

Travel

Cape Town inspires art in all forms



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By Mary Ann Anderson August 13



Cape Town framed by Table Mountain and Lion's Head. (Mary Ann Anderson/for The Washington Post)

Resting in the shadows of the severe and imposing Table Mountain, at the intersection of the impossibly green waters of the Indian Ocean and the cold, turquoise-blue Atlantic, Cape Town rises above and lies beneath my hillside hotel in an unforgettable display of tints and textures.

The 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.

Here at the Ellerman House, I am surrounded by art, really immersed in it, not only from Mother Nature's showy palette, but also 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," explains the hotel's Lindsay Marais, as she shows me works by Thomas William Bowler, known for his watercolor landscapes of South African scenery; Diane Victor, for her delicate smoke and charcoal drawings; William Kentridge, who is probably the best known of all South African artists and whose works feature 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.



South African artist Diane Victor's smoke drawings are among the artwork at the Ellerman House. (Courtesy of the Ellerman House)



The Ellerman House's extensive art collection raises the question, "Is it a hotel within an art gallery, or an art gallery within a hotel?" (Courtesy of the Ellerman House)

Peel away the layers of just about every painting, piece of pottery or jewelry, or handcrafted sculpture or ceramic, and you'll find a story of emotion, history and nature. You see it in places like the Ellerman House, museums

and even 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 that we combined with a safari in Zimbabwe a few days later. We are a group of five friends besotted by wanderlust and who want to travel together to see this city often termed the most beautiful in the world. With the recommendation from the Ellerman House, we have hired Richard Rahim, a local 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 becomes.

Before we leave the Ellerman House, Rahim points out a few things about Cape Town, which rests 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. One of our first 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 cobbled streets and homes 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 if I've stepped into an impressionist painting on 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.



Bo-Kaap is world-famous for its pastel-painted homes. (Mary Ann Anderson/for the Washington Post)

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 the top of 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 picnic lunch.

“You can’t keep a Capetonian inside on a beautiful day,” he observes.

I must say, the views from Signal Point are just as stupendous as they are from Table Mountain, but here we have an added bonus: Groups of parasailers are running and leaping off the side of the mountain into the

wind. In moments they are hovering over the city in a spectacle that is both mesmerizing and terrifying.

That afternoon we wander into the Old World working harbor of the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront — here it's just 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 its 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 created by the South African government during the time of apartheid. The journey into the townships is extraordinary. No matter that most of the people here 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 or 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 I 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 deep in 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 to come of 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 relocate to the more desolate Cape Flats on the outskirts of the city. District Six was completely razed, flattened practically to smithereens by bulldozers.

Several times as our group tours the museum, which opened in 1994, I am reminded of the American South in its 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 that was 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 it’s in a museum, a chalk drawing on a sidewalk, or simply the natural color of the sky, is truly 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.”

Anderson is a travel and nature writer in Georgia.

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IF YOU GO

Where to stay

Ellerman House

180 Kloof Rd., Bantry Bay

011-27-21-430-3200

www.ellerman.co.za

The Ellerman House features farm-to-fork dining with only South African ingredients with the menu and pricing changing daily, and a wine cellar that defies generalizations with its unique champagne cellar. In the \$620-\$700 range, but rates vary; includes breakfast, laundry, spirits and beer, in-room bar, 24-hour guest pantry, sunset cocktails and canapés, and return transfers to Cape Town International Airport.

South Beach

6 Link Road, Camps Bay

011-27 21 437 0074

www.blueviews.com/southbeach

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

Where to eat

The Pot Luck Club

Silo Top Flr., The Old Biscuit Mill, 373-375 Albert Rd., Woodstock

011-27-21-447-0804

www.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

www.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.

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www.africa-adventure.com

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www.ejafrika.com

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What to do

Passage to Africa

0-11-27-15-793-0811

www.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.

Information


Cape Town Tourism

011-27-86-132-2223

www.capetown.travel

— M.A.

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