

Of Wanderlust, Wines and Whales

A 40-day 'Explore Africa' trip couldn't have started on a better note – stunning landscape, superb food and wines and exhilarating shark encounters





SANJAY F GUPTA

A filmmaker based in Mumbai with several mainstream movies and commercials to his credit. A wildlife photography enthusiast, he spends considerable time every year in African game reserves. His website is www.greypartridgefilms.com

Photos: Sanjay F Gupta

The soft sand slid gently from under my knees as the ocean water rolled over them. I kneeled to photograph the reflection of a vibrant African sunset at the coast of Hermanus, a quaint village just a few hours away from Cape Town. The clouds were lit in varying bright shades of red, orange, and yellow as patches of deep blue sky peeped through. As soon as I got the exposure right for the photo: about one f-stop less than the camera meter to prevent highlights around the sun from blowing out, my mind drifted back to few minutes ago when I arrived at Birkenhead House near Cape Town. Cape Town, Africa's most popular tourist destination, remains one of the most sought after holiday destinations in the world. Spectacular coastline interspersed with vineyards and quaint towns, scuba diving, whale watching and great white shark cage diving.

I wanted to visit the lovely small towns near Cape Town and choose Hermanus and Franschhoek for various reasons: Hermanus for the excellent whale watching, the unsurpassed natural scenic beauty and for the various outdoor activities including Great White shark diving. All this just 140 km away from Cape Town airport. Franschhoek, 75 km from Cape Town, is considered the food and wine capital of South Africa with its varied world restaurants and selection of fine wines. Also, it is one of the oldest towns in that part of the world. And, of course, both cities have superb stay options from The Royal Portfolio.

The drive from Cape Town to Hermanus is a beautiful scenic drive with the deep blue ocean on one side and lovely mountains on the other. Vineyards, rolling green pastures, curving roads for the Garden Route and this drive itself was a highlight of the trip. I soaked in the natural beauty as I peacefully drove to Birkenhead House.

From the moment I stepped into this luxurious boutique hotel, their sophistication of service and interior design was evident. The walk from the reception to the other end of the hotel to my room reassured me that I was going to really enjoy my stay. The hotel is

Bench positioned to contemplate the shore and its endless rhythm (previous pages)

The area around Franschhoek is extremely beautiful with lovely houses and vineyards. (right)



decorated with lovely antique furniture of which I especially admired a cupboard covered with lovely shells. Cosy sunken cane sofas by cascading water...

I was however most impressed on hearing the reply to my question – “Where is the coffee maker in the room?” I had driven 2 hours after 10 hours of flying and was longing for a satisfying cuppa. The reply was: “You are on a holiday and we do not expect you to make your coffee. Call us any time of day or night and we will bring coffee or tea for you to your room or even to the beach.” I was floored right there. They really go out of their

way to make the guests feel spoilt.

The extended, appropriately leisurely meal started at my candlelit table from where I could see the deep blue ocean just metres away from me. It was all so exotic that I wrote it down for memory: Vodka and Juniper Cured Salmon Gravlax on Baby Leaf Salad with Lemon and Honey Vinaigrette for starters. Chilled Green Gazpacho Soup and Grilled Crayfish Tail with Lemon and Dill Garlic Butter with Orange Cumin Braised Fennel as main course.

Shane, the manager, still in his pure whites, came by and asked me if everything was to my liking and

A waxing moon shines through the clouds as Birkenhead house dominates the skyline



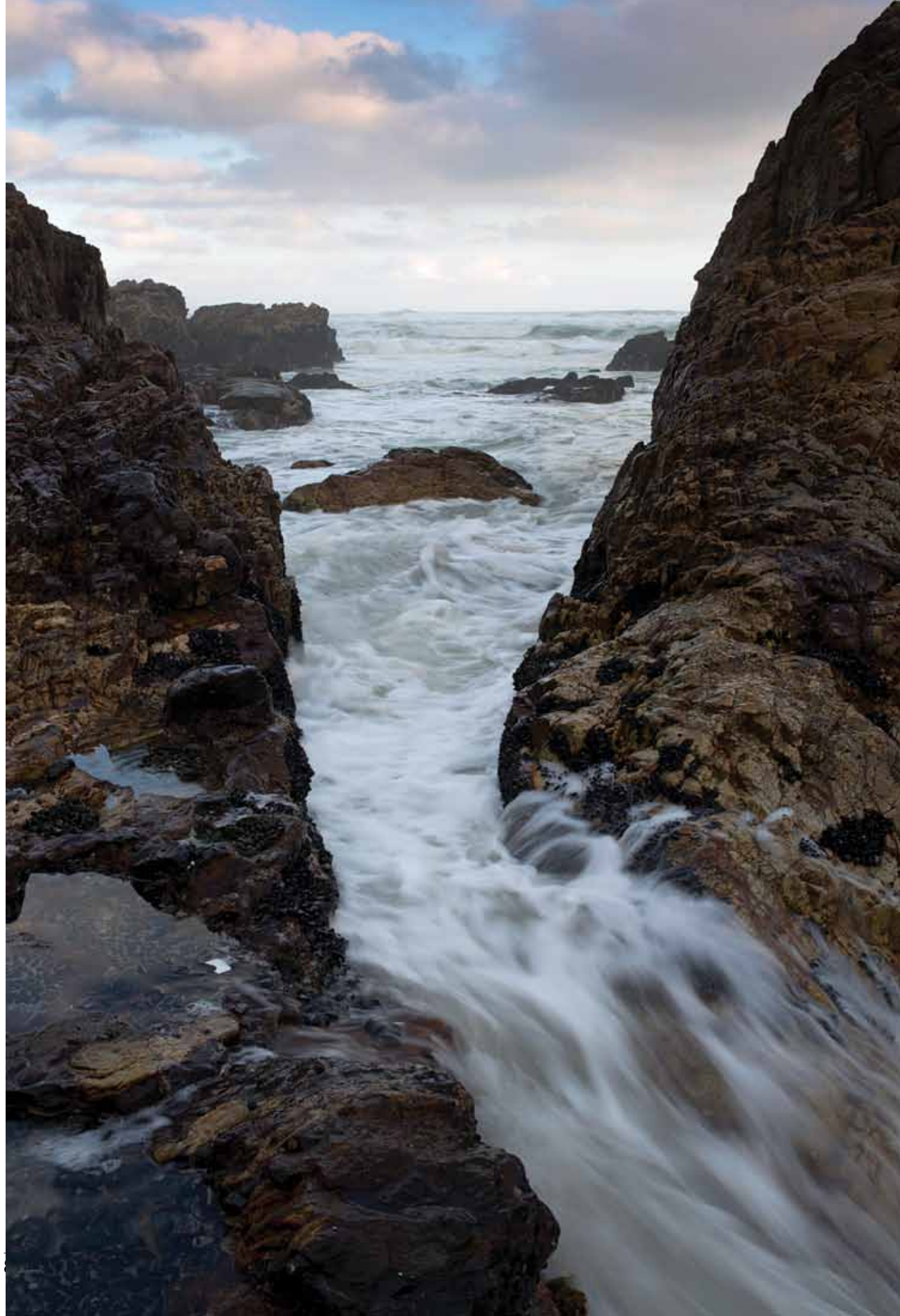
what I had planned for the next day. On hearing that I did not have any concrete plans but was thinking of diving with the Great White Sharks, he perked up and said that I must do that and also take the boat out to view the whales. “Sanjay! This is the place for doing these things and you should not leave here without it. Do not worry if you do not have bookings. I will sort it out for you,” he assured me with a wave of his arm.

It was the first of my forty days of exploring Africa including its top game reserves: Kruger in South Africa, Etosha in Namibia and Moremi in Botswana where I would spend intense days chasing shadows and light over landscapes



The lovely area around Franschhoek. This is just before it started raining real hard (above)

The most incredible pool to take a dip while the sun goes down. June to December whales come up to the shore. (left)



and wildlife in remote locations. I awoke much before my departure time for the shark dive, and walked onto the veranda where a gentle breeze and the soothing sound of the waves greeted me. And then, from nowhere these large dark shapes appeared in the ocean. Whales! And so close to the beach! It was a totally unexpected sighting of these gentle giants and I admired the achievement of South African conservation efforts.

Shane handed me a printed map to the shark dive and whale watcher outfit. He laughed out loud in agreement when I told them I had already seen them from my room and had no interest going on a boat ride when I could come back and sip on a beer here after the shark dive. "Yep, I agree. Many guests skip the boat as whales come so close to us," he said as he waved me off to Gansbaai, the great white shark dive capital of South Africa. The trip turned out to be something out of a movie. Throw the anchor, start chumming the waters, lower the cage and let the show begin! Four large sharks immediately started circling the



boat and went by the cage within touching distance. Shark cage diving is a great adrenaline rush to all adventure lovers. I left for another property of The Royal Portfolio. An extremely scenic two-hour drive brought me to La Residence in Franschoek, a city famous for its restaurants. If Birkenhead House was an exotic villa, this was a palace! Lovely antique furniture, large fireplaces and huge rooms reminiscent of a castle greeted me. Local activities

range from wine-tasting tours to trout fishing and hiking, apart from shopping at the numerous galleries and boutiques. On my way out of La Residence the manager stood with bottles of water for my drive to Cape Town and a gift-wrapped box. Surprised, I gingerly opened the box and to my utter delight it contained the coffee I so liked at Birkenhead House. The start of my expedition had been wonderful; I hoped the rest would be as amazing. ■

A great white approaches the boat attracted by bait. Sharks have been given a bad reputation but they do not attack humans generally and require our utmost conservation efforts. (above)

A heron gets ready to dive; lots of birds frequent the area (left)

Rocky passages like this make the shoreline more interesting (facing page)

For information about the hotels, visit <http://www.theroyalportfolio.com/>