Getting The Point

Meet the people who’re out to show that there’s more to Cape Point than penguins and lighthouses.

Words Nick Doll
Photos Eric Nathan

Cape Point is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Africa but if you steer clear of the tourist traps you’ll discover that the peninsula’s rugged mountains and empty beaches haven’t changed much since Bartholomew Dias rocked up in 1488. Join Eric and me on a caffeine-fuelled mission to meet some of the Deep South’s most creative souls.

Bagels for breakfast

After an early start, we stop off in Kalk Bay to dust away the cobwebs. We duck up a side-street and head straight for the hidden gem that is Bob’s Bagel Café. It’s only a hundred metres from the main drag, but in Kalk Bay this is far enough. The brainchild of surf-cum-architect Robin Pollard, Bob’s serves up legit bagels and a potent house blend that is roasted on-site in Bob’s beloved Has Cemani. The man himself is not in today, so we chew the fat with a German expat who drives all the way to Kalk Bay for his daily fix. “There’s nowhere quite like it in Cape Town,” he says, munching on an egg and cream cheese bagel. “It’s the best coffee I’ve found in South Africa.”

We browse the adjoining Pottershop, which is owned by Bob’s wife. It’s a wonderful airy space that showcases the work of local potters and also serves as a pottery supply store. We marvel at the chunky, Maine ‘Kitchen scales’ that take Linda Joubert three months to create and the diaphanous porcelain tealights that...
are Lisa Fierer’s signature.

It’s not even 9 o’clock and Cape Town’s cutest ‘hood is still blissfully empty, so we decide to brave Bootleggers on Main Road. With seven branches in Cape Town, there’s no denying that Bootleggers is a brand on the rise. But the great sea views, striking black and white decor and super-friendly staff mean that I’m still more than happy to pop-in for a mid-week machiato.

A modern-day Strandloper

Suitably buzzing, we waddle along the coast before turning up Red Hill, a steep, winding gem of a road with glistening views of False Bay. Once we’re on the planter’s patio in at Good Hope Gardens Nursery which was founded by Gail Gray over 30 years ago, “back when fynbos wasn’t fashionable.” We find Gail and her daughter-in-law Roushanna starting at a once handsome azalea shrub that has been destroyed by a porcupine overnight.

Roushanna invites us into rustic kitchen cabin which is the headquarters of her business, Veld and Sea. “There are 800 species of flowers in our oceans,” she bubbles, “And only one of them is poisonous. There’s a whole world of fynbos and ingredients that South Africans know absolutely nothing about...For a long time I was the same,” she says, “I’ve always been a foodie, but it was only when I moved out here and started a tea garden that I started to learn about wild fynbos. The more I immersed myself in this world, the more obsessed I became.” Gradually the tea garden became less about eating and more about teaching and eventually Roushanna reached a point where she decided to close it down entirely and open a school instead.

The courses on offer vary with the seasons. “In summer we do coastal foraging which is basically an excuse for adults to play in the rock pools,” she giggles. “At the end of the day we all come back here and make a banquet out of the stuff we’ve gathered...Jelp and avocado, haloumi, horseradish cream...”

The rough seas in winter tear most of the help from the rocks, so this is when Roushanna focuses on mushroom and fynbos foraging. The mushroom courses are led by someone else and they don’t take place on Cape Point, but the fynbos foraging happens in and around the nursery. After Eric has taken a few pics of Roushanna posing with a jar full of acacia seeds which can be used to make a coffee-like beverage which tastes “kind of like broth”, we head outside for an impromptu school lesson.

“It’s the absolute worst time of the year for this,” says Roushanna, “The hot weather robs all the fragrance and flavour out of the plants.” That being said, we’re both amazed by the intoxicating scent of peppermint pelargonium and the sweet tangy flavour of wild garlic flowers. And I’m still getting my around the idea that spiky little leaves “taste great in an omelette.”

Waves of wood

Also on the grounds of the nursery, also in a tumbleweed shed, we find another interesting character. Patrick Burnett is now one of the finest candle-making artisans. Patrick Burnett is now one of the finest candle-makers of wooden surfboards, but it wasn’t always that way. “My first board was a tragedy. When I was glossing down the rails I realised that the three clamps I’d picked up at my local Mica weren’t going to be enough,” he remembers with a chuckle, “I rushed inside and unscrewed the lens from every shoe I could find. The accommodations got all gummed up and had to be thrown away, but I managed to stick those rails down.”

All Patrick had back then was a dream that surfboards could be made in a more environmentally-friendly way. He’d never even seen a wooden surfboard, he had no woodworking experience and he owned no power tools. That first board was no oil painting, but he promised himself he would try surfing at least once.

“I found myself caught in the rip and this
were came and it was a good wave so I just paddled for it. I caught it and I got to my feet and I made the drop and I cruised all the way down the line. I can’t describe the satisfaction. I went home from that surf and started planning my next board.”

A hell of a lot of work goes into transforming a pile of planks into a wooden surfboard. Patrick handpicks the raw timber, before milling it into wafer thin planks which form the shell of the board. The board gets its strength from a plywood frame which looks a lot like the skeleton of a fish. In the early days Patrick used to hand-cut every piece of the frame, but nowadays he gets them CNC cut using one of the templates he has saved on his computer.

The sides of the board – the rails – have to be built up from anywhere between five and ten individual strips of wood. The board is then shaped, using simple tools and a lot of painstaking attention to detail. The final step in the process is coating the board with plant-based epoxy.

“If you look at that finished surfboard you see the grain and you see the polish and it looks beautiful,” says Patrick. “But what’s also involved there is several hours of sanding off dried glue and another few hours of sanding. What most people would consider really menial tasks. And it’s like that for any craft. If you’re not patient and you constantly want to get to the next step then you’re gonna blow.”

If this all makes the hair on the back of your neck stand on end, you’ll be asked to know that Patrick runs courses where blisters like you and me can build their own bespoke boards in one (very busy) week. He even runs courses in Cape St Francis and Durban…

**Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme**

Our last stop is the sleepy Atlantic Ocean hideout of Scarborough… except, it doesn’t seem to be that sleepy anymore. The Village Hub touts itself as “an innovative new place for community to gather, to chill out and watch the sunset, to buy groceries, to sit back and enjoy a fine cup of coffee, a craft beer, a delicious meal, some good local music,” and for once the words really do translate into reality.

We spend most of our time at Foragers, the Hub’s downstairs deli and café which stocks everything from locally-grown veggies and fresh-caught fish to piping hot pastries and rotisserie chickens. Over a cup of his bold and brooding Black Diamond roast we chat to Ivan Greenhalgh: “We’ve only been roasting for two months,” says Ivan. “But if you guys in Ethiopia can do it on the side of the road with a frying pan then I’m hopeful that I can come right with my Bullet R1. The idea is to ensure truly custom-made coffee… Once I’ve understood what someone likes I can hook the machine up to my iPad and save the profile as Dave’s profile or Janine’s profile, and then every time they come in I can roast to order.”

“At the moment we buy our coffee from Ulter Coffee Works and we get through about 10kg every week,” he passes. “Ulter’s great, but ultimately we’d like to get to the point where we serve our own coffee… Eventually we want to have a different brew for every day of the week, but for now I’m just learning what this baby can do…”

We stay a while (it’s that kind of place) chatting to Ivan about his other life as the founder of the Rim of Africa Trail, a pioneering 650-kilometre through-hike from the Cederberg to the Oosteniqua Mountains. “The mountains have taught me most of what I know,” he says. “But right now I feel like I’ve got a lot to learn from these humble coffee bears.”

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