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South Africa whale-watching: dazzled on the Western Cape

South Africa's De Hoop Nature Reserve offers the best land-based whale-watching in the world, but whales are just a small part of what it has to offer, says Sandra MacGregor.



Image 1 of 4

This stretch of coast claims to have the world's best land-based whale-watching Photo: ALAMY

By **Sandra MacGregor** 1:01PM GMT 20 Dec 2010

Comment

You've come at the perfect time," says the photographer, snapping another picture, "there's a lot of frisky business going on down there." There is indeed. As we crest the final dune and reach the coastline, we come upon a jaw-dropping spectacle: no fewer than a dozen southern right whales at various stages of seduction.

De Hoop, Western Cape: getting there, restaurants and activities

Some whales have begun to swim off in couples; while still-unattached, eager males continue to leap, roll and strike the ocean surface with their tails in a valiant effort to attract a mate. Meanwhile, the females float lazily in circles, their barnacled bodies barely moving, as though too bored by the trappings of courtship to expend any effort on attracting a partner. All of this carousing takes place less than 100ft (30m) offshore.

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"You could almost touch them," a woman beside me whispers, as though afraid the whales might hear her. But apparently loud noises don't disturb the giants, which is fortunate as the woman's two children have been vociferously keeping count of the belly-flops (14 so far) and tail-slams (seven in a row by one male) the courting males perform.

De Hoop Nature Reserve, a three-hour drive from Cape Town, lays claim to the best land-based whale-watching in the world: every year between July and about the end of November, 40 per cent of the world's southern right whale population comes to its shores to breed.

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But with so many whales on display, where are the people? There are only a handful of us at Koppie Alleen (an area surrounded by massive dunes and the best place to view the whales) and earlier we drove through the park without seeing another soul for hours.

"Most tourists go to the town of Hermanus to see whales," explains De Hoop's assistant manager Sebastien Jones, who attributes some of the town's success to its extensive marketing campaigns and proximity to Cape Town. "But while the tourists go to Hermanus, the people from Hermanus know to come here to watch the whales," he adds.

Despite the attraction of the whales, De Hoop's popularity doesn't centre around whale season; the summer months of December and January are actually the busiest time of year. Not surprising given that the 88,957-acre (36,000 hectare) reserve, known by South Africans as the "Jewel of the Western Cape", is part of a World Heritage Site renowned for its rich biodiversity and plethora of rare animal and plant species, some found nowhere else on Earth.

In fact, as I am a bit of a birder, my excitement at seeing the whales does not dwarf the earlier thrill of sighting dozens of blue cranes (South Africa's national bird), which were feeding alongside cows in the fields just outside the reserve. They were remarkably elegant. De Hoop is home to one of the country's largest populations of this endangered species.

Animals are so plentiful in De Hoop that one couldn't be blamed for suspecting that they are paid to stand around and pose for visitors. We come upon baboons, eland and bontebok, all grazing together on a vast plain just beyond the main reception area. Maybe animals here have learnt that playing hard-to-get is no way to compete with whales that are anything but coy.

Luckily, however, coyness is an attribute the local snake population seems to possess. Puff adders and Cape cobras are apparently plentiful. "But don't worry," promises Pierre Mouski, one of the reserve's guides, "no guest has ever been bitten. But you might be lucky enough to see one crossing the road," he adds. Which explains the road signs throughout the park with images of snakes entreating "Give Us a Break".



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TRAVEL EDITOR'S CHOICE



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Big or small, cuddly or scaled, all animals are respected here.

If you have a soft-spot for snakes, ask to meet resident reptile ecologist Tony Phelps. He captures, tags and releases many of De Hoop's "less-appreciated" population and is more than happy to introduce guests to his temporary captives.

Although our cottage is self-catering, we opt to dine at the Fig Tree, the on-site restaurant aptly named for the stately wild figs adorning the courtyard.

We reconsider our plans to dine out of doors, however, when we are joined by an unexpected dinner guest on the restaurant's patio: Klakkie the ostrich. A gregarious (if imposing) resident, Klakkie was raised by the staff after she was found orphaned.

Though I'm sure she would be charming company, she doesn't look like the type to share, so we head indoors where we find more suitable dinner companions: a couple from Germany who have spent the day snorkelling among rock pools along the coastline. However, the amazing meal can't erase my jealousy when I learn that, on their return from the beach, they spotted several of the rare Cape mountain zebra in the bush.

Although I have come to see all that De Hoop has to offer, the prospect of encountering this elusive and endangered species excites me most of all.

I need not have worried. As we head home, there, right by the reserve's exit, are four Cape mountain zebras. It is as if they want to send us home with a reminder that whales aren't the only reason to come to De Hoop.

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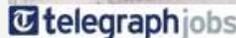
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