

PURSUITS | SOUTH AFRICA



# 13 Curry Stops, 5 Days, in Durban

Sampling bunny chow and an array of tongue-torching curries in one of the world's largest Indian communities.

By SARAH KHAN

How many curry shops is it reasonably possible to eat at in five days? Two? Three, if you're hungry, ambitious and endowed with a steel-plated stomach?

Whatever the answer, it should probably be fewer than 13.

I was somewhere around No. 4 when I sat down for a "bunny chow" in Durban, on South Africa's east coast. It's a funny-sounding name for a funny-looking concoction: a loaf of white bread hollowed out to form an edible vessel for a generous helping of curry, typically mutton or bean.

While these days such a zero-waste dish could be hailed as carbon-footprint-friendly and visionary, its genesis was strictly utilitarian. Enterprising merchants from the Gujarati bania caste within South Africa's Indian community created takeaway counters to serve makeshift lunches to laborers. Bania food became bunny chow, the quintessential Durban Indian fast food. Or at least that's how one origin story goes.

"Bunny followers are as fanatical as football-club supporters," said Erica Platter, co-author of "Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour." "Once a Manchester supporter, never a Liverpool supporter. It's the same with bunny dens — people almost come to blows about which is the best bunny."

If lifelong loyalties must be sworn to your very first team, mine are now pledged to Victory Lounge. This is where the Moodley family has been purveying bunnies since 1946. Not sure how to approach this sloppy undertaking, I dug into my bean bunny with a knife and fork.

"No! Absolute shock, horror, that's how people would react," Ms. Platter said with a laugh when I recounted my faux pas to her later. "It's quite architectural in a way. You go from the top, tear off and dip in, going round and round, gradually getting down to the bottom."

Pardon my lack of bunny etiquette. It was a muggy 85-degree afternoon, and I must have forgotten my manners somewhere between my masala-omelet breakfast and the masala-steak sandwich I'd snacked on en route to Victory Lounge. And the bunny was just an amuse-bouche to the curry buffet that lay ahead for dinner. The perspiration pooling around the back of my neck was surely pungent with salt, coriander and a dash of red chile, and yet, I persevered.

My quest began, as these kinds of culinary follies do, with a craving. Ever since I moved from New York to South Africa, I've been amazed by the quality and diversity of food, the mouthwatering result of centuries of intermingling — albeit not always voluntary — of Dutch, English, Indians and Malaysians with indigenous populations. And yet something was always amiss in Cape Town's Indian restaurants, something that I, as a first-generation Indian-American who is just as at home in Hyderabad as Boston, was particularly conscious of.

Indian food is my comfort food, my panacea for all manner of life's daily indignities. Some might seek solace after a bad day in their mother's chicken potpie; I request her khatti dal (lentils). There's no cold day a steaming plate of kheema (minced beef) and rice can't warm up, and no "Empire" marathon a takeout carton of butter chicken and garlic naan can't enhance. I even named my pint-size red car Mirchi — chile. In New York, I made regular pilgrimages four blocks from my apartment to Curry Hill, a spice devotee's Promised Land; but for all of Cape Town's culinary merits, I've struggled to find a go-to joint. It was time to look eastward: to Durban, home to one of the world's largest Indian communities.

Victory Lounge is on Dr. Yusuf Dadoo Street, the heart of Durban's Central Business District, once known as the Casbah. Today, the area simultaneously inhabits two worlds: It could be any city in Africa, or it could be any city in Gujarat. A colossal gilded dome presides over the Juma Masjid mosque, one of the largest in the Southern Hemisphere, and the sidewalks are crowded with vendors hawking fruits, phone covers and hair-braiding services. Justin Bieber tracks blaring from roadside boomboxes mingle with the adhan, or call to prayer.

From Victory Lounge I walked to Victoria Street Market, where numerous spice shops supply the city's curry houses with their red-hot flavor profiles. A cursory glance at the powdery pyramids made me wonder what havoc merchants-in-law must have wreaked in Durban to earn them such a noxious reputation — I spied "Mother-in-Law Hellfire" and "Mother-in-Law Exterminator" among the mounds of crimson and marigold.

My own (perfectly pleasant) in-laws served as my entree into this far-flung outpost of the Indian diaspora. Most Indian-American families I know began immigrating to the United States in the 1970s; my husband's family sailed to Durban from Gujarat nearly a century before that. (Mahatma Gandhi arrived in 1893, and the seeds of his Satyagraha movement were planted in Durban.) Yet despite being so many gener-



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Top, from left: sprinkling curry powder over pineapple at a stand on the Marine Parade promenade; bunny chow at the Britannia Hotel; curry dish at the Oriental Restaurant in the Workshop mall. Above, selling pastries by the Victory Lounge, established in the 1940s. Left, and below, spices at the Victoria Street Market.

cards, you're still in luck. Every week after Friday prayers, in a spotless dining hall above the catering operation, hundreds of patrons line up for a generous buffet Mr. Manjra prepares in deghs, massive caldrons balanced over open fires. "We come here once a month for the buffet," said a diner, Tony Ferreira. "We come because it's one of the best curry houses in town."

At Mali's Indian Restaurant, I tried a luminous, messy crab curry so intense my fingers burned for hours afterward. "Crab curry is a Durban institution," my cousin-in-law Imraan Tayob said as I struggled to stanch my running nose. "We've developed our own niche of Indian food here; it's definitely a hybrid type of cuisine," he added. "Indian food in the U.S. is more authentic, as most of the families who own the restaurants are first generation. But here it's adapted — it's more bordering on fusion."



local products."

As you might expect, after a hundred-year sabbatical from the subcontinent, Durban's Indian food has developed its own distinct patois in the broader Indian culinary vernacular. A Delhiite's dining experience in Durban might be akin to that of a traveler from Beijing trying General Tso's chicken, or of someone from Guadalajara dabbling in Tex-Mex — it's vaguely familiar to the palate, but something's definitely changed. Even the pronunciations and spellings have evolved subtly over the decades: biryani became breyani; dal turned into dhal; samosas are now samoosas. Cooks have incorporated local ingredients like samp (pounded corn kernels) and amadumbe (taro), and been daring — sometimes too daring — with the heat. The same Indian spices are wielded here, but why does it sometimes feel as if they're simply upturned without compunction into simmering pots?

Compared with Indian curries, "it's hotter and it's oilier," Ms. Platter confirmed. "If it doesn't come with its own oil slick, it's not a Durban curry."

In the Workshop mall, Oriental Restaurant serves a vermilion chicken curry that tastes about as red as it looks. "If you're not going to cook a genuine curry, why cook a curry at all?" asked Nelson Nundoo, the manager, with a smile when I ordered an extra water bottle.

I sat under colorful signs reminiscent of India's famous truck art while eating chaat and other street-food fare at the kitschy cafe attached to the Spice Emporium, a one-stop shop for everything from cookbooks to spices to tiffins (lunch containers) to home temples. Capsicum Restaurant at the Britannia Hotel is a past-its-heyday icon often lauded for the best bunny in town; I personally found their chicken kebab bunny a touch too fiery to make me trade in my Victory Lounge colors. The oceanfront Seabelle has a distinctly trapped-in-the-1970s air about it, with grungy tiled floors, Christmas lights, a soundtrack that veers from Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe" to Silk's "Freak Me" without notice, and, for some inexplicable reason, a larger-than-life pirate presiding over the dance floor. But what it lacks in ambience, it makes up for in flavor with its legendary prawn curry.

And no Durban family worth its cumin would dare host a wedding that isn't catered by Solly Manjra. If an invitation isn't in the

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO EAT

- Victory Lounge**, 187 Dr. Yusuf Dadoo Street.
- Victoria Street Market**, 151/155 Victoria Street (corner of Queen and Victoria Streets); indianmarket.co.za/jhi.
- Bangladesh Market**, Business Square, Chatsworth.
- Oriental Restaurant**, The Workshop, 99 Samora Machel Street.
- Spice Emporium**, 31 Monty Naicker Road; www.spiceemporium.co.za.
- Capsicum Restaurant**, Britannia Hotel, 1299 Umgeni Road; hotelbrits.co.za.
- Seabelle Restaurant**, 62 South Beach Road, Desainagar, Tongaat; seabelle.co.za.
- Solly Manjra**, 9 Lakedale Road, Sea Cow Lake; sollymanjra.co.za
- Mali's Indian Restaurant**, 77 Smiso Nkwanana Road; facebook.com/malisindian.
- House of Curries**, 275 Florida Road; facebook.com/HOCflorida
- The Morning Trade**, 5 Station Drive, the Plant; facebook.com/themorningtrade
- Oyster Box Hotel**, 2 Lighthouse Road, Umhlanga; oysterboxhotel.com.
- Sunrise Chip N Ranch**, 89 Sparks Road, Overport.

WHERE TO STAY

**The Concierge** is a stylish boutique hotel with 12 rooms; it also has the popular Freedom Café, set in a shipping container; 36-42 St Mary's Avenue, Greyville; the-concierge.co.za.

I certainly came back for more — then more, and more, and still some more after that. Durban awakened my taste buds to how a familiar bouquet of spices can still invoke new tastes. But even a die-hard masala fanatic like myself has her limits: On my final night in the city, after 13 curry stops in five days, I treated myself to a nice, bland pasta.