

TREASURE CHEST OF THE WEST COAST

The attractions on and around
Langebaan Lagoon are hard to beat



□ The clear, aquamarine waters of Langebaan Lagoon are about 10°C warmer than those of the Atlantic Ocean, making the lagoon ideal for all kinds of watersports.

□ Skipper and yachtie supremo, Chris Steenkamp.

□ Wendy Wentzel, qualified guide and honorary ranger in the West Coast National Park.

□ From the beginning of August until the end of September the West Coast comes alive with spring flowers. There are also some 1 200 species of flowering fynbos in the Langebaan area.

□ On the south side of Langebaan town is the Langebaan Yacht Club with its marina and club house.



THE WATER AND SKY FORM AN almost seamless aqua cocoon as our sleek white vessel sails out of the harbour in Saldanha Bay. The term 'yachtie' is bandied about by the jolly crew. Ignoramus is moi, arriving with too much luggage for the compact cabin and asking my host, Ernst Hugo, what a yachtie is.

"Well, it's someone who knows his way around yachts. Ahhhh, no it's more – it's sort of a way of life."

"Do you get women yachties too?"

"Ohhhh, I suppose so – yes – it depends . . ."

Depends on what, I wonder, hoping over the next two days to get some clues, as this is certainly a lifestyle to covet.

Our destination is Kraal Bay, a secluded cove in Langebaan Lagoon, where we will be spending the night on the yacht. We sail past the town of Langebaan, whose history stretches back to 1870 when it started out as a tiny village on the farm



Geitenmelksfontein. But the official date for the founding of the village – originally also a whaling station – is 1922.

As we exit Saldanha Bay to enter the 17km long tidal lagoon, we pass Schaapen Island. Because it had fresh water, Schaapen Island was stocked with sheep to provide early seafarers with meat. Folklore has it that at one stage an unaccountable drop in the number of sheep puzzled the sailors, until it transpired that a lion on the mainland had got wind of this woolly pantry and swum a good kilometre to get across to the island. If that sounds like a long yarn, well, the tale lives on.

My constant literary travel companion, T. V. Bulpin, tells how Saldanha Bay and Langebaan Lagoon were formed millions of years ago during the Cretaceous period. The southern end of Africa tilted and the sea flooded into a lagoon at the mouth of the Berg

River to form the bay, at the same time drowning what was the delta of the river under six metres of water to form the present-day lagoon.

To protect this natural legacy, the West Coast National Park was proclaimed in 1985. It encompassed more than 5 600ha of lagoon and marshlands, four small islands and some 1 09ha of beach. In time, private farms and the Postberg Nature Reserve were included to create a biosphere of great ecological importance. Postberg was the third private nature reserve in the Cape and when spring arrives and the arid West Coast is transformed into a flower wonderland, the owners open its gates, allowing the public to share in the beauty.

As we sail past Postberg into Kraal Bay, Wendy Wentzel, a local honorary guide and also an aspirant yachtie, treats us to a wealth of information about Langebaan's natural marvels. Its enormous deposits of oyster shells, for example, are second only in size to those of Chesapeake Bay in America. It's thought the immense beds of oyster shells, three to seven metres thick, were laid down when conditions adverse to the creatures arose, one possibility being the warmth of the water in the lagoon.

These days the water is about 10°C warmer than that in the sea, making the lagoon ideal for kite and wind surfing, kayaking, fishing and sailing. There is no one word to aptly describe the nuances of the water's colour – emerald depths with a surface that reflects the light like an aquamarine gemstone.

We anchor at Kraal Bay and go ashore, where we climb up the highest rock and take in the panoramic view as the day gradually draws to a mellow close. Back on the yacht, chilled white wine and the best of West Coast cuisine awaits us – heaps of fresh crayfish, oysters, mussels and fish. Evidence of the warm generosity of West Coast yachties, the food, along with the yachties' quirky sense of humour, brings a perfect day to a perfect end.

I awake, disorientated by the proximity of the smooth white ceiling above me and a faint swaying motion. Opening the hatch, I peep out onto a watery world under a crimson sky. Grabbing cameras and warm clothes, I rush onto the deck to capture the symphony of dawn being played out against a background of the firmament, the colours echoed on the palette of the lagoon's smooth waters.

As the others surface from their cabins to greet the new day, they settle into a golden silence, sipping steaming mugs of coffee. Ahhhh – a way of life and a kind of people . . . >>



□ Langebaan's flowers include aloes such as this *Aloe cryptopoda*.

□ Langebaan lagoon and marshlands are a feeding ground for more than 250 species of birds, including numerous migrants.

□ Die Poshuis – the original post house – on Postberg Private Nature Reserve, which opens its gates in spring for visitors to view the wildflower displays.



□ **Keeping her eyes peeled for whales is Anneke van de Walt.**

>> As we're sailing back to the small craft harbour, thick fog comes rolling in from the sea, creating yet another facet of this breathtakingly beautiful and mindbogglingly fascinating place. As soon as we've regained our land legs, we jump into Wendy's microbus to explore the town of Langebaan and the West Coast National Park.

The park surrounds the lagoon, which has earned Ramsar status as the biologically richest stretch of water and marshland in South Africa. It is a feeding ground for more than 250 species of birds and also the destination for a good number of palearctic migratory species. We were there

in September and a number of the migrants had already arrived from their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere. One of migrant species is the tiny Curlew Sandpiper, which flies 15 000km from Siberia to the warm Langebaan waters every year in around August.

At the bird hide we sit for an hour, watching a large colony of Lesser Flamingoes feeding on plankton. On our way to the Seeberg look-out point, eland shyly scuttle away and we arrive at the point just in time to see the sun setting over the lagoon. You could almost feel this ancient stretch of land sigh, here where eons ago animals such as African bears and sabre-toothed cats roamed.

The Langebaan area is a palaeontological treasure chest. The West Coast Fossil Park contains one of the richest deposits of Early Pliocene vertebrate fossils in the world, including the teeth of a 15-metre megatooth shark and the skeletons of a herd of sivatheres, or short-necked giraffe. Some artefacts of early human habitation can also be seen. The oldest of the fossils dates back five million years.

From a much later period, but also one of the oldest finds of its kind in the world, are 'Eve's footprints'. In 1997 geologist Dave Roberts found the 117 000-year-old fossilised footprints of an anatomically modern human being in the sand dunes. The diminutive footprints, 26cm long, caused quite a stir seeing that palaeoanthropologists theorise that all humans are descended from a small group of hominids who lived in Africa between 100 000 and 300 000 years ago. 'Genetic Eve' is the name given to the hypothetical first human mother and, although the Langebaan Eve is unlikely to have been her, she did live on the right continent at the right time.

It is my last day at this place where the ever-changing rhythm and intense hue of the water rule your senses. The local grapevine has it that whales have been spotted in the lagoon. I strain to spot them from my window overlooking Calypso Beach but, alas, fail to do so. Maybe it's a good thing – besides having to come back to earn more yachtie points, I'll have to come back to see the whales. □

**Map reference F2
see inside back cover**

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