

LIVE·LIFE·LOVE

Cape Town, South Africa, an open canvas of art

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A fragment of Lionel Smit's "Large Malay Girl" stands over gardens of the Ellerman House, a hotel that could be an art gallery. Illustrates TRAVEL-CAPETOWN (category t), by Mary Ann Anderson, Special to The Washington Post. Moved Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015. (MUST CREDIT: Photo for The Washington Post by Mary Ann Anderson) THE WASHINGTON POST

Mary Ann Anderson, Associated Press

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Resting in the shadow of the severe and imposing Table Mountain, Cape Town rises above and lies beneath my hillside hotel in an unforgettable display of tints and textures.

The South African city, sculpted with flower-filled balconies, leafy streets, mosques, and minarets, is an open canvas of art. At every turn, there is art in one form or another, whether in its staggering natural beauty or its museums that harken to every historical period in South African history.

At the Ellerman House, I am surrounded by art, really immersed in it, not only from Mother Nature's showy palette, but also from galleries of paintings and sculptures of South Africa's most impressive collections. If you were to plop yourself in the lobby and begin to wander around, the interior decor of the Ellerman House would seem more art gallery than hotel.

"The art is part of the house and not a separate gallery," the hotel's Lindsay Marais says as she shows me works by Thomas William Bowler, known for his watercolor landscapes of South African scenery; Diane Victor, known for her delicate smoke and charcoal drawings; William Kentridge, probably the best known of all South African artists, whose works are primarily charcoal with minimal touches of pastel; and my favorite, Dylan Lewis, whose African wildlife and wilderness bronze sculptures are so detailed they seem to leap at you.

Peel away the layers of just about every painting, piece of pottery or jewelry, and handcrafted sculpture or ceramic, and you'll find a story of emotion, history and nature. You see it in places such as the Ellerman House, in museums, and even on the sidewalks. Plenty of buildings are etched with artwork. That's the thing about Cape Town. It simply inspires art in all forms.

This trip to Cape Town is part of a women-only tour we combined with a safari in Zimbabwe a few days later. We are a group of five friends besotted by wanderlust who wanted to travel together to see Cape Town, a city often called the most beautiful in the world.

On a recommendation from the Ellerman House, we hired Richard Rahim, a guide working for Passage to Africa, to shuttle us around Africa's "Mother City," so named because it is the first one settled in South Africa. Although it didn't start out to be an arts-related trip - we had merely wanted to see Cape Town - that's what it soon became.

Before we leave the Ellerman House, Rahim points out a few things about Cape Town, which is at the very tip of the African continent.

"You can be on both sides of Africa in 10 minutes," he says as we crowd into his van. "You can drive across the peninsula from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean."

With that cool bit of trivia, off we go on our city sojourn. Among our stops is Bo-Kaap, one of the prettiest neighborhoods of Cape Town, enhanced by Malaysian, Indian, and Indonesian influences.

I'm utterly captivated by the cobblestone streets and houses painted in every shade of the pastel spectrum: Light lavender, pale yellow, and peach pink are mixed in with darker greens, bold purples, and vibrant blues. It's as though I've stepped into an impressionist painting onto which an artist has dropped a paint bomb.

I live in a small town in Georgia where everyone is either Baptist or Methodist, and the first time I hear the haunting yet lyrical - and completely unforgettable - muezzin's call to prayer is in Bo-Kaap. It heightens the sense of just how far away from home South Africa really is.

For the greater experience of Bo-Kaap, check out the small Bo-Kaap Museum, built in 1768 in early Cape Dutch style, for Islamic culture and heritage. Its unassuming facade seems almost out of place among all that splashy color. Seeing the exhibits takes only an hour or so, but the highlight is a series of historical black-and-white and sepia-toned photos titled "Who Built Cape Town?" that depict primarily the Muslim lifestyle of the Bo-Kaap neighborhood.

Next, Rahim drives to Table Mountain, pointing out that it's six times older than the Himalayas. He has brought along a gourmet boxed lunch from the Ellerman House, but the place is so crowded with other picnickers, bicyclists, hikers, and lots of dogs running around that he decides nearby Signal Point would be a better place to have a picnic lunch.

"You can't keep a Capetonian inside on a beautiful day," he observes.

The views from Signal Point are just as stupendous as they are from Table Mountain, but here we have an added bonus: Groups of rappellers are running and leaping off the side of the mountain into the wind. In moments, they are hovering over the city in a spectacle both mesmerizing and terrifying.

That afternoon, we wander into the Old World working harbor of the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront - called the V&A - marveling at the myriad galleries and shops plastered with local art. Storefronts crammed with herds of hand-carved elephants and giraffes compete for space with beads, bowls, ceramics, and, of course, the requisite paintings and photography of South African wildlife and scenery. Set in rows of converted dockside warehouses, the V&A, with more than 450 shops, is probably the heart of the tourism industry for Cape Town, but I am keen on returning to the townships.

On a previous trip to Cape Town a few years back, I took an extensive cultural tour into Langa and Khayelitsha townships, the shantytowns the South African government established during the time of apartheid. The journey into the townships is extraordinary. No matter that most of the people there live in utter poverty: Art and design are incorporated into the elements of daily life.

During this trip, we mostly drive through Khayelitsha but occasionally get out and walk.

Everywhere, there are drawings and paintings, on pieces of rusty tin, lean-tos, and anywhere there is an open space. Hand-painted images, sometimes crude and sometimes quite sophisticated, depict everything from simple graffiti to

complex portraits of local men, women, and children. I see a Cat in the Hat drawn on one shack, a leaping lion on another. It's a complete sensory overload, and I want to take photos but keep the camera tucked away. I don't want to intrude into the personal space of the people who live here.

We have other places to visit, so we leave behind Khayelitsha and its rainbow of outdoor art to visit a couple of museums. Several are definitely worth popping into, including the Koopmans-de Wet House, an 18th-century house museum that's a mixture of Cape Dutch and Georgian architecture filled with antiques. The opulent furniture - four-poster beds, glittering glass-front cabinets and chandeliers - is the centerpiece of the collection. Although I like the museum because it shows a different facet of lifestyles in Cape Town, I am struck by the sharp contrast to the poverty of the townships not so far away.

The Irma Stern Museum in the chic neighborhood of Rosebank is another highlight. The collection is impressive, showcasing not only the artist's pieces inspired by her journeys through Africa and Europe, but also artwork from other South African artists. The walls of the museum are painted with dramatic yellows, reds, and greens, and the artwork - vivid paintings and African carvings and sculptures brought from central regions of the continent, from exotic Zanzibar to the Congo - seems to leap to life against the background hues.

One of most touching and even disturbing museums we visit is the District Six Museum. The obliteration of District Six is perhaps the harshest of anything that happened in the apartheid era. In 1966, the neighborhood was declared "white," and its mishmash of more than 60,000 mostly black, working-class residents, plus a mix of Indians, Muslims, and immigrants from other African countries, were forced to move to the more desolate Cape Flats on the outskirts of the city. District Six was razed, flattened to smithereens by bulldozers.

Several times as our group tours the museum, which opened in 1994, I am reminded of the American South in the pre-civil

rights era. "For Use By White Persons," reads one unforgettable artifact. "These public premises and the amenities thereof have been reserved for the exclusive use of white persons." The razing was really the end of a world for residents of District Six, and there's still not much that has replaced it, just the exceptionally well-told story in the dignified exhibits.

At the end of the trip, as my friends and I sip glasses of pinotage, a wine created in South Africa, at the Ellerman House, I reflect on the sounds and colors of Cape Town. Undoubtedly, it's the perfect jumping-off place in South Africa, pre- or post-safari, and among our group, at least, we agree that seeing the city as a work of art or for its artwork, whether in a museum, a chalk drawing on a sidewalk, or simply the natural color of the sky, is one of the great travel adventures of the world.

That's part of the hype of Cape Town, and if you buy into it, your expectations will almost certainly be met. Everywhere is an artist's palette. "Cape Town is like a coloring book," Rahim had said at one point as we watched over the city from Signal Point. "It's just so beautiful."

If You Go

Where to stay

Ellerman House

180 Kloof Rd., Bantry Bay

011-27-21-430-3200

ellerman.co.za

Farm-to-fork dining with only South African ingredients, menu and prices that change daily, and a wine cellar that defies generalizations with its champagne cellar. \$620-\$700 range, although rates vary; includes breakfast, laundry, spirits and beer, 24-hour guest pantry, sunset cocktails and canapes, and return transfers to Cape Town International Airport. In the low season (Oct. 1 through Nov. 30), the rate drops to around \$470.

South Beach

6 Link Rd., Camps Bay

011-27-21-437-0074

blueviews.com/southbeach

Luxury apartments. South Beach also features the art collection of Lionel Smit, known for portrait painting and sculpture. From \$175.

Where to eat

The Pot Luck Club

Silo Top Floor, the Old Biscuit Mill, 373-375

Albert Rd., Woodstock

011-27-21-447-0804

thepotluckclub.co.za

South African fare including "bunny chow" (curry in a bread bowl), springbok carpaccio, and pork belly, with entrees from \$6.

Carne

70 Keerom St., Cape Town city center

011-27-21-424-3460

carne-sa.com

Trendy, fine-dining restaurant offering cuts of Romagnola beef and Dorper lamb and game that you pick out tableside. Entrees from \$12.

Travel packages

The Africa Adventure

800-882-9453

africa-adventure.com

Fort Lauderdale, Fla., company offering nine- to 15-day safaris in South Africa combined with sightseeing in Cape Town. Set itineraries from \$1,895 per person, exclusive of air. Also offers fully customized safaris, with costs depending on itinerary.

Extraordinary Journeys

800-403-6012

ejafrica.com

New York mother-daughter team specializing in customized itineraries priced per person and varying by season. Set itineraries in South Africa for 10-day Cape Town sightseeing and Phinda Private Game Reserve safari begin at \$5,300 per person, exclusive of air.

What to do

Passage to Africa

011-27-15-793-0811

passagetoafrica.com

Offers half-day Cape Town tours with private vehicle, guide, and entrance fees from \$97 per person. Otherwise, no set rates, as custom-tailored tours vary.

Mary Ann Anderson


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