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Sisters In South Africa

BY TANYAA. CHRISTIAN · APRIL 10, 2020

ON THEIR ANNUAL SIBLING ADVENTURE, THESE NEW YORK CITY-BASED SISTERS TRADE IN THE BRIGHT LIGHTS OF MANHATTAN FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S BEAUTIFUL SIGHTS.

We both agreed — just one carry-on and one personal size bag would do the trick. If we learned anything from our sister's excursion in Thailand, it was that in order to be agile in these international streets, we had to pack smart, pack light, and certainly pack for the most fluid of circumstances.

The planning phases of my sister and I's annual trips tend to play out like a tactical operation. LaToya trusts me to find the hotels, book the flights, and make dinner reservations at the best-rated restaurants in town. And I count on her to research every excursion, ad nauseam, figuring out the intricate details of things I don't care to know. How are we getting from the airport to the hotel? No clue. But LaToya knows the exact geographic coordinates of where our driver will be standing by the time we arrive at customs.

We make a good team in that way. Our mother, who planned every childhood

vacation to perfection before the inception of Google, taught us well. And after years of executing global adventures based on TripAdvisor reviews and our friends' first-hand accounts, my sister and I considered ourselves expert organizers. Our South Africa itinerary, like many others, would force us to flex our multi-city planning muscle. We worked on it for nearly three months and landed on a schedule that had us visiting five different regions in a span of 15 days. When my sister and I met at JFK the morning of our flight to Joburg, we went in confident that we were boarding a plane for another trip of a lifetime.



ANNUAL SISTER ADVENTURES HAVE BECOME A WAY FOR THESE SIBLINGS TO RE-CONNECT OUTSIDE OF THE DAY-TO-DAY RESPONSIBILITIES THAT CONSUME THEIR DAILY LIVES. (PHOTO COURTESY OF TANYA A. CHRISTIAN)

First up was Durban.

The hour flight from Johannesburg to South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province was just enough time to pick out a lunch location for after our check-in at the **Oyster Box Hotel**. Durban for us would be the calm before a very well-coordinated storm — good eating, marketplace shopping, and a couple of spa treatments that would help us decompress from the bustle of our lives in New York City.

I knew the **Oyster Box** would lend itself well to this leg of the jaunt because it offered luxurious rooms, views of the water, amazing eateries and a spa that catered to our relaxation fantasies. Within walking distance were a strip of restaurants, a super cute market, and the Umhlanga waterfront, while a less-than 20-minute uber ride placed us at Victoria Street Market or Florida Road. The former is where the city's unique Afro-Indian culture is on full display. Barrels of spices, traditional incense and the taste of fresh food fills the air. While the latter fuses shopping, dining, and nightlife in a district of bustling sidewalk cafes and a wide range of boutiques during the day.



DURBAN'S OYSTER BOX HOTEL OFFERS STUNNING VIEWS OF THE UMHLANGA ROCKS AND THE NEARBY LIGHTHOUSE. (PHOTO COURTESY OF OYSTER BOX HOTEL)

While we took advantage of the activities in the unique locale, we mainly stuck to the gorgeous retreat that awaited us outside of our hotel room doors. The Oyster Box was a dream, the view of the Umhlanga lighthouse from our room was serene and the food at **The Grill Room**, where we ate on our last night, set a bar for food so

high, we were excited to see if we could top it.

After three days of leisure, it was time to set off to Cape Town.

The plan for the second-most populous city in South Africa was the exact opposite of Durban. We had rested our legs and cleared our minds enough. Our full week in Cape Town was dedicated to exploring. Fashion Week activities and a little bit of clubbing took me through the first weekend and by Monday we were setting off to **Robben Island**. I contend that no first timer's trip to the nation that birthed **Nelson Mandela** is complete without a guided tour through the remote entrapment where he spent nearly three decades of his life. The island is secluded, somber, and a bit grim. But the education we took from it outweighed the scene. Standing outside of Mandela's cell, the one that molded the great political leader the world has come to know, was a surreal experience we'll both cherish for a lifetime.



CAPE TOWN PROVIDES SOME OF THE MOST PICTURESQUE VIEWS IN THE COUNTRY. FOR THIS AERIAL SHOT, WE TOOK A RIDE ON THE CAPE WHEEL. (PHOTO: TANYA A. CHRISTIAN)

When we reached back to the V&A waterfront, the place where our roughly 45-minute boat ride to the island began, we shook off the bleakness of the morning with fresh seafood and spirits. The waterfront would quickly become our central point for the week. If we weren't hopping off and on a double-decker bus, trying our hand at traditional cooking in **Bo Kaap**, on a private day excursion to the Cape of Good Hope, taking in the sights of the city from **Table Mountain**, drinking champagne at the **Belmond during afternoon tea**, or sipping sundowners in Camps Bay, the South Beach of ZA, we were there, relishing in the views and plotting our next move.

By Friday we had seen the best of what Cape Town had to offer. Next up was the wine region.

We both agree that the best way to see Stellenbosch and Franschhoek is through a private wine tour. On the morning of our departure from “The Mother City” our driver scooped us up and headed for the mountainous coast. LaToya had picked out a handful of vineyards before we left NYC, and our guide worked with us to settle on five. Now I’ve visited Sonoma and Napa a number of times before, but South Africa’s wine views are next-level beautiful. By the third vineyard, we were ready to push our flight back a day and by the fifth, I was setting up my future wedding on the grounds of the [Babylonstoren Wine Estate](#).





THE CAPE'S WINE REGION IS A MUST-SEE. EVEN THE NON-DRINKERS CAN APPRECIATE ITS STUNNING VIEWS.

We spent much of the weekend sipping wine — syrah, pinotage, Chenin blanc. And by the time it was over we had transferred our sister's journey to **Kruger National Park**.

Kruger would, of course, be one of the highlights of our trip. Not only did we book a suite in a private game reserve, but our sister's safari would also be the first time either one of us had truly ventured into the home of "The Big Five". Every morning

we woke up at the crack of dawn to track rhinos, buffalo, elephants, and lions. And by night we went back out in an open-top cruiser to do it all over again. Three days at the reserve gave us enough time to check three “big ones” off of our list, catching a feeding pride of lions on our last night in the wild.

After a few days in the bush, it was time to head back to Joburg, and we opted for the scenic route to take us to the city. The five-hour trip to “The City of Gold” was a welcomed moment for us to reflect. We had just one full day left on our sister’s adventure.



SUNSETS IN SOUTH AFRICA HIT A LITTLE DIFFERENT. THE BEST WAY TO ENJOY THESE VIEWS IS WITH A SUNDOWNER AKA A HAPPY HOUR COCKTAIL IN TOW. (PHOTO: TANYAA. CHRISTIAN)

That evening we checked into the [Hyatt Regency Johannesburg](#) in the city’s Rosebank neighborhood. A spectacular entry, luxury finishes, and a pretty impressive art collection make it a go-to retreat for businesswomen and tourists alike. For us, it was its proximity to great restaurants and the Sandton neighborhood that made it a no-brainer. As is our custom for dinners to close out our global tours, I reserved a table at a [fancy restaurant](#) just a few blocks from our swanky hotel.

There was officially one full day left.

The morning of our departure, our hopes of a **walking tour through Soweto** were sidetracked due to rain. But that just gave us more time to take in Joburg's **Apartheid Museum**. The structure dedicated to the history of racial segregation in a country still largely divided by race reminded me of the place we had left just two weeks before. Shopping in Sandton Square, a quick bite before the airport, and a 15-hour flight were the only activities separating us from being there again.





SOUTH AFRICA HAS SOME OF THE BEST SAFARIS IN THE WORLD. KRUGER NATIONAL PARK IS A POPULAR ONE AMONG FIRST-TIME GOERS.

I've reflected on South Africa a million times since we left. The beauty in every corner, its innate ability to teach, the overwhelming charm that met us in each one of our five destinations. And I often remind myself of how blessed I am to see all of it, any of it, really. But even more than the physical place, I feel thankful for the person

who I shared the experience with — my first friend, my favorite travel buddy, my co-logistician, my sister.

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