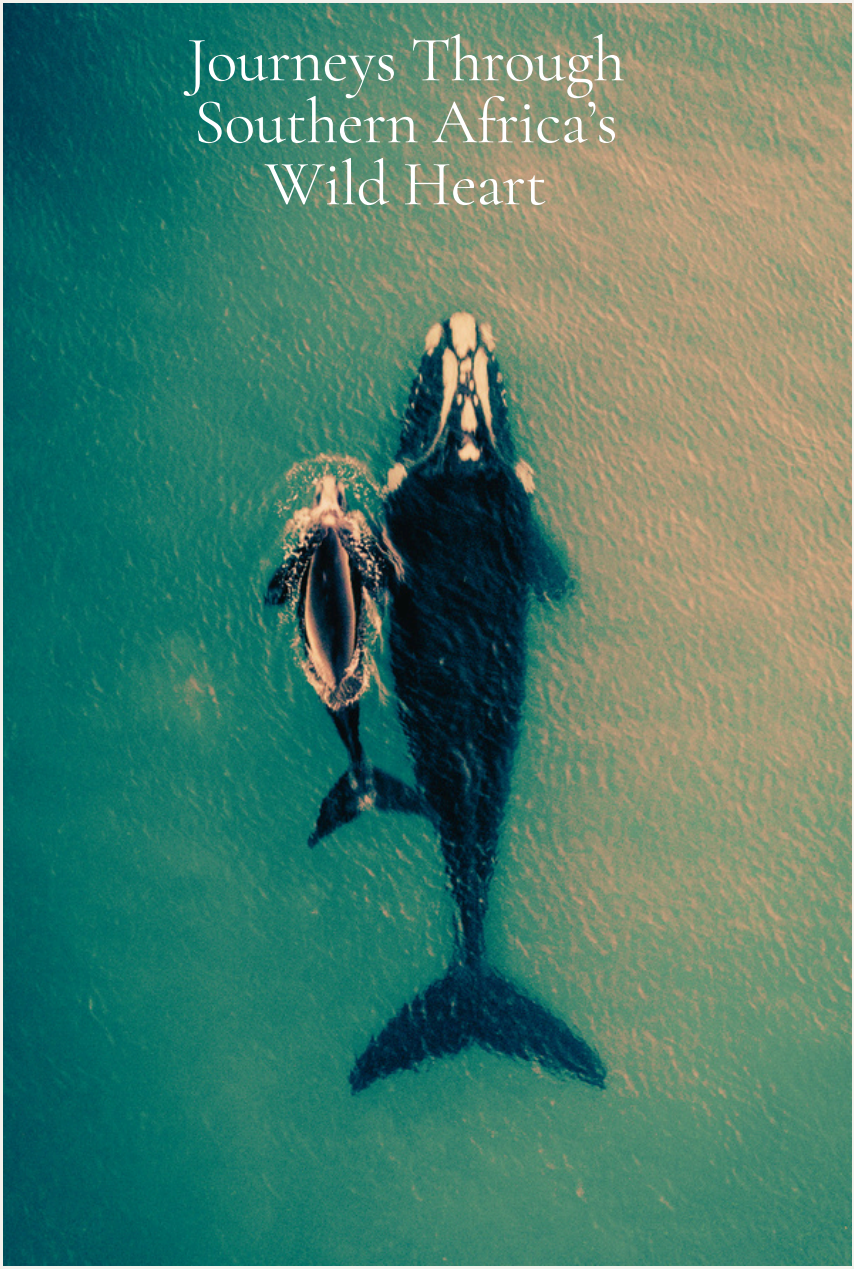
SEPTEMBER TIDES



BY JOHN SPARKS

Introduction

September is my favourite month of the year in Southern Africa. The whales are in Walker Bay, deserts burst into wildflowers, lagoons turn to glass, and the bush shakes off winter dust. This volume, the ninth in a twelve-month journey, drops you into that moment: a September stitched from real tours, real guests, and the quiet days in between. Some chapters follow families and friends on once-in-a-lifetime journeys; others find me alone on a path, a dune, or a farmhouse stoep, listening to what the land wants to say. Together, they form one spring month in Southern Africa's wild heart—and an invitation for you to imagine your own.

"The world is an open canvas for timeless memories;
when it's done properly, it's priceless."

About The Author

For over 30 years, John Sparks has been the quiet architect behind some of the most remarkable journeys ever taken in Southern Africa and beyond. Almost entirely by private referral, he has designed and led ultra-luxury safaris and expeditions for presidents, royalty, world-class athletes, UHNW families and globally influential entrepreneurs—guests who trust him precisely because he avoids the spotlight and delivers what money alone cannot buy: genuine access, deep local intelligence and absolute discretion.

With more than 6,000 days in the field, four generations of family roots in Southern Africa, and first-hand experience of over 300 of the continent's finest lodges, hotels, private villa's and private reserves, John knows these landscapes not from brochures but from boots on the ground and countless dawns in the bush. He is also a pioneer of Antarctic travel, instrumental in organising the first tourist and scientific flight to a Russian base on blue ice specially prepared in Antarctica—replacing the arduous annual sea crossing scientists had been forced to endure.

Beyond Africa, John is an accomplished sailor and was honoured, in 1993, to race across the Atlantic alongside one of the world's great sailing legends.

Earlier in life he was a top sportsman in South Africa, playing rugby and competing in athletics at the highest youth levels; several of his age-group records still stand more than 45 years later.
That same discipline and appetite for challenge now inform the way he plans complex journeys in remote environments.
As a third-generation wealth architect, he has overseen more than $400 million in real-asset investments across property, hospitality, wine estates, safari lodges and alternative assets, served on boards from offshore funds to pension schemes, and built a reputation for structuring capital with the same care he brings to crafting journeys.

His decade of voluntary service leading Air and Sea Rescue in South Africa, and his philanthropic work—such as donating the building that became the Songo Foundation's clubhouse and school in Stellenbosch—reflect a deeper ethic: safety, responsibility and impact matter more than appearances.

Clients describe him as a gracious ambassador for Africa, an older brother to their children, a "knowledge feeder" to their parents, and, by the end of a trip, more friend than guide.

Today, through Visitors to Africa, John sits at the intersection of capital, conservation and connection, personally curating invitation-only journeys—from emptied-out plains and reimagined safaris to hidden wine farms and Antarctic fly-ins—that reconnect families with nature, legacy and what truly matters.
For those who accept nothing less than extraordinary, he doesn't arrange holidays; he crafts the chapters your family will talk about for the rest of their lives.

SEPTEMBER TIDES

Journeys Through Southern Africa's Wild Heart

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12 The Light Between Worlds

“Between night and day there is a narrow hour when the world forgets to pretend—when whales rise, cliffs breathe, and the ocean tells the truth to anyone awake enough to listen.”

A September Dawn on the Hermanus Cliff Path

There are moments before sunrise when the ocean holds its breath. In that silence, Southern Africa reveals itself without spectacle—not as a destination, but as a confession whispered to those willing to wake while the world still sleeps.

September 2025. I stand at New Harbour as darkness retreats toward Madagascar, 1,800 miles east. The air carries that particular chill unique to the Western Cape spring—sharp enough to wake every nerve, gentle enough to feel like blessing. Walker Bay stretches before me like brushed pewter, its surface so still it might be milk poured into an ancient basin. Somewhere beyond the horizon, the Kleinrivier Mountains are gathering light.

I begin walking east.

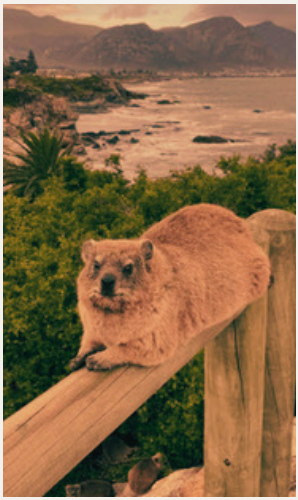
THE AWAKENING

The Hermanus Cliff Path unfurls ahead—twelve kilometers of perfectly constructed trail that somehow feels both engineered and eternal. Beneath my feet, centuries of wave-carved rock have been tamed just enough for my 89-year-old father to walk sections of this same route, yet wild enough that each footfall feels like trespass into something sacred.

The first light arrives not as announcement but as rumor. It touches the distant peaks first—Mount Baviaans, perhaps, or the ranges beyond Stanford—turning their silhouettes from charcoal to copper. Then it spills down the slopes like honey, slow and inevitable, until it finds the bay.

And the bay surrenders.

What was pewter becomes pearl. What was still becomes somehow stiller. The surface tension of the Atlantic seems barely able to contain whatever is rising beneath—not whales yet, though they will come, but something older: the morning itself, being born.



I round the path toward Fick's Pool, and there, arranged on the sun-warmed rocks like ancient sentinels, are the dassies.

THE GUARDIANS

A colony of perhaps thirty rock hyraxes occupies the prime real estate near Gearing's Point, their thick brown fur catching the new gold of sunrise. Mothers and babies together—the youngsters no more than a few weeks old, born in this very month when the Cape spring is kindest. They're perfect miniatures, fully furred, eyes bright as obsidian, already capable of the impossible leaps their species performs daily.

I slow my approach. One of the mothers raises her head, rounded ears twitching. Her baby—barely the size of a guinea pig—presses against her flank. We regard each other:

fellow mammals, separated by sixty million years of evolution but connected by this single September dawn, this single stretch of cliff, this single moment when the light is still negotiable.

I take one more step. The sentinel chirps—high, sharp, ancestral. The entire colony explodes into motion. They scuttle with astonishing speed toward the deep vegetation, their elephant-related feet finding purchase on rock that looks impossible. They vanish into crevices I cannot see, into the ancient architecture of the Old Harbour walls just ahead.

Then, almost immediately, the heads reappear. From the safety of stone and shadow, they turn to look at me.

In their eyes, I see what sixty-two countries of travel have taught me to recognize: the assessment every wild thing makes when encountering the human. Threat or temporary? Predator or passing?

I keep walking. They keep watching. The sun climbs higher.

THE OLD HARBOUR

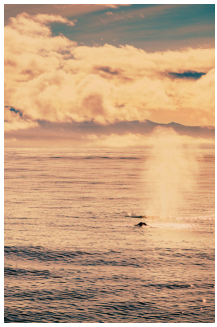
The Old Harbour is one of only two open-air maritime museums in the world preserved in its original state, a Provincial Heritage Site where Hermanuspietersfontein was born. At this hour, with sunrise spilling across the stone sea walls and brine tanks, it doesn't feel like a museum at all. It feels inhabited by every fisherman who ever wrestled a boat up these slopes, who ever gutted catch on these tables, who ever looked at this same horizon and wondered what weather was coming.

The historic fishing boats rest on concrete slopes, their hulls casting long shadows. Above the harbour, the Whale House keeps its vigil, that suspended skeleton of a young female Southern Right whale—the one that washed ashore in 2003—hanging like a prayer in the morning air.

But it's the living whales I've come for.....

THE BREATHING MOUNTAIN

Past the Old Harbour, the path curves toward Kwaaiwater—aptly named for its "angry water," though this morning the sea remains conspiratorially calm. The swell is present, yes—perhaps



The swell is present, yes—perhaps six feet, rolling in from the southern Atlantic with the patient rhythm of a planet breathing—but there's no chaos in it. Each wave approaches the rocky shore with almost ceremonial precision, lifting strands of kelp like offerings before folding into foam that hisses across stone worn smooth by a million such surrenders.

Then I see the blow.

Fifty meters offshore. Maybe less. A vertical column of mist catches the horizontal light of the new sun and turns to gold dust suspended in air. Then another. And another.

A pod of Southern Right whales, so close I can hear the percussion of their exhalations—that deep, wet whooosh that sounds like the earth itself clearing its lungs.

I stop walking. Stop breathing. Stop being a tourist, a traveler, a man who has seen sixty-two countries. I become only eyes and ears and the hammering of a heart that knows it is witnessing something that predates countries, predates borders, predates the very concept of human movement across the globe.

Near Roman Rock—that jagged offshore formation where 30-foot waves sometimes test the brave and foolish—the whales begin their ballet.

THE DANCE



Lobtailing first. A massive tail fluked against the sky, dark as wet slate, suspended for an impossible second before crashing down.
The sound reaches me a half-beat later—a thunderclap of displacement, of forty tons of whale declaring itself to the morning. Once. Twice. Three times. The bay erupts in white water, then settles, then erupts again.

Then comes the spy-hopping.

A head emerges—slowly, deliberately—rising vertical from the horizontal plane of ocean until I can see the callosities, those rough white patches of thickened skin that house colonies of whale lice and create a unique fingerprint for each individual. The eye regards the cliffside. Regards me. An intelligence older than language makes its assessment.

Threat or temporary? Predator or passing?

The whale holds my gaze for five seconds. Ten. Then slips beneath the surface with barely a ripple, leaving only questions.

My hands are shaking as I reach for my drone.

THE FOOTAGE

The DJI rises into the golden air, its rotors a whisper against the dawn. Through the camera feed, Walker Bay reveals its secrets from a god's perspective. The cliff path a dark ribbon. The town of Hermanus still mostly asleep, smoke beginning to rise from breakfast fires. The mountains now fully illuminated, their fynbos slopes showing every shade of green and gold the Western Cape can conjure.

And there, near Roman Rock, in water so clear the kelp forests below are visible, I witness what perhaps a dozen humans have ever filmed in wild conditions.



Two Southern Right whales, their bodies parallel, rolling together in the ancient choreography of mating. They surface and submerge in perfect synchrony, their massive forms moving with impossible grace. The male—perhaps 50 tons—positions himself with a gentleness that contradicts every assumption about size and power. The female receives him, rolling, adjusting, their tails creating vortexes that spin away toward the horizon.

I watch through the screen. I watch with my naked eyes. I try to burn it into memory with an intensity that borders on prayer.

Three minutes. Perhaps four. Then they separate, sound, and vanish into the blue cathedral of Walker Bay, leaving me alone on the cliff path with footage that will be studied, shared, treasured—but never quite believed by those who weren't standing here, in this light, at this latitude, on this September morning.

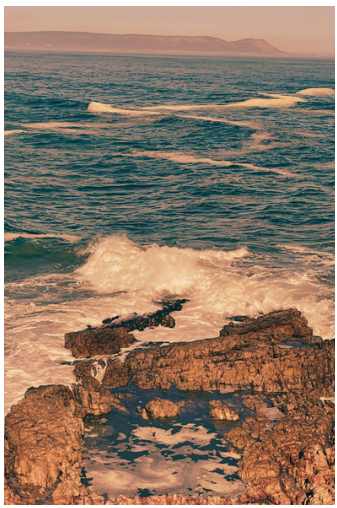
THE SOUND OF SHELLS

The path continues past Roman Rock toward Kammabaai, and now I'm walking through a different soundscape entirely. The tide is receding, pulling water back across millennia of accumulated shells—limpets, mussels, periwinkles—creating a sound like rainfall played backward, like applause from an audience of calcium and time.

To my right, the homes of Hermanus stake their claims on some of the most expensive real estate in South Africa. Glass and steel and architectural ambition, each positioned to capture this view, this light, this precise angle of Atlantic meeting continent. I don't begrudge them. If I had won different lotteries, genetic or financial, I might have built here too—built a life around these mornings, these whales, these moments when the world reveals itself without spectacle.

THE FISHERMEN'S GOSPEL

Near Siever's Punt, where the cliff path dips closer to the waterline, I encounter the brotherhood of dawn.



Three fishermen, spaced along the rocks like notes in a slow melody, their rods bent toward the horizon, their lines disappearing into water that's beginning to shimmer with full sunlight. They wear the uniform of their calling—weathered caps, salt-stained jackets, boots that have known a thousand tides.

Their tackle boxes sit open like small altars to patience.

"Môre," the nearest one greets me, his Afrikaans accent thick as the early morning mist that's finally burning off the bay.

"Morning," I reply, stopping. "Any luck?"

He grins, revealing gaps where teeth used to be. "The sea gives what the sea wants to give. Today, she's been generous."

His bucket contains four substantial fish—their scales catching light like scattered coins. But it's the largest one that draws my eye: a Red Roman, perhaps three kilograms, its distinctive pink-orange flanks still gleaming with ocean.

"Beautiful fish," I say.

"Roman Rock fish," he nods toward the formation offshore. "They're thick around there this time of year. The whales stir up the bottom, bring the food up, the Romans follow."

We talk for fifteen minutes—about the whales (he's seen the mating too, says it happens more than people think), about the spring run of fish, about how the path has changed over his forty years of fishing it, about how it hasn't changed at all. His companions cast and reel, cast and reel, their movements meditative, asking questions of the deep that may or may not be answered.

When I finally make to leave, he reaches into his bucket.

"Here," he says, lifting the Red Roman. "Take this one. You have somewhere to cook it?"

"I'm staying in a private villa—we have a chef—"

"Perfect. Tell your chef: lemon, butter, garlic, and a hot pan. Nothing else. Don't insult a fish this fresh."

I try to pay him. He waves me off with the irritation of a man whose gift has been misunderstood.
"Just enjoy it," he says. "And remember where it came from."

I walk on, carrying five pounds of Roman Rock's blessing in a plastic bag, the fish still cool from the Atlantic's embrace.

KAMMABAAI

By the time I reach Nanny's Beach—officially Kammabaai—the sun has fully claimed the day. The secret is out. The dawn magic has democratized into simple morning beauty, which is its own kind of gift.

The beach curves in a perfect crescent, protected enough for families, open enough for swells. The rock pools at the northern end are shallow, safe for children, filled with hermit crabs and anemones pursuing their small, fierce lives. But it's the southern break that calls to me.

Eight surfers are already out, spread across the lineup like punctuation marks in a liquid sentence. The waves are clean—perhaps 1.5 meters, just overhead, peeling right to left with the mechanical precision that makes surfers travel thousands of miles. These are locals, I can tell. Their positioning is too perfect, their patience too practiced, their wave selection too ruthless.

I'm wearing board shorts under my hiking clothes. I've carried this possibility with me all morning.

The water is shocking—perhaps 14 degrees Celsius—that particular cold the Benguela Current delivers like a Viking handshake. It strips away thought, pretense, everything except the immediate fact of being a warm-blooded mammal voluntarily entering a cold-blooded ocean.

I duck-dive the first set. The shock becomes familiar, then welcome. By the third duck-dive, I'm laughing.

I catch a single wave—a smaller one the locals let pass—and ride it poorly, joyfully, all the way to the beach where it deposits me among the foam and shells and ancient laughter of children I cannot see but can somehow hear in the hiss and retreat of whitewater.

Twenty minutes in the ocean. Twenty minutes of surrender to cold and current and the democracy of waves that care nothing for the sixty-two countries I've visited or the footage I've captured or the story I'm already composing in my head.

I emerge baptized. Reborn. Ridiculous and grinning.

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MILKWOOD CATHEDRAL

The final mile approaches, and with it, the sun's ambition. What was gentle at dawn has become insistent. The UV index in the Western Cape spring doesn't negotiate—it commands. My shoulders are beginning to prickle with heat, my water bottle running low.

Then the path delivers its final mercy.

Piet-se-Bos unfolds before me like a secret whispered by the landscape itself. An avenue of ancient milkwood trees—Sideroxylon inerme—their gnarled branches weaving overhead into a canopy so dense the temperature drops ten degrees in a single step. The light that filters through is green-gold, aquatic, as if I've walked not into a forest but into the memory of forests, into the Platonic ideal of shade.

These trees are old. Some perhaps three hundred years, their trunks twisted by centuries of wind into sculptures that belong in galleries. Their wood is so dense it sinks in water. Their growth so slow that a tree my height might be older than my country. They are the indigenous royalty of the Cape, survivors of fires and droughts and the wholesale transformation of a landscape that has forgotten more than it remembers.

I slow my pace. Not from fatigue—though I've been walking for nearly three hours—but from reverence. The path beneath the canopy is carpeted with fallen leaves and filtered light. Birdsong cascades from the branches: Cape robin-chats, olive thrushes, the distant hammer of a woodpecker testing bark for breakfast.
Through gaps in the canopy, I catch glimpses of what lies ahead: the vast white expanse of Grotto Beach, stretching eighteen kilometers toward an infinity of sand and mountain backdrop. The crown jewel. The grand finale.

But I'm in no hurry. Not anymore.
In the cathedral of milkwood, time moves differently. The crash of waves is muted to whisper. The urgency of morning—the whales, the drone footage, the race against changing light—dissolves into something older and slower and infinitely more patient.
I think of the dassies, whose closest relative is the elephant. I think of the fisherman's generosity, the Red Roman still cool in my bag. I think of the mating whales, their massive bodies moving with impossible tenderness. I think of the surfers, waiting for the perfect wave with the patience of monks.

I think: This is what I came for. Not the spectacle—though the spectacle was extraordinary. But this. The cathedral. The shade. The slowing down.

GROTTO BEACH

The path emerges from the milkwood onto Grotto Beach, and the world explodes into light and space and the kind of beauty that makes camera lenses seem like insults.

Eighteen kilometers of Blue Flag perfection stretch eastward, the sand so white it hurts to look at without squinting. Behind the beach, the mountains rise in layers of purple and blue, the Kleinrivier range stacked against the sky like a promise. The surf is bigger here, more exposed to the southern swells—overhead sets marching toward shore in perfect parallel lines, their faces catching sun like stained glass.

Families are beginning to arrive. Coolers and umbrellas. Children with buckets pursuing the architecture of sandcastles. Dogs chasing tennis balls into the shorebreak and returning triumphant, tails creating arcs of spray.

I walk the final hundred meters to the restaurant that marks the official end—or beginning, depending on your direction—of the Hermanus Cliff Path.

The establishment is Dutch-owned, all clean lines and ocean views and the smell of fresh coffee so powerful it might wake the dead.

I collapse into a chair on the deck.

Order.

Wait.

Watch the waves.

THE BREAKFAST

When the food arrives, it arrives as benediction.

Uitsmijter—that most Dutch of breakfasts, beloved of my Amsterdam years. Two eggs fried in butter, perched atop thick slices of bread, draped with ham and cheese that's been melted under a grill until it bubbles and browns. Simple. Perfect. Completely unexpected on the southern tip of Africa.

"You know this dish?" the waitress asks, smiling at my expression.

"My children are Dutch," I tell her. "I haven't had a proper uitsmijter since 2019."

"Then welcome home," she says.

I eat slowly, deliberately, trying to taste not just the food but the entire morning. The yolk breaks golden across the bread. The cheese is sharp, the ham smoky, the butter singing its familiar song of salt and cream. But it's the combination—this specific collision of Dutch comfort food and African ocean air, of memory and moment, of every kilometer I've walked condensed into protein and carbohydrate—that threatens to undo me.

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Around me, the restaurant hums with morning conversation. Afrikaans, English, German tourists planning their day, a French couple debating whether the water is too cold for swimming (it is, they'll go anyway). The staff moves with the easy rhythm of people who live where others vacation, who see this view every day and have somehow not grown blind to it.

I order a second coffee. Then a third. I'm not ready to leave. Through the restaurant's windows, Grotto Beach performs its daily miracle. A pod of dolphins—perhaps twenty strong—works the surf line, their dorsals cutting through wave faces with surgical precision. They're hunting, driving a bait ball into the shallows where escape becomes impossible. Gulls notice, screaming down from the sky. The surfers paddle wide to give them room. Even from here, I can see the explosions of silver as fish break the surface in their desperation.

Circle of life. Nature red in tooth and fin. The morning's beauty revealing its foundation of hunger and survival.

But there's no cruelty in it. Just the ancient contract: eat or be eaten, feed or starve, adapt or vanish. The same contract the milkwood trees signed three centuries ago. The same contract the dassies live by, sunning themselves on rocks while watching for eagles. The same contract that brought the fisherman to the cliff path at dawn, and the whales to Walker Bay each winter, and me—somehow, inexplicably—to this exact chair, in this exact moment, at this exact restaurant on the southern edge of Africa.

13

Where Time Breathes

“Here, the past is not behind you. It lies quietly at your feet.”

FIRST LIGHT

There are landscapes that whisper. And then there are landscapes that speak entire civilizations into existence.
The West Coast National Park unfolds like a secret kept too long—a palimpsest of geological memory, human migration, and the impossible blue of a lagoon that has witnessed war, peace, and everything between

I enter the gates—one of the first cars through.

THE FOOTPRINTS OF HUMANITY

1st stop – not a single soul in sight.

At Kraalbaai, where 117,000 years collapse into a single moment, I stand where she stood. Eve. Not the biblical Eve, but the real Eve—a Homo sapiens woman whose fossilized footprint was discovered here in 1995.

The landscape is unchanged.
Identical.
Breathtaking.

The Preekstoel rock stands sentinel—a natural pulpit rising from shoreline stone, bearing silent witness to generations of Khoisan who scraped survival from these crystalline waters. My fingers trace the same wind-carved surfaces their fingers touched thousands of generations ago.

Shell middens—ancient "kitchen" mounds—scatter the shoreline. The Khoisan didn't conquer this landscape. They negotiated with it.

THE LAGOON'S WHISPERS

Langebaan Lagoon lies impossibly still. So clear you could count the fish twenty feet below. A pure salt-water lagoon formed by millennia of rising and falling sea levels—not a river's mouth, but a geological poem written in water and stone.

Sixteen Mile Beach, 500 m to my right—my next stop—crashes in contrast: huge waves delivering ancient rhythms, the same surf that witnessed those first human footsteps. I walk where strandlopers walked, feeling simultaneously insignificant and profoundly connected.

I then retrace my route back to Churchhaven—I've been invited for tea. Twenty minutes of taking in the sights of the turquoise-blue lagoon on my right, stopping far too many times for photo opportunities.

TEA IN CHURCHHAVEN

The invitation came like a whispered secret: "Join us for mid-morning tea."

THE ARRIVAL

Churchhaven reveals itself slowly. No electricity. No tar roads. Just pure, fine white sand and fynbos stretching to impossible horizons.

Traditional stone houses—built from local calcrete and granite, finished with lime-wash made from burnt mussel shells—nestle into the landscape like they've grown from the earth itself. Thatch roofs. Walls constructed from stones carried by hand. Some dating back to 1740.

I step inside a home. Driftwood and shipwreck timber form interior beams. Walls thick enough to keep out centuries of wind.

Windows framing views that haven't changed in generations—a testament to architectural simplicity. White-washed walls of local calcrete, thatched roof crafted from local reeds, windows framing a landscape unchanged for centuries.

THE RITUAL

Proper English tea. In the most improbable of locations.

Bone china cups. Delicate porcelain brought generations ago, surviving journeys across oceans. Freshly baked scones—still warm, crusty edges promising butter and homemade jam.

Outside, a Cape grysbok grazes. The landscape continues its ancient ballet, indifferent to this most civilized of moments.

THE CONVERSATION

My host—third-generation Churchhaven resident—pours tea with precision.

"We don't preserve history," he says. "We inhabit it."

"People think isolation is a hardship," he says. "We see it as protection."

Stone tools. Maritime logs. A Dutch kitchen from the 1700s. Photographs documenting a landscape in perpetual conversation with human presence sit casually on side tables.

Windows framing views that haven't changed in generations—a testament to architectural simplicity. White-washed walls of local calcrete, thatched roof crafted from local reeds, windows framing a landscape unchanged for

THE VIEW

Through windows, the West Coast unfolds. Fynbos exploding with four hundred and eighty-two plant species. Rock hyraxes sunning themselves. The impossible blue of Langebaan Lagoon meters away.

THE LESSON

Sixty-two countries have shown me geography. Churchhaven shows me belonging.

A landscape that just doesn't exist anywhere in the world. A landscape that remembers. A landscape that teaches.

Another scone. Another cup of tea.

Indifferent. Precise. Alive.

I think about the Khoisan who walked these shores 117,000 years ago. About the strandlopers who read the ocean like a language. About the generations of farmers, fishermen, survivors who understood that this place demands respect, not conquest.

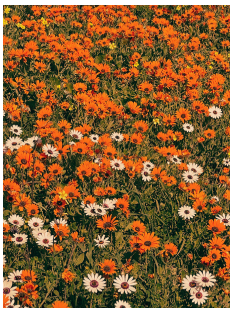
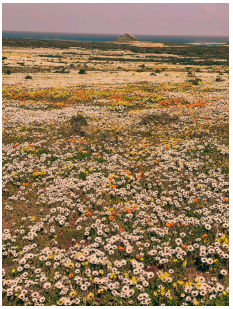
And then it's time to leave.
"Next time," my host says, "stay longer. Not as a tourist. But as a student of this place."

I understand now why some travelers become pilgrims. Why some journeys are not about distance, but depth. I will be back.

I drive back along my tracks towards one of my absolute bucket list items, never expecting the experiences that come with it all.

THE BOTANICAL KINGDOM – A LIVING CANVAS

The wildflowers don't just bloom. They perform.
Four hundred and eighty-two species transform the West Coast into the most extravagant, ephemeral art exhibition on the planet. Not a garden. Not a park. But a botanical miracle that breathes, pulses, regenerates with a complexity that makes human art look primitive.

THE WHITE CONSTELLATION

First, the white blooms—Arctotis—create landscapes that look like fallen snow. Delicate paper-thin petals so dense they transform entire plains into alabaster blankets. Weskus madeliefie and Cape daisies create constellations across ochre earth, each flower a perfect geometric star, so intricate you want to examine them under a microscope.

Some flowers so white they seem to glow from within, catching early morning light like tiny mirrors, creating a luminescence that makes the landscape feel ethereal.

PURPLE MAJESTY

Then the purple arrives.

Vygies—Mesembryanthemaceae—explode in royal hues. Not one purple, but a spectrum. Deep aubergine. Lavender. Magenta. Lilac. Entire plains transform into living amethyst fields.

Geelbos and Klipblommetjies create purple seas that roll like waves, so dense and vibrant they seem to pulse with an inner light. Each flower a rebellion against the semi-desert's aridity, each bloom a testament to evolutionary brilliance.

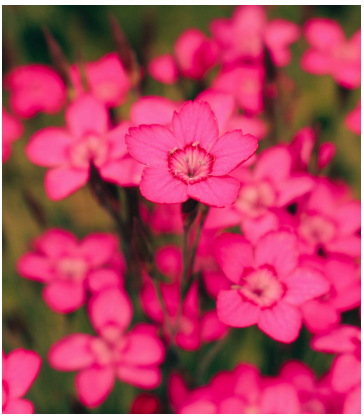
ORANGE FIRE

Gazanias set the landscape ablaze.

Not just orange. But fire orange. Burnt orange. Tangerine. Saffron. Colors so intense they seem to generate heat, creating pools of flame against green fynbos. Boekholts and Gousblom spread like molten sunlight, transforming ochre earth into a living canvas.

Some flowers so perfectly orange they look airbrushed, so precise in their coloration that they seem more like art installations than living organisms.

PINK POETRY



Soft pinks emerge like whispers.

Kougoed and Vygie-akkers create delicate pink landscapes that feel almost transparent. Blush. Salmon. Soft coral. Flowers so delicate they seem constructed from light itself, dancing between rock formations, creating living watercolors.

THE INFINITE PALETTE

Where white daisies create snow-like constellations, they blend seamlessly into rivers of purple vygies. Not separate. Integrated. A living watercolor where boundaries dissolve.

Orange gazanias burst like scattered flames, their burnt tangerine edges bleeding into soft pink kougoed. Magenta vygies flow between these colors, creating transitions so perfect they seem mathematically designed.

No color stays isolated. They communicate. Blend. Transform.

Some sections look like spilled paint. Others like carefully curated botanical art. But always—always—breathtaking.

THE BOTANICAL MATHEMATICS

Each bloom a precise calculation of survival.

Petals angled to maximize sunlight. Roots designed to extract moisture from seemingly impossible terrain. Colors evolved to attract specific pollinators.

Flowers that open only during precise hours. Blooms that last mere days. A botanical performance so intricate, so time-sensitive that missing it means missing an entire chapter of planetary storytelling.

THE ANIMAL CANVAS

And threading through this floral chaos—the animals.

Springbok pronking through orange fields. Eland grazing among purple vygies. Cape Mountain Zebras creating geometric contrast against soft watercolor blooms.

Not disrupting the landscape. Completing it.

THE EPHEMERAL MIRACLE

This isn't a landscape.

This is a living, breathing artwork that exists for mere weeks each year.

Perfectly timed. Impossibly beautiful. A botanical miracle that requires planetary alignment to witness at peak bloom.

Four hundred and eighty-two species.

Infinite possibilities.

One breathtaking moment.

THE MOMENT

This isn't just a landscape.

This is planetary art.

This is survival transformed into beauty.

This is the West Coast in September—when the world remembers how to truly bloom.

GEELBEK: WINGS AND WHISPERS

At Geelbek bird hide, time suspends.
A gentleman—weathered, kind-eyed—shares his binoculars. Suddenly, I'm not just watching birds. I'm witnessing migration's grand ballet.

Great white pelicans drift like cloud shadows across blue-green water. Flamingos—both Greater and Lesser—paint pink across the lagoon in formations so elegant they seem choreographed. African black oystercatchers work the shoreline with surgical precision.

"See that one?" he points. A Curlew Sandpiper. "Fifteen thousand kilometers from Russia. Every year."
I watch it land—exhausted, triumphant, impossibly alive after a journey that would break most species.

Four hundred birds? No. Four hundred stories of survival, migration, and the relentless mathematics of existence.

Over 250 species have been recorded here. Today, I witness perhaps thirty. Each one a small miracle.
"I'm not really a birder," I confess.
He smiles. "You are now."

Next stop—I curse again. I am seriously running out of time. My heart is beating as I can't imagine missing something. It's a day I really do not want to end.

Ten minutes further down the road—I am running way over time. What happens if I get locked into the reserve?

But I have to stop.

THE WHITE BUILDING: A REPOSITORY OF MEMORY

Fifteen minutes further, I reach it.

A small white building perched on a high boulder overlooking the lagoon—so easily missed that most visitors drive past without noticing.

I'm late. The reserve gates close at 6 PM. I have perhaps twenty minutes.

Inside, the beautiful white-washed room becomes a time machine. Wall-to-wall documentation. Whaling histories with photographs of massive carcasses being processed at Donkergat station. Khoisan stone tools with explanations of their ingenious design. Maritime charts showing how this lagoon served as navigational sanctuary for centuries.

Maps documenting geological transformation—how sea levels rose and fell, how this lagoon formed not from rivers but from planetary breathing.

The views through windows are awe-inspiring. The lagoon stretches impossibly blue. Table Mountain—100 kilometers distant—catches the setting sun, glowing like a distant temple.

Ninety minutes. That's how long you'd need to properly absorb

THE PROMISE

As I reluctantly leave, something fundamental shifts.

This wasn't enough.

One day to see all this is far too little.

I make a promise to myself: I will return tomorrow.

Even though it's not on my plan. Even though my itinerary says otherwise.

Some places don't ask permission. They demand witnessing.

THE LAGOON'S MEMORY

Langebaan Lagoon lies impossibly still. So clear you could count the scales on a fish fifty feet below.

This wasn't a U-boat sanctuary, as myths might suggest. This was an Allied fortress. Catalina flying boats launched from these waters, hunting German submarines along the South African coast. U-179 was sunk just west of here. UIT-22 destroyed by aircraft that once rose from this very lagoon.

Not a refuge—but a hunting ground.

Now it's a sanctuary of a different kind. Pure. Untouched. A salt-water lagoon formed not by rivers, but by millennia of rising and falling sea levels.

Sixteen Mile Beach crashes in contrast—huge waves delivering ancient rhythms, the same surf that witnessed those first human footsteps. I walk where strandlopers walked, feeling simultaneously insignificant and profoundly connected.

THE 1860 FARMHOUSE

I drive excitedly toward my accommodation—a farmhouse built in 1860, now transformed into intimate lodging.

Stone walls that have absorbed 165 years of wind, sun, and human story. Thatch roof. Shipwreck timber beams. Floors polished by generations of bare feet.

As I check in, the owner asks: "How was your day?"

How do you summarize 117,000 years in a sentence?

"I saw where humanity began," I say. "And where it might remember how to live."

She smiles—the knowing smile of someone who understands this landscape's power to transform.

"Most people need two days minimum," she says. "Some never leave."

EVENING REFLECTION

My room is simple. Whitewashed walls. A window framing the lagoon. No television. No Wi-Fi strong enough to distract.

Just silence.

And in that silence, the day reassembles itself.

The morning: Standing where Eve stood 117,000 years ago at Kraalbaai, the Preekstoel rock rising like a natural cathedral.

The wildlife parade: Eland and bontebok, Cape Mountain Zebras and ostriches, rock hyraxes and angulate tortoises—each species a living library of evolutionary intelligence.

Seeberg Viewpoint: Table Mountain glowing 100 kilometers distant, the white cottage holding its mini-museum of whaling and war and Khoisan survival.

Geelbek: Four hundred birds. Thirty species. A kind gentleman sharing binoculars and the gift of patient observation.

The flowers: Four hundred and eighty-two species transforming semi-desert into impossible color.

Churchhaven: Tea and scones in a house built in 1740, where shipwreck timber forms the beams and burnt mussel shells became the walls' white finish.

The final pilgrimage: That white building overlooking the lagoon, crammed with ninety minutes of history I absorbed in fifteen.

THE RECKONING

I pull out my journal. Begin writing.

Sixty-two countries under my belt. The Himalayas and the Amazon. Temples of Angkor Wat and souks of Marrakech. Northern Lights over Iceland and Southern Cross above Patagonia.

But this?

This West Coast—hidden, understated, easily overlooked on most South African itineraries—might be one of the most beautiful, tranquil, and historically significant places I've had the pleasure of witnessing.

A hidden gem that doesn't announce itself.
A landscape that whispers rather than shouts.
A place where geological time, human history, and ecological miracle exist in perfect conversation.

It reminds me of the sailors who arrived in Langebaan and never left —wanderers whose global ambitions dissolved the moment they encountered this landscape. One, midway through a planned circumnavigation of the world, simply anchored his sailboat in Kraalbaai and surrendered. "I was halfway around the world," he would tell locals, "when I realized the journey wasn't about completing a circle. It was about finding a place that completes you." Another arrived by chance, intending a brief stop, and found himself permanently claimed by the crystalline lagoon, the impossible light, the fynbos that breathes with an intelligence beyond human comprehension. Their boats became fixtures. Their stories merged with the landscape's ancient narratives.

The wildflowers alone justify the journey. Four hundred and eighty-two species creating a botanical masterpiece that changes daily, that exists for mere weeks each year, that requires perfect timing and planetary alignment to witness at peak bloom.

The wildlife moving through those flowers? Picture-perfect doesn't begin to describe it. Eland grazing among purple vygies. Bontebok leaping through orange gazanias. Cape Mountain Zebras creating geometric contrast against soft watercolor blooms.

The history? 117,000 years of continuous human presence. Khoisan survival strategies. Dutch colonial outposts. World War II submarine hunting. Whaling industries that learned to stop. Each layer adding depth to understanding.

The people? A Churchhaven resident explaining that isolation is protection. A birder sharing binoculars and knowledge. A farmhouse owner who understands that this landscape transforms visitors into students.

Just like those unexpected sailors, I too feel claimed by this place—not conquered, but completed.

NOW I KNOW WHY

As darkness claims the lagoon, I understand.

Why Churchhaven has no electricity, no sewerage, no tar roads.

Why the houses are built the traditional way—stone by stone, shell by shell.

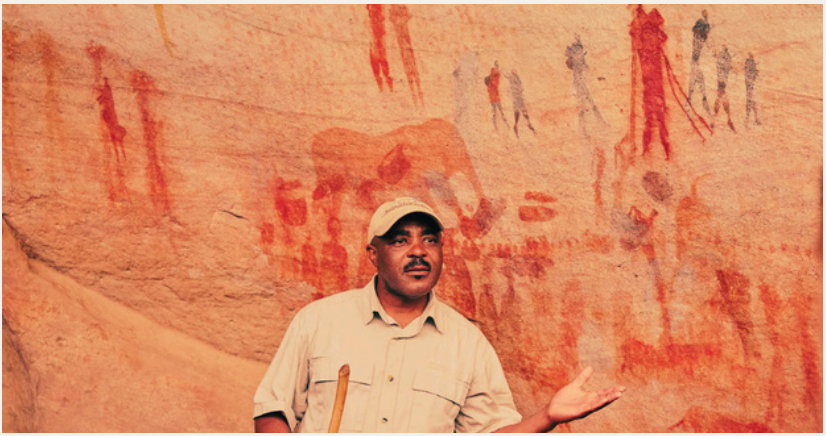
Why there are no fences, no double stories, no modern intrusions.

Why the small shop carries only necessities.

It's not primitive. It's intentional.

It's not backward. It's forward-thinking.

It's a deliberate choice to exist in conversation with landscape rather than dominance over it.



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Stone Cathedrals

“Some places do not remember history.
They are the history—written in stone,
traced in paint,and still watching us back.”

By the time the tar gives way to gravel, the world has already begun to change.

The frenetic geometry of highways and towns dissolves behind me; ahead, the road becomes a line drawn through an ancient painting. The morning has been a pilgrimage through bloom—fields and fields of wildflowers, as far as the eye can see. White daisies turned to snowfields under a high blue sky. Bands of orange and yellow sweeping over low hills like spilled fire. Pinks and purples stitched into the seams.

I've seen wildflower seasons all over the Western Cape. I've seen deserts bloom in other parts of the world. But this—this long approach toward the Cederberg—feels different. Less like a good year, more like a once-in-a-lifetime alignment between rainfall, soil, sunlight and mercy. There are stretches where I cannot see bare earth at all. Just colour. Living colour, breathing and shimmering in the light.

Then, slowly, the flowers thin. The land grows wilder. The mountains begin to rise—first as distant rust-coloured walls, then as enormous sandstone sculptures clawing at the sky. The air changes. Fresher. Drier. The temperature has risen a few degrees since the coast, but the silence has deepened with every kilometre.
Here, you can hear your own thoughts.

THE ARRIVAL

The track curls between boulders and fynbos, over dry riverbeds and past the occasional cluster of rooibos bushes, their fine leaves holding the memory of winter rains. And then, almost shyly, it appears:

A lodge in the heart of the Cederberg, so luxuriously out of this world it feels like a mirage.
Stone and thatch and glass, folded so gently into the landscape that, from even a short distance, it nearly disappears. Lawns softened into wild edges. Water channels glinting in the sun. A scattering of suites and private villas tucked into rock and reed, each one giving the impression it has been here for centuries, waiting patiently for your arrival.

Inside, it is all polished wood, cool stone, deep chairs and quiet art. There is nothing ostentatious. Just the confidence of a place that knows it belongs exactly where it is: in rooibos and rock-art country, among mountain leopards and Cape Mountain zebra, on land that remembers the first footsteps of the people who painted its shelters.
A cool cloth. A glass of something cold. A voice: “Welcome. You must be hungry. We’ve prepared tea.”

Hungry is not the word. But I follow anyway.

ROOIBOS & SCONES IN ROCK ART COUNTRY

The terrace looks out over a wide open plain, framed by towering red cliffs that catch the light like slow-burning embers. Somewhere beyond those ridges lies the Biedouw Valley, where riverbeds host the last known spawning grounds of sandfish and where an 8.5-kilometre restoration zone quietly stitches together what careless hands once tore apart. Closer in, the land rolls in soft undulations—fynbos, grasses, the occasional quiver tree, the faint suggestion of game trails.

On the table: a line of pots and cups. Not just any tea. Rooibos. Properly honoured.
A guide walks me through them with the reverence usually reserved for fine wines: pure, unblended rooibos with its deep, almost honeyed aroma; versions touched with citrus and spice; more floral infusions that carry faint echoes of the very plants scattered across the slopes around us. He talks of traditional harvesting, of families in these mountains who have cut and cured this plant for generations, of the way its roots grip this poor, sandy soil and coax sustenance from almost nothing.
I sip. Each cup is different. Sweet, nutty, slightly smoky, then unexpectedly delicate. There is a rhythm to it: taste, listen, breathe in the mountain air. Taste again.

And then comes the ambush.

Scones—still warm, crusts just beginning to crisp, insides soft enough to sigh when you tear them open.

Bowls of thick cream, strawberries that taste like actual sun, jams that seem almost indecent in their intensity. Finger sandwiches—cucumber, smoked salmon, cheeses layered between breads so fresh they still carry whispers of the oven.

I eat too much. Not because I am particularly hungry, but because everything is so simply, honestly delicious. Because this is the kind of tea you remember years later when you taste an inferior version in some anonymous hotel lounge and think: If only you knew.

And all the while, the mountains watch.

"Your vehicle is ready," my guide says eventually, with a smile that suggests he's seen this sequence play out a thousand times: guest arrives, guest is seduced by tea and carbohydrates, guest is gently pried from the table and loaded into an open game-viewing vehicle.

It's a private drive. Just me, the guide, and the Cederberg.

EDGE OF THE WORLD

We roll out across the plain, tyres humming softly over the track. The lodge falls away behind us and, with it, the last clear markers of the present. Ahead, the mountains rise, all carved sandstone and ancient fault lines, their faces painted in layers of red, orange, and gold. This is not a soft landscape. It is harsh, honest, unedited.

Within minutes, I feel as if I've slipped backwards in time.

The vehicle climbs toward a low saddle between two ridges and suddenly the world falls away.

We stop on the edge of a sandstone shelf, tyres inches from a drop that sends the land cascading thousands of hectares below. From here, the Cederberg opens like a book: layered ridges folding into one another, plains rolling out in ochre and green, dry river lines sketching silver paths through the valley floor. In the far distance, more mountains rise in hazy blue, their outlines softened by heat and time.

I've stood on many viewpoints in my life—Alpine passes, Andes, Himalayas—but there is something about this particular vista that presses unexpectedly at the back of the throat. Perhaps it's the knowledge that so little has changed here. That if a strandloper, a San hunter, or a 19th-century trekboer stood next to me now, they would recognise almost everything they see.
Below us, life begins to move.

A herd of Cape Mountain zebra drifts across the plain, their stripes resolving slowly as my eyes adjust to the distance—black and white calligraphy written across rust-coloured earth. Near them, red hartebeest pick their way through knee-high fynbos, bodies angled perfectly to the slope. Farther off, a line of grey rhebok threads into a shallow gully and vanish.

On a distant rise, eland graze—massive, deliberate, their pale flanks and dark necks catching the last of the sun. In San cosmology, eland are not just antelope; they are power, rain, trance, sacredness wrapped in muscle and horn. To see them here, under these cliffs, is to understand every painted eland that ever appeared on a rock wall.
“On some evenings,” my guide says quietly, “you can see a dozen species from this one spot.”

We sit in silence and let the mountain show us what it wants to.
A pair of ostrich steps out from behind a low rise, necks held high like sentries. In the basin below, a jackal trots along a faint track, pausing to test the air before melting into a patch of shadow. High above, a Verreaux’s eagle rides a thermal along the cliff face, black wings tipped in white, scanning the rocks for dassies. Sunbirds flicker among the proteas just below our vantage point, flashes of emerald and red against the sandstone.

“This is what it looked like,” my guide adds, almost to himself. “When they were walking here. When they were painting.”

He talks then—without fanfare, without sales pitch—about reintroductions. How, since the mid-1990s, the reserve has quietly welcomed back animals that had long since been emptied out by poor farming and poor decisions: these zebra, once teetering at the edge of extinction; red hartebeest; rhebok; growing herds of ostrich. At night, bat-eared foxes, African wildcats, Cape foxes and caracal move through the same valleys, their tracks stitched into the dust by morning.

“This is not a big-five show,” he says. “It’s a whole system finding its way back.”

I nod, unable to answer for a moment. The view, the story of return, the sheer scale of it all—something in the combination turns the chest tight and the eyes unexpectedly wet. You don’t need roaring lions here to feel moved. You just need this: stone, sky, eland and zebra and jackal on plains that remember them, and the quiet knowledge that humans have been standing exactly here, watching exactly this, for longer than we can easily comprehend.

WINDOWS INTO OTHER LIVES

We leave the high ledge and ease the vehicle into a narrower valley. Here, the rock walls stand closer together. Their faces are stained with mineral streaks, water scars, and the occasional blackened overhang where fires once warmed people who had no walls of their own.

“This is one of the shelters,” my guide says, stopping the vehicle in the shade of a sandstone outcrop. We disembark and walk the last short distance on foot, voices naturally dropping to a whisper.

Under the overhang, the air is cooler. The rock curves above like the roof of a stone cathedral, the floor worn smooth by centuries of human presence. And there, on the wall at eye level, they appear: the first lines of ochre and white.

San rock art.

At first glance, it’s just stains and smudges. Then the figures emerge from the stone—slender human forms in motion, lines of antelope, elongated shapes that at first look abstract until you realise they are trance dancers, shamans mid-ritual, bodies half in this world, half in another. An eland, carefully drawn, powerful and precise. Smaller antelope. Human figures reaching, running, bending in ways that speak of story rather than spectacle.

Yesterday, on the West Coast, I stood where a single human footprint—117,000 years old—was found in a shoreline cave. The earliest known evidence of a modern human walking along what would one day be called Africa's west coast. A woman, they say. Eve, in the scientific sense. Her step captured in stone.

Today, in this Cederberg shelter, it hits me: her descendants walked here.

The same lineage that left that footprint in wet sand at Kraalbaai walked these valleys, climbed to these overhangs, mixed pigment with fat and plant sap and placed their hands on these walls. The people whose feet once pressed into ancient beach sand are the same people whose fingers traced these eland, these dancers, these lines of power and prayer.
The distan
ce between 117,000 years and 10,000 collapses. So does the distance between "them" and "us."

He points out details I would never have noticed alone: the way an eland's legs are slightly elongated to show its spiritual importance; the faint, almost faded figure behind a clearer one—a palimpsest of visions; the tiny, deliberate handprints near the edge of the shelter, as if someone wanted to say, simply: I was here.

On 7,500 hectares of protected wilderness, more than 130 such sites sit in quiet patience. This is one of them. A national heritage woven into a private sanctuary. A partnership between present custodians and ancient artists.

"We're just looking after it for a while," he says. "They did the real work."

I stand there, heart beating a little too loudly in the silence, and feel something shift.

It's one thing to read dates on a museum placard. It's another to stand in a wild valley with dust on your boots, fresh zebra tracks outside the shelter, eland grazing within sight, and know—in your bones—that human beings were painting on this exact piece of stone thousands of years before your country existed, before your language existed, before your gods had names.

It is humbling. It is unsettling. It is, quietly, one of the most moving experiences you can have in Southern Africa.

Stone cathedrals. Rooibos plains. Eland at dusk. A footprint on a distant beach 117,000 years ago. And here, in the cool shade of an overhang, the proof that they were not just passing through. They were

Stone cathedrals. Rooibos plains. Eland at dusk. A footprint on a distant beach 117,000 years ago. And here, in the cool shade of an overhang, the proof that they were not just passing through. They were watching. Recording. Praying. Making sense of a world that, from this vantage, looks almost exactly the same.

WINDOWS INTO OTHER LIVES

We walk back to the vehicle slowly, as if sudden movement might disturb the paint

Outside the shelter, the evening has gathered itself. The sky has shifted from cobalt to something softer, threaded with the first faint stars. The air holds that particular coolness that only mountain dusk can manage—clean, thin, edged with the promise of a cold night.

On the drive back, the reserve reveals its nocturnal shift. The eland are now silhouettes on a distant slope, heavy shapes moving through half-light. The zebra have melted into the basin below. A jackal's call floats up from somewhere unseen—a thin, wild sound that hangs in the air longer than seems possible.

Near a shallow pan, an owl lifts from a low branch, wings utterly silent. Farther on, we catch a glimpse of something small and pale slipping between bushes—perhaps a bat-eared fox, perhaps an African wildcat. Here, certainty is less important than the knowledge that the night is full of lives we will never fully map.

The lodge appears again as a scattering of warm lights gathered at the base of the cliffs, like a small village at the foot of a vast cathedral. From the terrace, I can already see staff moving with that easy grace that comes from doing hospitality at the highest level for a very long time. Glassware gleams. Firelight flickers. Somewhere, a pot of rooibos is almost certainly coming to the boil.

WINDOWS INTO OTHER LIVES

I step down from the vehicle feeling taller and smaller at the same time. Taller because something in me has stretched to meet the scale of this place; smaller because, against ten thousand years of paint and a hundred and seventeen thousand years of footsteps, my own days feel briefly, beautifully insignificant.

Tonight there will be dinner, and perhaps a glass of wine grown in nearby valleys, and laughter from other tables, and stories traded under a ceiling of Southern stars. Maybe later I'll join a guide for an hour of skylore—constellations mapped against rock art, myths threaded across galaxies.

But that will be layering on to what has already happened.

The essential thing has already been given: an afternoon in which mountains turned into cathedrals, plains into time machines, and a few quiet figures on a rock wall stitched my own brief walk on this earth to a line of travellers stretching back beyond memory.

I wash the dust from my hands, knowing there are older traces on them now—pigment and story and the faint, enduring echo of those who walked here first.

Additional Volumes

Volume 1	January Tides:
Volume 2	
Volume 3	
Volume 4	April Tides: Realeased June 2026
Volume 5	
Volume 6	
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Volume 9	September Tides: Realeased May 2026
Volume 10	October Tides: Realeased July 2026
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Volume 12	

Conclusion
after September

September is when Southern Africa feels most impossibly alive. Whales in Walker Bay, deserts turned to wildflowers, lagoons like glass, safaris in soft spring light, stone cathedrals in the Cederberg, horses on white beaches, desert stars and the smoke of the Falls.

Writing this month as lived—day by day, lodge by lodge, road by road—I'm reminded how travel at its best is not about ticking places off a list, but about letting a landscape mark you. A single September can hold three weeks with a family who arrive as clients and leave as friends; an hour alone on a rock shelf above the plains; a footprint 117,000 years old; a whale's eye at dawn. In the end, what remains are not itineraries, but moments when time felt deeper and the world suddenly more honest.

This is Volume 9 of a twelve-month journey. In the chapters that came before September, winter storms broke over the Cape, fires burned in Kalahari camps, and long, dry-season safaris unfolded under hard blue skies. In the months that follow, the heat will rise, rains will return, and Southern Africa will shift again into another set of colours, migrations and moods.

If this volume has done its work, it has left you with more than a wish list. It has given you the outline of your own September: the cliff paths you'd walk at first light, the beaches you'd ride at sunset, the wild places where you'd like to fall silent with the people who matter most.

Should you ever want to turn those imagined chapters into a real journey, you'll find me where I have always been: somewhere on the road in Southern Africa, quietly crafting days like these for those who are ready to travel not just further, but deeper.

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