2, a busy four-lane highway, flanked by pylons and telephone lines, that would have constituted my approach to the Garden Route had I not made my beachy detour. Compared with what I've seen in the last 24 hours, it looks, well, dull.

I leave the N2 as quickly as possible, after 10km, heading for Strand, Gordon's Bay and Rooi-els. Retirees and Capetonians have weekend homes here, and I see them sprawled on the sand or >

THE ATLANTIC SWIRLS MILKY FOAM INTO ROCKY COVES, WAVES TUMBLE, AND THE MAST OF AN OLD SHIPWRECK PIERCES THE SURFACE



## THE NOISE IS COMING FROM THE WHALE CRIER – WHO SCANS THE WAVES AND SOUNDS A HORN WHEN HE SPOTS ONE

Cape canter: riding through the sea at Noordhoek

stocking up on local olive oil in the village shops. I follow their lead, cobbling together a picnic for a late lunch on the beach. When my SPF30 starts to wear off, I climb back into the driving seat.

Soon the bungalows and millionaire villas disappear, replaced by the lush, rolling Hottentots-Holland Mountains. The road has been cut right out of its fynbos-covered hillsides, the ocean practically touching distance from the car. Dewy aloes, rose geraniums, brown sage and flowering honeybush colour the slopes in pastels, wafting a herby perfume in through the window. If anything, this stretch is even more spectacular than the drive to Cape Point, and without the perilous escarpments. Dainty birds – siskins, flycatchers and canaries – flit over the wispy grasses and prickly shrubs, and a herd of grey rhebok antelope races above me before turning inland, hopping and prancing over orchids, lilies and succulents. Had I taken the Garden Route, I'd have missed all this. And what a lot to miss.

The sun is dropping as I pass the dunes of Pringle Bay to reach Betty's Bay. After checking into The Retreat Bed and Breakfast,

it's a short drive to a titchy car park, where I follow a sign that points through wild camphor bushes to the beach. Stepping onto a boardwalk, I'm greeted by a sight that stuns in the sultry summer heat. Hundreds of African penguins are paddling and bobbing in the ocean, effortlessly riding the waves with smooth moves that would inspire envy from Muizenberg's surfers. On land, these birds are less at ease, comically waddling beneath the boardwalk to nests tucked under the rocks and carved out of packed sand. They're completely unfazed by the humans – me and a mum with a pram – standing a mere metre above them. Who knew penguin-spotting could be so simple – and sunny?

The penguins have set the bar high on this coastal safari, and the next day (my last before joining the Garden Route) I have one goal: to snap a southern right whale. My final stretch is a breeding ground for these giants of the sea (they're up to 15m long), and on the migratory route for dozens of others, including humpbacks and bottlenose dolphins. After an hour's coastal

drive in the morning – eyes flicking between tarmac and sea – I pull in to Hermanus, Africa's whale-spotting capital.

I have high hopes as I set off on the clifftop path, famous for its shore-based sightings. But a couple of hours later, I turn back, having seen beaches that wouldn't look out of place in the Caribbean, and impressive flocks of sacred ibis and oystercatchers – but nothing else. I've all but given up hope when I hear a strange trumpeting. The noise isn't coming from the sea, though. Hermanus is home to the world's only whale crier – a man who scans the waters from shore and sounds a horn when one is spotted.

After a moment's frantic searching, I see a spout of water, followed by the huge black head of a southern right whale. Then another. And another. A small pod splashes about, less than a hundred metres from shore. After 15 minutes, they move off into the horizon, tail fins slapping the waves as they go.

I follow their lead and leave the coast, albeit in the opposite direction. After an hour's drive north, I join the Garden Route for the final few days of my trip – a pretty drive, it's true. But after the spectacles I've witnessed, I'm glad I took the long way round. ■

## Get me there

### GO PACKAGED

**Kuoni** (0844 488 0239, [www.kuoni.co.uk](http://www.kuoni.co.uk)) has 10 nights on the Western Cape from £1,885, room only, with flights from Heathrow to Cape Town, accommodation and car hire. **Rainbow Tours** (020 7666 1250, [www.rainbowtours.co.uk](http://www.rainbowtours.co.uk)) has a two-week fly-drive with safari from £3,095pp, B&B, with flights from Heathrow to Cape Town, domestic flights, return flights from Johannesburg, hotels, Kruger safari (full board) and car hire.

cruiselineer, its all-white exterior a beacon to passing ships. In Kalk Bay, **The Inn at Castle Hill** (00 27 21 788 2554, [www.innatcastlehill.co.za](http://www.innatcastlehill.co.za); doubles from £40, B&B) has four Colonial-style bedrooms in an Edwardian villa, with views over False Bay. In Betty's Bay, the four-room **Retreat Bed and Breakfast** (00 27 28 272 9157, [www.retreatbb.co.za](http://www.retreatbb.co.za); doubles from £45, B&B) is an intimate family home just five minutes from the beach.

### GO INDEPENDENT

For flights to Cape Town and car hire, see factfile on page 76.

### WHERE TO STAY

**The Twelve Apostles** (00 27 021 437 9255, [www.12apostleshotel.com](http://www.12apostleshotel.com); doubles from £310, B&B) perches on the eponymous slopes like a beached Art Deco

### WHAT TO DO

**The Whale Watchers** (00 27 28 312 4957, [www.whalecruises.co.za](http://www.whalecruises.co.za)) runs two-hour boat trips from Hermanus into the bay for £47pp. To add a quick safari to your trip, try **Gondwana** (00 27 21 424 5430, [www.gondwanagr.co.za](http://www.gondwanagr.co.za)), a malaria-free Big Five game reserve near Mossel Bay, east along the coast from Hermanus.

