

MY CAPE ESCAPE!

Sharon Feinstein heads south, like a swallow seeking the sun, to a city set in spectacular natural beauty



Everyone's heading to Cape Town, like swallows seeking the sun. The international jet set, discerning travellers and eager families, taking advantage of the Southern Hemisphere seasons, flock there from Christmas to May.

That moment of arrival is always transfixing, a city set in perfect natural beauty. It's one of those wonder of the world places you're told to see before you die. The flourishing food and cocktail scene, and easy lifestyle, is turning Cape Town into the new Cote D'Azur, but thankfully without the French glamour-posturing, and that's because it's all too friendly and relaxed. The city's latest accolade, being named as this year's World Design Capital, is yet another string to Cape Town's bow.

Our selected accommodation for our visit is The Belmond Mount Nelson, a hotel that has been celebrated for more than a century, with its star still rising. It has a dreamlike quality, set in nine acres of sensuous gardens at the foot of the mountain.

A luscious white flower walkway leads to the bigger of two pools, where loved-up Egyptian geese blithely take their early morning swim alongside bathers.

The staff effortlessly make you feel special, almost royal, and that's just the rest of us, quite apart from the recent welcome given to Prince Charles.

I'm afraid we were rather high-maintenance guests wanting perfectly formed, steaming cappuccinos and endless breakfasts (me), displaying enthusiasm over gardens and sculpture (Diana) and enjoying lavish afternoon teas (my mum, but they still seemed to love and pamper us).

The hotel's ambiance is old-fashioned English drawing room, sugar toned walls, sink-into sofas, whirring

fans, and exotic fresh flowers.

Manager Xavier Lablaude has refurbished the hotel's 209 bedrooms and suites to ensure comfort and glamour, while The Planet restaurant is bang in the moment. Stop at the rather cool jazz-style bar for cocktails before enjoying the fine fare of this elegant restaurant beneath a starry chandelier for a luscious meal made with fresh, local produce.

That's if you aren't still full from the famous Mount Nelson afternoon tea with its choice of 30 brews and decadent, heaven-rich cakes.

Cape Town is however not short on places to dine. The Greenhouse, on Cellars Hohenort wine estate in Constantia valley, is my top choice for a summer's evening of exquisite food and silver service.

A classic Cape-style setting, this venue is deeply romantic and produces world-class food in its artistry and fine flavours.

Catarina's is close behind though not as fine-tuned and exquisitely delivered, but it was still a rather splendid occasion with laughter drifting through the air and the other guests were clearly happy. I had a salmon tartare to start and glorious Steenberg Merlot to take me through the menu.

Kloof Street House is an antidote to the traditional high end restaurants, rather like a bordello with ubiquitous mirrors, tall candles and a lovely, sea washed chandelier. The waiters are ripped, my fish fell off the bone, and there's an electric buzz to the place that got my 84-year-old mum excited. But don't underestimate how good the food is either.

Meanwhile, it's all pretty special at The Roundhouse, with spectacular views high above Camps Bay, your name printed on the menu, and glamorous safari-style colonial with



Top: Table Mountain hovers in the distance above captivating Cape Town. Insets: Sharon learns to surf and glorious Mount Nelson

ceiling fans, whitewashed walls and wooden floors. Waiters are smart and knowledgeable.

For hipper, brasher and right on the beach, go to Shimmeys. Think Cheryl Cole, tangy cocktails, and big plates of lush food.

As the sun sets over this idyllic spot, it radiates around Robyn Island, highlighting the contradictions of Cape Town, magnetic and splendid, but with its sombre background drama.

For very fresh fish head to the small, exciting Codfather, which enjoys a legion of fans, including Annie Lennox. There's no menu to help fire up the imagination, and the dishes never let you down. I am still dreaming about my mouth-watering yellowfin tuna.

At the Waterfront, Cape Town's hub of shopping and fun spots, eat at Mondial, set in the original working harbour, a buzzy brasserie with talented chef.

Cape Town also has some of the best Jewish food I've ever tasted. For some great home-made Kosher cooking, head over to Goldie's Deli in Sea Point.

Away from the restaurant scene, Cape Town is of course home to home of the finest places to visit.

Starting from the Mount Nelson, walk through the orange-scented Government Gardens first laid out in 1652 by the Dutch settlers, with towering trees, historic buildings, musicians strumming home-made strings and shakers, and a cool breeze.

Nearby is the Holocaust Centre, the first in Africa, which provides a moving tribute and is well-supported by the 16,500 Jews in the city. The museum also runs a wide-reaching educational programme.

After one school visit, Rhodes High pupils wrote: "I've learned more today than I have in years. Words like prejudice, propaganda, anti-Semitism, discrimination and racism. It has

made me change the way I think about people of other cultures."

A short drive away (you can hire reliable wheels from Europcar), is Muisenberg, which boasts a soft, sandy beach, rows of pastel-coloured cubicles, warmer waters and perfect waves. I was only going to peer into Lifestyle Surfshop but in a flash they had me in a wetsuit, carrying my waxed 9' board into the sea. I thought, if those six-year-olds riding the curling waves could do it, so could I. Momentarily, I burst into a new way of life when I stood up and rode my first wave. That is until it bounced up, hit my jaw and nearly knocked out my front teeth.

Cape Town's a rich mix of spectacular landscape, dazzling art, foodie and fashion scene, and the good life. If you've been searching for a place you always wanted to escape to, look no further than here.

• Sharon stayed at The Belmond Mount Nelson Hotel. See: mountnelson.co.za