

# EXPLORING THE CAPE'S WILD COAST

Beyond Cape Town's vineyards lies a wild shoreline  
of flamingos, fishermen, and foraged feasts

By Sophie Baker

Most visitors land in Cape Town and make a beeline for Table Mountain. But just ninety minutes north lies another world, and not the manicured winelands many expect. Instead comes South Africa's West Coast: a sweep of fishing villages where wooden boats still drag across the sand, tidal pans are stained pink with flamingos, and life is dictated by tides and swell. For decades, this stretch of Atlantic shore remained a local secret where Capetonians came to fish, braai, and escape the crowds. Today, travellers are following suit and the West Coast is quietly emerging as one of the country's most beguiling regions; not for big resorts or tasting rooms, but for wilderness, culture, and food. The best way to experience it is from inside the West Coast National Park. At the edge of a shimmering turquoise lagoon sits the hamlet of Churchhaven, little more than a scatter of whitewashed cottages, all solar powered, and just a few barefoot steps from the water. Slipway Cottage is the most atmospheric of them all. With four bedrooms, three bathrooms and space for up to eleven, it is designed as a communal beach house: shuttered windows, cool stone floors, an open-plan kitchen that spills into a firelit lounge, a sheltered courtyard for windy days, and a timber deck facing the lagoon. From that deck, it is a few strides to a pale sand beach that is almost always empty. Guests spend their first day here swimming in the warm, shallow lagoon, taking out kayaks or paddle boards, napping with the doors open, cooking together as the sun drops, and unwinding until they've reached a suitably slow pace of life. It feels, as many visitors will attest, like having an entire bay to yourself.

A morning walk with botanist Rupert Koopman shines a light on another of the park's wonders: it's part of the world's smallest yet richest floral kingdom. More than 9,000 species thrive here, around 70 per cent of them found nowhere else on earth. Spring may bring the famous carpets of wildflowers, but even outside the bloom season the park is alive with bulbs, herbs, and hardy shrubs that have adapted to wind, fire, and salt for millennia. Later, there is time to float in the lagoon, read as the sun goes down, or meander along the shoreline, watching oystercatchers probing the tide line and flamingos feeding.

When the urge to roam returns, it's an hour's drive north to Paternoster, a working fishing village where whitewashed cottages and Mykonos-blue shutters lean toward the sea, and wooden fishing boats rest on the sand. Despite its humble roots, a handful of small restaurants on these shores are quietly redefining coastal food. Wolfgang put the village on the world stage when it was named Best Restaurant in the World at the World Restaurant Awards 2019, and The World's 50 Best 2021's Best Restaurant in Africa. Chef Kobus van der Merwe dishes up a seven-course tasting menu built on foraged and intertidal ingredients, like seaweed crisps dusted with dune herbs, wild sage mussels, and fish cured in kelp brine, served to just twenty guests a night.

Across the dunes, Leeto at Strandloper Ocean Boutique Hotel refines West Coast flavours into clean, modern plates: roasted

kabeljou with coastal greens, or slow-cooked kudu beneath raked ceilings and soft light. And at The Noisy Oyster, hidden behind a wooden gate lit with hanging lanterns, dinner feels like joining a whimsical garden party. Chalkboard menus change daily and usually have something unexpected, like spiced calamari with orange aioli, and food is served under strings of fairy lights and offbeat decor.

Yet, despite the multitude of restaurants from humble fish and chips to fine dining menus, the most authentic meal you'll have here might be one you cook yourself. Through Abalobi, a local app that connects travellers directly with small-scale fishermen, you can order snoek, kreef, or mussels straight off the boats and know exactly where they're sourced from. Eaten with your fingers and fire-warm bread – and paired with a lagoon sunset – it's as quintessentially West Coast as it comes. On your return to Cape Town, don't rush the drive. Instead, wind your way home inland through pale fields and windmills for a first stop at Darling, a town whose name perfectly suits its personality. It's a place of small theatres, artist studios, and the unmistakable sound of laughter spilling from Evita se Perron, the iconic cafe and cabaret set in a restored railway station. Just outside town, the family-run Groot Post offers drives through farmland. Those with keen eyes may spot giraffe and quagga, a once-extinct zebra now reintroduced here. Picnics beneath the oaks come with homemade cheese, olives, and preserves from the farm kitchen.



#### WHERE TO GO

The West Coast National Park is the region's heart: 27,000 hectares of fynbos, salt pans, and the lagoon that gives this coastline its Caribbean-blue glow. Base yourself inside the park at Churchhaven for direct access to swimming coves and walking trails.

Postberg, a section of the park that opens during wildflower season from August to September, turns into a floral amphitheatre, with carpets of blooms and regular antelope sightings.

Further north, Cape Columbine Nature Reserve offers walking trails and Atlantic viewpoints near Paternoster, while the fishing harbours of St Helena Bay and Velddrif give a glimpse of the region's working life.

#### WHAT TO DO

Join a San heritage walk at !Khwa ttu to learn traditional foraging and tracking skills, and visit its small museum to hear recorded San languages and stories.

Explore the harbour towns of St Helena Bay and Velddrif, where fishermen still mend nets on the quay and salt pans shimmer pink at dusk.

In Darling, spend an afternoon browsing antiques or watching a cabaret at Evita se Perron. Nature lovers can book guided wildflower or birdwatching walks with botanist Rupert Koopman, or kayak the still waters of the lagoon at sunrise.





## cape town

The final stop lies on a ridge above the Atlantic at !Khwat tu, a San heritage centre and nature reserve near Yzerfontein. The San are southern Africa's first people, hunter-gatherers whose history stretches back tens of thousands of years. Unlike a museum, !Khwat tu is alive and evolving. The project was founded more than two decades ago as a partnership between San communities across southern Africa and a Swiss anthropologist, with the aim of protecting knowledge that was vanishing as traditional ways of life faded. Every part of it, from the architecture to the daily tours, is designed and led by San people themselves.

Visitors join San-guided walks through the surrounding fynbos, learning how to interpret animal tracks, recognise edible and medicinal plants, and understand how the land sustained its earliest inhabitants. Inside the visitor centre, interactive exhibits showcase San languages and oral histories, while young trainees from across southern Africa learn guiding and hospitality skills.

At the restaurant, meals draw on the surrounding Strandveld: dune spinach, veld herbs, and slow-roasted venison served as the Atlantic air drifts through the windows.

As you roll back into the shadow of Table Mountain, the West Coast settles under your skin long after the lagoon is far behind the rear-view mirror. You already know you'll return, not for new memories, but for familiar ones: the pink salt pans, the smell of rain on fynbos, and the feeling of being completely at ease.

### WHERE TO EAT

From Michelin-worthy tasting menus to open-fire seafood feasts, the West Coast offers real 'soul food'. Wolfgat's foraged, ocean-driven cuisine remains a must, while Leeto and Die Gaaitjie capture the essence of coastal dining with simplicity and soul. The Noisy Oyster is all soft lights and generous personality, serving playful, produce-driven dishes in a courtyard that fills with conversation on warm evenings. For something communal and utterly local, The Strandloper Seafood Restaurant in Langbaan serves crayfish, mussels, and sneek over driftwood fires in an all-day beachfront banquet. And for a personal flavour of the coast, order fresh fish through the Abalobi app and braai it under the stars.

### WHERE TO STAY

Slipway Cottage in Churchhaven is the standout choice: an off-grid, solar-powered beach house within the West Coast National Park, with four bedrooms, generous living spaces and a deck that leads almost directly onto the sand, making it ideal for families or groups of friends looking to slow down in comfort. The Oystercatcher's Haven in Paternoster provides an intimate, sea-facing alternative with easy access to the village's restaurants. For travellers drawn to simpler stays, Sea Shack at Cape Columbine offers colourful, low-impact cabins scattered along the rocks.