

## **Rory Bremner's South Africa: A Lasting impression**

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Rory Bremner joins some famous cricketing friends on a long-awaited return to South Africa and discovers a country buoyed by a new optimism.

I was introduced to Cape Town by the cricketer Allan Lamb, which is rather like being introduced to ski-jumping by Eddie the Eagle: you know it'll be fun, but you also know things won't necessarily go to plan. Once, when Lamby invited me on a cricket tour to Grenada, I expressed a fear that I'd end up the wrong side of the Atlantic, in Granada. "Why do people say that?" he complained. "I've got a good mind to send you all there and see how you like it in France." Fifteen years on, I'm pleased to report, our friendship, and my love of Cape Town, remain as strong as ever.

I first arrived in the heady aftermath of South Africa's victory in the 1995 Rugby World Cup. The nation was buzzing with excitement and optimism. It seemed like a new dawn, something I witnessed many times as the sky lightened above the open-air courtyard of Hemingway's nightclub, in an old colonial building in the city centre. It closed long ago, amid tales of drug-dealing and a shooting – a metaphor for loss of innocence and for the fear of crime that remains a worry for tourists thinking of coming here.

Having spent every New Year's Eve here for six years around the millennium, I hadn't been back since 2003 and my return this winter reminded me how much I'd missed it. From the moment I saw the magnificent spectacle of Table Mountain, as the plane's engines eased back after the long overnight flight, I wondered why I'd left it so long. There's a new optimism around. The football World Cup arrives here this summer, but even the welcome posters at the airport are not without irony. "South Africa's Gift to the World", boasts one: "Robben Island". It goes on: "Symbol of freedom and democracy". I doubt very much whether Nelson Mandela, who spent some 30 years enjoying its charming, if cramped, hospitality, would see it that way. But that's another story, and anyway, Clint Eastwood has already filmed it.

So what's so special about Cape Town? Well, it has it all. So much so that you could spend three different holidays here in the space of 10 days; something which The Last Word hotel chain now makes possible, with boutique (Lamby calls them "bow-tique") private hotels in four different locations around the Cape Peninsula.

There are the affluent southern suburbs of Bishopscourt and Constantia; the city itself, with its historic buildings, waterfront and docks; and Camps Bay, which, with its neighbor Clifton, hugs the coast with its beach-houses, white sands, palm trees and views back up to the Twelve Apostles, a majestic sweep of mountains retreating down the coastline to Hout Bay.

And I haven't even mentioned the wine lands of Spier, Stellenbosch and Franschhoek, just an hour's drive away. I spent one baking hot morning sampling the produce at L'Ormarins, the wine estate owned by the renowned Johann Rupert. But since my companions included Allan Lamb and Ian Botham, my

memory of the day is a little hazy. They sampled wine like there was no tomorrow, which, for them at least, there probably wasn't. Luckily, others were paying more attention.

To visit the first of the Last Word "retreats" (as the company calls them), we stayed at the Constantia, whose unpromising gated entrance next to Peddlars On The Bend, a popular restaurant, slides open to disclose a real little oasis, complete with private plunge-pools, landscaped garden and (how civilised is this?) a complimentary bar for residents. It's quite a find, with the atmosphere – as in the Last Word's other retreats in Bishopscourt and Kommetjie – very much that of a private family house. The place has a calm about it and the staff are unobtrusive to the point of invisibility, which is fine so long as there isn't a problem. My own struggle with a non-functioning switchboard was put down to an engineer erasing its memory the week before.

As there was much else to compensate, I'll return the compliment and erase mine. Being small, and lacking the now obligatory spa and leisure centre, the Constantia is maybe a base from which to explore, rather than a destination in itself, but none the worse for that.

The pace is slower, but there's a lot to enjoy this side of the mountain, where high shrubbery and security fencing conceal the large houses and immaculate gardens of Cape Town's über-wealthy. Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens are nearby, and you're perfectly placed to visit the vineyards of Steenberg, Buitenverwachting and Uitsig (whose restaurant, La Colombe, is rated one of the best in Africa).

Not far away are the resorts of Fish Hoek and Kalk Bay, dotted with antique and craft shops and little cafés selling homemade ice cream, and, nestling in the Silvermine valley, the golf club at Clovelly, one of the most blissful little courses you could imagine. Further south, at Boulders Beach, the penguins gather in their hundreds.

Restored by the scenery, the wine and the food, you're ready for Cape Town itself. The view as you drive in is magnificent: a sweep of coastline and the mighty docks far down to your right as you see the tall buildings in the city's heart dwarfed against the backdrop of Table Mountain. The old docks have been reinvented as the Waterfront, where museums and hotels such as the newly opened Taj vie with acres of new malls – this is the place to come for serious shopping. If it's diamonds you're after, you can avoid the high-street prices by making an appointment at the Metropolitan Centre, Coen Steytler Avenue.

Alongside the trendy restaurants and bars of Kloof Street, Cape Town has a vibrant fashion and media scene. There's also the old historic centre to explore, its colonial buildings with wooden balconies reminiscent of those in the southern United States.

Heading out over Kloof Nek, skirting Signal Hill and the Lion's Head, or along the coast past Green Point – site of the new football stadium – you reach the other side of Cape Town: the beaches of Camps Bay and Clifton. The sand is clean and hot, but the water freezing cold – we've reached the Atlantic coast here, with nothing much between us and Argentina. The atmosphere is laid-back, the (still pricey) beachside bars and restaurants packed, the only drawback being the slow crawl of cars along the narrow

coast road. If its luxury you're after, try Ellerman House, a beautiful and classically stylish hotel that also serves to house part of the magnificent collection of South African art amassed by its owner, Paul Harris.

If wine, scenery and beaches are too tame for you, you could always head out to Gansbaai, two or three hours up the coast beyond Hermanus, where the big thing (indeed the only thing) is shark-watching. Standing five or six abreast in a cage resembling a window-cleaner's gantry dangled over the side of a boat, you wait for the great whites to come for the bait (you?), before ducking underwater to watch them swoop past, sometimes less than a couple of feet away (though it's hard to judge distances with your eyes closed).

It's an adrenalin rush, for sure, but most people survive – including, judging from the operator's picture gallery, Prince Harry, King Abdulla and Brad Pitt, who probably sees more frightening things at home.

But there's another Cape Town, too. The one you glimpse as you fly in and may not see again until you fly out: the sprawling expanse of shanty towns, secure compounds and squatter townships where the impoverished underclass live; a shocking reminder of that other, segregated South Africa – troubled, marginalised, crime-ridden and poor – that in part inspired Neill Blomkamp's film, District Nine. The existence of such poverty and hardship so close to such wealth and privilege is something that should trouble any conscience.

So what do you do? Boycott the country until conditions improve; or continue to visit, trusting that the government will use the prosperity from tourism to improve the lives of the people it represents? I still believe in the latter, a view reinforced by my own experience of working with the Portobello Theatre Company, a group formed largely from the townships and which performed Carmen and The Mysteries, first in Cape Town and then all over the world. Each company member supported almost 40 dependants back home.

Optimism alone will not help South Africa's problems. It will take money and commitment on the part of its government. World opinion must keep up the pressure to ensure that the wealth generated by tourism finds its way to the places tourists don't see. The places we do see make Cape Town one of the most beautiful and exciting cities on earth. And these days they even throw in a free Nelson Mandela.

Rory Bremner travelled with Africa Travel (0845 450 1532; [www.africatravel.co.uk](http://www.africatravel.co.uk)), which specialises in arranging tailor-made travel to southern and east Africa. A sample trip to Cape Town, staying five nights at the Constantia, with breakfast, costs from £1,695 per person, including return flight with Virgin Atlantic, hire car and departure taxes.