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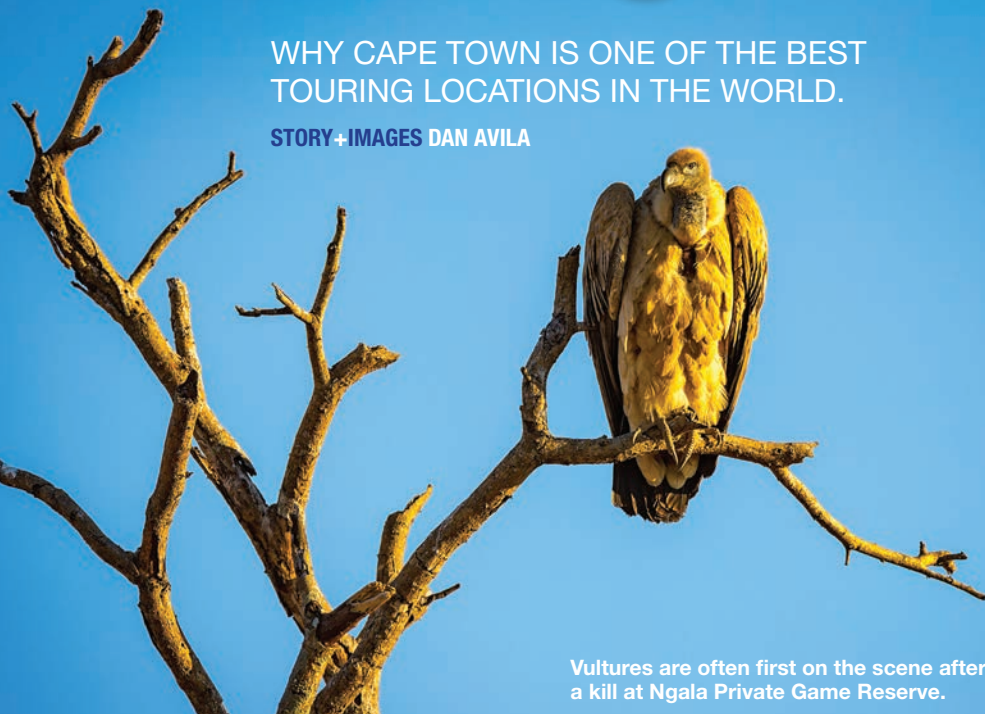
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VERSUS SUBARU IMPREZA 2.0-L

A mature lion relaxes at Ngala Private Game Reserve.

cruising the cape

WHY CAPE TOWN IS ONE OF THE BEST
TOURING LOCATIONS IN THE WORLD.

STORY+IMAGES DAN AVILA



Vultures are often first on the scene after a kill at Ngala Private Game Reserve.



The wheeling gulls circling Seal Island, False Bay.



Zebra displaying their unique pattern, which is like a fingerprint.



I'M STANDING IN a wetsuit on the edge of a boat, looking down at an open cage as a Great White shark rises from the deep to pursue a bait being drawn across the water in front of me. The words from the movie *Jaws* spring to mind: "we're going to need a bigger boat". I was neck-deep in just one of my bucket list adventures realised during two glorious weeks cruising Cape Town and its picturesque surrounds. The close encounters didn't end there.

Cape Town, as the name suggests, is located on South Africa's Southern Coast and famed for its Mediterranean climate, beauty and relative prosperity. It is also a fabulous place to use a base for a driving expedition of the Cape.

Standing like an oversized sentinel above the city, Table Mountain was an awe-inspiring site and, although not part of our driving tour, visiting the top of the table was high on our list of Cape Town experiences. A cable car is located close to town and even though we visited in winter, we were lucky to have a clear day affording incredible views of the city, coast and towns nestled between the mountains and the sea.

Setting off from Cape Town for the first road trip before dawn, I was bouncing with nervous energy knowing the encounter planned for first light. As a surf lifesaver and Fremantle-based water lover, I have held a life-long fascination and fear of the Great White shark and now, albeit from the relative safety of a cage, I was going to get a very personal encounter. Cage diving with the ultimate maritime predator was more daunting than I imagined. It was a cold morning as the pre-dawn light gradually illuminated the seascape surrounding our boat.

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Humpback and Southern Right whales are frequent visitors to False Bay.



A large bull elephant visits the Ngala Tented Camp for a drink.

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Seal Island came into view and the source of the screeching and barking became clear – 60,000 Cape fur seals and countless Cape cormorants all preparing to seek out their morning meal. They are not the only ones. The sea surrounding the islands is home to large numbers of Great White sharks congregating during the seal's breeding time and it didn't take long for the action to start. A juvenile fur seal launching into open water was obliterated by a large White, leaving nothing more than a bloody, grease patch which was immediately set upon by sea birds fighting for scraps.

Contrary to my basic human instincts of self-preservation, I prepared to jump into a cage that suddenly looked way too small and flimsy. The water was bracingly cold and adrenaline coursed through me as I tried to get my bearings. As the bubbles cleared, there she was. The body of the shark moved past me until I saw the tail, which was taller than me. I did it, bucket list item ticked and well worth it.

Cruising the Cape back from Simon's Town to Cape Town, the landscape is lush, undulating and scenic. This antipodean region has an air of familiarity to me as an Australian traveller, with its beautiful coastlines, farms and familiar vegetation, yet it is punctuated with stark contrasts that continually remind me this is Africa.

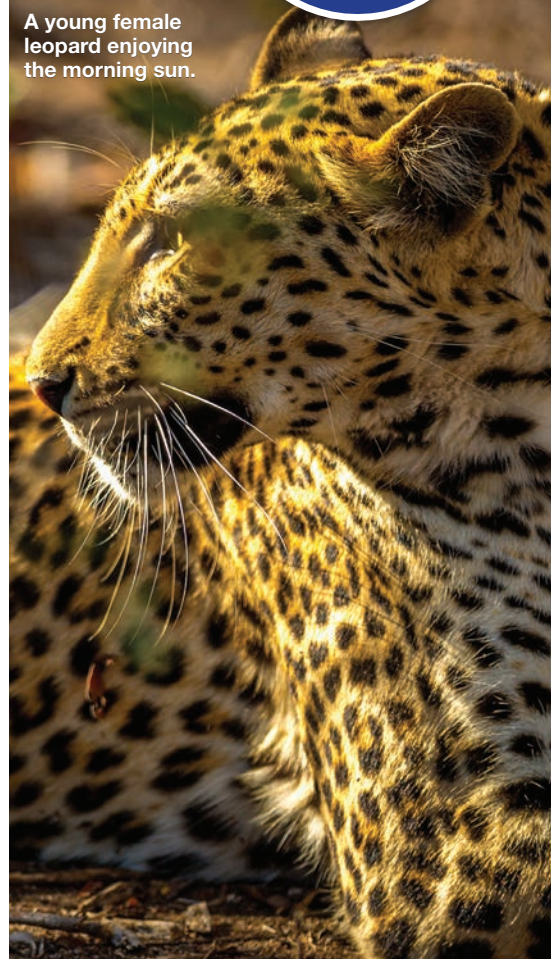
Driving back to Cape Town in the middle of a non-descript field behind a sand dune line, we came upon a township that had clearly grown organically in the absence of planning and structure. It stood in contrast to the opulence of the Cape Town waterfront and, without a guide on hand to safely

navigate the area, we decided not to linger.

The second day trip was to visit a family friend's historic winery in Stellenbosch, the Rustenberg Estate. The drive from Cape Town to the heart of Stellenbosch wine country was about an hour heading east, inland from the city. The route was picturesque with rolling hills and farms. The stunning Rustenberg Estate, founded in 1682, is nestled in a valley of the Simonsberg Mountain. The grounds around the white, Dutch-inspired buildings are ornate and the view at every point spectacular. The entire region looks classically European and the wines, dare I say it, give Australian vintners something to worry about.

We couldn't leave Africa without a big game safari experience and our break away trip to the Tented Camp within the 'Beyond Ngala Private Game Park' will endure as one of our greatest ever travel memories. Nothing can prepare you for the raw emotion of the first, close-quarters, big predator encounter. Sitting silent and still in a completely open safari vehicle, a lion stalking a buffalo walked by within pouncing distance of our vehicle. It's spine-tingling stuff to witness and one of many amazing experiences enjoyed over four days. The Tented Camp is set on a waterhole with tented accommodation akin to a luxury hotel suite draped in canvas. In between morning and evening safari drives and guided bush walks, there was time to relax and read a book on the tented veranda. Wild buck and warthog grazed at our feet and massive bull elephants strolled up for an afternoon drink from the swimming pool, capping off a series of pinch-yourself African moments. ■

A young female leopard enjoying the morning sun.



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