

The seal DEAL

BY NICK DALL



FAST
Know this
FACTS

- ▶ The Cape fur seal's range extends all the way from northern Namibia to Algoa Bay. The total population numbers about two million.
- ▶ An adult bull can grow up to 2.5m in length and weigh 350 kg, while cows average 1.5m and 60 kg. You will notice the difference on the dive.
- ▶ Cape fur seals feed on fish, squid, octopus and rays. They can dive to depths of more than 200m and hold their breath for more than seven minutes.
- ▶ The seals' main enemy is the great white shark. Fortunately, for them (and me), Partridge Point, where we dived, is apparently too shallow for great whites.

I DID
this

▶ *Diving with seals*

Nick Dall snorkelled with the staple diet of great white sharks, Cape fur seals, aka the 'dogs of the sea', near Simon's Town on the Cape Peninsula

'Three ... two ... one,' counts the skipper, and I plunge backwards off the side of the boat and into the waters of False Bay. It's early on a sunny but crisp morning and I'm kitted out in thick, cosy neoprene from top to toe, so the water doesn't feel particularly icy. I look down and am reassured by the sight of the seabed about 10m below me. I am the only snorkeller in the group, so I follow the scuba divers' bubbles. We swim in the general direction of a large exposed rock about 100m from the shore, which is covered in basking seals. Every five minutes or so, Tyrone the dive master checks to see that I'm doing okay.

GRACE AND POISE

I spy a pod of a dozen or so seals lazily floating on the surface and wonder whether I should back off a bit. Three seals make my decision for me and swim directly towards me, as if to say, 'Hello'. As they get closer and closer, I'm amazed by how much detail I can make out: from their huge brown puppy-dog eyes and long white whiskers, right down to the tiny bubbles that form on their impossibly sleek fur coats.

They move with a sort of mind-boggling nimbleness, especially considering how clumsy they are on land. When the urge takes them, the seals plummet towards the seabed at speeds of up to 16 km/h. When these creatures are underwater, they use their back flippers to steer, but otherwise their sole purpose seems to be chin scratching!

SUPPORTING CAST

The seals may be the main attraction, but the rocks are carpeted in gnarled black mussels, weird bulbous polyps and waving orange



YOU CAN
do it too

Ollava, Simon's Town

- ▶ For only R650, you can snorkel with the seals. This includes the boat ride and all equipment. Scuba diving the same site costs R850, but you'll need a qualification.
- ▶ To snorkel, you should be a strong swimmer. No kids under 10 are allowed.
- ▶ Weather conditions and tourist numbers both play a part in scheduling trips, so be sure to phone ahead. Ollava won't run the trip with fewer than three people.
- ▶ Only bring sunblock and a swimming costume. The guide will take some snaps with an underwater camera, so don't risk bringing yours.
- ▶ Contact Ollava (ollava.co.za) on 021 786 1261 or pay them a visit at 85 St George's Street, Simon's Town.

anemones. Crabs shelter between spiky urchins, and reef fish of all shapes and sizes dawdle aimlessly, seemingly unfazed by the seals' presence. There's a show above the water too, and I pause for a moment to catch my breath and enjoy it – cobalt skies and a looming mountain with striking bands of orange rock. Further afield I can make out Cape Point, Hangklip and Devil's Peak in the distance.

'Whoa!' a zooming swirl and a fleeting black shadow break my reverie. 'What was that?' I look underwater again and catch the outline of a seal torpedoing into the depths. It passed so close to my chest that I can feel its wake on my skin. As the adrenalin subsides, I realise how extremely lucky I am to have had this experience, and a huge smile washes across my face.

I'm still grinning about 10 minutes later when the boat pulls up alongside me to signal the end of the dive. I clamber aboard and take my fins, mask and weight belt off. Tyrone hands me a Bar One, and any thought of shivering is rapidly forgotten. Once everyone is back on board and munching on a chocolate, we speed back to Simon's Town.

ADDED BONUS

Which reminds me: the journey there and back, on a zippy semi-rigid boat, is an attraction in itself. I put my feet in the 'stirrups' on the floor and lean back and enjoy the ride. We bounce along the surface, past Miller's Point (a great spot to dive with docile cow sharks, apparently), Froggy Pond and the world-famous penguin colony at Boulders Beach before taking a gentle arc around the shipwrecks in the bay and into the placid waters of Simon's Town harbour. I really can't think of much better ways to spend a morning. Now I just have to decide where I'll go for lunch... It's a tough life. ✪