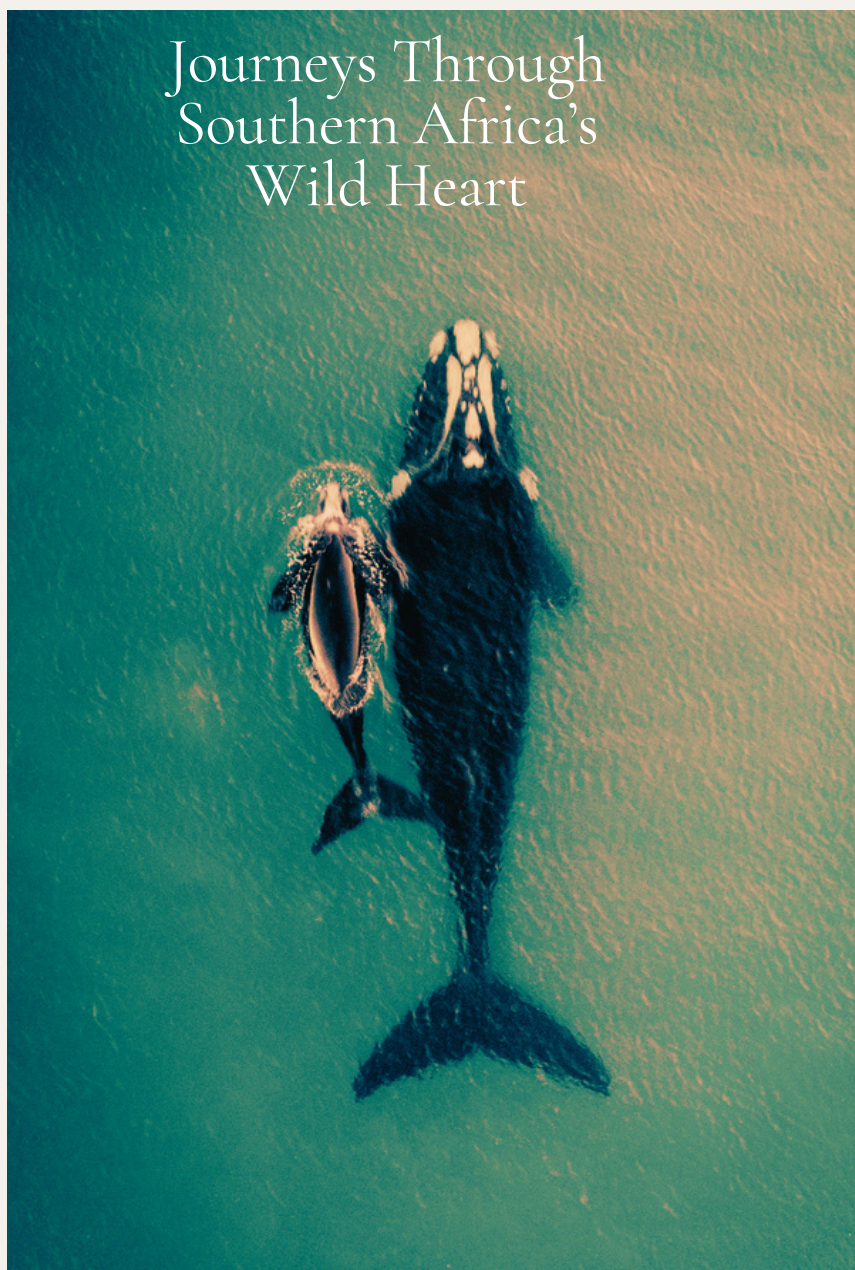


SEPTEMBER TIDES

Journeys Through
Southern Africa's
Wild Heart



BY JOHN SPARKS

September Tides

Volume 9

Journeys Through Southern Africa's Wild Heart

John Sparks

“Mom

You left far too early, after fighting a battle braver than anything I have ever seen.

Yet every day, you are with me.

In every breath I take, every road I choose, every step I guide another soul along,

*I feel you beside me—steady, loving, watching—
just as you always did.*

*This book walks us through Southern Africa;
on every page, I carry your footsteps next to mine.”*

Title: September Tides

Subtitle: Journeys Through Southern Africa's Wild Heart

Volume: 9

Author: John Sparks

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First edition

Published by: John Sparks

www.jwsparks.com

Cover photography: John Sparks

All photographs courtesy of Canva & John Sparks

Designed by: John Sparks

Typeset in: Cormorant Garamond

Printed and bound by:

Published in: South Africa

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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.”*

John Sparks

SEPTEMBER TIDES

Journeys Through Southern Africa's Wild Heart

Volume 9 of 12

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Prologue

September Tides

It's when everything that makes this part of the world extraordinary seems to arrive at once. The whales return to Walker Bay, rolling their vast bodies through spring light. Deserts in Namaqualand and the West Coast burst into wildflowers so dense they swallow the horizon. The bush shakes off winter dust and leans into new green. Rivers run full from long rains. The air is clear enough some mornings to make you doubt your own eyesight.

For most people, this is a time to visit. For me, it is a time to live on the road.

Over the course of one September, I move almost constantly: from vineyard valleys to whale cliffs, from flower-rich plains to rock-art cathedrals in the Cederberg, from low-flying hops over the delta to the edge of the Falls. Some days I travel with families and friends on once-in-a-lifetime journeys; other days I walk alone along a cliff path or sit at a small table with coffee, watching the light change and thinking about what it all means.

This book is that month.

It is not a guidebook and not a brochure. There are no price lists in these pages, no "Top Ten" lists or star ratings. Instead, there are days—thirty of them—as they unfolded. Whale breath at dawn. Sand beneath old bridges. A penguin's eye at arm's length. A rock painting older than any city you know. The quiet weight of a goodbye at an airport gate after three weeks with a family who arrived as clients and left as something closer to kin.

I've spent more than 6,000 days guiding in Southern Africa. I've driven these passes and walked these tracks enough times that I can almost do some of them with my eyes closed. And yet, every September, they surprise me again. The work never really becomes routine, because the land never quite repeats itself.

What follows is September through my lens: the roads I drive, the people I meet, the silences between the sightings, the way a single day can hold more beauty and complexity than a camera or a schedule can comfortably manage.

We'll start where so many good journeys here begin: in a wine valley held tightly between mountains, on a road that once belonged to elephants, heading toward whales.



1

Vines to Whales

“

“The world will show you its secrets if you give it two things it almost never gets: your full attention, and enough time to change you.”

John Sparks

From Franschhoek to the Whale Coast



THE ELEPHANTS' ROAD

Some roads feel like they were invented for cars. Others feel older than wheels.

Franschhoek Pass is one of the latter.

I ease the vehicle out of the village just after breakfast, climbing past white-washed gables and vine rows still holding the last memory of winter. Above us, the mountains close in—rock faces folded and faulted, fynbos clinging to impossible seams. The road begins to wind.

It's hard, from a modern driver's seat, to imagine that this strip of tar began as an elephant track.

Long before the first French words were spoken in this valley, before the first barrel rolled into a cellar, elephants moved through this notch in the mountains—following water,

seasons, their own hard-wired geography. Early settlers followed in their wake, turning the rough spoor into “Olifantspad”—the Elephants’ Path. Later still, in 1819, a man named Cats cut the first official wagon track here. They called it “Cats se Pad”, and it was so steep that ox-wagons often had to be unloaded halfway up and brought over in relays.

Today we call it Franschhoek Pass. We take its engineering for granted. But as the gradient sharpens and the valley falls away behind me, I can feel the old road under the new: elephants, wagons, exhausted oxen, soldiers of the Royal African Corps hauling stone under a foreign flag, all folded into this narrow ribbon of tar clinging to the mountainside.

The French Huguenots arrived in this valley in the 1680s, religious refugees carrying vine cuttings and impossible hope. They came over low, rougher tracks, long before this road was properly engineered in 1825. Still, I can’t help imagining them here, pausing where I will pause, looking back over the newborn valley and wondering if they had made a good bargain with history.

The road climbs in tight curves, each bend pulling a little more of the valley into view. Vineyards spread below like a green patchwork quilt bordered by the grey-blue bulk of the Wemmershoek Mountains. The town shrinks to something almost toy-like: ordered blocks, church spires, guesthouses with their neat gardens and discreet signage.

I pull into a small gravel lay-by on a sharp bend, one of those sudden widenings in the road that exists purely because somebody, long ago, realised people would need to stop here and understand what they were driving through.

Stepping out, the scale hits properly. To the left, the pass we've just climbed clings to the mountain in tight loops, a thin grey thread against a wall of fynbos and stone. To the right, the drop is immediate—vertical slabs of rock falling into a gorge hidden by its own steepness. Far below, a ribbon of water flashes in and out of sight, the sound of it lost in distance. Across the valley, cliffs rear up again, scarred and folded, their tops torn and jagged where the weather has had its say.

Below, Franschhoek lies long and thin along the valley floor—a tongue of civilisation and vineyards pushed gently into the throat of the mountains. Beyond it, layers of peaks slide away into haze.

If you stand with your back to the pass and look down, it is easy to imagine arriving, not leaving. A wagon creaks to a halt. Oxen lower their heads, sides heaving. A Frenchman, tired and dust-coated, stares at this unexpected wrinkle in his life. Vine cuttings wrapped in damp cloth. A Bible. A few small, stubborn possessions. The mountains are high, the valley narrow, the work ahead unthinkable hard. But the light—the light is generous, even now. Water runs cold and clear in the streams. The soil, once turned, will reward the labour.

It must have felt, in that moment, like a test and a promise.

Today the valley is famous for its food, its wine, its boutiques, its curated charm. But standing up here, above the linen and tasting rooms, you can still feel the rawness underneath. A small human story in a large, indifferent landscape.

A gust of wind nudges me back toward the car. The sun is climbing. There is a long, beautiful way to go.



OVER THE EDGE

The eastern side of the pass feels different.

We leave the view of Franschoek behind and tip over into a world of higher, harsher rock. The road clings to the mountainside, cutting through notches carved by hand and explosive almost two hundred years ago, then rebuilt and tarred in the twentieth century. Tight hairpins curl under overhanging cliff. Streams tumble down beside us in narrow, clear ribbons, disappearing into ravines that seem too steep to hold water.

Halfway down, the road crosses an old stone bridge. Jan Joubertsgat. Built in 1825 by the Royal African Corps, it is the oldest functioning bridge in South Africa—a thick-shouldered arch of stone resting its full weight in the gorge. Generations of wheels have passed over it: iron rims, wooden spokes, first the clatter of hooves and wagons, then the thrum of tyres, the whisper of radial rubber. Somewhere under the tar, the original masonry holds.

When you know this, the simple act of driving over it feels like a small act of reverence. A quiet nod to forgotten hands who quarried, lifted, set and packed each stone into place.

We wind lower still, and the pass begins to relax. The bends soften. The rock walls step back. Scrubby fynbos yields to scattered trees. The horizon, which has been a narrow slice of sky between cliffs, begins to widen.

Then, almost suddenly, the world opens.

WATER IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

The first glimpse of Theewaterskloof Dam arrives like a surprise.

One minute you are weaving through mountain shoulders; the next, a sheet of water appears—vast, improbable, sitting in the bowl of a valley as if poured there by a careless god. The road curves along its northern edge, giving you time to understand its scale. This is not a farm dam or a seasonal pan. It is an inland sea, its surface dark blue in the morning light, coiled around the feet of mountain ridges.

Theewaterskloof is Cape Town's largest dam, a quiet giant that holds the city's thirst in concrete and contour. A few years ago, during the drought, images of this basin cracked open and empty, tree stumps high and dry, were on every front page. Now, today, it is full. The winter rains have done their work. The old drowned farms and dried-out fears lie under metres of collected sky.

Small stony islands break the surface here and there—ghosts of higher ground. Dead trees stand in the shallows, grey arms reaching from the water, some stripped smooth, others still holding a few twisted branches. They look like something half remembered from a dream.

I pull off at a lay-by and stand for a while at the guardrail. The road hums softly behind me; in front, nothing but water, wind, and the faint hiss of small waves slapping the stony shore. For a moment, it feels as if I'm standing at the edge of an inland ocean.

Along the verge, wildflowers have taken full advantage of the disturbed ground. Yellow, white, purple—small, sturdy blooms

pushing up between stones and gravel, turning an engineered embankment into a spontaneous garden.

It is one of the small miracles of this drive: man lays tar and concrete, and nature decorates it.

FIELDS OF GOLD AND GREEN

Leaving the dam, the road crests a low rise. I take it without thinking, mind half on the next turn toward Villiersdorp and the Overberg beyond.

Then I come over the top and the world erupts in colour and light. The first sweep of canola hits like a shout—hills rolled out in front of me, dressed in a yellow so intense it looks backlit. Under the clear September sun, the flowers don't just glow; they glisten. Every tiny petal catches the light and throws it back, so that whole slopes seem to shimmer, as if a thin layer of gold leaf has been laid over the land and is trembling in some invisible breeze.

Between those sheets of yellow, the wheat is still in its spring growth—deep, saturated green, moving in long, slow waves. The wind runs its fingers across the fields and the light runs with it, turning each hill into a living, breathing surface that shifts from emerald to silver and back again in a single gust. For a few kilometres, it feels less like driving through farmland and more like driving through a painting that hasn't quite decided on its final colours.

Wildflowers fringe the verge. Pink and white fruit blossoms flash briefly in orchards as we pass. The sky is a clean, high blue, pinned at



the horizon by more hills wearing that impossible mix of green and yellow. The whole scene borders on surreal—too precise, too saturated, too perfectly arranged to be an accident, and yet entirely, stubbornly natural.

Around one bend, a pair of blue cranes stands in a freshly turned field.

South Africa's national bird. Tall, elegant, everything about them a study in understatement. Long grey necks, pale bodies, trailing dark wing plumes that look like a cloak cut for much colder climates. They move with a deliberateness that makes every step look choreographed. One lowers its head to feed; the other keeps watch, gaze tilted toward the road as I roll past.

It is one of those moments that feels almost staged. The colours, the birds, the light. In a thirty-minute stretch we have moved from tight mountain switchbacks to deep dam, from wildflowers in road cracks to canola oceans and national birds in attendance.

No camera can do it justice. You can photograph it, of course—the dam, the bridge, the yellow hills. But some drives are not meant to be captured. They are meant to be inhabited.

This is one of them.

TOWARD THE WHALE COAST

We join the N2 for a brief, utilitarian stretch.

Traffic thickens a little—trucks, commuters, the low-level hum of a national artery. But even here, the land refuses to be dull. Peaks rise to the left, their flanks scratched with erosion and fynbos.

To the right, the checkerboard of fields continues, the canola and wheat playing out their high-contrast argument to the horizon. Then, just as the road starts to feel familiar, I turn off.

A small sign points the way: R43 Hermanus.

The road narrows again, hedged by fences and low trees, then opens into rolling country that carries an entirely different invitation. The air feels moister. The light softens. Somewhere ahead, out of sight but very much present in the brainstem, is the sea. What matters is that the land is now sloping, however gently, toward whales.

Before dropping all the way to the coast, there is one more valley to visit.

HEAVEN AND EARTH

Just outside Hermanus, another sign appears: Hemel-en-Aarde.

Heaven and Earth.

I indicate, slow, and turn left off the main road into the valley. Within seconds, the character of the drive changes. The long, open fields of the Overberg fall away behind me and the road tucks itself between lower slopes and river flats. Vineyards line the valley floor in disciplined rows, marching toward the foothills; higher up, the mountains rise in steep, folded walls, holding the sky in a wide, cupped hand.

In September, the Hemel-en-Aarde is impossibly lush. The vines are in fresh leaf—small, bright, almost translucent when the sun hits them from behind. Cover crops soften the soil in white and green. Streams cut cold lines through the valley, flashing in ditches and under small bridges.

Above it all, bands of fynbos run up the slopes until rock takes over and the mountains show their bare, weathered faces.

I drive slowly.

After the drama of the pass, the surprise of the dam, the shock of the canola, this feels like a long, contented exhale. Wineries sit back from the road—some grand and architectural, others modest and almost shy. Their names are familiar to anyone who has ever read a wine list in Cape Town or London or New York. But here they are just neighbours on a quiet country lane.

I pull into one of my favourites for lunch.

It's the kind of place where the vines come almost to the deck, where every table seems positioned to catch the best of the view: valley running down toward the sea in a blue-green funnel; mountains rising behind in a precise semicircle; sky doing its endless work above it all. The menu is short, seasonal, clever without being self-conscious. Wines are poured with the easy pride of people who know their valley has earned its reputation.

I sit, order, and watch the light move slowly across the slopes.

It's hard not to think of the journey I've just taken in the last hour and a half: from a Huguenot valley held tight between peaks, up the first engineered pass in South Africa, over the oldest working bridge in the country, down to a dam that holds a city's thirst, across fields stitched with flowers and oilseed gold, past blue cranes and fruit blossoms, onto a highway, then back into green and vine and, finally, down this aptly named valley that runs from heaven to earth and, if you follow it, to whales.

There are more spectacular drives in the world. There are higher passes, deeper gorges, more famous coastal roads. But as a single, continuous piece of quietly escalating beauty and history, this one is hard to beat.

After lunch, I will roll down into Hermanus proper. The first glimpse of Walker Bay will appear like a sheet of burnished metal. The whales will be out there, somewhere, lifting and blowing and writing their signatures into the spring sea. The ocean part of this journey will begin.

For now, though, I sit in the shade of a vineyard in the Valley of Heaven and Earth, tasting food and wine grown in the very soil the Huguenots once trusted with their futures, and I think:

If you want to understand why people fall in love with this corner of the world, drive from Franschoek to Hermanus in September.



2 Eye-to-Eye with Giants

“

“Some loves are loud and fleeting. The deepest ones cross oceans in silence and still find their way back to the same hidden bays in our lives—year after year, long after the eyes that first loved us are gone.”

John Sparks

Whales from the Villa



FIRST LIGHT OVER WALKER BAY

There are mornings when the ocean feels like it is leaning in to listen.

The first day in Hermanus breaks like that.

I step out onto the stoep of the villa just after sunrise, coffee in hand, barefoot on cool stone. The house hangs on the cliff's edge, the kind of place someone once dreamed up and then had the courage—and the capital—to build. Glass and clean lines and understated luxury. But this morning, all of that is background. The real theatre lies sixty metres below.

The sun is still rising to the left, pushing a soft gold into the bay.

Walker Bay is barely moving.

The water is not flat—not exactly—but its small, slow swells look as if some great hand has smoothed the surface.

The sky above is pure September: high, clean, a blue that has not yet decided to turn harsh. A single gull scribbles across it. The air carries that particular mixture I have come to associate with this stretch of coast: salt, kelp, and a faint metallic tang that belongs only to deep water.

I lift the binoculars before I even sit down.

I don't need them to see the first blows.

THE BAY FILLS WITH BREATH

From the villa's stoep, my world is framed by glass railings and low white walls, but the view is pure wild theatre. To the right, the coastline runs toward the New Harbour, all serrated rock and white water. To the left, the cliffs curve away toward Kwaaiwater and beyond. Directly in front of me, Walker Bay opens like a giant amphitheatre—the stage a few hundred metres wide, the backdrop a slow, indifferent horizon.

Out there, the whales are already at work.

Even with the naked eye, I can count at least twenty Southern Right whales scattered across the water. Blows show first—vertical white exclamations against the calm blue. Two blowholes, two jets, a brief, hard-edged V of steam that hangs for a moment in the still morning air before dissolving. Then backs surface: black, smooth, enormous, rolling up and over in slow arcs. Occasionally a tail lifts, dark and wide, draped in water that streams silver in the light, then disappears with the weighty inevitability of a closing door.

Hermanus likes to call itself the world's whale-watching capital. On days like this, it isn't marketing. It's geography.

Every year, between about June and November, hundreds of Southern Right whales leave the icy abundance of the Southern Ocean around Antarctica and move north into warmer coastal waters. They come to places like Walker Bay for the same reasons humans seek out warm, safe rooms: to make love, to give birth, to raise the next generation without having to fight for every breath.

They are loyal to their maps. A third of the world's Southern Right population uses a handful of bays in the southern hemisphere to breed and calve. Walker Bay is one of them. The same whales return, year after year, to the same curves of coast. Some even come back to the very bays where they themselves were conceived—circles within circles, written in salt and memory.

I lower the binoculars and just look.

The bay is full of them.

THREE WHALES, ONE STORY

It takes me a few minutes to notice the three directly in front of me.

The rest are scattered—pairs, trios, solitary animals moving with the ponderous grace of things that have mastered their medium. But about sixty metres out from the villa, slightly to the left, three whales lie close, in an almost suspiciously neat triangle. They are just far enough from the others to feel deliberate.

I raise the binoculars again.

Two are lying nearly parallel, a few body-lengths apart, pale callosities—their roughened, barnacle-colonised patches of skin—standing out cream against black.



The third moves in a slow arc around them, circling. There is a different quality to their presence. Less drifting, more enquiry. Something is happening.

I set the coffee down carefully, heart rate already a few beats higher than caffeine alone can explain, and reach for the drone case.

LIFTING INTO THEIR WORLD

The whine of the DJI's rotors feels almost obscene in the softness of the morning, but the whales pay it no apparent attention. I check the wind—light, perfect—glance once more at the screen, then send the drone out over the water.

From fifty metres up, Walker Bay rearranges itself. The villa, which moments ago felt substantial and central, shrinks to a pale geometry on the cliff edge. The shoreline becomes a ragged scribble of rock and foam. The whales, which from the stoep seemed like ink marks on a flat sea, reveal their full, three-dimensional selves: forty-ton bodies suspended in water so clear I can see the paler scars on their backs and the shadows they cast on the kelp beds below.

I ease the drone forward, then into a gentle orbit above the three to the left of the villa. The screen fills with their world.

Two of them are lying side by side now, bellies almost touching, bodies angled slightly toward each other. The third holds position a little ahead and off to one side, turning, watching.

There is no rush. Not even much movement. Just small adjustments—a slow rolling of a flank, a fin lifting a little higher than usual, a turn of the head.

But after thousands of hours with these animals, something in the pattern is unmistakable.

Courtship.

THE DANCE BELOW

Through the camera, at 2x zoom, the intimacy is almost unbearable.

The two central whales begin to roll, bellies brushing, callosities clearly visible. Those pale patches, thickened skin colonised by whale lice and barnacles, are their fingerprints—each animal's pattern unique, recorded by researchers to build life histories that span decades. Some of the whales in Walker Bay are older than I am. Southern Rights can live a hundred years if we let them.

The male eases himself into position with a patience that belies his size. He could, if he wanted, move with enormous force—these are animals that migrated here from Antarctic waters, travelling thousands of kilometres at speeds that would leave most boats behind. But here, in this moment, everything is gentleness.

From above, I watch the choreography unfold.

They surface and submerge in slow synchrony, their bodies tracing overlapping curves in the blue. The male arches slightly, then rolls, tucking himself under the female with a delicacy that is almost human in its care. She adjusts, tilting, presenting the right angle, her tail lifting, then fanning down to create space. The third whale keeps circling, maintaining a respectful proximity, occasionally closing the distance, then easing off again, as if undecided whether to leave or bear witness.

There is a moment when the male's pectoral fin lifts and then lowers onto the female's back, resting there like an arm. He holds it for a few seconds—an enormous, pale paddle lying across her darker flank—then lifts it again, water streaming from the trailing edge.

Later, as they surface side by side, their upper jaws meet. From this angle, it looks like a kiss—two massive mouths touching, callosities brushing, a brief contact that, if you were inclined to sentimentality, could pass for affection.

I am inclined.

I've watched enough animal behaviour to know projection is a dangerous habit. Whales are not people. They do not live under our narratives of romance and loyalty. And yet: Southern Rights return to the same bays; they recognise individuals; mothers nurse calves for a year in these waters before leading them back south. They endure. They memorise. They remember.

If love has a shape in the ocean, I would not be surprised if it sometimes looks like this.

GIANTS IN CONTEXT

For a few minutes I forget to breathe properly.

I am only camera and eye and the quiet code of the drone under my thumbs. The stoep, the villa, the cliff—all of it falls away. There is only this blue space above three whales, and an awareness that I am being allowed to witness something very few humans ever see this clearly in the wild.

Southern Right whales were once the “right” whales to hunt. Slow-moving, curious, rich in oil, they floated when dead. Between the 18th and 20th centuries, whalers killed them in their tens of thousands from South Africa to South America, from Australia to New Zealand. By the early 1900s, there were perhaps sixty breeding females left in some populations. Fewer whales than people in a small village.

Protection came in 1937, at least on paper. Only in the late 20th century did the slaughter truly cease. Since then, Southern Rights have climbed slowly back, at roughly seven percent a year in some groups. Today, perhaps 13,000 to 15,000 are left on the planet.

It sounds like good news. It is, relatively. But stand on a cliff above Walker Bay and look out over twenty animals; then imagine that they, and all their cousins, all their mothers and calves and mates, could fit into a small town stadium. Recovery is a fragile word.

On the screen, the whales continue their dance.

Their bodies are stocky, rounded, almost blunt by comparison with the sleek lines of a humpback or a blue whale. No dorsal fin interrupts their backs. Their heads are large and broad, those strange white callosity patches mapping brows and jaws like continents in reverse. Beneath the surface, baleen plates—long curtains of keratin hanging from their upper jaws—filter krill and small fish from the water. No teeth, just combs and patience.

They are calm. Curious. Capable of lifting their tails and “sailing” in the wind, using their flukes like anchors.



Capable, too, of breathtaking surface displays: breaches that throw forty tons of whale into the air, landings that sound like the continent itself is applauding.

Today they are not performing. They are living.

THE WORLD WATCHES

Behind me, somewhere inside the villa, someone stirs. A bedroom sliding door opens. My guests step out onto the stoep, coffee mugs in hand, hair still soft with sleep. They see the drone in the air, then the whales below, then the feed on the tablet screen.

For a few seconds, no one says anything.

Then:

“You’re joking,” the younger boy breathes. “They’re...they’re really...?”

“Yes,” I say. “They are.”

His brother leans in, eyes flicking between real sea and mediated image, trying to reconcile scale. Their parents stand back a little, drinking their coffee, watching both the screen and the animals, faces opening in that way I’ve seen so many times when people realise they are not just witnessing a sight but an event.

All over Hermanus, at this hour, people are watching whales.

On the cliff path, walkers pause, cameras raised. At the Old Harbour, the whale crier’s horn waits to sound if someone spots a particularly good breach. On balconies and stoops and at café tables, tourists and locals alike scan the bay for blows and backs and tails. Hermanus in whale season is a town turned inward, eyes and binoculars and lenses focused on the bay like worshippers on an altar.

People travel from all over the world for this. From cities and continents where their closest encounter with wildness is a city park or a nature documentary in 4K. They arrive jet-lagged, sun-stunned, and then one morning they stand on a cliff in Hermanus and watch an animal older than their grandparents lift half its body out of the sea in slow, impossible grace.

On days like that, you can almost hear something recalibrating.

CLOSING THE CIRCLE

After a while, the whales separate.

The third one slides away, slow and unhurried, joining two others farther out. The pair that mated rest near the surface for a time, then begin to move together along the shoreline, following some invisible line parallel to the rocks. I follow with the drone a little longer, keeping my distance, then decide I have seen enough and pull back, sending the machine home with a soft, obedient whine.

On the stoep, the boys are already arguing about who gets the reel first. Their mother is quietly wiping at the corners of her eyes. Their father leans forward, as if trying to absorb the whole bay at once.

“Do they always do that here?” he asks.

“Not always,” I say. “Not like that. You can live here for years and never see mating that close to shore. But they do come back. Year after year. This bay is one of their nurseries.”

“When will that calf be born?” the daughter asks, eyes still on the sea.

“Not this year,” I answer. “If they conceived now, she’d be back in about twelve months, maybe a little more.”

Here. Or somewhere very close. Same coast. Same curve of land. Sometimes the exact same bay.”

We stand for a few more minutes, just watching whales breathe.

Somewhere deep beneath the surface, the one we have just seen mate carries, in her body, the possibility of another whale that will, in time, make this migration. That will feed in Antarctic waters in endless summer light, then swim thousands of kilometres north to find this curve of coast, this bay, this latitude. That will, if we do not make too many terrible decisions, lift its own calf to the surface in the calm waters below these cliffs.

The thought is almost too large.

CLOSING THE CIRCLE

Later in the day, when the light hardens and the wind picks up, the bay will look different. Whales will still be there, but the intimacy will be gone. They’ll breach and lobtail and tail-sail for their own reasons, and people on the cliff will cheer and clap and drink wine and take more pictures.

By evening, the moment will have turned into story.

We will talk about it over dinner on the villa’s terrace. We will pour wine from a valley seen earlier in the week. We will replay the footage on a big screen and freeze frames where the whales’ heads touch, where the fin lies across the back, where the bodies align in a way that almost looks like an embrace. We will talk, perhaps, about how Southern Rights were nearly gone, and how strange and lucky it is that we can stand on a luxury stoep in the twenty-first century and watch them love.

But the truth of it will remain where it happened: in the water, in the blue light between cliff and horizon, in the private geometry of three whales whose names we do not know and whose lives will unfold mostly beyond our sight.

When I lie in bed that night, window open to the sound of waves on rock, I will hear, under the ordinary noise of a coastal town, the memory of that slow, deliberate dance. On days like this, I think of my own mom too—how love can cross years and oceans and still find its way back to the same quiet harbours in the heart, long after the person is gone. And I will think, as I often do in September, that for all our attempts to organise and interpret and own the world, the most romantic thing about it is this:

The whales come back, whether we are here to see them or not.



3 Hooves in the Surf

“

“To all the horses who carry us, patiently and without complaint, into moments we will never forget.”

John Sparks

White Sand, Full Moon



AFTERNOON PROMISE

Some afternoons announce themselves long before they begin.

This one starts under old trees on a farm outside Stanford, with the heavy kindness of a lunch that has gone on just a little too long. The table is scattered with the small wreckage of pleasure—olive pits, bread crumbs, a wine bottle breathing its last, the faint smear of sauce on a plate that someone has already tilted to catch the sun.

The air is soft. Early September inland has that particular warmth that suggests summer but doesn't yet insist on it. Swallows write quick hieroglyphs above the lawn. Somewhere behind the house, a dog barks once at nothing in particular, then thinks better of it.

Across from me, my guests lean back in their chairs, that slow, satisfied lean that says: if the day ended here, we'd call it a win.

It doesn't.

I look at my watch, then at the sky, then at them.

“Shall we go and earn this?” I ask.

They know what’s coming. We’ve spoken about it for days, in fragments and hints. They nod, almost in unison, and the energy at the table lifts a notch. Chairs scrape. Sunglasses are found. Someone jokes about whether they remember how to get on a horse. Someone else confesses they have dreamt about this ride since they first saw the brochure.

We climb into the vehicle. The road to the coast waits.

THE ROAD TO THE WHITE EDGE

The twenty-five minutes from Stanford to the horse farm are enough to change the day’s grammar.

The neat geometry of vineyards and paddocks gives way to looser, rougher country. Low fynbos. Scattered farms. Dirt tracks running off into nowhere. The occasional glimpse of a river, always heading, however circuitously, for the sea.

The conversation in the car is light, a little nervous. Three of us have ridden often; three have not. There will be no heroics. This ride is not about demonstrating anything to anyone. It is about being small on a big piece of beach with a good horse under you and the sound of the ocean in your chest instead of your phone.

We turn off onto a gravel track. Dust rises in polite spirals behind us. A line of modest paddocks appears, then a low stable block, then a simple house. Nothing about the place is ostentatious.

Saddles hang under a corrugated-iron awning. Bridles wait on pegs. The horses are the only luxury here—sleek, bright-eyed, curious.

They watch us arrive the way horses do: ears forward, nostrils flaring, a quick, efficient assessment of whether we are likely to mean work, trouble, or carrots.

MEETING THE HORSES

We are six guests and two guides. Eight horses.

They have names that make you smile—Storm, Nala, Whiskey, Luna. Long manes, strong necks, the sort of solid, honest build that tells you they know their job and have done it hundreds of times. They are barefoot, used to sand. Their eyes are clear.

Two stable hands stand quietly by, hands on halters, watching us with that combination of friendliness and appraisal that horse people never quite lose. They see things most guests don't—how someone approaches, where their weight sits, what kind of horse will suit.

One of the guides, a woman with the sort of easy, grounded body language I trust immediately around horses, takes us through the basics again. Mounting. Reins. Pressure. What to do. What not to do. How to let the horse take care of the balance so you can take care of the looking.

We match riders to horses—not by height or ego, but by temperament. The nervous guest gets the steadiest gelding you could put on a postcard. The one who used to ride every weekend as a teenager gets a mare with a little more sparkle in her step.

I am given a horse I have ridden before, and I can feel the shared memory under the new light. Animals remember too.

The stable hands lead each horse up in turn and walk beside us as we mount, a hand on a knee here, a quick adjustment of stirrup there. The lead guide takes us one by one and rides up next to each, reins in her fingers, checking that everyone feels safe, that everyone understands that today will move at the pace of their comfort, not their bravado.

Those who only want to walk are told that walking is perfect. Those who'd like to trot or canter are encouraged, but always under the beady eye of that lead guide. Nothing here is left to chance.

The first moment of settling into the saddle is always a little like meeting an old friend in a new place. There is an adjustment—a shuffle, a sigh, a quick exchange of reassurances in muscle and leather. Then the small miracle of being taller than you were a second ago, carried instead of carrying, moving through the world on top of something that breathes.

We file out of the yard and onto the track, hooves ringing softly on hard ground.

The ocean is still out of sight. But you can smell it.

THE PATH THROUGH SAND AND FYNBOS

The trail to the beach threads through low dunes and coastal fynbos. The sand under the horses' hooves changes texture: hard-packed here, soft there, forcing them to adjust their balance, to dig a little deeper.

Around us, the vegetation is tough and low, built for wind and salt. Restios. Small proteas. Stunted milkwoods. A few stubborn aloes. The path winds between them in a way that feels almost designed, and in truth, it is—not by landscapers, but by hooves and feet and the small negotiations of many seasons.

The riders fall into a rhythm.

We start in a simple walk. Saddles creak. Bits jingle. Every now and then a horse snorts and tosses its head, tasting the air. The guides chat, lightly, checking on everyone without making it sound like an inspection. I ride half-turned, watching faces: the guest who was nervous is already beginning to smile; the teenager is already asking if there will be a chance to canter.

There will be.

But not yet.

First, we have to pass through the last line of dunes.

THE REVEAL

No matter how many times I do this, the reveal gets me.

The path climbs a little, nothing dramatic—just a gentle rise between two low dunes. The fynbos parts. The sound of the waves, which until now has been a rumour, suddenly becomes a sentence. The light brightens, reflecting off something broad and white ahead.

We come up over the lip of the dune and the world opens.

Ahead of us lies a beach so long it seems to have misplaced its own end. Pearl-white sand stretches away in both directions in a line so clean even the word “horizon” feels imprecise. To our left, dunes rise in soft, sculpted curves, the wind’s handwriting in sand. To our right, the ocean presents itself in layers: pale turquoise in the shallows, deepening into cobalt and then into the darker blue that hints at depth and distance.

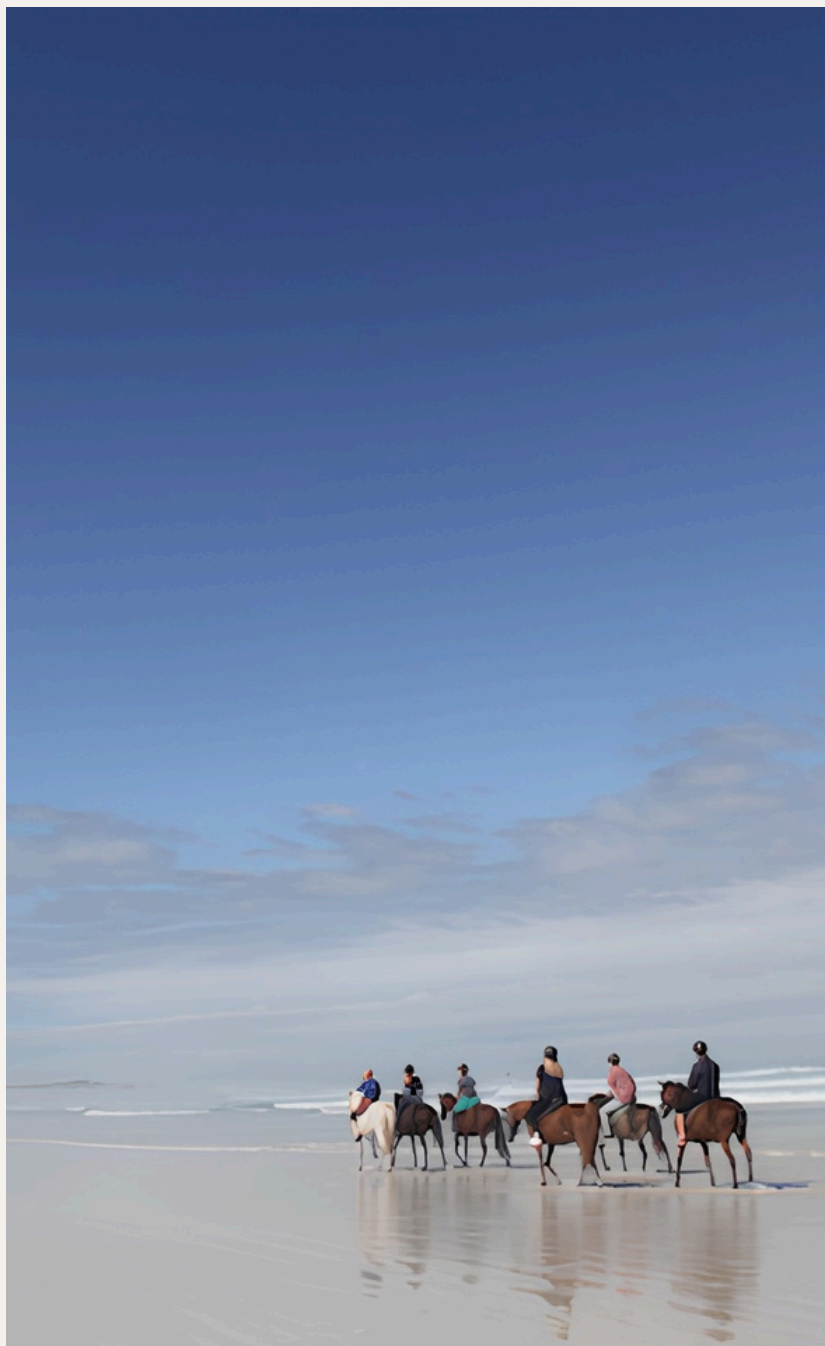
There is no one else here.

No beach umbrellas. No lifeguard towers. No ice-cream stands. Just six riders, two guides, eight horses, and an edge where continent meets water in a conversation that has been going on for longer than our species has had words.

We stop for a moment on the dune, letting the horses look, letting ourselves look.

I turn in the saddle and watch my guests take it in.

One of them simply whispers, “Wow,” the word dragged out on a breath that sounds like both disbelief and relief.



Another laughs, that high, incredulous laugh that people make when the world has exceeded their expectations and short-circuited their vocabulary. Someone else goes quiet, the quiet that means something inside has clicked into place.

“You see why I insist on this?” I say, softly.

They nod. No one takes out a phone. Not yet.

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ONTO THE WHITE

We ride down the face of the dune and onto the hard sand.

Hooves make a different sound here—a deep, damp thud instead of the dry clop of inland roads. The horses lower their heads a little, ears flicking back and forth, reading wind and wave. The guides fan us out into a long line parallel to the water, leaving enough space that each rider can feel alone and together at the same time.

We start in a walk along the wet edge, where the last thin sheets of foam reach for the land and then slide back, disappointed. The reflection of the sky in the water makes it feel, momentarily, as if we’re walking through a shallow sea of light.

As we spread out along the firm wet sand, the lead guide moves up and down the line like a quiet metronome—sometimes beside a

nervous rider, sometimes in front setting a gentle pace, sometimes dropping back to check a girth or a stirrup. One of the stable hands walks alongside the least experienced guest, a hand lightly on the reins, talking softly to both horse and human. The second guide ranges farther, GoPro in hand, capturing small films and stills—silhouettes against the surf, a first tentative trot, a canter caught in that perfect moment where all four hooves are off the ground. These will be the kind of images that follow people home and, years from now, pull them straight back into this light, this sand, this sound.

After a few minutes, the lead guide looks back, raises her hand, and calls out the most liberating sentence in the equestrian language:

“Those who want to trot, left. Those who want to stay in walk, right. Those who’d like to try a canter, with me in the middle.”

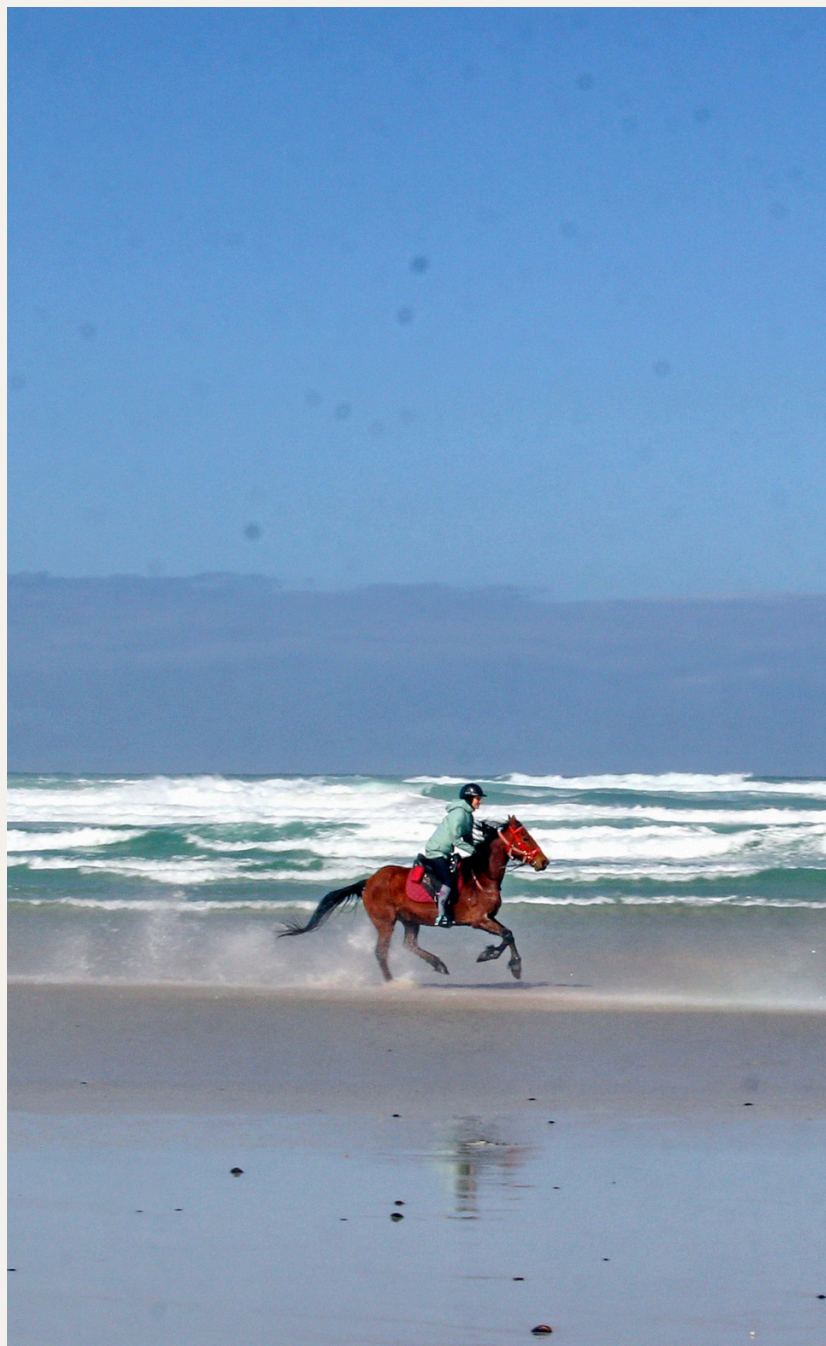
We reorganise mid-stride. Two riders peel off for a gentle trot, experimenting with the rise and fall. One chooses to stay with the steady walk, completely content with the sway of the saddle and the rhythm of the waves. The teenager slots in behind the lead guide, eyes bright.

They pick up a canter.

The horses stretch into it, easing from four beats to three, sand flicking from under their hooves, manes lifting slightly in the wind. The line lengthens, then straightens. For a few magical seconds, horse and rider are precisely aligned, weight forward, hands light, hearts hammering in the same time.

Farther along, we slow again, collect everyone, and the beach returns to a sedate walk, like nothing extraordinary just happened.

But the looks on their faces say otherwise.



CHAMPAGNE AND SALT

After an hour and fifteen, the guides lead us to a particular curve of the beach where the dunes fold in a little and the wind seems to calm itself. Here, behind a low shoulder of sand, a small miracle has appeared.

A folding table, dressed in a white cloth that flutters just enough to prove this is real. A few camp chairs. Two silver buckets already beading with condensation, holding bottles of good MCC. A platter of oysters so fresh they still smell like a rock pool at low tide. Canapés arranged with the kind of care that suggests someone loves this work.

We dismount.

There is that brief, always slightly amusing moment when legs rediscover land. Riders walk like new foals for a few steps, then find their balance. Horses are loosened, reins looped over necks. They drop their heads and start on the sparse dune grass as if they have personally negotiated this grazing clause in their contract.

We stand around the table, boots in the sand, champagne flutes in hand.

Words fail again.

There is something in the juxtaposition—horses, surf, dunes, champagne—that verges on ridiculous in the best possible way. An oyster tastes different when you eat it with wind tangling your hair and hooves shifting quietly behind you. Bubbles feel more celebratory when the soundtrack is waves and horse-breath instead of background music.

For ninety minutes, time stretches.

Some wander to the water's edge, shoes in hand. Some sit on the sand, backs against warm horse bellies, staring out at the line where blue meets blue. A few of us talk, softly, about nothing and everything—families, work, why we travel, how few places in the world still allow this kind of unmediated space.

At some point, I step a little away from the group and just look.

Six horses. Six humans. Two guides. Two stable hands. One table. Nothing else in sight.

If you drew it on a storyboard for a film, it would look contrived. Standing in it, it feels like grace.

BAREBACK IN THE BREAKERS

The light begins to tilt.

Shadows lengthen along the dunes. The sun rolls slowly toward the horizon, smudging the sky with the first hints of colour. The guides start to move again, efficient and gentle, gathering plates, folding the table, checking girths.

“Anyone want to try a swim?” one of them asks.

The question hangs in the air like a dare wrapped inside a dream.

A few shake their heads, perfectly content with what the day has already given them. Three say yes. Of those three, one is hesitant but determined, the kind of person who knows they'll regret saying no more than they'll regret a slightly cold dip.

We strip saddles and bridles, leaving only halters and ropes. The horses seem to understand the change in mood.



They snort, toss their heads, paw the sand a little, as if remembering previous evenings like this. The lead guide comes to each of us in turn, checking we're comfortable, explaining exactly how far we'll go, how she'll stay beside us, hand on the rope, ready for anything. One of the stable hands walks at a horse's shoulder as we mount bareback, giving a boost here, steadying a leg there. The second guide steps back, GoPro ready, already framing the shots he knows we'll watch a hundred times back home.

I strip down to my jeans—I have a second dry pair waiting in a bag for later—and swing up onto my mare's back. The absence of a saddle changes everything. There is only warm muscle under my thighs, the rise and fall of her ribs, the subtle language of her movement transmitted directly into my bones.

We walk down into the shallows.

The first slap of cold water against bare skin is a shock, stolen breath, a sharp intake that turns quickly to laughter. The horses blink, then lower their heads and push on. They know this drill. Knees, then thighs, then hips get wet. Someone squeals; someone else shouts something wordless and joyous into the wind.

We keep going.

Waves start to roll over my jeans, white water breaking against my mare's chest. She keeps her head just above the foam, ears flicking, nostrils wide, utterly focused. I feel the change under me when her hooves finally leave the sand—just for a moment at first, a lightness, then a longer, weightless glide.

She's swimming.

Two hours ago I was at a farm table. Now I am sitting bareback on a swimming horse in the Atlantic, trusting her completely as she lifts and pulls and lifts again, body carving through the water with a strength that makes every gym I've ever seen look laughable.

Wow doesn't cover it.

We don't stay long—this is about wonder, not endurance. When I can feel her breath deepen and her stride shorten, I turn her gently and we angle back toward shore. Under me, there is a brief scramble as hooves find sand again, then the comforting solidity of ground, water streaming off her sides, my jeans heavy and clinging and absolutely perfect.

On the beach, the others are grinning like children, hair wild, clothes soaked, eyes bright with that particular light that only comes when you've just done something you know you'll talk about for the rest of your life.

THE FULL-MOON ROAD HOME

We saddle up again in the fading light.

The sun slides down, finally dipping its edge into the ocean. The sky goes through its palette—gold, orange, rose, then that sudden, shocking deep blue that arrives just before true dark. As we leave the hard sand and climb back into the dunes, a pale disc lifts itself casually over the inland hills.

Full moon.

If you planned it, it would feel contrived. But we didn't. The calendar simply offered it and we happened to be paying attention.



On the ride back, we turn off our headlamps.

The guides know this route like they know their own hands. The horses know it better. They walk in a long, loose line through the dunes and bush, hooves silent on the sand, their breathing the loudest sound in the world. The moon washes everything in silver: manes, ears, the curve of a neck, the outline of a hand resting lightly on a wither.

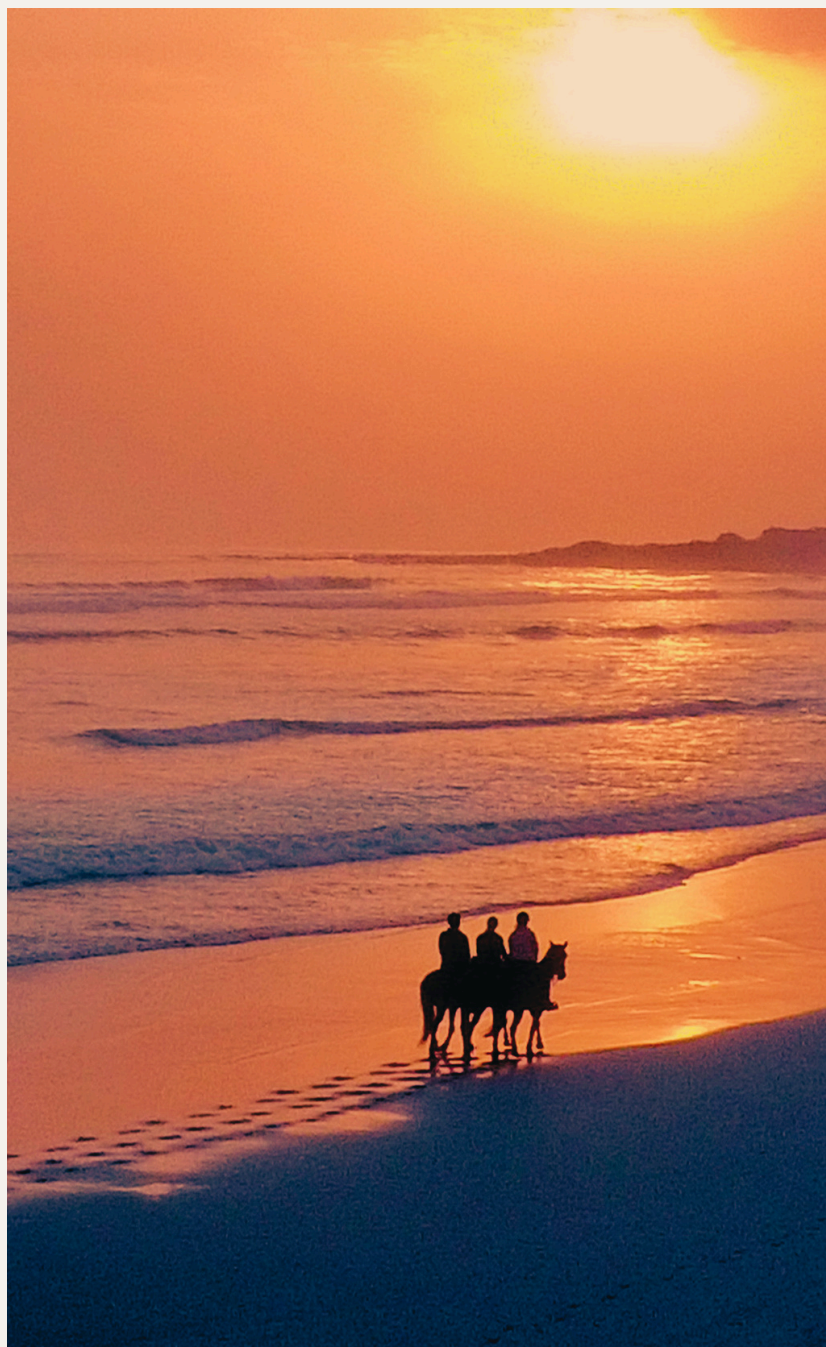
Silence, ocean, horses breathing as they walk through the damp tracks; stillness broken only by the occasional rustle of a night bird or the distant boom of a bigger wave on a farther reef. Vision fills with soft, monochrome shapes. The smells sharpen—salt, horse, dust cooling after a hot day.

No one speaks.

There are experiences you can explain, and there are experiences that sit beyond tidy sentences. A five-hour ride from farm to dunes to surf to champagne to bareback swim to full-moon return falls solidly into the second category.

I have travelled a long way across this world. I have stood in deserts under skies so thick with stars they looked like spilled milk. I have watched glaciers calve into Antarctic bays and lions walk along the edge of my firelight. I have seen waterfalls, mountains, temples, cities.

But there are very few things as quietly, insistently beautiful as the sound of a horse breathing under you on a white South African beach, moonlight on its mane, the ocean pulsing in the dark beyond.



As we ride the last few hundred metres back into the yard, the lights of the farmhouse come into view, warm and domestic. The spell loosens, but doesn't quite break.

We swing down, legs heavy, hearts oddly light.

Later, back in whatever beds hold us that night—farmhouse rooms, guesthouse suites, the familiar shape of home—we will close our eyes and still feel the roll of the horse's back, still see the impossible white of the sand, still hear the sea.

Some days roar; others whisper.

This one does both.

GREEN PEACE

As I finish writing this chapter, another horse quietly steps into it. Last night, while these memories of white sand and full-moon water were still fresh on the page, a beautiful horse named Green Peace—Grisha—took his last breath.

Once a standout show jumper, he broke his leg years ago and was lamed, but never discarded.

My wife walked him, groomed him, fed him, loved him, almost every day. He was cared for as gently as any guest I've ever guided through this country.

Knowing he has gone while I write about hooves in the surf makes this ride feel less like a story and more like a small tribute—to all the horses who carry us, patiently and without complaint, into moments we will never forget.



4 Fairways Above the Ocean

“

“Some days don’t just give you memories; they stitch together a coastline of moments so rare that for the rest of your life, every ordinary day will be measured against them.”

John Sparks

From Whale Coast to Presidents Cup



THE INVITATION

Some days begin with the feeling that you're about to step into somebody else's dream.

This one starts on the lawn of the villa in Hermanus, with the helicopter already warming on the grass and a family of five standing beside me, half trying to look casual, half failing.

The rotors idle in that low, contained thrum that seems to vibrate straight into your chest. The machine—a LongRanger—looks almost modest: sleek, compact, the sort of thing that would be perfectly at home on the deck of a yacht. But this morning, it is our private key to a very particular kingdom: a strip of coastline very few people ever see from this angle, and an afternoon on one of the most legendary golf courses on the continent.

If you are a golfer and find yourself in the Western Cape, there are certain things that belong on your “must” list. This is one of them.

In 2002, I had the privilege of being drawn into the orbit of the 2003 Presidents Cup. I was part of Gary Player’s organisation committee, helping with logistics around the International Team—moving players and captains and families and VIPs through the complex choreography of an event that drew the golf world’s gaze to South Africa. That week, watching Ernie Els and Tiger Woods go head-to-head in a playoff that eventually ended in darkness and a handshake, The Links at Fancourt stopped being just a course and became, in my mind, a stage.

Today, we are flying to that stage.

My guest—James, a keen golfer who knows the Presidents Cup holes by heart—stands with his sons and daughter, everyone in headsets, grins a little too wide to be anything but real. His wife gives me that look that says: I cannot quite believe this is our morning.

The pilot gestures. Time to board.

LIFT-OFF OVER WHALE COAST

We climb in, plug in, buckle down. The pilot runs through checks with the calm efficiency of someone who has done this thousands of times and still, somehow, cares.

Then the lightness.

The skids leave the grass with a softness that always surprises me. There is no lurch, no brute force. Just an easing away from the ground, the sense that gravity has been temporarily downgraded

from law to suggestion. Hermanus drops beneath us: rooftops, trees, the cliff path a thin, darker line along the edge where rock meets water. The villa shrinks to a bright square on the cliff.

To the north, the Kleinrivier Mountains hold their usual position, stern and folded. To the south, Walker Bay opens—this time not as an amphitheatre from the cliff, but as a crescent of blue that curves all the way from Hermanus to Gansbaai.

Even as we climb, we can still count whales.

From this height they are punctuation marks on the sea—dark backs, white blows. The boys start pointing them out, calling numbers into the intercom. By the time we've traced the curve of the bay toward De Kelders and almost to Gansbaai, we've counted at least fifteen Southern Rights on our side alone, rolling and breathing and fluking in the same waters we looked out over from the stoep barely an hour ago.

We bank along the shoreline and drop lower.

The pilot knows I like to fly this route low when the weather allows. For a decade I headed up an air and sea rescue service along this coast—hundreds of hours in helicopters like this, skirting waves, searching for flares or overturned hulls or a single human head in a very large ocean. I was the jumper then, the one who went into the water when the call came. That work leaves a permanent tension between awe and respect in your bones. The sea is beautiful. The sea is not your friend.

Today, though, it is behaving. The pilot takes us down to a height where the spray lines and white foam of breaking waves are clearly visible,

where the shadow of the helicopter sometimes skims across their backs like a dragonfly.

The boys press their heads to the glass as we follow the curve of Walker Bay, the cliffs and rocky points passing beneath us in a slow, cinematic pan. The water shifts colour with depth and bottom—turquoise over sand, dark emerald over kelp forests, deep indigo where it drops away.

Past Grotto and Voëlklip, past De Kelders and the kelp-rich shallows of Gansbaai, the coast begins to scatter into reefs and rocks. Ahead, two low, rough islands appear: one dark and slick with life, the other pale and bare.

“Seal Island,” the pilot says. “Dyer Island and Geyser Rock.”

Even from up here you can hear it: a low, constant roar that is not waves but voices. Thousands of Cape fur seals haul themselves on and off the rocks, bodies packed tight on every usable ledge. The sea immediately around the island is a shifting soup of brown backs and white wakes as they slip in and out of the water.

Between the islands lies the narrow channel the world has come to know as Shark Alley.

For years this strip of water was one of the most reliable places in the world to see great whites. Boats from Kleinbaai would anchor here and cage divers—nervous, excited, paying good money to shiver in cold water—would watch those long grey shadows appear out of nowhere, circling, assessing, reminding everyone in attendance who really owned this corridor of sea.

Great whites have been here for millennia, following seal colonies,

migrating up and down the coast on routes we still only half understand. In more recent years, their numbers and patterns have shifted—over-fishing, changing currents, and, in this area, the arrival of orcas that have learned to hunt them have all played their part. Some days you see them. Many days now you don't.

"We'll keep an eye out for the real boss of this coast," I say into the intercom. "If we're lucky, we might see a great white."

Sometimes, on days like this, you can spot them from the air—long, unmistakable shapes cruising just behind the breakers, bigger than the shark cages built to watch them. I've seen sharks from this angle that were, length-wise, not far off this helicopter.

Today, despite all of us scanning the water with the greed of children, none appear.

"The king is off duty," one of the boys says.

"Even kings take days off," I reply.

We skim past the bay that holds Kleinbaai's little harbour and on toward the longer beaches. Ahead, the coastline straightens and the sand begins to run in uninterrupted lines.

And then there it is below us: Pearly Beach.

The same perfect white arc we rode along less than fourteen hours ago—horses in the surf, full moon rising behind the dunes—now stretched out like a strip of polished bone between green land and blue water. From up here the hoofprints are already invisible. The memory is not.

"Look," I say. "Last night's road."

They peer down and laugh, that delighted sound people make when two experiences suddenly click into the same map.

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TO THE TIP OF A CONTINENT

We follow the coast east, then south-east, tracing the outline of the continent.

Past Pearly Beach and on toward Quoin Point and Arniston, the houses thin. The land grows wilder. Dunes march inland, soft-edged and restless. The Atlantic, or the Indian, depending on which cartographer you ask, throws its weight onto the rocks in long, slow sets.

After half an hour, the pilot points ahead, where a low, uncompromising point of land pushes into the sea.

“Agulhas,” he says. “The end of Africa.”

Everyone knows the Cape of Good Hope from postcards and myths and old maps that needed a dramatic corner of the world to hang their legends from. Fewer people realise that the true southernmost tip of the continent lies here, at Cape Agulhas, a relatively flat, rocky promontory where the warm Agulhas current and the cold Benguela meet, argue, and move on.

We circle once, low, giving the family the full sweep: the lighthouse standing guard; the rocky shoreline; the plaque that marks the exact spot where south finally gives way to nowhere but water and then, eventually, Antarctica.

Then the pilot drops us a little lower still and settles onto a patch of cleared ground near the lighthouse.



We step out into wind.

The air here has teeth. It smells of salt and kelp and something iron-hard. Waves crash themselves to foam on the low reef, sending up spray that catches the sun and then falls back to the business of erosion. The sound is a constant, rolling roar.

There's a small, simple thrill in doing what we do next.

We walk to the official marker—a block of stone with a metal plaque—and stand with one foot on each side. Indian on one side. Atlantic on the other. A ritual as simple and as satisfying as striking a match. James laughs and looks at his children balancing on the line.

“Didn’t think we’d straddle two oceans before lunch,” he says.

“Welcome to South Africa,” I reply.

We take a few photos, not because we need proof, but because some moments demand witnesses, even if the witnesses are pixels.

Then we’re back in the helicopter, rotors spinning, lifting away from the tip of Africa and turning east along a coastline that will soon begin to curl north again.

COASTLINE AS SCOREBOARD

The next stretch is pure geography as theatre.

We fly low along the Overberg and Garden Route coast, watching the land write itself in cliffs and beaches and estuaries. Estuaries slide inland in narrow tongues, their water tea-coloured from the tannins drained from fynbos and forest. Farmers’ fields fall away in precise geometries—greens, browns, yellows—right up to the edge of cliffs that pose questions about courage and erosion in equal measure. 65

The pilot points out familiar names: De Hoop, Still Bay, Gouritz, Mossel Bay. From this height, towns are punctuation marks in a much longer sentence written by plate tectonics and weather.

Past Mossel Bay, the coastline rears up in one of its more dramatic flourishes.

“Look right,” the pilot says.

There, like something lifted from a dream of Scotland and dropped into the southern hemisphere, Pinnacle Point shoulders out into the Indian Ocean—high cliffs, caves carved by time, and, perched improbably above it all, a golf course, fairways and greens clinging to the edge like strips of velvet.

From above, the scale becomes stark. Teeing off toward that much sky, with that much water to catch your mistakes, must feel like golfing on the edge of the world. We circle once, giving James and the kids the chance to really see it. They drink in the sight wordlessly; even the teenager, who has seen more landscapes through a screen than most people see in a lifetime, has gone quiet.

Then we bank inland.

The sea falls away behind us. Mountains rise ahead.

APPROACHING A LEGEND

Fancourt appears not as a single object but as an arrangement: neat clusters of buildings, manicured stands of trees, the ordered green of fairways woven into the wilder contours of the Outeniqua foothills.

From the air, you can see the three main courses—Montagu, Outeniqua, and, tucked a little apart, The Links. The resort itself looks like a small town: hotel, spa, villas, staff housing, service roads. But my eye is drawn, as it always is, to that one piece of land that looks nothing like the rest.

The Links.

From above, it is a different colour—more muted, more dun than emerald. No trees punctuate its interior. It rolls in deliberate, sculpted waves, its fairways snaking through manufactured dunes in a way that suggests nature, but, for those who know, speaks of bulldozers and vision and an architect who knew exactly what he wanted to evoke.

We touch down on the landing pad, rotors flattening the air into a roar for a few seconds, then spool down. The sudden quiet is almost startling.

Two golf carts wait.

A staff member steps forward with the kind of polished ease that tells you this is not the first time they've collected people from a helicopter.

Welcome to The Links. If you're ready, we'll take you through."
There's a brief, efficient division of the day.

James and I are ushered into one cart and taken to the halfway house for a quick lunch before our warm-up. Toasted sandwiches, salads, something substantial enough to carry us eighteen holes but light enough not to drag. The rest of the family climbs into another cart and is driven toward the main hotel—pool loungers, spa appointments, a book in the shade, a different kind of perfect afternoon.

Everyone looks perfectly happy with their assignment.

APPROACHING A LEGEND

The Links clubhouse is understated in that way the truly confident often are. No grand columns, no unnecessary glitter. Just solid architecture, warm wood, clean lines, the quiet assurance that this place is built for people who understand where they are.

Inside, there is a short, efficient routine.

Scorecards. Caddies introduced—men who have walked this course with players who have their names on majors and others whose names are known only to their children. A quick, concise briefing: wind direction, firmness of greens, the fact that “links-style” here does not mean seaside, but imagination.

We step onto the range. Balls click off faces in that particular sound metal makes when it meets intention. James starts stiff—most do—but I can see the swing loosen as the body remembers what it knows. We finish with a handful of putts on the practice green, which does nothing but confirm what I already know: this is not going to be a casual stroll with a flat stick. These surfaces have opinions.

Our tee time is at 14:00. The shadows are just beginning to lengthen. The breeze has picked up, not maliciously, but with enough insistence to matter.

We walk to the first tee.

WALKING INTO MEMORY

Standing on that first tee at The Links is a strange layering of time.

For James, it is an arrival: a first step onto a course he has only ever seen on television, a pilgrimage he has quietly hoped for since the early 2000s. For me, there is an overlay of ghosts: crowds, ropes, scoreboards being updated in careful numbers; that playoff in 2003 where Woods and Els matched each other shot for shot until the African light simply ran out.

Gary Player's laugh. Ernie's slow, deliberate gait. International flags snapping in the wind. My younger self somewhere out there, half hidden in a radio and clipboard, worrying about shuttle times and seating plans.

Today there are no crowds. No ropes. Just us, our caddies, and a course built to be exactly what it is: a test.

The first tee shot leaves the clubface with that sound all golfers chase: a compressed click, followed by the small white dot rising against the backdrop of manufactured dunes and big sky. It lands in the short grass, finds its line, and rolls out.

Nerves settle.

We walk.



A COURSE THAT SPEAKS BACK

The Links was modelled on the great courses of the British Isles—St Andrews, Ballybunion, Muirfield—not by copying holes, but by importing their DNA: undulating fairways, pot bunkers placed exactly where your ego tells you to aim, greens that look generous until you're actually putting on them.

Out here, inland but built to feel coastal, the wind becomes another player.

On the short holes, it toys with ball flight. On the long par fours, it turns respectable distances into questions. Tee shots that would be routine elsewhere require thought here: line, trajectory, where to land it so the contours take your side instead of your pride.

James plays well. Better than he expected. A few early nerves, then a rhythm.

He hits fairway after fairway, occasionally stepping back in disbelief at a bounce he could not have predicted. Now and then, he walks to the lip of a bunker, looks down at the deep, revetted face, and laughs with the nervous respect of someone who understands the difference between challenge and cruelty.

We talk between shots, because that's what golf really is—conversation with interruptions. We talk about that Presidents Cup week. About pressure. About what it must have felt like to stand over a putt on these greens knowing millions were watching. About the way sport can, for a few hours, carry the weight of far more than scores.

On one tee, our caddie points out where a particular famous drive finished in 2003.

“He was longer than you,” he says with a grin. “But he wasn’t straighter.”

James grins back and hits it right down the stripe.

On another hole, we pause at the green and look back down the fairway toward the mountains. The late-afternoon light has done its favourite trick, sliding in low and turning every crease and hollow into shadow and highlight. The dunes look almost wild from here, the hand of the shaper hidden behind the hand of the sun.

“It’s like playing in a painting,” James says.

I nod. I’ve thought the same thing.

THE EIGHTEENTH

By the time we reach the eighteenth tee, the round has done what the best rounds do: it has emptied the mind of everything except the next shot and, sneakily, filled the heart with more than just scores.

The last hole at The Links is not cruel. It is honest. A wide fairway that narrows, bunkers that ask more than they demand, a green set in a way that makes you want to aim at it and nowhere else.

James stands on the tee and looks down the hole with the calm of a man who has already received what he came for.

He swings.

It is not his longest drive of the day, but it is his truest. The ball flies on a strong, straight line, rides the wind just enough, lands where the architect hoped it would, and releases.

On the fairway, he hits an iron that, for a moment, makes the years of frustration and practice and hope worth it. Crisp, balanced, high. It lands on the front of the green, hops once, and rolls to ten feet. We walk up in the long shadows.

The putt is uphill, right-to-left. Not easy. Not impossible.

He stands over it, takes his time, breathes.

The ball starts on the right line, drifts gently with the slope, and drops with that small, deeply satisfying rattle that has ruined more men for other interests than any drug ever has.

He looks at me, not with triumph, but with something softer.

“That,” he says quietly, “was worth a helicopter.”

THE MEASURE OF A DAY

We shake hands with the caddies, step off the eighteenth green, and for a few long moments simply stand there—two small figures on a great, quiet stage where giants once traded blows in front of the world. The family drifts back toward us from the hotel side, sun-warmed and spa-softened, full of their own stories: lazy laps in a blue pool, long drinks on a terrace, books half-read in deep chairs.

Around us, the Outeniqua mountains hold their line, and The Links settles back into its usual rhythm—another day, another round, another set of footprints in the sand-coloured turf.



If you stripped everything else away—the helicopter, the five-star estate, the Presidents Cup history—what would remain is this: a father and his son walking up the last fairway together, a family who began the morning counting whales below their villa, flew low along a coastline they had ridden on horseback the night before, stood with a foot in each of two oceans at the tip of Africa, and finished the afternoon on fairways above the sea.

South Africa can still, on some days, string together a sequence of moments so improbably rich that the only honest response is gratitude.



8

Leaving as Family

“

“Some guests arrive as clients and leave as proof that the richest thing a journey can give you is not a view, but a family you didn’t know you had.”

John Sparks

A September Farewell



THE LAST MORNING

Some goodbyes announce themselves early.

They start days before you reach an airport or a hotel lobby, in the small moments when you catch yourself watching a family more closely than the view. You notice how a soon-to-be teenage son now holds his fork with a little more ease in the bush than in a Cape Town restaurant; how a usually reserved father laughs louder on the Garden Route than he did at the V&A Waterfront; how a mother's shoulders have dropped, slightly, now that the office is an ocean away.

By the time 8 September arrives, I can feel the ending long before we load the bags.

Three weeks. One gracious, loving family from Ohio. Five people who stepped off a long-haul flight as clients and, by now, travel through my country like they have always belonged in my vehicle.

We've been everywhere.

Winelands lunch tables under ancient oaks, the kind where conversations stretch longer than the shadows. Hermanus cliff paths and a morning where whales wrote their own script across Walker Bay, breaching and lobtailing. A West Coast lagoon so still it held the sky like a secret. Dusty Karoo roads. A safari where lions chose to lie in the shade of our tyres and elephants crossed in front of the vehicle with the sort of calm that makes everyone reconsider their place in the world. Johannesburg's pulse. Garden Route forests that smelt of resin and history. My own home, twice, where we ate a simple meal cooked by people I love, at a table that has seen my own children grow.

It has been a lot of South Africa for one visit. It has been, in its own quiet way, a lot of life.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

From the beginning, they were easy.

Some families arrive on safari with their arguments already packed. Siblings competing for attention. Parents trying to salvage control from a year of overwork. Grown-up children who would rather be anywhere than in a vehicle with their elders.

This family was different. Not perfect—no family is—but kind.

The father, James, came with that particular combination you see sometimes in successful men who are still curious: analytical, but open. He wanted to understand the country as much as see it. Laws, economics, history. He asked questions that made me think again about stories I've told a hundred times. At the same time, he had the patience to stand in absolute silence for ten minutes watching a single elephant scratch its side against a tree.

His wife brought softness and steel in equal measure. She noticed things—how a housekeeper served tea, how a tracker checked a tyre, how a school group stood a little straighter when they realised someone was actually listening to their answers. She had that deep, unshowy generosity that reveals itself in tips quietly increased and in questions asked of staff that have nothing to do with service and everything to do with personhood.

The children were a study in stages.

One son was on the cusp of adulthood, striding between boy and man in a way that sometimes made him trip on his own height. In the city he kept half an eye on what was being said; in the bush he was all ears. His younger brother watched everything, absorbing, processing, building the kind of internal atlas that will surface later in life when he finds himself in a boardroom or a lab and realises that not all learning happens under fluorescent lights. The daughter had already written part of the script in that note she put in my hand as we said our goodbyes: older brother, older friend, “knowledge feeder” to parents and, for her, “an all-round great guy.” It made me smile, not because of the flattery, but because it captured exactly the relationship I aim for on these long journeys:

part guide, part uncle, part quiet conspirator in the project of making them fall in love with this country.

By the end of the second week, I wasn't just managing logistics. I was balancing temperaments, moods, blood sugars and unspoken wishes. Who needed a slow morning in the winelands instead of another museum. Who would secretly be happier on a horse rather than in a market. Who should sit up front on a long drive because they had questions about apartheid, or the business of wine, or how on earth one begins to move a family across an ocean for months at a time.

It's intimate work, this. You sit close to people when they are jet-lagged, ecstatic, scared in a thunderstorm, quiet after a lion sighting, thoughtful after a township visit. You get to know the shape of their silences as much as their sentences.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Twice during those three weeks, I invited them into my own home. I don't do that with everyone. My house sits on the edge of my professional life like a small, private cove. It is where the guide puts down the phone and becomes, again, just a man who needs to fix a tap and remember his children's birthdays.

But some guests cross that line into something else. They bring their own graciousness. They ask, not just about the next lodge, but about your own story. They remember the names of your kids. They are interested in the way South Africans eat, not just where.

So one evening, on the way back from the winelands, we drove a little farther. My wife had been busy all afternoon, filling the kitchen with the smells of rosemary and garlic and slow-cooked meat.

The table was laid; a bottle from one of my favourite small cellars in Stellenbosch stood breathing quietly in the middle of it all.

They came in shy at first, the way people do when they realise they are stepping not into a dining room in a hotel, but into the private chaos of someone's life. Then, within minutes, the shyness melted. Shoes came off. The children ran on the beach in front of our apartment. Stories were swapped across cultures in the language that beats any translation: food.

James and I talked about other things. I listened to his wife laugh with mine in that way that women do when they recognise, in each other, some common battle scars. The kids were outside, running free, like children should.

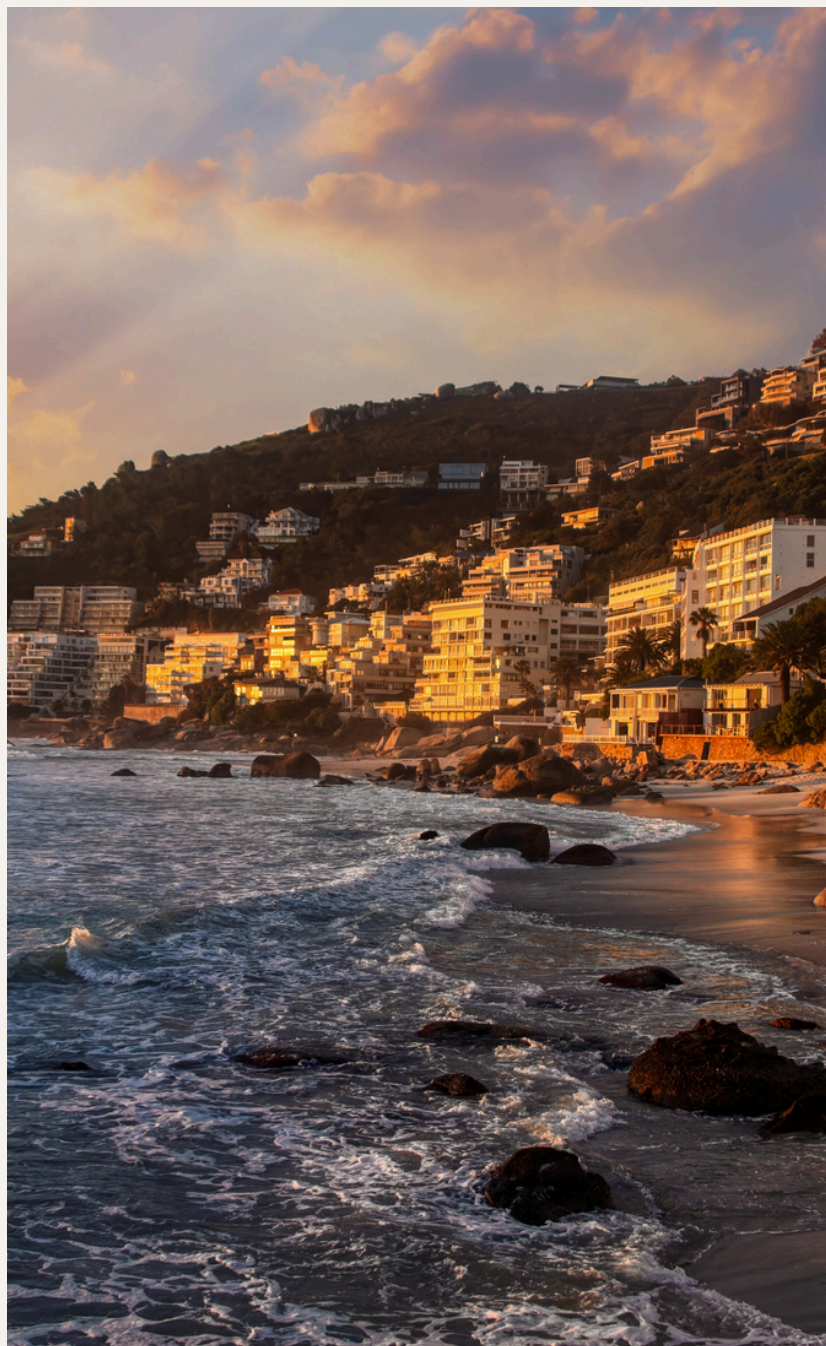
For a moment, my apartment wasn't in Cape Town or Ohio; it was in the small, happy country that can appear when people drop their guard and sit around a table long enough.

When they left that night, the apartment felt larger.

THE LAST DRIVE

Now it is the last morning.

We pack in near silence, the kind that isn't heavy but careful. Bags are zipped. Souvenirs are wrapped in clothing. Forgotten chargers are dragged from beside beds. The children do that slow tour of their rooms that anyone who has ever left somewhere they loved will recognise: touching the back of a chair, checking the view one more time, standing for a heartbeat in the space where their suitcase stood, now empty.



In the vehicle, the conversation is half practical, half wistful. What time the flight departs. How long the connection will be. Who will sleep and who will watch movies all the way across the Atlantic. At the same time, memories keep bubbling up like spring water: a particular leopard in a fever tree; the taste of a certain Pinotage; the way the surf sounded below their rooms in Hermanus; the night drive where a porcupine decided the spotlight was beneath its dignity.

On the highway toward the airport, Cape Town does her usual thing: a city pretending to be ordinary, ringed by mountains that refuse to comply. Table Mountain sits in that impossible way it has, flat and absurd and exactly right. The sky is huge. The sea flashes to our right in strips of dark blue and steel.

We talk about nothing and everything. What the boys will tell their friends at school. How many photos the daughter took with her camera. Whether anyone will believe the colour of the West Coast flowers without seeing them.

THE AIRPORT

Airports are equal-opportunity levellers.

No matter how luxurious the three weeks leading up to them, check-in counters and security lines reduce everyone to the same handful of tasks: documents, bags, belts off, laptops out. It's an odd way to end something as textured as a safari or a coast-to-Kalahari loop, but it is also merciful in its distraction. Forms banish sentiment for a while.

We move through the choreography together. I help with the bags, with the small negotiations over seat changes, with the confusion over which passport to present where. We joke about how quickly the miles we've just driven turn into numbers on a frequent flyer statement.

Then, eventually, we reach the place where I cannot follow.

Every guide knows that spot. It might be a glass door, a security line, a point where only passengers can proceed. I have stood at it more times than I can count. It never gets entirely easy.

We stop.

There is a small silence, then everyone speaks at once.

The older boy shakes my hand with new firmness. "Thank you," he says, and I can hear in the way he says it that something settled in him out there—a piece of himself he didn't know he was missing. The younger one hugs me quickly, tears creeping down his cheeks. My eyes well up; it's always hard. He steps back looking a little embarrassed, which only makes it more perfect.

Their mother holds my hands longer than custom demands. "You've given us more than a holiday," she says. "You've given us...context." She struggles for the word. She is crying; my eyes are moist. I know what she means: space. Scale. A sense that their world is bigger and more complicated and more beautiful than any screen could have told them.

James, who has been watching this with the quiet of a man who feels things deeply and shows them carefully, steps forward.

He has the look of someone about to sign off a major deal, but his voice betrays a crack. “You’ve looked after my family,” he says simply. “That means more than anything.”

We hug. Three weeks of shared air, shared risk, shared joy and shared silence sits between us in that brief contact.

The daughter steps forward and hugs me for what feels like an eternity. “This is the best holiday I’ve ever had with my family,” she says. Then she presses a folded note into my hand—her own handwriting, small and certain and turns and quickly walks away.

The family follow towards the gate.

I watch them, they turn, wave and then disappear.

AFTER

Walking back through the terminal alone, the city feels louder. The fluorescent lights more insistent. The advertisements more desperate. But under it all, there is a steady, familiar calm.

This is the work. But this one has been extra hard.

It is logistics and vehicles and knowing how to get a last-minute table at a restaurant in peak season. It is reading weather and tide charts. It is reconciling invoices and checking tyres and updating itineraries on the fly.

But beneath all that, for me, it is this: three weeks in which five humans from Ohio let me hold a small part of their story and trusted me not to drop it.

In the car park, the silence is mine again. No questions from the back seat. No arguments over playlists. Just the hum of an engine and the ghost of their laughter in the upholstery.

I sit for a moment before starting the car and unfold the daughter's letter. I read it with tears in my eyes: older brother, older friend, "knowledge feeder" to parents, "all-round great guy." I think of James calling me more friend than guide. I think of how easily we moved, by the end, from talking about lions and leopards to talking about legacies and choices and what it means to make a life that matters.

It is a privilege, this. Not the kind that shouts or shows up on a statement. The kind that arrives quietly, in families who open their lives for a few weeks and then go home with a piece of your country stitched into them.

I pull out of the parking bay and join the stream of cars heading back toward the mountain, thinking about the next arrival in two days' time, the next set of names on a manifest, the next set of children who will step into the bush with eyes that haven't yet learned how big the world can be.

Behind me, a plane will lift in a few hours, noses pointed toward the north, five people strapped into their seats with stories only they can fully tell.

Ahead of me, the road curves toward another September day in Southern Africa.

And my work—and my gratitude—continue.



9 A September Pause

“

“A life on the road only makes sense in moments like this—when, for one quiet morning, the only journey is from your coffee cup to the sea, and you finally feel how far you’ve come.”

John Sparks

THE QUIET AFTER



There is a particular silence that follows a long tour.

Not the silence of absence—no engines, no voices—but the softer hush that arrives when the intensity eases and your nervous system realises it no longer has to be everywhere at once.

9 September. Twenty-one days on the road behind me. Three weeks with a family that, by the end, felt less like clients and more like the sort of relatives you wish you'd been born with. Children who climbed into the vehicle in Johannesburg a little cautious and climbed out at Cape Town airport with hugs that belonged, almost, to my own.

It never felt like work.

I had to pinch myself sometimes. The logistics were there—flights, transfers, rooming lists, dietary quirks, last-minute changes— but

they slipped into place with the ease that only comes when you're doing, every day, what your life has trained you to do. I love organising things. Routes, timings, restaurant bookings, surprise stops, small upgrades no one asked for. That part of my brain hums contentedly when it's busy.

With this family, it wasn't just efficient. It was light.

And now, for the first time in three weeks, the day is mine.

THE QUIET AFTER

I'm sitting at a small table on the pavement in Camps Bay, a cappuccino cooling slowly in front of me. The sea is a hundred metres away, beyond the low wall and strip of sand, flat as a thought that hasn't yet decided what it wants to become. The Twelve Apostles rise behind me, stacked against the sky like vertebrae.

It is another beautiful spring day—clear, still, the kind of air that makes colours sharper. The tourists have not yet come into full madness, but the promise is there. Locals in running gear pad past; someone walks an elderly dog with the confidence of a creature that has seen many springs and is willing to grant this one its charm.

I've done the laundry run. Answered the urgent emails. Sent the "safe home?" messages to the family who left yesterday, even though I know the plane is still somewhere over the Atlantic and they won't see it for hours. My phone lies face-down on the table. For once, I allow myself the luxury of not being on call for the next transfer, the next check-in, the next unexpected customs form.

It is quiet. Not completely—Camps Bay never is—but quiet enough inside my own head.

This is what a pause looks like for me: coffee on a sidewalk, a notebook half open, a towel in a bag for a swim later, and the knowledge that, just for a few hours, nobody needs me to decide anything.

A HOLIDAY WITHIN A HOLIDAY

I think back over the last twenty-one days.

The winelands laughter. Hermanus whales. West Coast flowers. Lions and leopards and late-night fires. The way those boys leaned forward in their seats when a tracker raised a hand in silence. The way their mother fell in love with a particular piece of coastline and went quiet in a way I recognised as gratitude. The way James's handshake changed between Day 1 and Day 20—from polite professionalism to something closer to brotherhood.

Guiding is often described as work. It is. It can be exhausting, relentless, full of responsibility. You carry people's safety, expectations, anxieties, and dreams simultaneously. You are driver, translator, safety net, storyteller, negotiator, mediator, sometimes therapist, sometimes comedian.

But with the right people, it becomes something else.

Those three weeks were like walking inside a perfectly tuned piece of music. Every day had its own notes, but the theme was consistent: ease. No drama. No entitlement. Just a family willing to be where they were, with whomever they were with, and let the country do its work on them.

It was, honestly, a holiday within a holiday—for them, and, quietly, for me.

PREPARING THE NEXT CHAPTER

Tomorrow, it starts again.

Another ten-day trip. Another set of names on a manifest. A couple, arriving with their own luggage of hopes and histories. I'll meet them at an arrivals gate with the same quiet smile and the same sense of curiosity: Who are you? How will this land change you? How will you change me?

This afternoon I'll open the laptop and look over the bespoke itinerary I did months ago for them with fresh eyes. Check the flight times. Confirm the lodge transfers. Read weather forecasts for the places we're headed. Confirm all the small surprises I've built in—an unscheduled stop at a viewpoint; a lunch under a tree that isn't on any official plan; a detour through a village that tells them more about South Africa than any museum brochure.

But not yet.

For now, I am just a man on a sidewalk, watching the light move across a bay that has anchored my own life for decades. I think briefly of a swim—the water will be cold, always is on this side, but my body has learned to convert shock into awakening. Maybe I'll go in later. Maybe I'll simply sit and let the sound of waves and traffic and stray laughter wash over me.

A pause is not the absence of movement. It is the deliberate choice to feel where you are before you move again.



My September Pause

If I had one quiet September day in Southern Africa, this is how I would spend it...

People I'd Share It With

The people I would invite to share that day with me—and why

What I Want to Remember

Years from now, I would want to remember this about my own journey...



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.”

John Sparks

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.

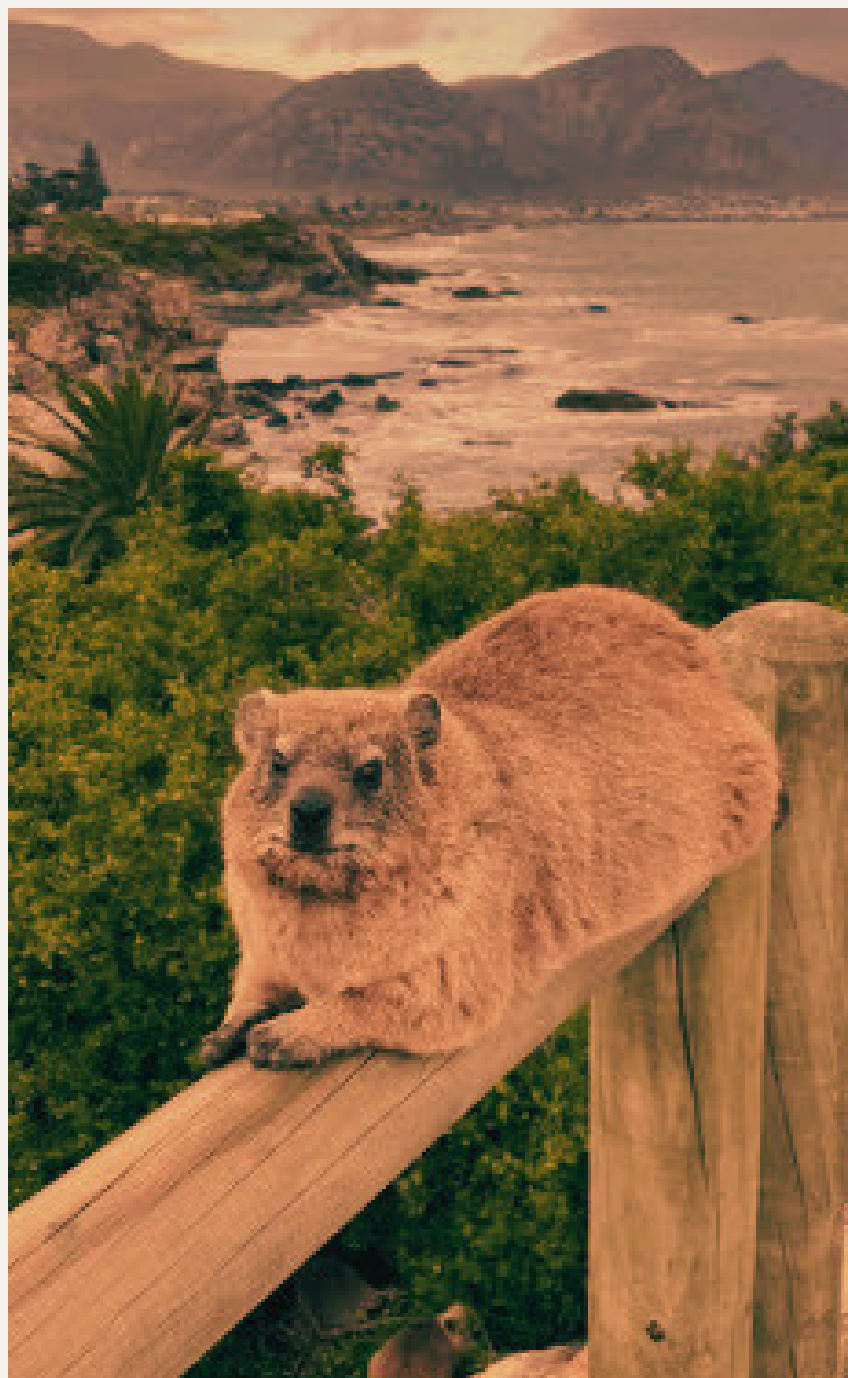
And the bay surrenders.

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.

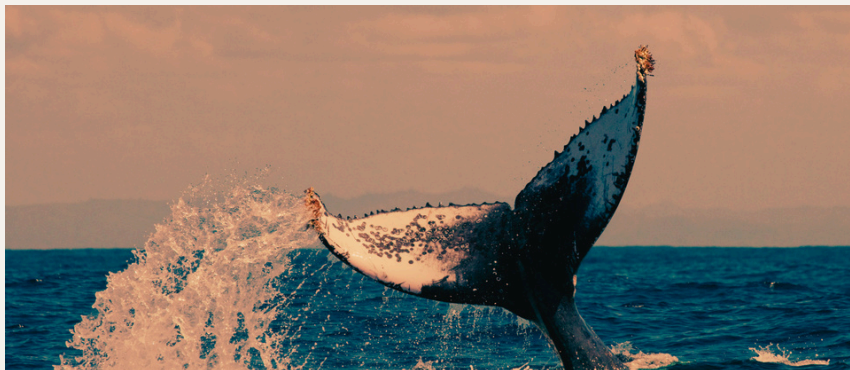
A pod of Southern Right whales, so close I can hear the percussion of their exhalations—that deep, wet whooosh that sounds like the earth itself clearing its lungs.

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 Kammabaa, 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.



By the time I reach Nanny's Beach—officially Kammabaaï—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.

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.

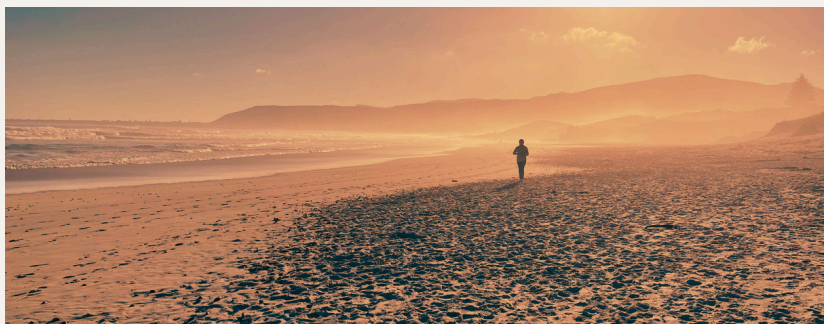
But I'm in no hurry. Not anymore.

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.”

John Sparks

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 strandloppers 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.

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.

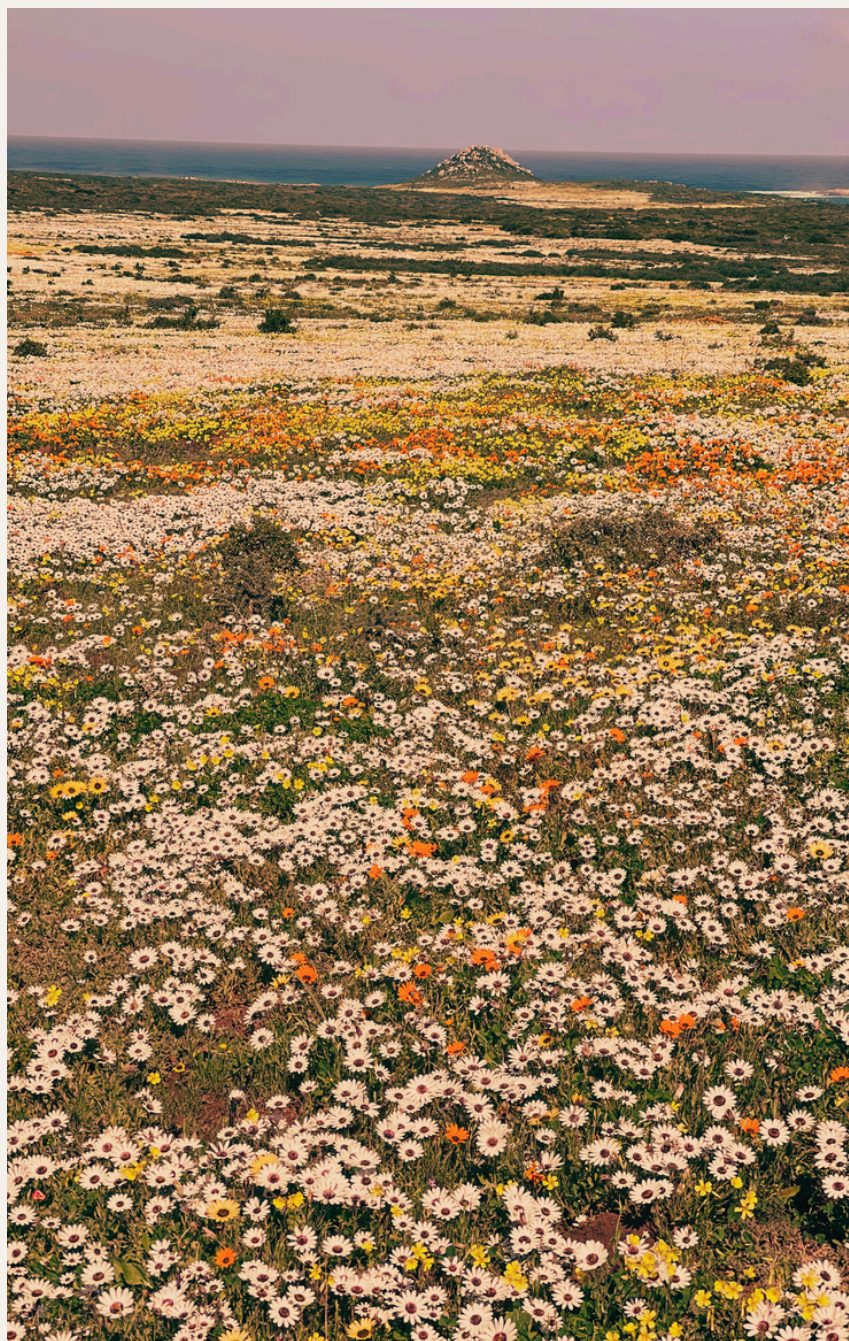
Not just orange. But fire orange. Burnt orange. Tangerine. Saffron. Colors so intense they seem to generate heat, creating pools of flame against green fynbos. Boekholts and Gousblom spread like molten sunlight, transforming ochre earth into a living canvas.

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. Nearly five hundred 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.



14

Stone Cathedrals

“

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

John Sparks

THE CEDERBERG'S HIDDEN SANCTUARY



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 distance 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 watching. Recording. Praying. Making sense of a world that, from this vantage, looks almost exactly the same.

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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.



22

The Penguin Road

“

“On land they wobble like jokes; in water they move like gods. Between those two truths, a small bird quietly outlives empires.”

John Sparks



I wake to the sound of a donkey braying in my dreams.

It takes a moment to realise the donkey is a penguin.

That raw, ragged call—somewhere between a laugh and a complaint—carries up from the rocks and small coves below the hotel. It saws through the thin pre-breakfast silence, bounces off granite boulders, and slips straight under the curtains like it owns the place.

My wife smiles without opening her eyes. “Best alarm clock in the world,” she murmurs. Boulders is her favourite place in the Cape. Maybe in the world. I understand exactly why.

It’s a bright August morning. Spring hasn’t quite declared itself inland yet, but down here on the False Bay coast the sun is already sharp enough to turn the ocean into a field of scattered glass. People love to argue about which ocean we’re looking at—Indian or Atlantic—but the truth, like most truths, is untidier. Geographers will tell you that Cape Agulhas, two hours down the road, is the true meeting point of oceans. Here, the warmer Agulhas current folds into the great bay, softening the Atlantic’s usual cold bite.

The result is its own small miracle: water that feels, at least by Cape standards, almost kind.

It's time for a swim.

DAWN VOICES

I leave the hotel before breakfast, barefoot in sandals, towel over my shoulder, costume under a T-shirt. The air is that precise August mix of promise and honesty—cool in the shade, already warm where the light finds stone. The road down toward Boulders is quiet, save for the odd delivery van and a few early-rising locals walking dogs that look faintly embarrassed to be out before coffee.

The calls get louder as I draw closer. Once you've heard it, you never forget it: the full-throated bray that earned the African penguin its other name—Jackass penguin. It sounds exactly like a donkey complaining about the price of hay. This morning there is a whole choir in session. Somewhere beyond the line of low houses and milkwood trees, several hundred birds are negotiating breakfast, relationships and border disputes at high volume.

Boulders has changed since my childhood.

Then, even into my twenties, there were no gates, no boardwalks, no entrance fees. Just a string of small beaches and giant, rounded granite boulders stacked like God's forgotten marbles, and penguins moving through them with the unconcern of rightful owners. You slipped down a path, dumped your towel on the sand, and shared the cove with whoever happened to be there—human or bird.

Today, the world knows about this place.



On the Foxy Beach side, elevated walkways and viewing platforms carry hundreds of thousands of visitors a year past the nesting birds. Rangers patrol, fences keep penguins from wandering too far into gardens and garages, and everything runs with the disciplined ballet of a national park trying to protect something rare and fragile from the very love that could smother it.

But there is still a quieter way in.

I bypass the Foxy Beach entrance and slip instead toward the original Boulders swimming beach—the little cove squeezed between walls of granite, the one I first knew. A wooden walkway threads down through coastal scrub and milkwoods, then drops toward sand that still feels, in the right light, like a secret.

FIRST SIGHT

The cove is almost empty.

One older couple already in the water, bobbing in the gentle swell like seals. A teenager perched on a warm rock, earphones in, pretending not to watch the birds. And the birds themselves—ten, maybe twelve African penguins—scattered along the sand and



lower rocks, each held in a pose that suggests both ownership and faint curiosity.

They look at me as I step onto the beach.

I look back.

There is always a moment, standing here, when the ancientness of them punches through the cuteness. It's easy to see the tuxedo comedy—waddles and flaps and the occasional undignified stumble. But then you remember their lineage runs back almost to the age of dinosaurs, through millions of years of ocean and change. At one point there were penguins as tall as a man. They've gone now, folded back into rock and fossil. The ones in front of me are smaller—70 centimetres of bone and dense feather and attitude—but genetically they carry that whole story.

I nod at them. They continue to stare.

INTO THE WATER

The sand is cold underfoot, but the water, when it wraps around my ankles, is surprisingly forgiving. Eighteen degrees, perhaps—practically tropical for a coastline once described as “sharper than a solicitor's letter.” The sheltered nature of False Bay and the nudge of the Agulhas current turn this into one of the rare Cape beaches where you can linger without your bones filing a formal complaint.

I wade waist-deep, then shoulder-deep, then begin my usual slow breaststroke out and around toward Middle Beach. This has become a ritual over the years: a quiet, meditative circuit before the world arrives with towels and cameras and the endless appetite of social media.

On land, penguins move like someone has replaced elegance with stubbornness: the famous waddle, small feet, short steps. In water, they are revelation.

Three of them appear from nowhere—black-and-white torpedoes streaking under the surface. They pass me at astonishing speed, cutting the water so cleanly they might be thought, not bird, but precise machines. Then, twenty meters ahead, they wheel and come back, sliding past again just below the surface where I can see their eyes, their compact bodies, their impossible control.

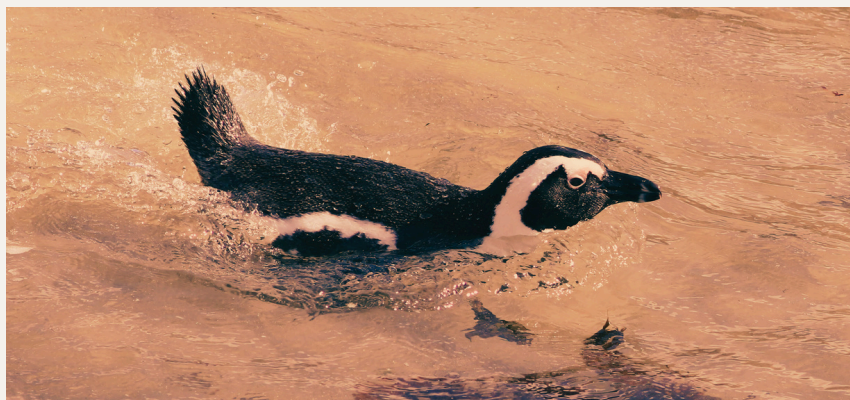
Their scientific name means “diving wedge.” No description could be simpler or more accurate. They are built to cleave water, to turn depth into highway. On an average dive they might go down thirty or forty metres. At their best, they reach far deeper, holding their breath for minutes in the cold and dark, chasing sardines and anchovies through an underwater world most of us will never see.

On land they are punchlines. Out here, they are poetry.

MIDDLE BEACH

I round the shoulder of the boulders and Middle Beach reveals itself—a narrower strip of sand, framed by granite and scrub. Fewer people know this corner. It feels, as it always has, like a slightly more private room off a crowded house.

On the sand and low rocks are more penguins. Ten, perhaps twelve, arranged in no particular pattern, each occupied with some version of the same work: preening, guarding, watching. Around this time of year, the beach is thick with young birds in various stages of



becoming themselves—fluffy grey chicks begging ruthlessly from parents, blue-grey juveniles midway through their awkward molt into adult plumage. The sand is mottled with old feathers; the air smells of salt, guano, kelp and something faintly fish-sweet.

I step out of the shallows and walk slowly past them, keeping the kind of respectful distance that comes from experience and from not wanting my fingers perforated. Their beaks are sharp enough to make foolish tourists remember boundaries. Rangers always warn: if a penguin starts swaying its head from side to side, it isn't dancing. It's giving you a chance to reconsider your life choices.

These ones don't sway. They simply look.

If you spend enough time around penguins, you start to imagine questions in their faces. What do they make of us—this restless, noisy species that appears in droves at certain times of the day, stands staring for a while, then disappears back into cars and guesthouses? Do we register, in the long chronology of their lineage, as anything more than a current nuisance and an occasional help?

I wonder, not for the first time, what runs through a mind that has outlived empires, survived ice ages, sea-level changes and the sudden appearance of trawlers that strip whole shoals from the sea.



A LITTLE NATION

The Boulders colony itself is young.

The first two breeding pairs arrived only in 1982, blown here, perhaps, by the accident of currents and the logic of sardines. Commercial fishing was banned in False Bay at the time. Food was abundant. Within two decades, the colony had grown from those original four birds to more than 3,000. Penguins took over gardens, nested under people's hedges, wandered into garages and occasionally, gloriously, refused to yield right of way on residential roads.

People loved it. People hated it. Fences went up.

Today a neat boundary separates national park from suburb, and most of the colony lives within the managed boulder field. Boardwalks keep tourists from trampling burrows or trying to turn wild birds into props. Artificial nesting boxes—ceramic and fibre-cement igloos—dot the sand and bushes, replacing the guano burrows people harvested to exhaustion decades ago. Rangers move through the colony like quiet referees, pulling birds out from under parked cars, warning children back from over-eager approaches, keeping an eye on both the birds and the humans.

The wider story is less cheerful. From an estimated 1.5 million African penguins in 1910, the global population has crashed to fewer than 20,000 breeding pairs. Climate shifts, overfishing, oil spills and a dozen smaller insults have pushed them into the red zone of the conservation lists. Boulders is one of the very few colonies still accessible, still visible, still breeding.

I look at a pair near the back of the beach—a male and female, almost indistinguishable to our eye, standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the entrance to a shallow burrow. Their posture is pure domestic partnership. Penguins are not perfectly monogamous, but most pairs stay together for life. They take turns incubating their eggs, forty or so days of careful, warming stillness between them. When chicks hatch, both parents work, commuting relentlessly between sea and nest, disgorging half-digested fish into the open mouths of grey, shouting offspring who seem to have learned the art of emotional blackmail from birth.

Once a year, adults molt. For three weeks they cannot swim or eat, trapped on land in a ragged cloak of failed feathers, living off their own stored fat. In those weeks they look vulnerable and slightly embarrassed, like bankers between suits. But it passes. New plumage comes in. They shine again, waterproof and immaculate, and throw themselves back into the surf as if none of it ever happened.

Commitment. Endurance. A kind of fierce, unadorned love.

I watch the pair for a while and feel my admiration sharpen into something close to respect.



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THE STRANGE, SMALL MIRACLES

Closer to the waterline, a bird stands with its head tipped back and its beak held high. Above its eyes is a patch of bare pink skin that looks almost like a careless dash of paint. In this light, it glows.

Those patches are radiators. When a penguin overheats, blood floods to those exposed areas; the air cools it; the bird regulates itself without ever needing shade or a glass of cold water.

It is a small, brilliant adaptation—one of many hidden in what, at a distance, looks like a simple black-and-white suit.

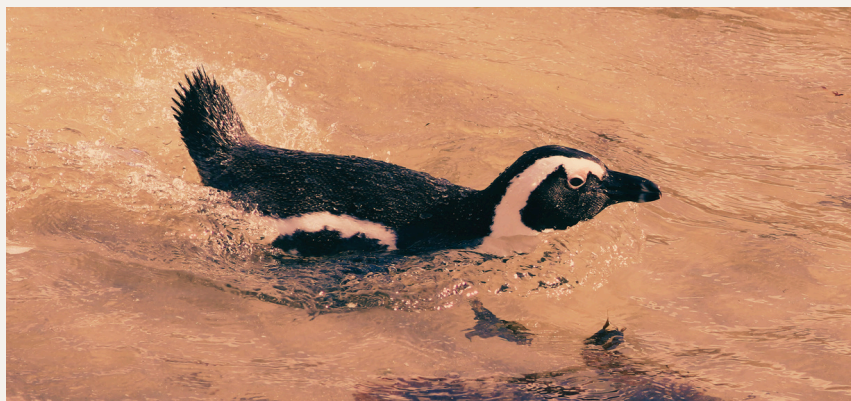
They never drink fresh water. They swallow seawater, salt and all, and their bodies route the excess through a gland above the eyes. The salt is then ejected in a sharp, unceremonious sneeze—a tiny act of alchemy that turns something lethal into nothing. These are the details you miss if you only ever see them on postcards.

From where I stand, I can imagine their whole commute: out past the sheltered boulders and gullies, into deeper False Bay water, down through the green and blue columns after fast-moving shoals. Anchovy. Sardine. Juvenile horse mackerel. They move through that world at speeds that, on land, would split them. They dodge sharks and seals. They negotiate thermoclines and shifting prey. Then they come home to this thin strip of sand and stone, to partners and chicks and the endless small gossip of the colony.

Some mornings, when the wind is wrong and the sea has had a bad night, you can smell their work. It is sharp, fish-rich, unapologetic. It is not the smell of a tourist brochure. It is the smell of a system doing exactly what it has done for millions of years.

RETURN

The sun climbs. The light flattens, then hardens. The cove begins to fill—families, cameras, bright beach towels, the low murmur of multiple languages. The day's first ranger strolls down to take up position, watchful but friendly.



I slip back into the water for the return swim, cutting through the channel between boulders with slow strokes. One of the earlier trio appears again beneath me, veering close enough that for a split second our eyes meet through the slight distortion of seawater. There is no recognition in that look, no sentiment. Just assessment. Threat or harmless? Predator or passing? Passing, he decides. With a flick, he is gone.

By the time I wade out onto the sand in front of the little changing rooms, the queue at the gate has lengthened. People are paying, as they should, for the privilege of stepping into this small, complicated miracle. I dry off, change, and begin the climb back to the hotel, already anticipating coffee and eggs eaten with a view over this curve of coast.

Behind me, on Middle Beach, a dozen penguins stand at the edge of the world, looking out to a horizon they have read for far longer than any of us. They were here before our borders, before our cities, before our arguments about which ocean meets what.

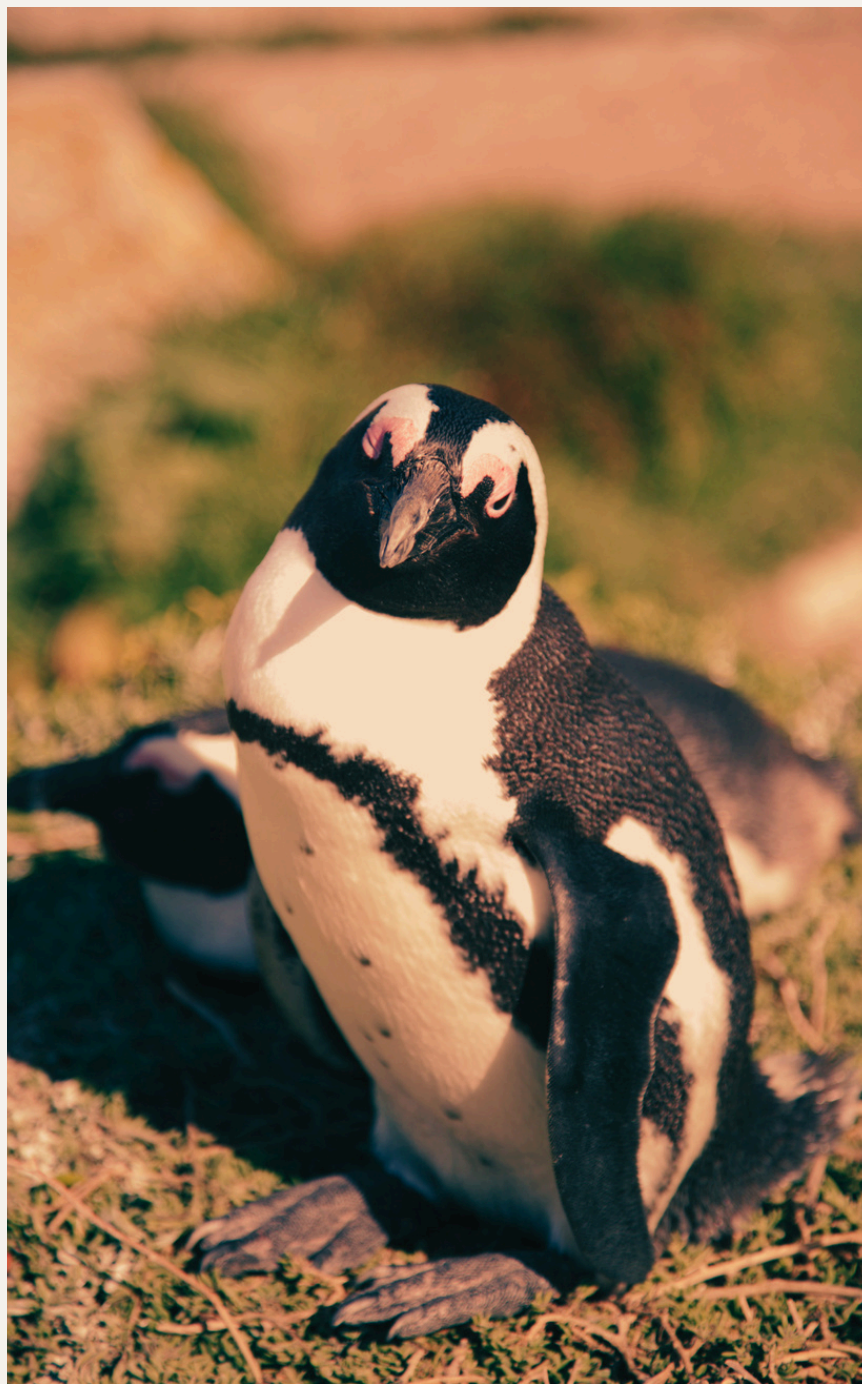
If we do our work properly, they will be here long after we have gone.

I walk uphill, heart beating harder than the gradient demands, and think of all the days I've spent chasing big game and big vistas across Southern Africa—lions at dawn, leopards in riverine shadow, elephants under a blood-red delta moon. Those scenes are theatre—necessary, unforgettable, overwhelming.

But some mornings belong to smaller things.

To a cove carved out of time. To birds who walk like jokes and swim like gods. To a braying call that sounds like a donkey in distress and is, in fact, just a penguin saying: I am here. You are here. Remember this.

And my day begins.





29

Smoke, Stone and Sky

“

*“Some journeys don’t move you from place to place;
they lift you from one heartbeat of the continent to the next,
until rivers, rocks and sky agree on who you really are..”*

John Sparks

FROM DELTA WATERS TO THE EDGE OF THE FALLS



ASCENT

I climb again into light.

The King Air settles into a low, confident hum and the delta folds away beneath me like a page being turned. From the ground the Okavango is intimacy—channels and shallows, quiet islands—but from the air it becomes language: silver ribbons of water, fans of sand, a grammar of life you can read all at once. The pilot eases a gentle bank and the world opens: floodplain resolved into texture, herds into patterns, every animal a deliberate mark against the ochre.

There is a hush in the cabin that is not the plane. It is the hush of people who have been given something private. Faces are soft with the same stunned gratitude I have seen in guests after a rare sighting—children pressing foreheads to glass; parents with that small, grateful smile that says the world has just removed its costume. One of the boys, usually restless, is utterly still. “It looks like it never ends,” he whispers, more to himself than to anyone else.

His mother catches my eye over his head and we share the same thought without saying it: I hope some part of him never forgets this view.

I am pleased, and quietly sad. Leaving a place like the delta always feels like stepping back from a painting just as the artist adds the final stroke. You want to keep the moment in your pocket, but the rhythm of travel obliges movement.

I fly low enough to read detail. The turboprops cut the air into smooth planes and the earth answers with colour: milky water against rust banks, papyrus green like a seam, herds that wobble between dots and bodies. Elephants look like knuckled islands on pale sandbars—matriarchs in the shallows, calves collapsing into water with the sort of clumsy devotion that undoes any hard day. One calf tumbles, rolls, scrambles up and is immediately corrected by a trunk that is as gentle as a reprimand. From above they feel both intimate and monumental: household scenes against a continental scale.

THE VANISHING DELTA

As the delta thins, the land changes its grammar. Papyrus yields to mopane; mopane loosens into drier savannah. Yesterday's proud channels become thin blue stitches and then disappear into the page. Villages assemble into clear human punctuation—clusters of roofs, a schoolyard, a market of scrub and colour. The map of people arrives like counterpoint: where water is certain, settlements pin themselves; where it is not, the land reasserts its old rules.

RIVER OF ANCIENT NAMES

Crossing into Zimbabwe, smoke curls from small fires—fields being prepared, harvest coaxed from tired soils. The human work of the land is visible from up here and it humbles you: everything we do is a conversation with seasons. The Zambezi becomes a larger presence the closer I draw: first a line, then a width, then an edge that hints at something both violent and very old.

Approaching Victoria Falls, the river stops being just water and becomes a premonition. A pale haze—mist riding above the gorge—moves like a secret. This month the Falls are lean; there is less fury than in the high season, but what is exposed is arguably more telling. Where torrents might bury the rock in a curtain of white, the cliff's anatomy is revealed: terraces and steps, a carved face that reads like the weathered page of a planet. Drought has a way of showing structure; in lean months the Falls become a textbook in geology, each ledge and serration legible in a way the rain hides. It is a different kind of magnificence—less thunder, more architecture—and I find the honesty of it hard to dislike.

ELEPHANTS IN THE SHALLOWS

The pilot banks low over a sandbar and a family of elephants rises in the shallows like actors taking the stage. Calves tumble with the disregard for dignity that only the very young possess; a matriarch stands, surveys them, lifts her trunk and trumpets—sharp, almost comic—and the valley answers with spray that fragments the light. Nearby, giraffe turn the ridge into a line of calligraphy and, with impossible grace, break into a gallop; their feet are sudden and light against the earth.



A pride of lions pads along the shade edge as if indifferent to our attention; predators here move with an economy that feels like etiquette. From that low, moving theatre the scene reads like a benediction: life not staged, but very, very present.

THE SMOKE THAT THUNDERS

I circle the gorge. The Smoke That Thunders is smaller than its name promises this month, but no less magnificent. The spray throws faint rainbows, the rock face is an essay in time—each notch an age. There is a pleasure in witnessing the Falls in a lean season: water reveals the architecture of its own making, the basalt steps and eroded ledges that centuries of floodwaters carved. In that clarity, the Falls' quieter note feels somehow more articulate.

The descent to the Victoria Falls runway is tidy and precise—the strip a purposeful incision into the wild. I land and the world rearranges itself: boots back on earth, paper checked, smiles exchanged. Customs runs with the smoothness of a well-rehearsed choreography. Nature is unruly; people, blessedly, like to make processes out of its edges.

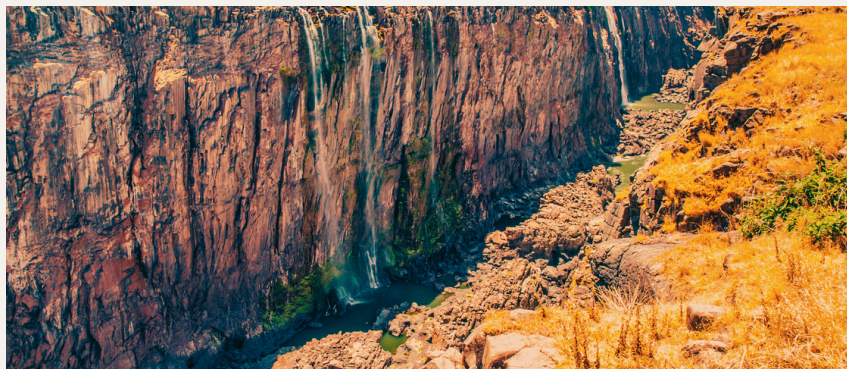


LUNCH WITH HISTORY

The Grand Victoria Falls Hotel waits on its promontory: verandas and columns, the kind of Edwardian building that reads as a history book in stone and paint. It carries—uncomfortably but honestly—the shadow of figures like Rhodes; empire leaves its architecture and architecture keeps the memory. Under creeping ficus, on a shaded terrace, the world feels as if someone has put you back into civilisation with a polite nod.

Lunch is measured and kind. River fish arrives with a lightness that respects the catch; salads cut with citrus picked close by; bread still warm from the oven. Glassware catches the light, silverware rests just so. Conversation drifts like tide between laughter and those small, unasked silences when people watch the horizon and understand they are unlikely to forget. We speak of the morning's elephants, the giraffe's absurd gallop, the pride that refused to hurry. Someone mentions Rhodes; the name hangs uneasily, and we feel the complicated weight of history that rooms like this carry. Architecture comforts; it also requires honesty. We are passing through legacies as much as landscapes.

WALK TO THE EDGE



After lunch we take the hotel's private path—forty five minutes down to the gorge, a short, curated pilgrimage that still asks something of the body. The path moves from dry gravel into misted undergrowth; the sound of the river swells from distant percussion to a chest-deep bass. The air thickens and mineralises, a private rain that clings to clothes and hair. A child reaches out and lets the moisture bead on his fingers as if testing the truth of it.

When the Falls finally appear, language deserts you. Even after years and hundreds of photographs, the sight arrests the body. Today there is less roar and more clarity; you see terraces and sculpted faces as if the planet had stopped to show you its work. The gorge yawns; the river throws itself down in ribbons and sheets; the spray rises and falls like breath. Standing there, shoes damp, hair bright with mist, the constant of travel resolves itself into a single truth: we go so moments can mark us. The Falls flatten the smallness of daily urgency into perspective. You stand and, for a while, it is enough. It is, in a way, the place where in 1855 Dr David Livingstone first recorded these falls—an event whose name and date have been folded into the valley's long story.

The same Dr Livingstone who, years later, would be greeted by Stanley with the sentence the world has quoted for generations—"Dr Livingstone, I presume?"—a line that carries all the strange weight of curiosity, encounter and the burdens of history. Here, the question lands differently: not an arrival into conquest, but an arrival into a landscape that has always been larger than our names.

WALK TO THE EDGE

Back at the hotel a day room waits—a small, civilised mercy: a cool shower, a change of clothes folded and ready, a place to collect the dust of travel and rearrange myself for the flight ahead. There is a brief, blessed hour to sit and breathe, to repack slowly, to watch the light shift across the lawns while the memory of the river replays at the edges of thought.

The King Air waits under a spare sky, patient and ready. As I climb, the familiar melancholy of departure arrives—soft, human, not dramatic—and the quiet satisfaction that I chose the long route. On the run to OR Tambo the continent unspools: towns, farms, the tidy grid of everyday life. I make short jottings—elephants in the shallows, a pride moving like a lesson, giraffe galloping with improbable grace—small reliquaries for the months ahead.

There is always a private pleasure in choosing the long route. I could have flown direct, bypassed the Falls and saved an hour or three. Instead I chose generosity: an afternoon offered by the land, extravagant in its simplicity. That is the difference between travel and touring—between passing through and being given something that changes, however slightly, how you believe the world to be.

As Johannesburg's grid draws near and suburban lights gather, I close my notebook and let the remembered river play behind my eyes—the smell of wet sand, the distant trumpets, the spray that braided sun and stone into a single acoustic. The delta sits behind me, generous and indifferent. Ahead waits the small, ongoing business of life.

But the day remains: calves in water, zebra on the plain, the Falls revealing their bones like a cathedral stripped for repair. These are the moments that complicate sensible plans; they make you return to a life that claims to be reasonable—and then quietly, absurdly, grateful.

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.

About The Author

For more than three decades, John Sparks hasn't just visited Southern Africa—he's lived it, line by line, horizon by horizon. He has walked cliff paths at dawn with whales below, slept under a billion desert stars, flown scientists and a handful of brave tourists onto Antarctic blue ice in an IL-76 he helped put there, rebuilt forgotten farms into wine estates and hunting blocks into conservation lodges, and quietly opened doors for presidents, royalty, world-class athletes, UHNW families and global entrepreneurs who want the real Africa.



Almost all of his journeys have been by private referral. With over six thousand days in the field, four generations of family roots in Southern Africa, and first-hand experience of more than three hundred of the continent's finest lodges, hotels, villas and private reserves, John doesn't read about places—he walks them, flies them, sails them, then stitches them together into stories and itineraries that simply don't exist on the open market.

He is a pioneer of Antarctic travel, instrumental in organising the first tourist and scientific flight from Cape Town to a Russian blue-ice runway in Queen Maud Land—replacing the brutal sea crossing scientists had endured for years. He has raced across the Atlantic with one of the world's great ocean sailors. Earlier in life he was a top South African sportsman, playing rugby at the highest level until under twenty one.

and running track to senior level; several of his age-group athletics records still stand more than 45 years later. That same engine—discipline, curiosity, appetite for risk—now drives how he designs complex journeys in remote environments.

Away from the road, John is a third-generation wealth architect who has overseen more than \$200 million in real-asset investments across property, hospitality, wine estates, safari lodges and alternative assets, and has sat on boards from offshore funds and SPVs to pension schemes. He structures capital with the same care he brings to routes and reserves: long-term, precise, and always with the end in mind.

For fifteen years he served in South African lifesaving and Air & Sea Rescue, logging thousands of hours and leading more than 250 life-saving missions. He took a derelict building on the edge of a Stellenbosch township, rebuilt it from its foundations, and donated it as the clubhouse and school that birthed the Songo Foundation, now transforming the lives of underprivileged children through education and sport. Safety, responsibility and impact are not marketing lines for him; they are habits learned the hard way.

Clients call him “a gracious ambassador for this breathtaking part of the world,” “an older brother to our children,” “a knowledge feeder to our parents,” and, more often than not, “a friend we thought we’d only hired as a guide.”

Today, through Visitors to Africa, John sits at the intersection of capital, conservation and connection, personally curating invitation-only journeys—emptied-out plains, reimagined safaris, hidden wine farms, Antarctic fly-ins—for people who want more than a holiday. He doesn’t sell trips. He builds chapters you’ll still be talking about with your children and grandchildren, long after the luggage is unpacked.

Additional Volumes



Volume 1	January Fires - Scheduled for publication in August 26
Volume 2	February Heat - Scheduled for publication in July 26
Volume 3	March Silence - Scheduled for publication in September 26
Volume 4	April Light - Scheduled for publication in June 26
Volume 5	May Lightening - Scheduled for publication in October 26
Volume 6	June Rain - Scheduled for publication in November 26
Volume 7	July Storms - Scheduled for publication in December 26
Volume 8	August Bloom - Scheduled for publication in January 27
Volume 9	September Tides - Scheduled for publication in May 26
Volume 10	October Dust - Scheduled for publication in February 27
Volume 11	November Skies - Scheduled for publication in March 27
Volume 12	December Winds - Scheduled for publication in April 27