

Paddling with penguins

Its abundance of natural beauty and offering of prized vintages aside, Cape Town has another star attraction—colonies of adorable African penguins.

Text **Lucy Corne**

It's not unusual for someone to visit South Africa with plans to indulge in some wildlife watching. The country's superb national parks are stellar safari spots, with sightings of lion, cheetah, giraffe, elephant, hippo—and more—very likely. But would it surprise you to hear that you can also see penguins in South Africa? And that you barely need to leave the city to do so?

The town's tiny celebs

Simon's Town is Cape Town's farthest-flung suburb, sitting 40 km south of the city centre and just 25 km from the oft-visited Cape of Good Hope. It's a quaint seaside town, home to photogenic Victorian facades, around 7,500 people, a healthy dose of holidaymakers and a 2,000-strong colony of African penguins.

The diminutive penguins—they measure a maximum of about 60 cm—used to be known as Jackass Penguins for their donkey-like call but the name African penguin was adopted to avoid confusion with a similar braying penguin in South America. Today, the African penguin colony at Foxy Beach is one of Cape Town's main tourist attractions.

Locals and overseas visitors flock to the beach's boardwalks to watch these cute, comedic birds nest, roost and waddle into the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

Those wanting to photograph largish groups of penguins should make a beeline for Foxy Beach, where the birds hang out en masse. But if you yearn to get a little closer, perhaps Simon's Town's biggest draw is the opportunity to paddle with penguins, not just view them from the network of raised platforms. The verb 'paddle', of course, has two meanings, and in this picturesque corner of the Cape, both definitions are available to the traveller.

▲ The African penguin is the only species of penguin found in Africa. These black-footed birds, classified as endangered, are found living in colonies on the south-western coast of Namibia and South Africa.

Bare feet, shallow water

The admission ticket you buy at Foxy Beach—one of a number of sites within the Table Mountain National Park, which stretches from the mountain's flat top to the cliffs of Cape Point—also allows entrance to the delightfully sheltered Boulders Beach, a short stroll south. Here, the penguins hang out in smaller numbers and sometimes you'll find just one or two. However, what Boulders lacks in penguin quantity, it more than compensates for when it comes to quality encounters. Here,

there are no barriers between you and the birds and you could feasibly find yourself sharing your patch of sand or rock with a basking penguin or two.

It is here that you can paddle with penguins, wading in the calm, turquoise waters while these 'torpedoes in tuxedos' zoom beneath the surface, exhibiting a grace that they never quite manage to muster on land. Remember though, that while the penguins look cute and cuddly, their beaks are not so endearing and

despite their serenity around people, these are wild animals. Get those photos of you posing near the penguins, but keep your distance and don't ever try to touch them.

Kayaking birders

One of the most wonderful things about Cape Town is that however many times you visit or however long you stay, there are still so many activities available. Whether you're a first-time penguin seeker or an old pro, the second paddling option is bound to delight. The paddle in question is of the oar-related variety; the vessel is a two-person kayak.

Two-hour trips to peek at the birds from the ocean, rather than the beach, leave every morning from Simon's Town's adorable harbour. Well, almost every morning—when Cape Town's notorious wind blows a touch too much, excursions are cancelled, though it's rare for wannabe kayakers to miss out if they have a few days to play with. The 3-km route heads straight out into what can be quite choppy

◀ **Left: A little boy takes a break from shovelling sand and observes penguins at Boulders Beach in Simon's Town.**
Below: A kayaking excursion allows visitors the chance to see penguins, seals, seabirds and sometimes even whales, up close.

©Imagebroker / Alamy / IndiaPicture



©Gallo Images / Alamy / IndiaPicture



©Peter Timmus / Alamy / IndiaPicture

water, first skirting Simon's Town's naval harbour—not quite as cute as its smaller, yacht-filled neighbour. There's time to take in the splendour of False Bay and the mountains that back Cape Peninsula's towns as you attempt to follow Derek, a guide who likes to joke with his clients. He makes kayaking seem simple in the way that the occasional seal that passes by makes swimming seem easy, and if the water gets particularly choppy, mimicking his movements can be something of a challenge.

But it's a welcome challenge and one with worthy rewards, such as a flock of Black Oystercatchers resting on a rock half way between the launch site and the first very welcome stop. The stop in question is Seaforth Beach, a cove just south of town, and it is there that many paddlers get their first glimpse of penguins. Small groups totter along the rocks, looking

▲ **Above: A ride in a metro rail train that passes through Fish Hoek en route to Simon's Town makes for a scenic journey along the coast.**
Right: Bertha's is a Simon's Town institution. The famous restaurant serves authentic South African fare while also offering guests gorgeous views of the yacht harbour and False Bay.

Seeing the birds—penguins and the rest—from the ocean is a serene experience that adds an extra sprinkle of wonder to this already special excursion.



©Suretha Rous / Alamy / IndiaPicture



dinodia photos

▲ Picturesque Simon's Town rises from near the edge of False Bay and keeps progressing upwards. A pit-stop at this scenic Cape Town suburb makes for a relaxing break for the whole family.

Five other wildlife encounters in Cape Town

Seals: Spot these smelly sea dwellers on a boat trip from Simon's Town or Hout Bay, or get closer with a snorkelling trip.

Dassies: They look like fluffy rodents, but the dassie, or rock hyrax, is actually a distant relative of the elephant. Look out for them atop Table Mountain.

Whales: From June to November, southern right whales calve in False Bay. Spot them on a boat trip from Simon's Town.

Sharks: June to August are the best for spotting great white sharks feeding off False Bay's Seal Island, though they might be glimpsed at year-round. Daredevils could try shark-cage diving further along the Western Cape coast.

Baboons: Cape Point, part of the Table Mountain National Park, is infamous for its marauding baboons. Keep your windows closed while driving and be vigilant when picnicking—they're best viewed from afar!

as cumbersome on land as the kayakers who've come to see them do in water. Of course, once the paddlers dock and the penguins launch themselves in, the roles are reversed as the birds cut through the waves at speeds of up to 25 km per hour.

The second stretch sees participants paddling past Foxy Beach's colony and the colony of visitors peeking at them from land. Before turning back and hoping for a convenient current to make the return journey an easier one, there's time to paddle past Boulders Beach, with sightings of cormorants and cranes along the way. Seeing the birds—penguins and the rest—from the ocean is a serene experience that adds an extra sprinkle of wonder to this already special excursion.

Whether you opt for the easy paddle or the more challenging one, the chance to get close to penguins in a country better known for big cats and enormous land mammals is one that will have you planning your return trip before your feet have even had a chance to dry.

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways has daily direct flights to Doha from Mumbai, Delhi and Kochi. From Doha, you can catch a connecting flight to Cape Town using our codeshare partner Qatar Airways.

Accommodation

Simon's Town has a place to stay for every budget. Boulders Beach Lodge (www.bouldersbeachlodge.com) is the closest to the penguins, though that means it is close enough to hear—and smell—them!

Activities

A ticket for Foxy and Boulders beaches is ZAR45 (ZAR20 for children). The beaches are open daily. Kayak Cape Town (www.kayakcapetown.co.za) runs the excellent two-hour kayaking trips (ZAR250), leaving Simon's Town harbour daily at 9.30am.

For more information:

Log on to www.capetown.travel