

By **Gavin Larsson**

SOUTH Africa's Garden Route may be one of the world's best-known drives, but it isn't the longest. America's Route 66, as the song reminds us, runs more than 2,000 miles. By comparison, the Garden Route is more of a slip road, just 190 miles between Mossel Bay in the Western Cape to Storms River in the Eastern Cape.

Initially, we were anxious about how safe a self-drive tour would be, but there was no reason to be concerned. Although it is important to be vigilant, it is perfectly safe to travel in the main tourist areas.

After touching down in Port Elizabeth, we drove to our first stop – the 61,000-acre Shamwari Game Reserve, which focuses on conservation sustained through tourism.

The day starts early at Shamwari, with a morning drive to spot any animals that might still be active from the night before. While the 5am wake-up call felt painful on holiday, we quickly got into the spirit of the adventure.

We were delighted to see a leopard and lion on our first drive, and

“OUR ‘TENT’ HAD TWO SHOWERS, ONE INSIDE AND ONE OUTSIDE

during the course of our stay, our ranger was able to sniff out the Big 5 – lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant and buffalo – with ease.

When you're not out searching for animals, the tented lodges provide luxurious comfort, with each 'tent' containing a plunge pool, a wood-burning stove and an outdoor shower (as well as an indoor one!). The safari schedule does allow for lunches and dinners, and a welcome sundowner on the final drive of the day.

Experiencing the animals at close hand was a moving experience. Seeing the elephant herd was particularly memorable, with two baby elephants playing among the bushes. We were also lucky enough to see a pride of lions on our night drive.

After three nights on the reserve, it was time to move to our next destination. We drove for three hours to Plettenberg Bay, a seaside town with fine restaurants and outdoor

190 miles of lions, elephants, glittering bays, glorious vineyards AND Table Mountain...

Now that IS a scenic route!

WINE COUNTRY: Vineyards dot the lower slopes of the hills around Franschhoek

activities. We stayed at Lairds Lodge, one of the most comfortable hotels I've experienced. It has only ten rooms, so it feels as if you're staying in the hotel on your own.

After our drive, we decided to head straight out for dinner at Emily Moons – the go-to location in town. It features wood-fired pizzas and craft beer, presented with a panoramic view of the river flats.

This set us up perfectly for our hike the next day along the Robberg Peninsula. The national park provides three routes, depending on your fitness levels and appetite for danger. We learned quickly that safety benchmarks are quite different between British hiking paths

and those in South Africa, where we were offered the chance to free-climb a section of cliff.

Plettenberg has a good selection of fish restaurants and our favourite was Fat Fish, which had great sushi and local specialities. And the strong exchange rate meant that eating out was very reasonable – a decent meal with wine came to no more than £25 each.

Our journey continued to the wine region around Franschhoek. It was a long drive from Plettenberg but culminated in stunning views. Franschhoek became a wine-making centre following the arrival of French Huguenots fleeing persecution from Louis XIV. Vine-

yards dot the landscape as far as you can see.

The French influence is notable, particularly when it comes to food. We stayed at La Petite Ferme, a restaurant with rooms, which has one of the finest views in the region. Our suite looked out over the valley, and it was a treat each morning just to draw back the curtains.

Most activities in Franschhoek revolve around tasting wine. One of the most enjoyable ways to experience the different estates is to take the wine tram. Each vineyard offers a generous sampling selection for the equivalent of a few pounds, and you can buy cheese or snacks at most of them.

In the hills of Franschhoek, Mont Rochelle is a great place to walk off those calories.

We ate dinner at a new Indian restaurant called Marigold, which was one of my favourite meals of the trip. It was paired with craft beer from a nearby microbrewery.

We ended our South African adventure with a stay in Cape Town. The natural setting is unforgettable with Table Mountain overlooking a long stretch of coastline.

We chose a hotel on the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront – the six-bedroom Dock House Boutique Hotel, a great base from which to explore.

We ventured up Table Mountain – the cable car makes light work of the climb, and we were quickly on the flat summit. The view is as good as you would expect, and we gazed out at it alongside a group of dassies – they look like giant hamsters, but in

fact they are closely related to elephants. How can that be?

Robben Island is another must-see – book a trip in advance, because tickets sell out. The former jail provides an emotional insight into apartheid and the struggle political prisoners faced. As you'd expect, the most famous inmate, Nelson Mandela, features heavily and it's possible to see his old cell.

The District 6 museum also highlights the cruelty of apartheid for the residents of this area of Cape

“HOW CAN A GIANT HAMSTER BE RELATED TO AN ELEPHANT?”

Town, who were forcibly removed from their homes. It also shows what life was like during apartheid, with signs dictating who could sit where.

While modern-day Cape Town recognises the hardships of its past, it is also a confident city. The locals know how to enjoy themselves with world-class food and wine. Two favourites were the Chefs Warehouse and the Pot Luck Club, which has 360-degree views of Cape Town (and the best fish sliders).

For dinner with a view, try Dash on the V&A.

As we strolled back to our hotel by the waterfront, we reflected on two incredible weeks spent exploring South Africa.

Like the dassies lying on the top of Table Mountain, we'd basked in the warmth of South African culture.

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VIBRANT: Cape Town's V&A waterfront, with Table Mountain in the background

GETTING THERE

Best Of South Africa Travel (bestofsouthafricatravel.com, 01233 802727) specialises in tailor-made itineraries. A 14-night holiday costs from £3,602pp, including return flights from Heathrow via Doha, three nights' all-inclusive at Bayethe Lodge at the Shamwari Game Reserve with game drives, four nights' B&B at Lairds Lodge Country Estate in Plettenberg Bay, three nights' B&B at La Petite Ferme in Franschhoek, four nights' B&B in Dock House Boutique Hotel & Spa in Cape Town, VIP meet-and-greet at all airports, and car hire.

COMPANY: Dassies, right, live on Table Mountain



of South African culture.