Tips From a AAA Travel Advisor: Erin Smuda

Headline: South Africa an eye-opening experience

Deckhead: Breathtaking natural wonders, wildlife and more await

Who doesn’t want to see a penguin live in their natural habitat at Boulder Beach? Experience the sunrise on a morning-game drive, complete with your own personal tracker? Take a cable car up Table Mountain to take in the breathtaking views of South Africa’s Peninsula – the city, harbor, and boats below? I have been a Travel Advisor with AAA for 29 years – most of my adult life – and I love to make my clients’ dreams come true. This time, it was my turn, and I still have not woken up from the dream!

African Travel greeted us upon arrival and its guide provided VIP service – accompanying us through customs and immigration, with a van transfer to the hotel and check-in. Our hotel – Table Bay – in Cape Town was conveniently located by the Boardwalk at the Victoria Albert Waterfront.

After a much-needed sleep, Day 1 was all about the culture! We met the owner of the Thunariso Organic garden. She started her business with the goal of teaching the locals to grow their own food and to improve their health and eating habits. Then, we visited the Ekhaya Ekasi non-profit art and education center. They teach the local women crafts to try to create positivity in the community. The highlight was a visit to a local kindergarten, where we attended a graduation ceremony. The school was built out of trash and recycled materials.

Boulder Beach was a remarkable wildlife encounter with the hundreds of African Penguins who reside there. The beach is a sheltered inlet between granite boulders. Boardwalks make the area wheelchair friendly, but also provide protection for the penguins.

Next, we drove along Chapman’s Peak Drive, a toll road on the Atlantic Coast between Hout Bay and Noordhoek in the Peninsula renown as one of the most spectacular marine drives in the world. Cape Point is wheretwo oceans meet – the cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean on the west and the warmer Indian Ocean waters on the east. The views were spectacular. I rode the funicular up but decided to do the 10-minute walk down to enjoy the views.

And it kept getting better. Our Winelands tour took us to quaint towns, complete with wine-tasting at family led Haute Cabriere. We enjoyed lunch at the five-star Delaire Graff Estate restaurant, where we tried local delicacies with a view of the Winelands as our backdrop.

On our Safari, we flew to Skukuza, and stayed at the Sabi Sabi Bush Lodge inside Kruger National Park. As the oldest lodge in the collection, every room is a suite with a blend of relaxed luxury mixed with local tradition, inspired by the owners’ love of Africa. Upon arrival we were briefed about our next two days at the Lodge.

Our stay was all-inclusive with three meals and drinks. We did two game drives by jeep each day – one at 6a.m. (with an early 5:30 a.m. wakeup call), and 4:30 p.m. (the afternoon time is seasonal), for 2.5-3 hours. Each jeep had a tracker who knows from tradition how to interpret the animal footprints and patterns, and a ranger who sat up front to explain the animals. Over the two days our tracker did not disappoint. We saw the BIG 5: Leopard, Lion, elephant, American buffalo and rhino.

Some tips I learned from my experience include discussing the recommended medications and vaccinations with your doctor. It is a personal choice. Bring neutral not bright clothes, and layers; and keep your arms in the jeep, but your camera ready. You do not want to miss any photo opportunities!

Mug shot

AAA Travel Advisor:

Erin Zmuda

Cutline: EYE CANDY – Cape Town is one of the more beautiful cities in Africa. Mountains rise in the foreground of blue waters. Image: Erin Zmuda. AAA.