

#ADVENTURE #SAFARI #SOUTHAFRICA

An ocean safari

All eyes on deck turn seawards during an ocean adventure to spot the Marine Big 5 off the Western Cape of South Africa. *By Lynn Gail*





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RANQUIL WAVES ARE ROLLING IN, ONE after the other, stirring the sand before retreating back into the ocean. It's like watching sand filter through an hourglass as bubbling whirlpools form, then dissolve into tiny holes, before another wave rushes in, leaving a fleeting footprint. It could even be a meditation soundtrack – only the crystal sound bowls are missing in the background. But when I look up, I realise the ocean has lulled me into a daze. Like a click of the fingers I'm brought back to reality, as further out to sea it's looking more crushing, more 'heavy metal' than meditative. There's a steady, dark rising swell and this is my only chance of seeing the Marine Big Five in Gansbaai, a small fishing town in South Africa's Western Cape.

Being September, it's usually peak viewing season, but due to storm warnings our ocean safari cruise has been moved forward a day. We'd heard the morning's cruise had marked off four of the Big Marine 5: the Cape fur seal, easy because they number more than 60,000; endangered African penguins – sadly not so easy; whales; sharks; but no dolphins. Our vessel, the *Dreamcatcher*, has capacity for 64 passengers. With two viewing

platforms, a 360 degree view, and only 20 people on board (including crew), our afternoon 'spotting' odds look promising.

During the pre-board safety briefing, the dedicated team from Dyer Island Conservation Trust provide background information on Gansbaai's marine ecosystem. Alongside educating more than 25,000 visitors annually on vital marine conservation, the trust works tirelessly to maintain ongoing sustainability programs. Recognising increasing hazards to marine life, as a result of discarded fishing line, they established the Fishing Line Bin Project in 2010. More than 350 collection

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bins were installed along the coast, and in Gansbaai alone, more than 60 kilograms of discarded fishing line has now been collected. Through ongoing monthly beach clean-ups, the trust and local community have collected more than 2,300 kilograms of recyclable marine rubbish. Where there's strong community, positive action follows.

The trust's biggest plight however is saving the endangered African penguin. Declining numbers on Dyer Island (once

considered one of the most important breeding colonies in the world) reveal the population has decreased from 25,000 breeding pairs in 1970, to around 1,000 pairs today. Images from 1956 show a thriving black-and-white penguin landscape, but today the same terrain is sparsely inhabited. It's now feared the African penguin could be extinct by 2026. The causes of decline are many. Considered a delicacy until 1960, an estimated 13 million eggs were removed from penguin colonies for fine-dining menus in affluent societies. Add marine pollution and a depleted sardine food source, their

struggle to survive began. The removal of guano (droppings) also threatened their existence. When man realised guano was a rich organic fertiliser they scraped it away, leaving the penguins exposed and at risk. Guano gave penguins a base to build homes, provide insulation and protection from predators. Fearing extinction of the African penguin, the trust pioneered an artificial penguin house of which 2,000 have been installed on Dyer Island. The



trust's manager, Pinkey Ngewu, uses an effective sales pitch about the penguin 'houses' which are available for purchase: "Where else can you buy a house and land for just US\$35?", she asks, with a hard-to-turn-down smile. "It even comes with an ownership certificate and title deed."

After our briefing, we size up for life vests and spray jackets. Looking like inflatable orange beacons, we climb on board. Waves batter the side of the boat as we climb each rising swell, then thud down. The skipper suddenly cuts the engine, "To your nine o'clock," he shouts, as a southern right whale rises, and, like a burst underground water pipe, blows a V-shaped victory stream of water into air. For several minutes the whale plays hide-and-seek, reappearing and disappearing, leaving whitecaps in its wake. It's like searching for the Big Safari 5. You know they're there, but the adventure is in finally spotting them; the thrill is in watching them, unscripted, from ringside seats. As my first ocean marine hunt I compare the experience to land safaris. Two days ago I'd tracked a cheetah by foot after it killed an oryx. After searching for a while we eventually spotted it panting under a tree, priming its kill, as we enjoyed the rare opportunity of watching it feed. It reminds me nature is full of unforeseen, magical moments as we head further out to sea, searching.

In the distance we see black, dense seaweed, being slapped repeatedly

against sharp jagged rocks in unforgiving waves. As we get closer though, we realise it's a colony of cape fur seals, some of which nose dive into waves like body surfers on borrowed time. Older, wiser seals lounge around like bronzed holidaymakers on safer, higher ground.

"Again, to your three o'clock," the skipper shouts, as a humpback whale performs the only fluke flip of the day. I'd seen tail flips in glossy brochures, but not in reality. For once, it looked like the pictures. Water cascades from its lobes as the tail hangs momentarily in mid-air. It's completely captivating to see a whale harness such raw, natural power in its environment.

On our return we spot a small group of penguins hunting for food. At around 60 centimetres long and weighing between two to three kilograms, they look vulnerable flapping their wings like flippers on a pinball machine to stay above the waves.

We head back to Gansbaai, hoping to see sharks and dolphins, but it seems the stormy weather is keeping them at bay. Either way it's a 'victory sign' to the passionate crew who tracked down three of the Big Marine 5 during wild weather in the far-sweeping South Atlantic Ocean. I'm already planning my return, hoping to hear the soundtrack of millions of squawking penguins, repopulated and looking resplendent in their black-and-white top and tails. 🐧

OPENING IMAGE: Spotting whales on the marine safari. OPPOSITE: The waters off South Africa's western cape. ABOVE: The lodge at Grootbos Private Marine Reserve.

TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE
South African Airways flies to Johannesburg from Sydney via Perth. flysaa.com

STAYING THERE
Grootbos Private Nature Reserve, listed as one of *National Geographic's* Unique Lodges of the World, offers five-star accommodation a 10-minute drive from Gansbaai town. The Reserve also offers various, private tours of the area. grootbos.com

CRUISE AND CONSERVATION INFORMATION
Dyer Island Conservation Trust dict.org.za

FURTHER INFORMATION
southafrica.net