

Cape Times: 11 December 2006: Escape Times – Hout Bay
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If Cape Town is a fishing village then Hout Bay is, well, a real fishing village without the trappings of bright city life to distract it from its main purpose, the sea. Both eating from its cold underbelly to playing in its icy but refreshing waters.

Hout Bay was discovered by early Dutch settlers in the 1600's, and the forested ravines were to prove a rich trove of wood for boat builders and repairers. It was aptly named "Hout Baai" meaning literally 'Wood Bay'.

Today Hout Bay exists almost as a microcosm of South Africa. With the comfortable and extremely comfortable occupying center stage and Imizamo Yethu Township, home to almost 16 000 residents, on the one side and the Hangberg Fishing village on the other. An unusual mix of residents living side by side in this delightful little bay surrounded by mountains.

Add the 1000s of visitors who throng to her calling every year and you get a vibey, cosmopolitan village, rich in culture, history and creativity but with its solid fishing foundation ever-present.

Every year big wave chargers from around the world converge on her shores for the annual Red Bull BWA, that's Big Wave Africa. If you take a 20 minute boat ride out to Sea Island (or duiker island), you might just spot a wave of awesome power and magnitude. That would be Dungeons. The largest surfable wave on the African coast. It's probably best to leave the big waves to the experts (this year the contest ran in 12 – 18 foot conditions but three days later three surfers went out and landed up surfing some of the biggest waves of the year, anywhere! (60 foot has been bandied about as a possible size). See www.redbullbwa.com for more

In less dangerous conditions, it's quite safe to kayak out or simply take one of the many pleasure cruises for a trip out in the bay under the watchful eye of the sentinel. (The Sentinel is the mountain that's proudly stands guard at the entrance to the bay.)

Hout Bay's mountains, although sadly ravaged by fires over recent years, still offer fantastic hiking and beautiful view for anyone with a little energy and a spring in their step.

The annual Hout Bay Trail Challenge is a tough 36km trail run which takes place in the surrounding mountains and takes in stunning mountain trails, steep ravines, disused Manganese mine and a lovely jog on the beach to finish. (see www.sports4u.co.za for more).

The good news is, no matter how you choose to explore the area; good food is waiting round every corner.

Mariner's Wharf is a good place to start. Stanley Dorman, who envisaged and created what is referred to as the waterfront emporium has built as authentic a waterfront as you can hope to find in the 21st century. He is a nautical fanatic and has traveled the world collecting original nautical memorabilia, some of which he used to decorate the premises and some of which is on sale in the downstairs shipwreck shop. Head upstairs to the Wharfside Grill, a nautically themed seafood restaurant for a maritime feast in sea side comfort.

Alternatively if you want to know why all this people are queuing, its the downstairs Wharfette Bistro and their famous take away fish and chip meals. If you prefer to cook your own, head to the fish market and choose from freshly caught fish which literally smack of the sea. Contact Mariners Wharf on 021 790 1100.

While the region is know for its fishing related activities, its also home to the world famous World of Birds, a walk-through this aviary of hundreds of rehabilitated birds is both fascinating and educational, kids love it. (World of Birds: 021 790 2730, they are open daily from 9-5).

Sundays is market day on the Village Green and this colourful craft market needs at least a few hours to browse and a few rand to spend. The market is open every Sunday from 10am to 5pm, Call 021 790 3474 for more details. While the waves may be huge just around the corner, Hout Bay beach is protected and easily accessible to swim. In the evening every man, woman, and their dogs congregate and play on the beach. Like a daily canine social gathering to stretch the legs, watch the sun go down and bitch about their owners.

Sometimes its just nice to browse the harbour and watch the fisherman going about their business, or take a slow cruise on Chapman's Peak drive. Browse the medley of shops or explore the crafts and skills of the township traders. Find an indigenous forest and incredible waterfalls, meet interesting and colourful people

and eat delicious food caught and prepared by locals who have fished these parts for as long they remember.

No matter how many times you visit Hout Bay, there is always something new to experience or someone else to get acquainted with. After all this is still probably the only fishing village in the world with its very own passport.