

Here’s why Durban is South Africa’s next big thing.

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Story by Rachelle Mackintosh

The vibe

With Johannesburg just a 70-minute flight away, the balmy Indian Ocean welcoming year-round dips and family-friendly holiday apartments right on the water’s edge, it’s hardly a surprise that most of Durban’s visitors come from Jo’burg to recharge.

Join them wandering along the Golden Mile, a near seven-kilometre promenade that runs from the uShaka Marine World theme park (ushaka.marine.com) to Moses Mabhida Stadium and makes it easy to cycle, stroll or Segway between swims and surfs. But 20 minutes drive north, it’s gentrified uMhlanga that’s emerging as the city’s most prized playground, with upmarket bars along Chartwell Drive, a new luxury mall and exclusive residences.

Perched on the shoreline, The Oyster Box Hotel (oysterboxhotel.com) shines bright, its old-school opulence accented by shades of aqua-blue and lighthouse-red. Having hosted everyone from Prince Harry to Mariah Carey, the five-star sanctuary is lauded for its interior design (the 86 rooms, suites and villas are individually decorated) and its Facebook-famous cat, Skabenga. Plus, its decadent spa offers hammam sessions and traditional Rungu massages – a deep-tissue treatment in which the therapists incorporate an East African throwing club into their technique. Savour sundowners and oysters on the private terrace of your Luxury Sea Facing Room or head to the

glam Lighthouse Bar for an Umhlanga Schling – a muddle of sugarcane spirits, pineapple, mint and mango.

The people

Downtown reveals the living history of the people who shaped Durban’s evolution from waterside settlement to bustling city. The seaport has long been southern Africa’s most important and busiest: the first Europeans landed here in 1497; the British, Dutch and native Zulus then battled over it for centuries; and the first Indians arrived as slaves in 1684 (the city now has the world’s largest Indian population outside of the Subcontinent).

The city’s multicultural journey is played out in its architecture, with Victorian, Edwardian and neo-Baroque administrative edifices alongside more than 100 Art Deco buildings, an African traditional herbal medicine market and the Phoenix Settlement, where Mahatma Gandhi lived in his formative years. At the PheZulu Safari Park, local Zulus present a deep dive into customary dance, artefacts and delicacies such as Umqombothi – a maize beer sipped from a communal clay pot.

The food

“At every hour of the day in Durban, someone’s eating a bunny chow,” says executive sous chef Larry Ramadhin, known as the King of Curry. He’s talking about the city’s most popular meal – a hollowed-out quarter loaf of bread filled with curry made from beans or meat (but strangely, no rabbits). While no-one seems to agree on how it got its name, the dish was developed by Indian

workers in the 1940s and infused with African flavours. “The fillings have changed over the decades but the original and most popular is still mutton,” says Ramadhin. Try his version at Oyster Box’s Ocean Terrace or head to low-key HouseOfCurries (fb.com/houseofcurries).

For a fancy dinner, book a table at 9th Avenue Waterside at the Durban Marina (9thavewaterside.co.za) where head chef Theo Chiloane gives local ingredients like East Coast prawns and rock cod a Mediterranean twist.

The wildlife

You don’t have to go far for an animal encounter – you might even spot vervet monkeys in Durban’s beachside dunes. For a more immersive experience, visit St Lucia, three hours drive north, where the World Heritage-listed iSimangaliso Wetland Park and its neighbouring waterways are home to everything from whales to their closest land relatives, hippos. Makakatana Bay Lodge (qantas.com/hotels/makakatanabaylodge) has eight plush suites and exclusive access to iSimangaliso’s remotest areas, while Thula Thula Private Game Reserve (thulathula.com) is a 4500-hectare wilderness where the rescued giants immortalised in Lawrence Anthony’s bestseller, *The Elephant Whisperer*, roam freely alongside an ark’s worth of creatures, including rhinos, hyenas and giraffes. Back in town, you might score a sighting over dinner at John Dory’s restaurant (johndorys.com). “Some nights,” says assistant manager Wonder L’tosa Molefe, “a few hippos come from the lake to graze and they walk up the main street right next to our terrace.”



(From top right) The Lighthouse Bar at The Oyster Box and the hotel’s entrance