

JN2 TRAVEL



Sharon Feinstein is bowled over on a visit to Cape Town by the natural setting, the hip population and the 'cultured sophistication' of her hotel. Oh, and then there's the food ...



Main picture, Cape Town glories in its natural setting; centre, Sharon Feinstein on the beach, a meal from one of the many excellent restaurants; above, the flamingo-pink Belmont Mount Nelson Hotel

Cape Town's natural setting never stops changing and making its impact on mesmerised visitors as clouds sweep down the granite face of Table Mountain, Atlantic breakers crash on to soft beaches and the blazing African sun ignites towering palms and vivid hibiscus.

Cape Town has soul. Africa's most passionately creative city has become a playground for artists, designers, chefs and entrepreneurs.

With the weak rand and low prices, the flamingo-pink Belmont Mount Nelson, a favourite with British visitors, is booked well into autumn, flights are full and everyone wants some of the stardust.

The Mount Nelson is the antithesis of the international shiny hip hotel reeking of new money and glitz. It sits comfortably in its history and has an air of cultured sophistication.

I feel welcomed and cherished. We're all one here, is the overall feeling, down to Noku remembering my style of breakfast, a lounge laid out for my morning swim, and even the two resident Egyptian geese waiting to do our laps together.

Set in grounds modelled on classic English gardens, with oak trees and glorious white-fringed herbaceous borders, it has the air of colonial England still intact.

As a foodie, I was in awe of La Colombe, which sits above a glorious valley of green and purple vineyards and forests against the backdrop of Table Mountain. The dishes are astounding, each mouthful lush and flavoursome, with a chilled Uma Mira wine I fell in love with.

Two days after dinner we went back for lunch and the French manageress, Jennifer, had the wine waiting at our table with a real touch of élan.

Cape Town still has that messy character of change, a mixture of Africa and a European outpost. It's a haphazard charm and emerging hip that is quirky, vibrant and exciting.

Restaurants like Grand Café & Beach, along with Bombay Bicycle, are of that ilk, super-cool, and bursting with imagination.

I spent my meal at Grande Café with my toes in the soft white sand, watching the moon rise over the waves as I ate delicious fish. Bombay Bicycle is magical in candlelight, a kind of Aladdin's cave with swings, hanging drums and a clanging bell ringing out at 10pm.

I loved it, but had to ask the waitress if I was the oldest person there. She replied sheepishly, "You obviously have a very young spirit."

There's almost a heady spirit in Cape Town today. It offers a sense of freedom and creativity that many European cities, past their prime and struggling in faded glory, have lost.

Cape Town's Jewish community is strong and welcoming. It recently organised its first Jewish Literary Festival, and there is also a thriving Holocaust Centre that takes educational programmes to high schools in outlying areas examining the Shoah, racism and prejudice generally.

The Mount Nelson is round the corner from the Jewish Museum and the hotel actually hosted the first Jewish service in the city during the mid-19th

century. I braved the climb to the top of Lion's Head over several hours with a friend's son who virtually jogged ahead of me and refused to entertain sighing or flagging.

The views kept changing, ever more spectacular, with a real sense of bonhomie among the climbers, some of whom bring their dogs in backpacks or let them scramble up.

The extraordinary thing is that this is the centre of the city, and you can be back down and in a restaurant just minutes later.

We went to Rumbullion in Camps Bay, a real favourite for families on a Sunday afternoon, where guests arrive for lunch and don't stagger home until the evening.

Cockerels strut up to your table, children are playing and there's a kind of joy in the air. The food is fresh, casual, picnic-style in the sun.

Back at the Mount Nelson, I loved to flop into the classic Planet Bar, and then move to fine dining at Planet Restaurant, which reminds me of a nocturnal scene in an old film, with its stary carpets, and tinged blue atmosphere. It is elegant, deliciously fresh, with seamless service. You can find yourself sitting at a table next to Idris Elba or Daniel Radcliffe, because the city is suddenly full of British and Hollywood stars making new films here.

Round the corner is the best Japanese Cape Town has to offer, Kyoto – so peaceful and spa-like you almost expect a massage in between the light, piquant courses. I loved the delicacy of the seaweed and mustard cabbage, and the fresh fish from the cold Atlantic is among the best in the world.

Don't miss Mano's along the Green Point Road, where you sit outside in the warm evening breeze on a perfect Cape Town evening in a buzzy, exuberant atmosphere and eat really well. This restaurant is an institution packed with Capetonians, who appreciate its home-made, simple dishes, not to mention the gorgeous waitresses.

This great city built on a bay has preserved its historic buildings, wooden houses and Dutch-gabled architecture, and shunned chain stores and bland tourist traps.

Walk down Long Street, up Bree, wander into old-fashioned record shops, lively coffee bars and my favourite jewellery shop, Linde, on Shortmarket Street, where staff really care about giving personal service and have innovative designs.

I've decided I'm already booking my next trip – if I can get on the plane.

Sharon's contacts...

Mount Nelson Hotel, Cape Town:
www.belmond.com/mount-nelson-hotel-cape-town

British Airways: Flights to Johannesburg start from £543, including fees and taxes. Connect to Cape Town with franchise Comair through www.ba.com

Avis Budget Rent a Car: www.avis.co.uk