

South Africa

Spring at the Cape

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 To Cape Town and Cape Peninsula

After an overnight flight from London we'll arrive in Cape Town early in the morning where we'll begin our exploration of the flora on the 70 kilometre-long mountainous spine of the Cape Peninsula. Here the Table Mountain National Park protects the unique 'fynbos' vegetation and patches of rare Afromontane forest. The Cape Peninsula itself holds more plant species than the entire British Isles, and as an introduction we'll explore the Cape Point area, where in addition to plant species such as *Protea*, *Ericas*, *Mimetes*, *Restios* and *Satyriums*, we'll look for the endemic mammals Bontebok and Cape Mountain Zebra. Pink *Satyrium carneum* orchids grow along the roadsides, and the delicate *Moraea tripetala* is common in many forms. The nutrient-rich Benguela current surges along the coast from Antarctica and we'll have a chance to see many of the endemic seabirds, including a visit to an African Penguin colony. Southern Right Whales will be calving immediately offshore. Ancient Milkwood Trees and the fragrant Camphor Bush inhabit the coastal thicket.

Day 3 Table Mountain & Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden

Nestling below the towering cliffs of Table Mountain is the world-famous Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, where we will have time to explore the magnificent collection of plants from across the country. The horticultural displays merges with natural vegetation which extends up the mountain and includes a population of South Africa's largest protea, *Leucadendron argenteum* (the Silver Tree). Here we'll also see *Protea nitida* and the ancient *Cunonia capensis* which survives naturally in streambeds – it's closest relatives being in New Caledonia! Cape Sugarbirds and Orange-breasted Sunbirds, both endemics, adorn the many species of flowering *Proteas* and *Ericas*. We'll spend much of our time slowly exploring the vegetation outdoors, but also won't ignore the conservatory where a diverse display of miniature succulent plants, such as *Lithops*, *Conophytums* and *Haworthias*, are displayed in a simulated desert environment.

If luck is on our side with the flower timing, we might be fortunate to visit the last remaining population of *Moraea aristata*, a "peacock moraea" and one of the rarest plants in the world. Less than 50 plants survive on a tiny patch of vegetation in the city suburbs on a private site and they only flower for 2 weeks.

Days 4 & 5

West Coast National Park, Darling area & Tiene Verveld Wildflower Reserve

The sandy shores of the West Coast, just north of Cape Town, hold a completely different flora, and we'll explore both the flashy Asteraceae displays of the coastal sands and the endemic-rich granites of the West Coast National Park. This park is centred round the 16km long Langebaan lagoon, a globally important site for shorebirds. Patches of daisies, such as *Gazania krebsiana* and *Dimorphotheca pluvialis* occur among areas of bulbs such as *Lachenalia rubida*. *Ferraria crispa* and *Pelargonium fulgidum* occur on the granite hills. We'll look out for *Microlooma sagittatum*, the only plant in the world known to be pollinated by the tongue of a bird. One of the world's rarest raptors, the striking Black Harrier, might well quarter overhead and Southern Black Bustards draw attention with their raucous displays. *Babiana ringens*, with its red blooms and special rat's tail-like 'bird perch', is perfectly adapted to pollination by Malachite Sunbirds.

The nearby shales in the Darling area have a profusion of bulbs, such as *Romuleas*, *Babianas* and the stunning *Geissorhizas*, a number of which are endemic. *Geissorhiza radians* and the similar *Babiana rubrocyanea* are particularly striking with their red and deep purple flowers. Large specimens of *Drosera cistiflora* flower in the seeps, and whole fields are filled with *Moraea miniata* and *Heliophilas*. Star-shaped *Spiloxenes* abound in the damp patches. Some species, such as *Spiloxene capensis*, have dark marks in the centre of the flower that are thought to act as mating stimuli for monkeybeetles, the plants' clumsy pollinator. We'll also see the unrelated *Gorteria diffusa* whose flowers act as courting stations for a fly.

Days 6 - 8

Nieuwoudtville - bulb capital of the world

Moving further north, the Nieuwoudtville area has been called the "Bulb capital of the world", with over 300 species around the small town. We'll spend three nights on a farm here, visiting nearby reserves, the newly formed Hantam National Botanical Garden, and private lands. As we potter from place to place, the diversity at our feet is bewildering. Fields are dominated by the tall yellow *Bulbinella nutans* and there is a profusion of *Ornithogalums*, *Lachenalias*, *Moraeas*, *Romuleas*, *Ixias* and *Geissorhizas*. Delicate *Hesperanthes*, such as the endemic *Hesperantha vaginata*, only open late in the day in preparation for nocturnal pollinators. Three species of *Sparaxis* are endemic and there are numerous *Babianas* and *Gladiolus*.

One of the remarkable aspects of the flora is how unrelated species mimic one another to compete for pollinators, and we'll see how this has occurred with a species of *Lapeirousia* and a *Pelargonium* which both attract a specialised long-tongued fly. We might be lucky enough to see the huge fly, which has such a long proboscis that it must point it backwards when it flies, and the end still sticks out beyond the back of the fly! Curious ground-hugging *Androcymbium pulchrum* have recently been found to be pollinated by rodents! A special place that we'll visit nearby is the Knersvlakte, a large low-lying quartz plain that forms part of the Succulent Karoo flora and hosts a diversity of stone plants. These "babies bottoms"

as they are known locally (*Argyrodema*) represent a fascinating adaptation by miniaturisation in this hard climate.

Day 9

Tanqua Karoo

The Karoo is a semi-desert that stretches across a vast area of the country. The landscape is empty, save a few scattered farmhouses. Huge open plains are juxtaposed with desert mountain cliffs. The landscape is dominated by small succulent bushes, prone to bursting into pink flower at this time of year. The profusion of succulents of the family *Mesembryanthemaceae*, well over 1000 species, is officially the most explosive radiation of any plant family in the world. We'll see many species, most of which will defy identification unless we can dissect their seed capsules! We might even see the narrowly endemic *Eurystigma clavatum*. Most famous of the plants are the now rare *Hoodia*, collected for use as an appetite suppressant, and Bushman's Candles (*Sarcocaulon crassicaule*). Many of the endemic birds are found here, including Karoo and Ludwig's Bustards, and we might expect to see as many as four species of eagle here too.

Days 10 & 11

Floral diversity and orchid hunting around Ceres

Ceres boasts a remarkable diversity of 'tulps'. One of the most beautiful of these, *Moraea villosa*, is really quite common and we'll also come across numerous *Moraea gawleri* in its yellow form, *Moraea galaxia*, and the uncommon *Moraea macronyx*. Parrot-beaked Tortoise and the impressively large and surprisingly speedy Leopard Tortoise wander amongst a mouth-wateringly colourful and diverse flora. We'll find impressive *Drosera cistiflora*, lovely *Spiloxene capensis*, *Lachenalia juncifolia*, *Babiana sambucina*, *Ixia capillaris*, *Oxalis lanata rosea*, *Gladiolus venustus* and *Gladiolus alatus*. Other highlights are gorgeous *Wurmbea variabilis* and the local speciality *Gladiolus quadrangularis*.

Many of these beauties bloom on old burn sites, a constant feature in this area, and in particular orchids love this habitat. *Disperis villosa*, *Pterygodium catholicum*, *Schizodium cornutum*, and *Holothrix villosa* are amongst the most common. *Holothrix aspera*, *Disperis bolusiana*, and *Pterygodium pentherianum* are yet more fine orchids but the superb finely divided flowers of the Spider Orchid, *Bartholina burmanniana*, will probably draw the most admiration.

Another burn site near Worcester hosts fine *Watsonia meriana*, tall plants with striking red flowers. In this area we can also see *Aristea africana*, *Sebaea exacoides*, and *Microloma tenuifolium*, and beautiful red flowered *Drosanthemum speciosum* which colours the roadsides in the area.

Days 12 & 13

De Hoop limestone fynbos

The plains of the Overberg, which stretch from the mountains to the southernmost tip of the African continent at Agulhas, have mainly been converted to wheat.

Blue-flowered *Moraea polyanthos* often produces a fine show on the Agulhas Plains. We'll see Karoo Korhaan and the localised Agulhas Long-billed Lark here. Small patches of "renosterveld" vegetation survive along the roads and support a variety of *Hermannias* and *Salvias* among the *Elytropappus rhinocerotis*, the dominant grey bush. The regal Blue Cranes are common in open lands, and we should see Denham's Bustards, the males performing an elaborate display at this time of year. Cape Vultures breed on the Potberg Mountain. Closer to the coast, De Hoop Nature Reserve protects large swatches of coastal habitat and the unique limestone 'fynbos' here has showy species such as *Protea obtusifolia* and *Leucospermum patersoni*. Looking at one's feet, the small scented *Agamthosmas*, or "buchus" as they are known locally, have been used medicinally for centuries. Bontebok and Cape Mountain Zebra Graze on the flats and Fiery-necked Nightjars hawk insects close to the chalets. Southern Right Whales winter off the coast at De Hoop in good numbers, and a large wetland in the reserve is excellent for waterbirds. Near the hotel at Houhoek we'll find the glorious *Phaenocoma prolifera* and lovely pink *Geissorhiza schinzii*.

Days 14 & 15

Houhoek and to Cape Town

We complete the loop towards Cape Town, on the way exploring more fynbos-covered slopes which hold a profusion of *Aspalathus*, *Erica*, *Leucadendron*, and *Serruria* species – and we should encounter family groups of striking Cape Rockjumpers hopping among the pathside boulders. The pink flowered trailing *Protea compacta* is a common roadside plant whilst marshy areas host Prince-of-Wales Heath *Erica perspicua* and the lovely yellow *Erica patersoniae*, as well as *Osmitopsis asteriscoides* and *Serruria adscendens*. It is an indication of the incredible floral richness of the Cape that even on the last day of the tour, almost anywhere we stop will continue to yield new species. African Fish Eagles fly overhead whilst butterflies such as the Common Dotted Border and the Fynbos Blue flutter over lovely pink *Geissorhiza schinzii* and simply stunning *Phaenocoma prolifera*. Sweet and Common Waxbills potter about the gardens around our chalets.

We'll visit the Harold Porter Botanical Garden, where 'fynbos' vegetation intermingles with afro-montane forest and lovely *Psorlea pinnata* grows along the streams. The botanical garden also has an excellent bookshop. We'll arrive in Cape Town in the afternoon and will go to Callan's home for a wash and brush-up and perhaps a quick search for the Cape Dwarf Chameleons that live in Callan's garden before heading to the airport and our evening departure for London.

Day 16

Arrive UK/Europe

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