

South African cruise leads to safari by sea

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a nearby village welcome visitors with traditional singing and dancing.

After the safari, we head back to East London's pier where our cruise ship, the *Nautica*, is docked. The rolling hills of the Eastern Cape give way to the scenic beaches of the Wild Coast along the Indian Ocean. The white lions' image clings to our memories like African red dust to our pant legs.

Visiting South Africa had been at the top of our travel wish list for years. However, we'd always been reluctant to rent a car and drive ourselves or to endure a grueling land tour.

This logistical logjam was broken when we booked Oceania Cruises' 15-day South African Explorer cruise, a round trip sailing from Cape Town with five ports of call in South Africa and additional stops in Mozambique and Namibia.

Doug and I discovered that taking a safari by sea offers more comfort, easier transportation, and greater security than traveling overland. A cruise also affords dramatic views of the Cape of Good Hope and the ever-changing southern African coastline.

During port stops, we took guided excursions to three big-game reserves, a Zulu village, two ostrich farms, and a Durbanville winery. The mix gave us a good introduction to South Africa.

We also spent a day exploring local sights and shopping at a native marketplace in Maputo, Mozambique. During an overnight stop at Walvis Bay, Namibia, a native guide showed us the "moon landscape" of the Namib Desert, and we climbed up the 1,200-foot-high Dune 7

for a lofty view.

Shipboard lectures vastly deepened our understanding of Africa's southern region.

"There's no substitute for experiencing South Africa firsthand," insists author Timothy Hughes, who recounted Nelson Mandela's leadership in the anti-apartheid movement, his imprisonment on Robben Island, and his election as the country's first Black president in 1994.

With apartheid now behind it, South Africa's future hinges on reducing poverty and increasing employment, according to Aneel Karnani, a University of Michigan business professor and author. "The government must make it easier for businesses to create steady jobs at reasonable wages," he tells us.

After leaving Cape Town, the *Nautica*'s first port of call is Mossel Bay, once the epicenter of the ostrich-feather trade. We drive along the lush Garden Route and cut through several mountain passes to reach Oudtshoorn in the arid Klein Karoo. The town and surrounding farmland are home to the world's largest ostrich population and 180 breeding farms.

At the Safari Ostrich Farm, gangly black-and-white birds, weighing up to 150 pounds, entertain us during a show. We feed them food pellets from giant metal spoons, and enjoy the antics of fluffy 5-day-old chicks with stubby little wings. Nearby, a stately "feather palace" attests to the huge fortunes amassed during the heyday of the feather trade.

Rough seas greet the *Nautica* at Richards Bay, the gateway to Zululand. A helicopter lowers a local pilot onto the fantail to guide the ship into the deep-water harbor. Port cranes



PHOTOS BY CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

sprout above mounds of coal and wood chips awaiting export.

Eucalyptus scents the air as we drive into the hinterland. Sprawling tree plantations, or "green deserts," are stitched together by apartment complexes and shopping malls. After an hour, we veer onto a gravel road leading into the DumaZulu Cultural Village. An imposing Zulu warrior decked out in animal skins and feathers greets us in the strange clicking sounds of the Zulu language.

Inside the traditional Zulu settlement of thatch-roof huts surrounded by a stick fence, tribal members demonstrate spear making, basket weaving, and stick fighting. They also offer us frothy traditional beer in a black-clay bowl.

Today Zulus, who number around 12 million, still revere Shaka, the fierce warrior and clan chieftain who led South Africa's Zulu empire in the early 19th century. That proud heri-



tage shines through when our tribal hosts perform ritualistic dances, accompanied by chanting and drums. We buy two miniature woven-grass baskets as mementos.

After sailing eastward as far as Mozambique, the *Nautica* retraces its course westward to South Africa and docks overnight at Durban, the country's third-largest city. Many residents are descendants of laborers brought from India to work in the cane fields during the mid-19th century.

A portal to the Garden Province, Durban attracts sunseekers to its sweeping beaches, including the popular Golden Mile, a seaside promenade with shops, restaurants, and amusement-park rides. Less well-known is the city's waterfront Muthi Market, where shamans sell potions and cast spells.

The N3 highway takes us northwest through a mosaic of cornfields to the 7,000-acre Tala Game Reserve. During a three-hour game drive, acacia thorns pluck at our sleeves, and the rutted red-dirt track provides a free "South African massage."

Our safari driver, Lonely, spots an African harrier hawk in a tree and two warthogs feeding in thick underbrush. Waterbucks, kudus, elands, and impalas sprint off when we approach. Lanky giraffes, unperturbed by tourists, nibble treetop leaves. Back at the game lodge, we get one more surprise. A venomous spitting cobra was ushered out of the reception office just minutes before we arrived.

That evening, the *Nautica*'s chef prepares a South African barbecue of grilled springbok, blesbuck, and alligator, along with side dishes, such as boerevors (farmer's sausage) and chakalaka (spicy vegetable relish).

Our tablemates, Bob and Brenda Hansen from Thibodaux, La., tell us they long dreamed of traveling to Africa, but always felt such a trip was out of reach.

"This cruise offered the opportunity to experience different cultures in a far-off part of the world," the couple says. "We have loved going on safari and seeing wild animals up close."

Before heading westward to Namibia, the *Nautica* stops at Port Elizabeth, the "Dolphin



From top: Giraffes tower above the trees at the Tala Game Reserve; in Maputo, Mozambique, a vendor sells batik fabric at the Faima Market; near Walvis Bay, Namibia, visitors climb up the 1,200-foot-high Dune 7; visitors feed hungry ostriches at an ostrich ranch near Cape Town.

If you go . . .

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Capital of the World" and a mecca for black penguins. Early British settlers who founded the city in 1820 would hardly recognize it today. High-rise buildings and a massive commercial port reflect Port Elizabeth's prominence as an automotive manufacturing hub for Isuzu, Volkswagen, and Ford.

Goats scamper through the scrub grass around the Pumba Private Game Reserve, where we meet our safari guide, Josh. He skillfully maneuvers our 4x4 safari truck through the 16,000-acre property in search of the Big Five. We spot a bulldozer-size male elephant mowing down saplings in the Albany thicket. Further on, blue wildebeests graze on a hillside, and a family of zebras eyes us warily. In a small pond, we see two hippos submerged in the murky water.

We stop at a bush lodge for an al fresco lunch of grilled meat with all the trimmings — including chattering vervet monkeys overhead. Owner Paula Howarth tells us she and her husband, Dale, who grew up on an adjacent farm, are dedicated wildlife conservationists.

"We hope visitors leave South Africa with an understanding of how precious our wildlife is, and why we need to nurture and look after it," Paula says.

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