

# Extreme seaside barbecue, S. Africa fashion

By **Sandra MacGregor**  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

LANGEBAAN, South Africa — “Just remember to pace yourselves,” says Johann Booyens as he goes from table to table greeting diners at Die Strandloper, a restaurant in Langebaan, an hour and a half north of Cape Town. “There are 10 courses and you can eat as much as you want.” I nod to let him know I’ve heard his instructions. In answer, he shakes his head, smiles, and says, “We’ll see. It’s surprising how few people take my advice.”

You would be forgiven for not taking Booyens’s advice seriously. Looking more like a shipwreck than a restaurant, Die Strandloper appears to be the kind of place that throws caution to the wind. Upon arrival, guests are led to a jumble of seafarers’ bric-a-brac seemingly strewn haphazardly upon a breathtakingly beautiful beach.

This bucolic seaside village retains its charm because of its location on the least developed (and visited) stretch of coastline on the Western Cape. Though a few resorts have begun to appear in the area, their growth has been curtailed because of the town’s proximity to the West Coast National Park, one of South Africa’s top destinations for seeing birds and wildflowers.

Die Strandloper is casual, open-air dining at its best. And I do mean casual. Shoes are optional and beachwear — including swimsuits — is encouraged. Silverware, too, is optional; however, utensils in the form of mussel shells are offered to the more genteel clientele. Several varieties of South African wine are on offer at the beach bar and guests are also invited to bring their own alcoholic beverages (with no corkage fee).

Having been informed by residents that Die Strandloper was the place to experience a traditional South African seafood “braai,” Afrikaans for barbecue, I also was warned that the meal requires a serious time commitment — four



JONATHAN STRUG

**Die Strandloper is seaside and casual; between some of the 10 courses diners can go for a swim.**

hours on average. None of the 10 courses is prepared beforehand.

Guests are invited to watch as the food is cooked on the barbecues and fire pits set up along the beach. Standing where the traditional “roosterkoek,” or bread cooked on coal, is being baked sends my olfactory system into overload and without thinking, as soon as the bread is ready, I grab three big pieces, two of which are gone before I even make it back to my table. A rookie mistake, I soon realize, as my stomach begins to hint it is on its way to full.

Mussels, dried fish, and seafood paella soon follow. Though I begin to doubt my ability to make it to the 10th course, I still manage to go up for seconds on the mussels. Knowing well the limits of the human stomach, one of our hosts announces a break, the first of several timeouts designed to break up the meal and allow guests a chance to digest their food.

Never has the slogan “make yourselves at home” been so sincere. As soon as the break is announced, shoes come off, shirts are removed to reveal bathing suits, and benches, which moments before were used for seating, are transformed into loungers as more than a few diners become horizontal. I resist the urge to nap and decide to take a dip in the sea with some of the others.

After the break, the courses continue, this time with an emphasis on whole fish. As the fish is prepared, seagulls arrive. I start on the angelfish. It has a delicate yet

## Die Strandloper

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During high season, December and January, lunch and dinner are served daily. In winter, May to October, only lunch is served. Hours vary depending on the weather and season and availability is updated weekly on the website. Reservations are a must in high season. Set menu and only one price 190 rand (\$30 a person).

smoky flavor and I worry I might have to fight the birds for seconds. But the birds don’t bother the diners. They only go for the fish heads and fins the cooks throw them.

“That snoek was swimming in the ocean this morning,” says Chris Maltby, noticing my obvious enjoyment as I bite into the meaty flesh of this local favorite. He says all the seafood Die Strandloper serves is caught daily nearby. “Local food prepared by local people, that’s what we aim for,” he adds as he dishes out generous servings of various dried, smoked, and grilled fish, all of which are cooked to perfection.

Next is a unique stew containing a local vegetable delicacy I’ve never had before called “waterblommetjie,” or water flower. The

stew is followed by the pièce de résistance: whole, grilled crayfish, South Africa’s equally delicious answer to lobster.

“Look, it’s a pirate,” whispers a child at an adjacent table. Certainly the atmosphere is ripe for a youngster’s imagination. But indeed a “pirate” has landed among us, a woman with an enormous parrot on her shoulder.

“Are animals allowed?” I say to Maltby as he walks by. “Of course. They eat for free,” he says as though surprised by my question. “We’ve had cats, dogs, birds, and someone once even brought a snake in a cage.” With a wink he adds, “We find animals can sometimes be better behaved than their owners.”

As the meal nears its end, I decide to admit defeat and resist the last course of coffee and “koek sisters,” a delicious, traditional South African dessert similar to a doughnut. But the call of caffeine is too tempting and as I wait for a cup I witness the most unique preparation of coffee I have ever seen: A burnt log is dunked several times into a large kettle of boiling coffee. “We don’t know why it works, but this log is the magic touch,” says Booyens, noting my skeptical gaze.

The aroma rouses even the napping patrons. Together we line up for the last time, smiling at one another like victors after a glorious battle where, thankfully, our waistlines are the only losers.

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