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Travel > Africa

South Africa: Eight days, four stops, one incredible journey

A new tour of the Eastern Cape mixes safari with activities such as cooking and canoeing. Olivia Greenway tried it out

SUNDAY 26 SEPTEMBER 2010

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We crept forward, Etienne the ranger leading the way. I felt anxious – why had I worn a cherry-red coat? I whispered my concerns to Etienne. "Keep quiet," he ordered, adding with a smile: "Don't worry, you look like red meat."

Suddenly, he halted and held up his hand. "There!" he hissed, pointing. Ten feet ahead of us sat the male cheetah we had been tracking. It tolerated our intrusion for a few minutes before standing up and, with a flourish, flinging the remains of a monkey's arm in the air, five of its fingers disappearing inside its mouth.

This was just one of the highlights of a new luxury eight-day group tour of South Africa's Eastern Cape. Titled "Incredible Journey" and offered by Odyssey World, it visits four different luxury stopovers by private plane, and offers wildlife watching plus other activities.

We began our journey on George Airport, between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, where I boarded my third flight in 18 hours since leaving Heathrow, this time in a single-engine Airvan designed for six

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passengers. First stop, Prince Albert, a small dorp buried deep in the Great Karoo, an oasis fed by water from the Swartberg mountain range.

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Our stopover was African Relish, a cookery school with accommodation co-owned by Jeremy Freemantle, who gave up a career in advertising to pursue his culinary passions. Jeremy has sensitively renovated three Cape village homes for guests to stay in, simple structures with whitewashed walls and verandas. He has also recruited Vanie, one of South Africa's up-and-coming chefs, as head tutor.

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The next morning we set off on a hike up the nearby Swartberg Pass (wickedly sold to us as a "stroll"). The untarred pass was built by a Victorian engineer with the help of 200 convicts and lots of gunpowder. For most parts its sides are sheer rock, at times falling away on one side to reveal a valley. But the real interest lies above this almost perpendicular path (which caused me to catch my breath at least once – the very fit can view it from the saddle of a borrowed mountain bike). Unusual, towering rock formations cast eerie shadows by the light of the morning sun. It's said mountain lions live up here.

Back at African Relish, it was time to roll up our sleeves and get cooking. After a quick introduction to knife skills, Vanie showed us how to stuff a leg of lamb and make tagliatelle. But the school, which uses local produce exclusively, also teaches recipes from the Karoo. So we also made a traditional meat potjie, which included kudu, lamb belly and local cured ham, and cooked it on the fire.

Too soon, we were in air again bound for the Sneeuwberg mountains and the Camdeboo game reserve. Giraffes and ostriches ran for cover as the plane bumped down on the tiny grass strip by a small collection of exquisitely restored Cape homesteads with polished stone floors. But while this place says luxury it also feels homely and relaxed.

Game drives are offered morning, afternoon and night at Camdeboo and guests can expect to see rhinos, impala, wildebeest, zebra, giraffes and lions, as well as mountain eagles, secretary birds and long-tailed warblers. But here too wildlife is complemented by something completely different. In this case history, because it is near the Boer War battle site at Paardefontein where the Boer commander Johannes Lotter was captured by the British.

A turn in the weather meant the temperature dropped, so we welcomed the homemade ginger beer and blazing log fire that greeted us at our next stop, the Addo Elephant Back Safari and Lodges, near Port Elizabeth. The tents here are of a semi-solid construction, a combination of wood and canvas that is arranged on stilts and accessed by a wooden walkway.

Three elephants that were saved from a cull live at the park and, although semi-tame, they are allowed to roam freely during the day. The main attraction here is a bareback ride on the back of them through the bush. It takes a bit of an effort and the help of a platform to get on the beasts, their backs are so wide. "No one has fallen off yet," laughed our guide.

Onwards, and after a thrilling flight along the coast to Port Alfred, we travelled on to Kenton-on-Sea and sailed up the Kariega River – the only route to our final destination, the tented camp of Sibuya. Conservation is the key here so the wood used on the site is from the surrounding bush: pine, blue gum, driftwood and old stinkwood. Electricity is by a generator or solar driven.

With the river on hand, canoeing is a popular activity, and a way to see more than 40 different bird species. There is wildlife watching, too. And after an evening game drive, dinner is served by candlelight in a boma – an outside dining area with a fire in the middle, with tables and chairs arranged in a convivial semicircle. It was a great way to spend our last night – I just wished I could start this Incredible Journey all over again.

Compact Facts

How to get there

Until 30 Nov 2010, to those who mention The Independent on Sunday when booking, Odyssey World (01453 883937; odyssey-world.co.uk) is offering the eight-day "Incredible Journey" for £2,650 per person, based on two sharing; £2,250 each, based on three sharing; and £1,920 each based on four sharing. Single supplements cost £490. Includes all food, accommodation, game drives, advertised activities and private transfers from Prince Albert. Transfers from George to Prince Albert cost an extra £210. Virgin Atlantic (virginatlantic.com) flies from London to Cape Town from £759; Odyssey World offers this flight for £677 when booked with this tour, subject to availability.

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South Africa is one of most develop country of the African continent that has countless places to that need to explore with in its full colors. My brother went to Kruger National Park, one of the places where fever free tree baobab grows, and share his experience that it was one of the best place to have vacations. He stayed in Pafuri Camp and also met to Makuleke people (landlords of Kruger area). He saw lions, elephants, leopards, rhinos and buffaloes. He tried to hunt buffaloes and successful after several tries.

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