

PERSONAL JOURNEYS | SOUTH AFRICA



Watching, and Waiting, for Whales

In an area known for sightings, the animals do not always show. But there are penguins.

By SARAH KHAN

In a world so unpredictable, we reassure ourselves with the knowledge that there will always remain a few enduring certainties: The Earth revolves around the sun. Toothpaste, once unfurled, can never return to its tube. The better a restaurant’s view, the more mediocre its food. The only things Drake loves are his bed and his mama.

And if you visit Hermanus, South Africa, between July and November, you will see whales. Countless whales. A bountiful bevy of behemoths, shimmying and gyrating for your entertainment, easily glimpsed from any cliff top along the shore. Nothing could be more absolute — except, perhaps, the fact that the Chicago Cubs would never win a World Series.

Or so I thought.

Every year, during South Africa’s winter and spring months, hundreds of southern right whales make their way to its coast, congregating in the waters of Walker Bay to calve and mate. The result has the tiny coastal hamlet of Hermanus proudly proclaiming itself the whale-watching capital of the world, complete with a town “whale crier” who patrols the boardwalk, blowing into a vuvuzela every time a sighting is confirmed. Given the density of whales off Hermanus’s shores at that time of year, it’s not usually a job with much downtime.

And so I hit the road from Cape Town with my father on a mild October morning, on a mission to watch some whales. Our first stop was the surfing town of Muizenberg on False Bay, known for its rows of seaside changing huts in a riot of primary colors. You’re more likely to spy sharks than whales in these waters, but I saw neither: just hordes of surfers and families heralding the first proper summery day in months. We grabbed croissants and cappuccinos from a cafe and strolled along the promenade to find a bench to take it all in.

“Flag’s up!” squealed a little boy, running out of the water and toward his parents. Suddenly, swimmers receded from the sea en masse. Shark spotters dot the hills around Muizenberg, on the lookout for any possible signs of nefarious marine activity. Different flags are raised to signify various scenarios — good visibility, bad visibility, suspected sighting, confirmed sighting. The flag being hoisted right then, featuring a menacing black shark against a white background, meant there had been a confirmed sighting — surf at your own risk, in other words. Judging by the number of swimmers still in the water, many deemed it worth that risk. Lifeguards on Jet Skis zipped through the waves, shooting stragglers back to shore. The last confirmed sighting was two months ago, someone told me, so I was witnessing the first bit of shark excitement in a while.

I took this flurry of action in the water as a good omen, and we got back into the car. Slopes clad in electric-green fynbos with bursts of vivid violet and yellow flowers rippled toward the ocean, and the mountains rising up in the distance looked more like painted backdrops to a play than anything found in nature. Suddenly, a garish digital sign interrupted the scenic splendor, flashing “High-crime area — don’t stop,” reminding drivers that danger often looms beyond the bucolic watercolor peaks.

Just past Gordon’s Bay begins a stretch of Route 44 known as Clarens Drive, arguably one of the most scenic roads in the world. Sheer granite slopes to the left tumble dramatically toward the teeming gray-blue Atlantic to the right. Streaks of white clouds striped the sky above, some descending closer to earth to ring distant mountains like halos. “What ragged peaks!” my father exclaimed, over and over, impressed into redundancy by the drama unfolding around us. The scenery was so beguiling that it even compelled him to look up from his constant study of a map and ruminate on the unreal color of the water. In a country of spectacular road trips, this stretch is one of



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOAO SILVA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

the most breathtaking: Whales or no whales, it’s definitely worth the drive.

But it’s a drive I’d done many times before, so this time I was focused on whales. There are plenty of lookout points helpfully scattered along the way, many marked with a whale illustration, indicating the best vantage points. We pulled out over a cliff above Dappat se Gat beach, a scenic cove framed by mountains, next to a shark-spotting hut where a black flag — low visibility, poor spotting conditions — was rippling in the breeze. Surfers still dotted the waters below. These lookouts are famed for some of the best land-based whale watching on the planet, but the horizon was hazy. Plenty of others were peering out from the edge of the cliffs with binoculars; I began to wish that I had a pair, but immediately dismissed the thought. I was promised whales by the dozens, plain as day, seen from land. No binoculars necessary.

We carried on with a few more pauses, turning a two-hour drive into a leisurely five-hour journey, passing towns and enclaves with charmingly unwieldy Afrikaans names — Suikerbossie, Blausteen, Rooi-Els — before a sign simply proclaiming “Penguins” prompted us to take another exit. More signs directed us through the town of Betty’s Bay, leading to one with just a silhouette of the beach-bound bird in question. Simon’s Town on the Cape Peninsula to the west is home to a much more famous colony of African penguins; while the avian residents of Betty’s Bay may not have attained the same A-list status as their cousins at Boulders Beach in Simon’s Town, they’re still mighty cute, and the area is much less crowded. The birds aren’t shy, waddling right up to inspect visitors by the jetty. “Do

From top: whale sightings off Hermanus, which were common until recent years; the town of Hermanus; and the local whale crier, Bravo Sobazile, who sounds a vuvuzela fashioned from seaweed and kelp when a whale is visible.

‘Nature decides where the whales will be, not me,’ a guide says.



THE NEW YORK TIMES

not cross the yellow line,” reads a sign, but it applies only to humans; curious penguins amiably sauntered across to pose for pictures with my dad.

Just as we walked back toward the car, my friend Eric called me with bad news from Hermanus: no whales out today. “But maybe you’ll see some tonight?” he added. I was disquieted, but not prepared to give up, so onward to Hermanus we went.

Originally known as Hermanuspietersfontein but thankfully abbreviated courtesy of a pragmatic postmaster, Hermanus was founded as a fishing village in the early 19th century. These days, whales are its primary calling card for half the year, but the nearby valleys make up the increasingly popular Hemel-en-Aarde — “heaven on earth” — wine region. After a quick stop at the chic Betty Blue Bistro for lunch, we made our way to the then-newly opened One Marine Drive. I had chosen the cheerful five-room boutique hotel for its location: Water views meant we could keep a watchful eye for whales from the living room, and the front door is just steps from the beginning of the path that takes you along the cliffs. We dropped our bags and set out down the meandering route densely enveloped by fragrant fynbos; just breathing deeply seemed to have curative properties. Along the way we saw striking contemporary sculptures by Guy du Toit and Lionel Smit that had been erected as part of Hermanus’s FynArts Festival, but nary a whale.

For dinner I’d booked a table on the patio

of Bientang’s Cave at sunset, eager to catch shy whales emerging just as the sun went down. If there were any lurking, this would have been a sublime perch from which to observe them: uninterrupted water views, late afternoon sun casting a rosy hue over the mountains in the distance, atmospheric mist rolling in, crashing waves making the perfect background melody. But this was not my day. I returned dejectedly to the hotel, worried that the whale pillow on my bed might be the only one I saw that weekend.

“I can remember working in Hermanus in the late ’90s and early 2000s, when I would see 20 to 30 groups of whales at a time,” said Prof. Ken Findlay, a research chair in oceans economy at Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, when I called him a few months after my visit. Until 2016, the year of our trip, he was director of the Whale Unit of the Mammal Research Institute at the University of Pretoria; for four decades, he had conducted a helicopter-based survey counting southern right whales along the coast. The numbers had been declining: in 2014, they counted 450; in 2015, they had about 250. And in 2016, when I’d been on my quest? “The 2016 survey returned 55 groups of cow-calf pairs, when we were expecting 400,” he said. “Something very drastic has happened in terms of the migration to this ground over the last two or three years.”

Numbers have rebounded a bit since 2016: Last year’s aerial survey yielded 183 cow-calf pairs — “more than 2016, but still below numbers of 2015 and very much below normal numbers, which should be more than double,” said Dr. Els Vermeulen, a research manager at the Mammal Research Institute Whale Unit, via email. “Possibly a strong aftereffect of El Niño or some other climatological effect which may have affected the whale’s food resource. Very simple, if they have no energy, females will not be able to reproduce in normal numbers, and whales will cease to migrate. We are not sure what this year will bring.”

But I didn’t know any of these stats or explanations when I awoke the next morning to hit the cliff path before breakfast, again with no results. It was time to take to the sea: The charter boats that ply Walker Bay have permits allowing them to get within 50 meters of the whales, so I knew we were in for guaranteed sightings.

“Bad news for today: the whales are far-off,” Tom Gelderblom, the director of Hermanus Whale Cruises, announced before we even boarded. “It’s not normal for us. But nature decides where the whales will be, not me. Only what nature going to offer us today, we’re going to accept.”

Sure enough, nature was not in a benevolent mood. We cruised for over an hour toward Gansbaai before our guides gave up and turned the boat around. I stared vigilantly at the horizon the whole way, even though I can’t discern a whale from a mound of kelp. Unlike the ride out, which had been filled with optimism, the return to Hermanus felt interminable.

Back ashore, I sought out the town whale crier. Ricardo Andrews was just three months into his tenure. “The whale crier proclaims the good news that the whales are here,” he described his role. But the news had not been good this weekend.

In consolation, Mr. Andrews posed for a picture with my father and showed off his horn, a vuvuzela fashioned from seaweed and kelp, but declined my requests for a hoot. “It would be a false alarm,” he said. It appeared Mr. Andrews had not had to work too hard that season. (The role has since been taken over by Bravo Sobazile.)

Walking to the car to begin the drive back to Cape Town, we passed a woman on the phone trying to score a whale fix: “Do you have any whales out there at the moment?” I heard her ask. I felt her desperation. But I didn’t wait for the answer.

Ten days after my whale-less whale-watching visit to Hermanus, the Chicago Cubs won the World Series after a 108-year drought. Six days after that, Hillary Clinton lost an election she was primed to win.

I guess there’s no such thing as a sure thing anymore.