



SO, ABOUT THAT BOILED EGG QUESTION...

(AS PONDERED ON OUR COVER)

The answer is: on a fishing boat in Kalk Bay, Cape Town. Yup, a fishing boat. Eggs that spell danger is just one of many traditions and beliefs held by members of the tightknit, generations-old community of Kalk Bay fishermen who make a living scouring the sea, as **Nick Dall** discovers



It's 4am on a cold September morning and my fingers fumble as I tighten the straps on my oilskin. Bearded men in loose-knit jerseys huddle at the tables in front of Kalky's fish-and-chip shop, smoking and joking in the harsh fluorescent light.

I am obviously no regular, and Peter Swart, a Kalk Bay fisherman who's been in the game for over four decades, comes over to introduce himself. He has agreed to take me and my father-in-law, Patrick Delbridge, out on his boat the *Freda*. 'I hope you haven't got any hard-boiled eggs in there,' he says, pointing at my day pack. 'The wind will pick up if there's a boiled egg on the boat...' Such eggs, it seems, bring contrary winds and dangerous stormy conditions – which of course would end the day's fishing. I haven't got any with me, luckily, but I am a bit self-conscious about my bulging brand-name bag. Most of the fishermen seem to carry their oilskins, all of their tackle and their lunch in decommissioned supermarket shopping baskets, which have superseded the wicker baskets of yore.

'*Môre* Boeta Sollie,' chime the crew, when the sun finally shows its face on the horizon at 6.19am. Greeting the sun is one tradition I can completely understand: our boat has been chugging towards Cape Point for an hour-and-a-half, and it's a massive relief to finally feel some warmth on my skin.

Shortly after 7am we reach the fishing grounds and the boat instantly comes to life. Another boat has beaten us to it, and their frenzied activity makes it clear that the yellowtail are running. Patrick, who has been fishing since he was 10, shows me how to bait a hook (cut a sardine in half and thread the hook through it twice) before hurrying back to his own spot. Where people sit is determined by how long they've been fishing on the boat. The spots at the stern (the back of the boat) are best, as they're much closer to the water which makes it easier to get the fish aboard and they're also better for trolling – dragging rubber lures (known as 'feathers' in Kalk Bay) behind the boat. Needless to say, I'm nowhere near the back. Each fisherman sits on a wooden bench with his feet in a compartment known as a *laaitjie*. The fishing is all done with hand lines, and this *laaitjie* is where the looped line gathers when a fish is pulled in. In front of him there's another *laaitjie* for his fish.

'How do I know when I've got a bite?' I ask, naively.

'You'll know,' they laugh.



SEAGULLS INCOMING

From top: Brightly coloured boats line Kalk Bay harbour after a long day's fishing; a moment of calm on Peter Swart's boat. Note the wooden bait boards screwed into the boat's gunnels and the *laaitjie* in front of fisherman Boggle Fortune

DOCKING STATION

Previous page: The first local fishermen, and the whalers before them, dragged their boats on to the beach at the end of every day. After petitions from the Kalk Bay community, a harbour was eventually built between 1913 and 1919



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With that, my arms are nearly yanked out of their sockets and my line starts scything into the ink-blue depths. I'm glad I'm wearing the *vingerlappies* (thimble-like contraptions made from the inner tubes of tyres) Patrick gave me. Hand-line fishing is a lot more rudimentary and visceral than using a rod but it's also much quicker and more efficient. Within 15 seconds or so I have dragged the fish aboard, taken the hook out and dropped my catch, still writhing, into the *laaitjie* in front of me. Over the next hour or so the other, more experienced, guys nab as many as ten each, but I am happy with my haul of four shimmering yellowtail – each nearly as long as my arm.

And then, just as quickly, the fish go off the boil. I look up at Cape Point looming above us and I can see why it was called the Cape of Storms. A precipitous cliff amidst a backdrop of bruised, malevolent clouds. I just make out a trail of ant-sized tourists scuttling along the



HAVE BOAT, WILL FISH

The rands and cents of the trade

How much a fisherman earns depends on how much he catches, so both the skipper's ability to find fish and the fishermen's ability to land them are seriously incentivised. After deductions have been made for the cost of bait, the skipper of the boat claims 'boat share' from each of the fishermen on his boat. At the moment 'boat share' is set at 50 per cent of the fisherman's earnings. Each fisherman gets to keep one 'fry' each – a fish for the pan that he doesn't have to pay boat share on.

The skipper covers all fuel, so he can be out of pocket if no-one catches anything, but on a good day he can do very well. Boats pay an annual harbour fee of about R1,000 which entitles them to moor at Kalk Bay, Hout Bay, Hermanus and Gansbaai. Fish are generally auctioned straight off the boat to *langgannas*, the hawkers who take the fish away from Kalk Bay (they used to use horse-drawn carts but nowadays you'll see their bakkies on Prince George Drive) or sell them at the harbour's market itself. Snoek, yellowtail and kob are sold individually, but bank fish are sold in bunches – depending on the size of the fish there may be two, three or even four hottentot on a bunch.

A big roman could be sold *koptel* – on its own.

famous landmark. To the north, an imposing spine of mountains culminates in the unmistakable silhouette of Devil's Peak. To the south, Antarctica, Australia and Argentina are the closest landmasses.

We start the long trek back to the harbour. I put my hat on my head and try to doze, but I'm soon woken by gleeful cackles on the boat's radio. A shoal of snoek – the fishermen's most lucrative catch – has turned up close by. For half an hour or so it's impossible not to catch snoek. They hit the 'snoek leads' (big heavy lures) hard and fight like hell. Their teeth are seriously sharp and dangerous, so the fishermen wedge the fish into their armpits before removing the hook and breaking the snoek's neck. An experienced fisherman can complete this whole process in seconds, but I can't even get the writhing muscular fish under my arm, let alone dispatch it. Snoek fishing is all about speed and strength. On a good day you can catch a hundred a man ('By the end of the day your arms are so *pap* you can barely lift the fish onto the harbour wall,' says Patrick), but there are also times when the wind blows and boats don't even leave the harbour for two weeks, so it all evens out in the long run.

As I struggle to land my sixth snoek in as many minutes, my line is taken by something far heavier, and I struggle to stay on the boat. And then, the line goes slack. When I pull up the severed head of a snoek, Peter explains what has happened: 'You pulled it up too slowly,' he chuckles. 'A seal must have got hold of it.'

By the time we eventually get back to the harbour I've caught more fish than I could ever have hoped for. But I haven't done a very good job of being a journalist. I've taken hardly any pictures and my questions have been practical ones about bait, and tackle and fish, not philosophical ones about freedom and tradition and the old days.

THE BLUE DAM

Like most Capetonians, I've always been fond of Kalk Bay. As a student, I used to drink there, and now, a decade later, I often take the kids for a pizza or ice cream. I always buy my sister's birthday present at the pottery shop next to the park and I like hiking in the mountains behind town because they're lower and gentler than Table Mountain proper. ➔

HAUL OF FAME
Crew on the *Amber D* can rely on the help of a mechanical winch to pull anchor. Most other boats aren't so lucky. (PS: that's not an egg sandwich in the fisherman's mouth; it's a hot cross bun)



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If I hadn't married into a Kalk Bay family this is probably where my appreciation of the place would have ended. Both my wife's parents grew up in Kalk Bay and my wife lived there as a kid. My father-in-law, Patrick, spent his school holidays working on his uncle's fishing boat and when he was old enough he became a skipper himself. Now he's got a regular job but his eyes still sparkle when he talks about fishing. I spent years listening to fisherman's tales about the time a great white shark jumped into their boat and the three-year period in the 1960s when huge bluefin tuna came all the way into Fish Hoek bay – and eventually I decided to see it for myself.

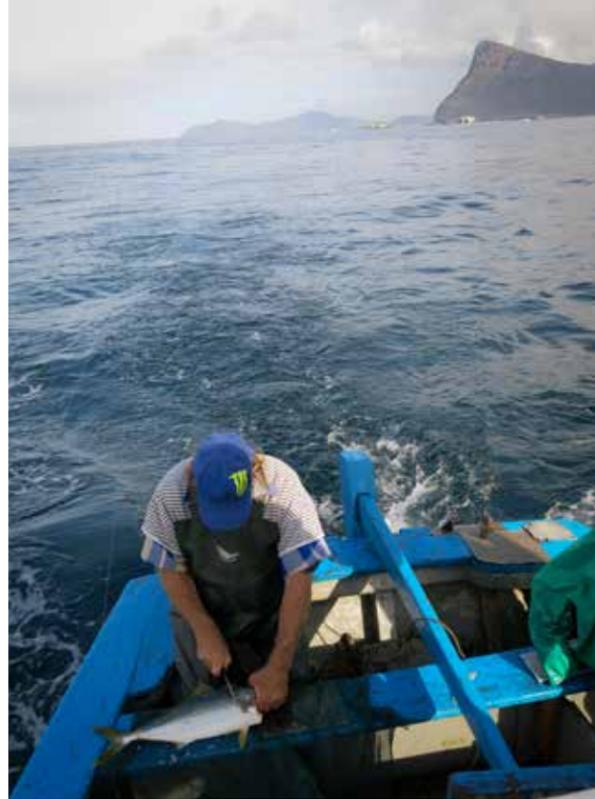
False Bay, or *Die Blou Dam* as it's known locally, is the Kalk Bay fisherman's harvest land; what's available depends on the seasons, the winds and the currents. A few weeks after my first trip I'm out at sea again, this time aboard the *Amber D*, without my father-in-law. We're going to target bank fish – smaller fish that live on the bay's reefs.

Although it seems like we're chugging aimlessly in the general direction of Seal Island, Robert Gillespie, the boat's skipper and a fisherman for 30 years, has plugged the coordinates of some of the best spots into his GPS. At one point we see the massive grey bulk of a Bryde's whale breaking the surface; a few minutes later we are joined by a shoal of dolphins. It's all pretty idyllic but we're barely a mile from the spot where – in 1922 – 14 people lost their lives when an afternoon fishing trip aboard the *Hamilton* turned sour. A strong southeaster came up, and skipper George Clarence chose to stay out because the kob were biting. Bad call.

We drop anchor as the sun creeps reluctantly above the Kogelberg. 'My grandfather told me about this spot,' explains Alfonso Laguma, a 20-something, fourth-generation fisherman. I'm still threading little slivers of chokka onto my hooks when the first fish is landed, a feisty silver hottentot the size of a side plate. 'Two fathoms,' mutters an old-timer without removing the cigarette from his lips. This means that the fish are biting about 3.5m above the sea bed, so I pull my line in accordingly. Every time I cast I either catch a fish or lose my bait. Every so often I catch two fish at a time. It's hard not to feel a bit guilty about the ever-growing pile in my *laaitjie*, but every fisherman I speak to explains there's no way hand-line fishing really dents the resource. Trawlers and trek nets are the real problem...

Every so often someone lands a red roman, the king of bank fish due to its larger size and hefty price tag. When one of the others moans about not catching any romans, Laguma points to his Liverpool FC scarf: 'To catch red you've got to wear red.'

Bank fishing is a far more relaxed affair, and I get the chance to ask some questions. 'My mommy didn't want me to go to sea but it's in my blood,' says Laguma. Most of the guys on the boat don't have much to say to me but Laguma is different. 'Catching fish is like picking up girls. Different bait works for different kinds of fish.' And that's about as philosophical as it gets. ➔



BAY OF PLENTY

Of names and phrases

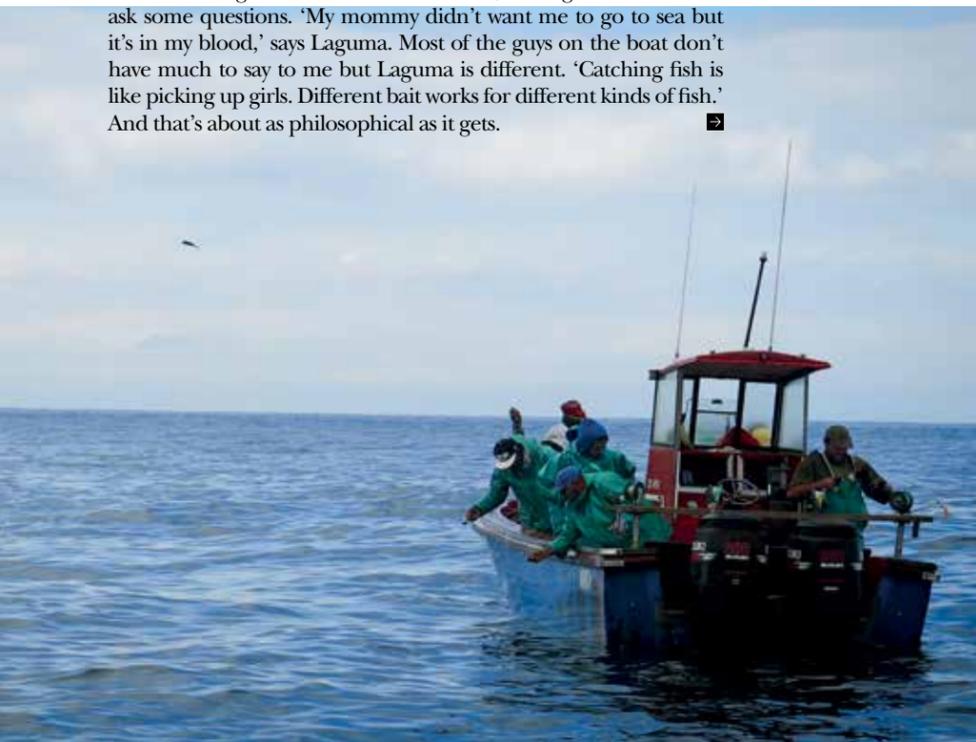
ALL YELLOW
From top: Peter Swart prepares his fry (a yellowtail) after a successful day's fishing at Cape Point; when the yellowtail are running each fisherman will have at least two lines out at all times. How they avoid a crow's nest (a tangle) is anyone's guess

In the 1800s, Kalk Bay was one of several whaling stations at the Cape. But by 1830 the whales had been hunted almost to extinction and the whalers turned to fishing and seal hunting. Some of the earliest fishermen were Filipino sailors whose ship had been wrecked at Cape Point, and ex-slaves from Batavia, Java and Malaysia. These people had fishing in their blood and names like de la Cruz, Fernandez, Menigo and Erispe are still common in Kalk Bay.

This heritage means that Kalk Bay fishermen still use Javanese and Malayan words. *Sarang* is a skipper; *buangbatu* is an anchor-stone; and a *koeteboelie* is a bully. If a skipper is short of a man, you'll hear the word '*panupangman*'. So, 'have you got *panupang*?' means 'have you got space for one more fisherman?'

A *mombakkie* is a mask. It's removed when you catch your first fish of the day, a moment called '*mombakkies afhaal*'. If you catch nothing, you're labelled a *mombakkie*.

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THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

Kobie Poggenpoel is 87, but he moves and talks like someone a lot younger. 'My grandfather was part of the whaling boom, back when the boats were powered by oars and sails and there was no harbour.' His dad was a fisherman too and although his mom tried to get him to work at the Post Office, there was only one way Kobie's story was going to end. 'I stopped fishing when I was 70,' he says, 'But every morning the first thing I do is look at the sea from my window.' His flat on Gordon Road, Kalk Bay, is one of 40 built by the council during WWII and has one of the best views in Cape Town.

'Kalk Bay's always been different because we coloured people owned our boats. In Hout Bay the boats are owned by the fish factories but here it's always been more of a family affair. There's plenty of difference in Kalk Bay – whites, coloureds, Catholics,



Muslims, Anglicans – but being part of the fishing community has kept us together through the tough times. We all used to play rugby on the beach you know... Even Doug Hopwood [one of the greatest Springboks of all time] played with us...'

Kobie was a fisherman for nearly 50 years. He started off fishing on others' boats, but eventually clubbed together with family members to buy a boat, and then another and another. He would still fish today if he could get on and off the vessels. 'These days,' he laughs, 'They put you in a life jacket and throw you into the harbour with three other guys. If you get to shore safely they give you a ticket that says you're a fisherman. Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous?'

'Once fishing is in your blood, it's there to stay,' he says a few weeks later when I phone him up. 'It was a hard life, but a good life. I raised six kids through my life at sea,' he pauses, 'And they all turned out okay.'

Still, only one is a fisherman. ■

Kalk Bay boats have always taken 'trippers' on board to help cover fuel costs. Phone Fadiel Savahl (+27 (0)74 861 2667) or Kalky's Fish 'n Chips (+27 (0)21 788 1726) to arrange a trip. It costs R350 per person.

SNOEK HOEK
Clockwise from above: The boats pull up next to the harbour wall and throw fish to the langgannas. Everyone's smiling when snoek are about; Kobie cuts an imposing figure at his front door; after a huge storm, the central jetty was restored in 1994

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GET GOING
DESTINATION: CAPE TOWN

British Airways flies to Cape Town from Jo'burg, Durban, Port Elizabeth and London. Visit ba.com.

VILLAGE PEOPLE

Kalk Bay's pleasures go well beyond fish. Besides established locals like Kalky's and Olympia Café, new places are always popping up. Here's where to go for sustenance (and shopping)

Between Artvark Gallery and the Kalk Bay Theatre is **Courtyard Café**. Expect sea views, adventurous salads and veggie delights like their caponata (a Sicilian brinjal, tomato and capers dish) served with lemony couscous or cauli rice. 48 Main Road; +27 (0)21 788 1691

Bob's Bagel Café roasts their own coffee beans and serves a mean New York or Montreal-style bagel. It opens onto a park with swings and seesaw to occupy little ones. 6 Rouxville Road; +27 (0)83 280 0012

Served from 6.30am, **Bootleggers'** red-eye R14 coffee has a loyal Cape Town following, not least in Kalk Bay. The salted-caramel-popcorn milkshake is a dream and they do everything from burgers to buttermilk flapjack breakfasts. 125 Main Road; +27 (0)21 788 1670

Try **Catacombes** boutique for one-off designs like a silk dress made by the owner from an Indian sari or a net dress with silk appliqué (one of just four available). 71 Main Road; +27 (0)21 788 8889

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