

20

Bucket List
Experiences in
South Africa

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is an incredibly diverse country in every sense of the word – it isn't called 'The Rainbow Nation' for nothing.

Raw natural beauty of every kind is in abundance, with mountains backing onto cascading valleys and waterfalls, beaches and wetlands not far from deserts. There is the chance to learn about Indigenous culture dating back 20,000 years, stay at a range of stunning, close-to-nature accommodation, and experience vibrant cities filled with beautiful people.

With this in mind, it is extremely difficult to limit the amount of things to do in South Africa to just 20...but we've done our best, and come up with the Top 20 experiences to tick off your bucket list in South Africa.



▼ ROBBEN ISLAND

Cape Town, Western Cape

The 5.18 square kilometres comprising Robben Island stands tall as one of the world's great symbols of human triumph over adversity. Just a short ferry ride from Cape Town, the island is home to the former maximum-security prison that housed Nelson Mandela for 18 years, amongst other opponents of South Africa's Apartheid. And while it is a sombre place considering the many injustices against those imprisoned, as you peer into Mandela's humble cell, it is also a reminder of how far this diverse country has come in such a short time.

robben-island.org.za



▲ WILDLIFE SAFARI

Spot the Big Five at world-class national parks and private game reserves across the country.

South Africa is famed for its safari offering. Some of the most unforgettable experiences on safari include watching wildlife gather around waterholes, the thrill of having a lion walk past your vehicle, or gazing at a scurrying warthog passing as you eat your breakfast.

There is the option of going public at your own pace, or gaining the expertise of a professional ranger on a private safari, whose local knowledge of the area and its animals is likely to lead to unforgettable wildlife-spotting experiences with their ability to drive 'off-road.' The oldest and largest in the country, Kruger National Park is known globally as an iconic safari

destination – given that it is the natural habitat to a wide array of majestic animals big and small.

Like the national parks themselves, a range of accommodation options are available across the country, from budget self-catered camping, to top-end luxury lodges with a difference – like the Kruger Shalati. Located within Kruger National Park, sitting in stasis on the historically- significant Selati Bridge with commanding views over the Sabie River, 'The Train on the Bridge' has been generously refurbished with luxury finishes. All 31 rooms connect seamlessly to a pool offering a heart-thumping experience, where crocodiles, hippos and elephants peer up at swimming guests from below.

krugershalati.com



◀ HOT AIR BALLOON SAFARI

Pilanesberg National Park, North West

The Super Seven: lions, elephants, rhinos, buffalos, leopards, cheetahs and wild dogs – are all known to roam the Pilanesberg National Park, an extinct volcano crater. Try to spot all these animals during a hot air balloon safari alongside an African sunrise, and with breakfast included as well – not a bad way to start the day!

You can book this experience when you're a guest at the nearby Sun City resort, which is located at the entrance of Pilanesberg National Park. Sun City assists guests in booking exciting game drives and hot air balloon safaris, run by Mankwe Game Trackers. Not only is it conveniently situated, but it's also a bustling hub of luxury and entertainment: there's the renowned Gary Player Country Club Golf Course, a giant wave pool, casinos, restaurants and more.

suninternational.com/sun-city

▶ THABAMETSI TREEHOUSE

Marakele National Park, Limpopo

You can't get any closer to nature than this. Connect with South Africa's raw beauty with a stay at Marataba's Thabametsi Treehouse, where it's just you and the sounds of the African bush. The double-storey treehouse is solar-powered, with a beautiful acacia tree protruding right through the middle. The accommodation also provides a viewing deck offering 360-degree views of the surrounding valley and its residing wildlife, where you will enjoy sundowners over a sunset dinner. In the morning, watch the sunrise over a cup of coffee, and take in the abundance of solitude on offer – a pinch yourself moment awaits.

marataba.co.za



▼ STARGAZING IN THE KALAHARI

!Ae!Hai Kalahari Heritage Park, Northern Cape

From !Xaus Lodge, gaze skyward at night and see the beauty of the night sky unfurl in front of you for one exceptional, awe-inspiring experience. !Xaus Lodge is situated in the !Ae!Hai Kalahari Heritage Park, one of the very few 'Dark Sky Sanctuaries' in the world recognised by the International Dark Sky Association. This means it is one of the world's darkest places and best areas for viewing pristine night skies. Its incredible quality of bright, starry nights are protected for scientific, educational and natural purposes.

The sky is spiritually and culturally significant to the local ǀKhomani San, one of the world's oldest 'First People', whose culture is full of skylore: tales of the sun, moon, stars, and galaxies. Maintaining dark skies is a cultural imperative for the ǀKhomani San, as part of their efforts to preserve their traditions and to teach and transfer them to the younger generations. The stark beauty of the arid desert is apparent during the day but it is at night as you sit on the large observation deck at !Xaus Lodge that the sky lights up, with astrologers and star-gazers from across the globe coming to the !Ae!Hai Kalahari Heritage Park to revel in the extraordinary night sky.

xauslodge.co.za

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The famously bright lights of the Kalahari Desert. There is hardly a clearer night sky anywhere in the world.

► THE DRAKENSBERG

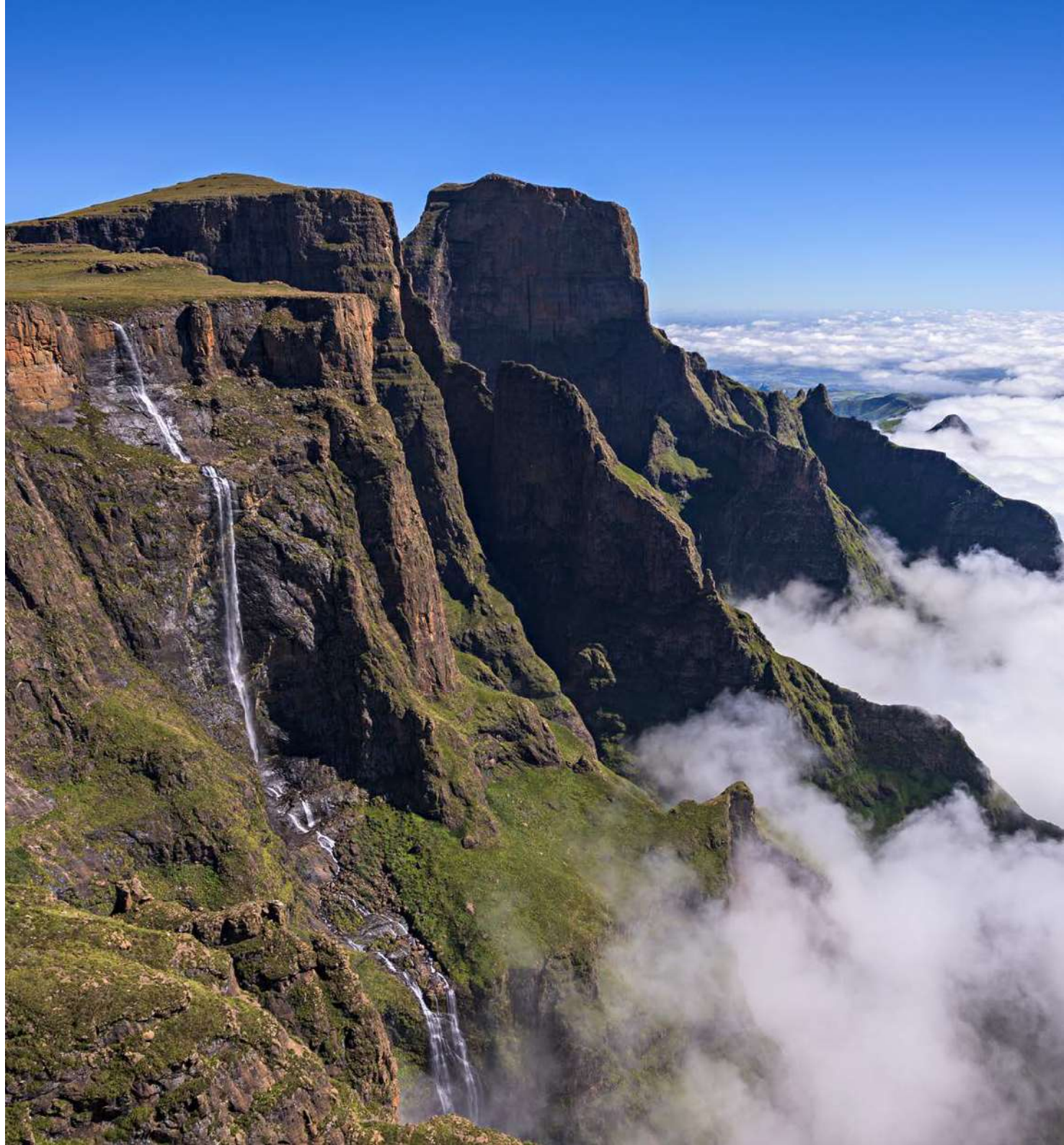
Spans across KwaZulu-Natal,
Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga

The word 'dramatic' doesn't do justice to the Drakensberg (Dragon's Mountains) of Royal Natal National Park. Known as South Africa's highest mountain range – which draws hikers from around the world – the Drakensberg spans across three provinces and combines sublime scenery framed by sheer cliffs. The crowning jewel of the Drakensberg is Tugela Falls, which has a combined total drop (over five freeleaping junctures) of 948 metres, making it one of the highest waterfalls in the world. Base yourself at the Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge and wake up to the spectacular views of the northern Drakensberg. This is the perfect spot for hikers, families, or groups wanting to take part in a variety of activities, such as rock climbing, mountain biking, and bird watching. To truly appreciate the vastness of the mountain, the Drakensberg is arguably best seen from above by helicopter, giving travellers a bird's-eye view of one of the most extraordinary regions on earth.

witsieshoek.co.za

#6

Tugela Falls – situated in the Royal Natal National Park – is one of the highest waterfalls in the world.



▼ DINE LIKE MANDELA

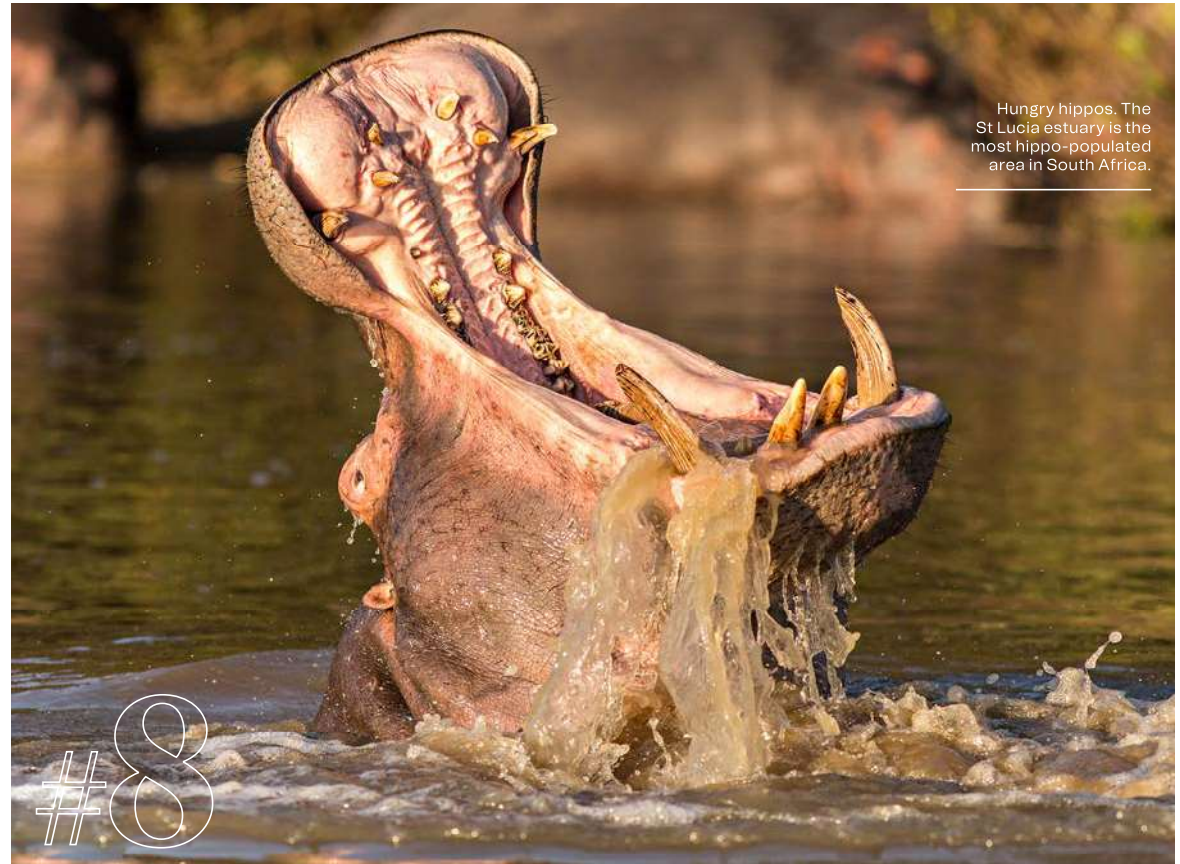
Johannesburg, Gauteng

The dining at Sanctuary Mandela in Johannesburg isn't just influenced by civil rights icon Nelson Mandela – it's cooked by his favourite chef. Xoliswa Ndoziya was Madiba's personal chef for 22 years, and here she recreates many of the larger-than-life figure's favourite dishes; many of which favour simplicity. Based at Nelson Mandela's primary place of residence, the historic Sanctuary Mandela also offers boutique accommodation, and is an excellent place for reflection.

sanctuarymandela.com



Xoliswa Ndoziya has cooked for some of the world's biggest leaders – and she can cook for you as well, at Sanctuary Mandela.



Hungry hippos. The St Lucia estuary is the most hippo-populated area in South Africa.

▲ HIPPO AND CROC CRUISE

iSimangaliso Wetland Park, Kwa-Zulu Natal

iSimangaliso means 'wonder' in local Zulu language, and it's certainly appropriate when you consider the stunning, UNESCO World Heritage-listed iSimangaliso Wetland Park. There are beaches and colourful coral, coastal forests, lakes and more, but arguably, the St Lucia Estuary in the south of the park is the park's centrepiece. Around 800 hippos populate the area – the highest concentration of hippos in South Africa – and visitors can get up close on a sunrise cruise with Heritage Tours and Safari. As well as hippos, you are likely to see one of the 1200 Nile crocodiles that make themselves at home in the estuary, as well as a plethora of wildlife on the land, either side of the water.

heritagetoursandsafaris.com



▲ PANORAMA ROUTE

Mpumalanga

There are scenic drives, and then there's the Panorama Route. The breathtaking Lisbon Falls, Three Rondavels Mountain Peaks, and the Insta-worthy Bourke's Luck Potholes would all be justifiable vistas to see on a single road trip. The Panorama Route takes you to all three. The star of the route is the impressive Blyde River Canyon. With its lush subtropical foliage and deepest precipitous cliffs, it takes the crown for the world's largest green canyon. There is the option of adding the Panorama Route as a day trip to a Kruger safari stay, or soaking it all in over a few days on a self-drive for the ultimate adventure.

mpumalanga.com

▼ JAZZ SAFARI #10

Johannesburg, Gauteng

Jazz weaves its way melodically through backstreets, cafes, bars and homes in Johannesburg. The Jazz Safari Tour, run by Coffeebeans Routes, takes travellers into the homes of local jazz musicians where you are able to tap your toes and click your fingers to their incredible tunes. Sit around the dining table of the esteemed musicians, listen to their stories, and enjoy the flavours of their home-cooked meals, not to mention the opportunity to live out your jazz dreams with your own personal gig. Understand how music (and more specifically, jazz music) imbues every part of this culturally-rich city and experience human connections which resonate with you long after you return home.

coffeebeansroutes.com



#11

▼ MARINE SAFARI

Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape

Traffic can get busy during
rush hour at Algoa Bay.

Raggy Charters Marine Safaris have been showcasing Algoa Bay's extraordinary array of marine life to travellers for 30 years. Getting up close and personal with Bottlenose dolphins in the 'Bottlenose dolphin capital of the world' is a memorable experience that can't be replicated anywhere else. Algoa Bay is also home to the Marine Big Five: seasonal Southern-Right whales, African penguins, Cape fur seals and Great White sharks.

These ocean safaris are run by leaders in community education, marine research and marine conservation in South Africa, meaning your once-in-a-lifetime experience is contributing to the wellbeing of the waters you cruise on, and (most importantly) the marine life that lives underneath.

raggycharters.co.za



▼ ZULU BATTLEFIELDS

KwaZulu-Natal

Battlefields come alive on tours of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, sites of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Hear passionate and gifted storytellers recount gripping tales from years gone by, and gain a new understanding of the history of this extraordinary country. Nearby is Fugitives' Drift Lodge – five-star accommodation set upon a 5000 acre game reserve, offering world-class hospitality and the perfect place to base yourself for a battlefield tour.

fugitivesdrift.com

#12



The six-month long Anglo-Zulu war, fought between the Zulu Kingdom and the British Empire, is brought to life by skilled storytelling and visits to crucial historical sites.



Thanks to conservation efforts, the critically endangered wild Black rhino has doubled in total numbers since 1995. Continuing this work through rhino notching is both a thrill, and highly valuable.

▲ RHINO NOTCHING SAFARI

Madikwe Game Reserve, North West

Conservation safaris not only give travellers the chance to engage with the wildlife they love, but also the chance to contribute to their protection. Madikwe Game Reserve is a patchwork of wild grasslands, forest and rocky hills, where critically endangered Black rhinos roam free. Rhino notching involves guests following a rhino in an open 4x4 safari vehicle, guided by a veterinary team flying overhead in a helicopter. Once the animal is located and darted, there is the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work alongside the wildlife veterinarian to take DNA samples, notch the rhino's ear and insert a microchip for identification and security purposes. These experiences are not only thrilling, but extraordinarily beneficial in aiding conservation and research work. Nearby, Jaci's Lodges are built under a grove of tamboti trees on the edge of the Marico River, and can facilitate conservation experiences for its guests in the Madikwe Game Reserve.

jacislodges.co.za

#14

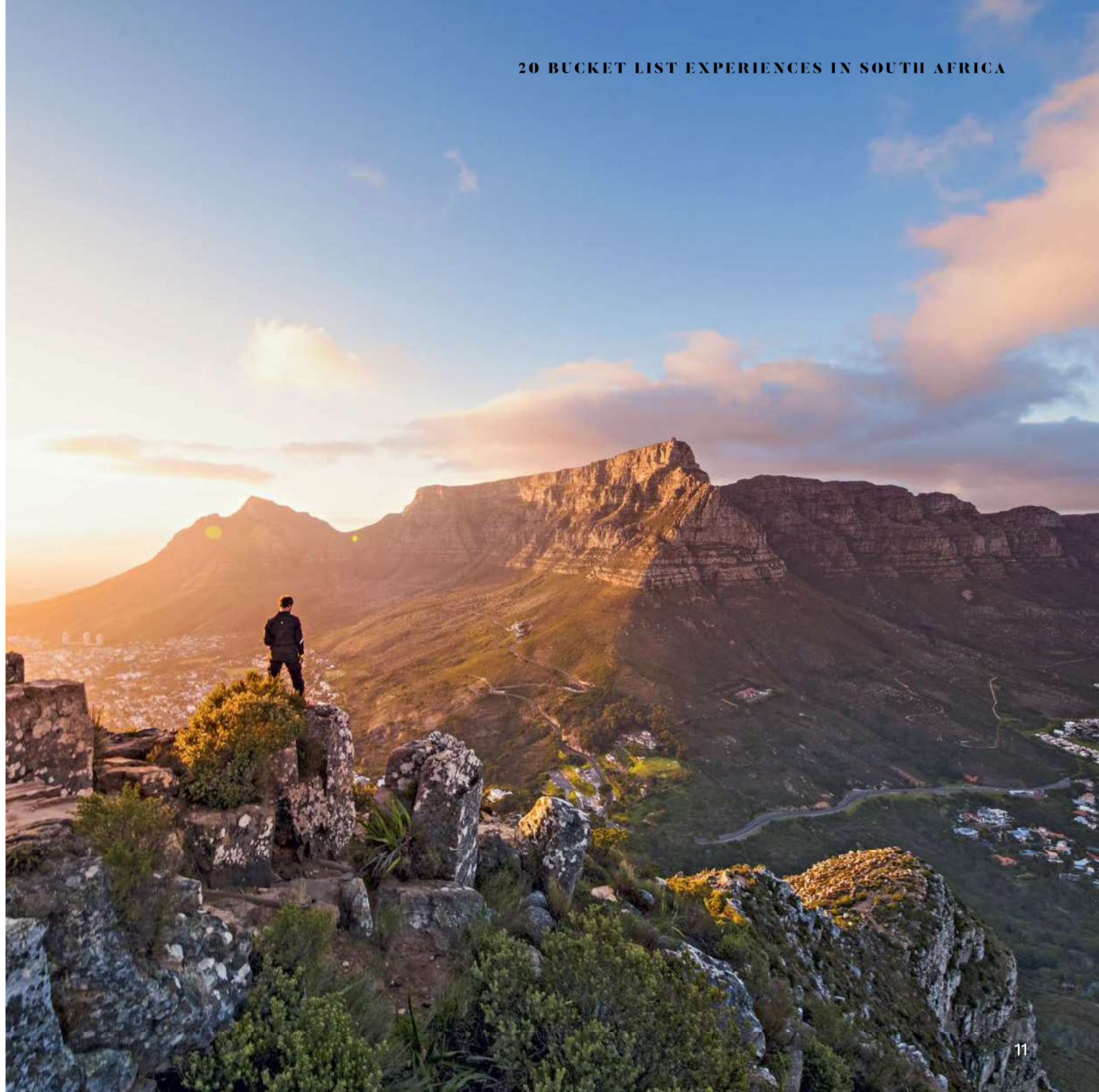
► TABLE MOUNTAIN

Cape Town, Western Cape

The sight of the iconic Table Mountain, standing tall over Cape Town's beaches and thriving metropolis, is one of the enduring images of South Africa, showing just how remarkable it is in a country of immense natural beauty. Cape Town itself is among the most beautiful cities in the world, and an electrifying Aerial Cableway journey to the summit of the mountain is the best way to see it. You can explore the majestic mountain by foot, enjoy the vista at its all-conquering peak, and the more adventurous can even abseil down the side of the mountain.

tablemountain.net

Whether you opt for the Aerial Cablecar or the more old fashioned method of walking, Table Mountain's peak is spectacular.



▼ BOULDERS BEACH

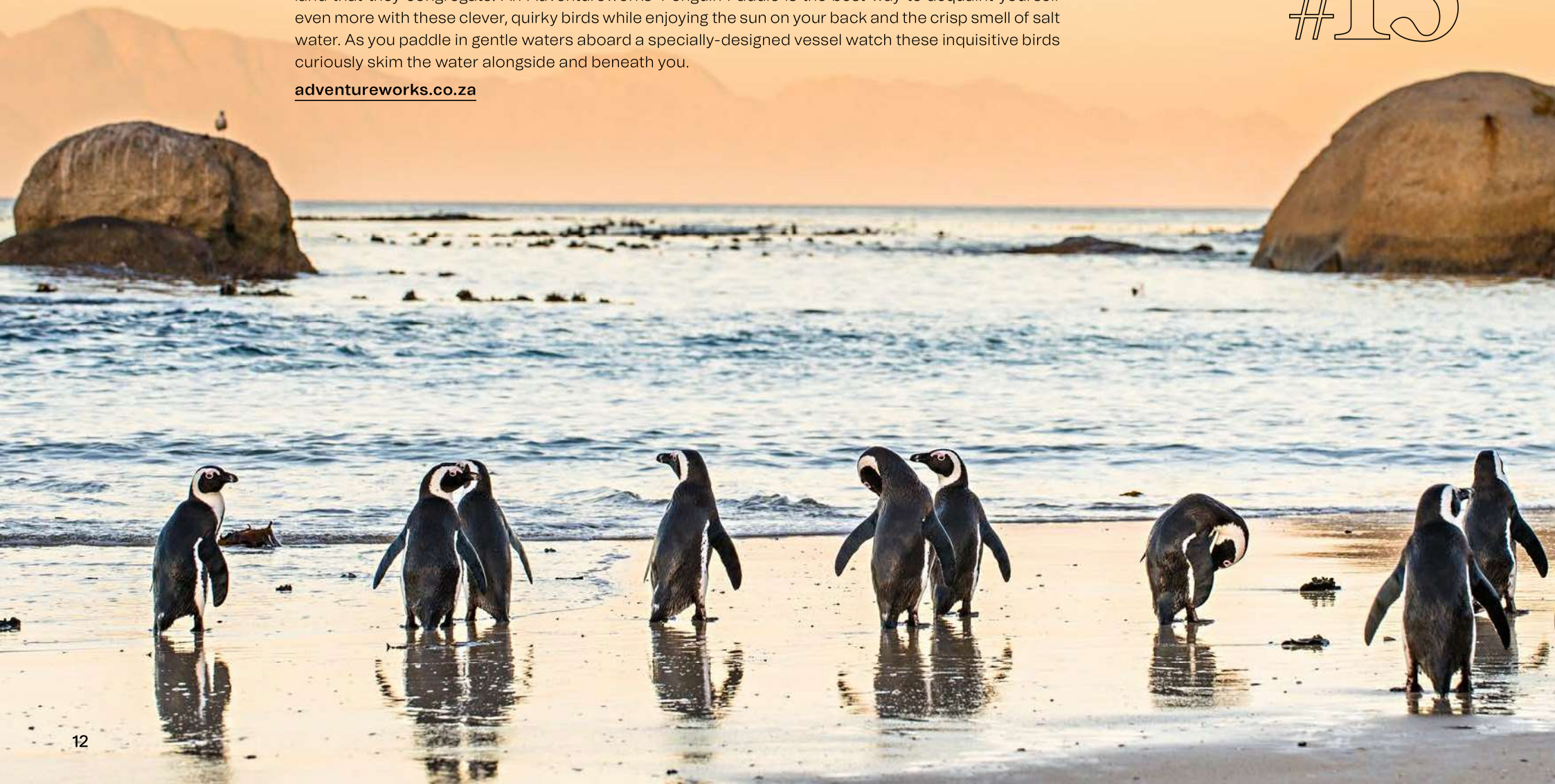
Cape Town, Western Cape

The sight of hundreds of endangered African penguins in their black and white tuxedos waddling down Boulders Beach at Simon's Town is enough to soften even the hardest of souls, but it is not just on land that they congregate. An Adventureworks' Penguin Paddle is the best way to acquaint yourself even more with these clever, quirky birds while enjoying the sun on your back and the crisp smell of salt water. As you paddle in gentle waters aboard a specially-designed vessel watch these inquisitive birds curiously skim the water alongside and beneath you.

adventureworks.co.za

The friendly residents at Boulders Beach, Simon's Town. The beach is about 45 minutes south of Cape Town.

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#16

The !Khomani are the last surviving indigenous San community in South Africa.

▲ STORYTELLING WITH THE !KHOMANI SAN

Kalahari Desert, Northern Cape

Kalahari Desert bush-woman Vinkie Van der Westhuzien's tours guide intrepid travellers to the remote, sandy savannah of the Northern Cape, giving them an unforgettable experience among South Africa's first peoples. The !Khomani San have a long history in the Kalahari, and to hear a descendant orating stories that have been passed down for thousands of years is as much of a privilege as it is fascinating. Vinkie's family have inhabited the area for over 20,000 years, enabling her and her family to speak with authenticity during this truly special cultural experience. The tours also offer bow and arrow shooting and an exhilarating four-wheel drive trip over the desert's red dunes.

kalaharivinkies.co.za

▼ THE FRANSCHHOEK WINE TRAM

Franschhoek Valley, Western Cape

There's no doubt a tram is the best way to see the sun-kissed, vineyard-laden Franschhoek Valley – a wine tram, that is. Choose from eight lines that each take you to eight wine estates, either hopping on or off as you please, or embarking on exceptional curated wine and cuisine tours flanked by gorgeous vineyards and impressive mountains. Franschhoek is only 45 minutes from Cape Town, situated along Route 62 – the longest wine route in the world – and is a must-tick bucket list item for any wine aficionado.

winetram.co.za



All aboard! The Franschhoek Valley's warmer climate suits robust red varieties, although there is wine to suit every palette aboard the wine tram.

#17

▼ WILD GORGE SWING

Oribi Gorge, KwaZulu-Natal

This experience isn't for the faint hearted. Staring over the precipice at Oribi Gorge is adventurous enough... but jumping off? The Wild Gorge Swing is an exhilarating 165 metre jump – the highest swing in the world. Brave souls leap into a giant valley, alongside the gorgeous Lehr's Waterfall, which cascades into a deep and beautiful pool below. This is one of the most Instagrammable spots in Africa, but this probably won't be on your mind as you experience the ultimate rush from one of South Africa's most adrenaline-surging activities.

wild5adventures.co.za/adventure-activities/wild-swing

Are you game? The Wild Gorge Swing is the highest of its kind, anywhere in the world.



#18



Peel back Soweto's layers, by bike. There are a variety of options available for every kind of cyclist, including short (two hours), half-day and full-day bike tours.

▲ SOWETO

Johannesburg, Gauteng

Exploring the township of Soweto by bike is one of the best ways to enjoy a truly immersive experience. Lebo's Soweto Bicycle Tours offer travellers an authentic adventure throughout the historically-rich township. Cycling through South Africa's largest urban settlement, you'll meet with locals, take in the likes of Orlando Towers and the Hector Pieterse Museum and taste traditional beer. You'll also cycle to Vilakazi Street that was home to not one, but two Nobel Peace Prize winners – Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Madiba's home has also been converted into Mandela House – a modern and educational museum.

sowetobackpackers.com

◀ MABONENG

Johannesburg, Gauteng

Maboneng Precinct is a colourful and lively hub of creativity, art, coffee, food and music in Johannesburg's inner-east. Among the best of Johannesburg's regeneration stories, Maboneng was transformed from an industrial and factory district to one of the coolest neighbourhoods in the world. A walk through Joburg's beating heart and a chance to experience this heaving city's artistic expression up close is truly one-of-a-kind. Stroll down Fox Street, home to the pioneering Arts on Main development and an eclectic selection of bars, cafes and restaurants. Curiosity offer walking tours that peel back the layers of this historic, modern, thriving area, offering insights and stories beyond the suburb's art-laden walls.

curiosity.africa

#20

Maboneng literally means 'Place of Light', and it's easy to see why when taking a stroll through this vibrant suburb.

