The West Coast

Paternoster
- Paternoster Dunes Boutique Guesthouse (00 27 22 752 2217; www.paternosterdunes.co.za) is in a fantastic beachfront setting with five pretty, if slightly overdressed bedrooms. Doubles from R1,100 (about £55).
- There are plenty of cottages and houses to rent in and around Paternoster. Contact Icon Villas (00 27 21 424 0905; http://iconvillas.travel) or Perfect Hideaways (00 27 21 790 0972; www.perfecthideaways.co.za).
- The four-star Shelley Point Hotel, Spa & Country Club (00 27 22 742 1508; www.shelleypointhotel.co.za) is about 30 minutes drive north of Paternoster. It is a full-service resort with a nine-hole golf course, spa, beauty salon and pool. Doubles from about £110.
- Silverbay Villa (www.silverbay.co.za) at Shelley Point sleeps eight in four en-suite bedrooms. Beautifully finished and decorated to an exceptionally high standard, it has a heated courtyard pool, a big playroom and views out over the ocean. The villa is serviced daily, and guests can use the hotel facilities (see above) at a 10 per cent discount. It costs from about £340 per night.
- The Noisy Oyster (00 27 22 752 2196) has a daily changing menu of mainly seafood dishes.
- Voorstrandt Restaurant (00 27 22 752 2038; www.voorstrandt.com) is in a converted fisherman's cottage right on the beach.
- Gaaitje Salt Water Restaurant (00 27 22 752 2242; www.saltoast.co.za) is also in a former fisherman's cottage. Classic Cape dishes are served on the veranda.
- Horse rides on the beach can be arranged at Drikus Horse Trails (00 27 82 748 5596).
- South African satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys has a cabaret/restaurant/theatre, Evita se Perron (00 27 22 492 9932; www.evita.co.za), in the former railway station.
- Book a table at Hilda's Kitchen, the restaurant at Groote Post (00 27 22 492 2825; www.grootepost.com). It is open for lunch Wed-Sun. The cellar is open for wine-tastings and sales 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat-Sun.

Langebaan
- The Farmhouse Hotel (00 27 22 772 2062; www.thefarmhousehotel.com) has comfortable bedrooms furnished with a lot of pine. Cottages and villas are also available. Doubles from about £70.
- Die Strandloper Seafood Restaurant (00 27 22 77 22 490; www.strandloper.com) is a Langebaan institution: mussels, crayfish and barbecued fish are served in a beach-party atmosphere. All-you-can-eat lunches for R190 (about £17) per person.

The National Park
- West Coast National Park (00 27 22 772 2144; www.sanparks.org) has an interesting range of simple properties to rent, including chalets.
- Jo Anne's Beach Cottage and two houseboats.
- For cottages at Churchhaven contact Perfect Hideaways (see above). To rent a houseboat at Kraalbaai contact Langebaan Houseboats (00 27 21 689 9718; www.houseboating.co.za).
- The Geelbek Restaurant (00 27 22 772 2134; www.geelbek.co.za) is open 9am-5pm daily.
of Caribbean-blue heaven on the remote western shores of the lagoon, where the sand is fine and white and the water clear and calm. There is nothing here other than the tiny blue-and-white St Peter’s church and a sprinkling of sugar-cube fishermen’s cottages to rent, some very simple, others restored and tastefully furnished with farmhouse antiques and washed-linen soft furnishings.

A little further along from Churchhaven is Kraalbaai, with its crescent-shaped, white-sand beach. On weekends and school holidays it is busy with water-skiers and houseboat parties, but when I visited on a hot midweek day in February, the bay was eerily quiet, the water reflective and warmed by the sun.

The West Coast is famous for its beach-shack restaurants serving barbecued seafood; dried mullet (bokkoms) is the region’s official snack. But the fertile Swartland, ablaze with wild flowers in the spring, also produces exceptional wines and even olives. There is a cluster of boutique wineries around the town of Darling, home to South African satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys (who performs as Mrs Evita Bezuidenhout, ‘the most famous white woman in South Africa’). Of the Darling wine estates, Groote Post has the edge thanks to its restaurant, Hilda’s Kitchen, in the original 1790 manor house. Only an hour’s drive from Cape Town, it is a popular spot for long, lazy Sunday lunches.

The Overberg Coast

The Garden Route is South Africa’s most celebrated stretch of coastline, and deservedly so. But if you are driving from Cape Town, there are several hours of N2 motorway to negotiate before reaching Mossel Bay, the official start of the route. And then there are the crowds to consider.

The less-explored Overberg Coast, to the west of the Garden Route, makes a rewarding alternative. It has wide beaches, good restaurants and wineries, moody seas at the southern tip of Africa, an 1824 mission station, and a sensational coastline even the locals don’t know about.

Gordon’s Bay, a pleasant seaside town 50 km from Cape Town, is the start of Clarence Drive (the R44), dramatically carved into the craggy cliffs of the Hottentots-Holland mountains above the crashing waves of False Bay. The road was built by Italian prisoners of war (some say by hand) during World War II and is one of the most scenic drives in South Africa. It cuts through the KogelBay Biosphere Reserve, recognised by UNESCO for the diversity of its Cape fynbos vegetation, and shoots past Pringle Bay, Betty’s Bay, sizeable holiday- and retirement-home villages on the way to Hermanus, the biggest settlement on the Overberg’s Southern right whales migrate here, regular as clockwork, from June to December, stopping at Walker Bay to mate and give birth.

Each time I visit Hermanus, a former fishing village, I fear its increasing popularity will destroy its sunshiny coast as yet that has not happened. Tourism may now be its mainstay, but it remains a village at heart and has everything a visitor could want: a spectacular location, great hotels and guesthouses, a mix of restaurants, an embarrassment of excellent beaches and enough attractions nearby for interesting day trips.

The beautiful Hemel-en-Aarde (Heaven and Earth) Vlei, the folds of the mountains behind Hermanus, is a successful...
region with a dozen or so small vineyards, the most famous being the Hamilton Russell estate. But one of the newest and most innovative wineries is hidden away 40km east of the Hemel-en-Aarde wine hub. The Hermanuspietersfontein winery is named after Hermanus Pieters, who founded Hermanus in 1855, and the natural spring (fontein) he discovered. Its winemaker, Barthe Eksteen, was last year’s Winemaker of the Year, and his namesake vintage, Die Barthe (the winery is the only one in South Africa to use Afrikaans exclusively on its labels), was awarded five stars in the industry bible, Plater’s South African Wines.

The Hermanuspietersfontein wine farm is run on sustainable and eco-friendly principles, with indigenous fynbos ‘corridors’ preserved to maintain the flow of bird and insect life; its red wines have a characteristic herbal note created by the fynbos-enriched soil. Because the winery is relatively remote, its press and cellar were built on the outskirts of Hermanus, with a smart shop attached. A Saturday-morning farmers’ market has built up around it, selling cheeses and chocolates, honey, bread, herbs and spices, dried fruit and nuts, biltong, homemade jams and pickles and traditional Afrikaans cakes such syrups koeksisters, lemoenkoek and creamy melktert.

From Hermanus, I drove east along the coastal R43. Great expanses of the Walker Bay coast are protected as a marine reserve, which the road skirts around from the sleepy town of Stanford on its way to Gansbaai, where shark-cage diving has become a popular ‘extreme’ activity (the great whites are baited with tuna and sardines to circle a boat, from which spectators are lowered in metal cages). Eventually the tarred R43 simply runs out, after which a spider’s web of dirt roads spreads enticingly across the farmland interior.

I followed the road signs to Elim, one of a dozen or so mission stations established in the Cape by the Moravian Church, evangelical Protestants originally from Bohemia. The 19th-century village still belongs to the church, and its congregation lives in rows of thatched cottages, some of which wouldn’t look out of place in the Cotswolds, others resembling simple Scottish crofts. I visited on a Sunday morning and, save for a few stragglers, the entire village was at morning service in the gabled church, belting out hymns accompanied by a pipe organ. Members of the congregation give guided tours of the school, and there is a small guesthouse, but otherwise Elim appears entirely unsullied by contact with the outside world.

It is said that the Moravian missionaries grew vines in the early 1800s to make communion wine, and a number of vineyards have recently sprung up outside Elim on the way down to Cape Agulhas. One, Black Oystercatcher, has
The Overberg Coast

HERMANUS
- Birkenhead House (00 27 28 314 8000; www.birkenheadhouse.com) is the best hotel in Hermanus, with top-flight service, food and decor. It's on the coast, near the best beaches, 30 minutes' walk from town along the famous Hermanus cliff path (or 10 minutes' drive). There is a spa. Breakfast is served on the pool terrace overlooking the ocean: it's a magical way to start the day. The hotel also has a private villa next door. Doubles from R5,080 (about £435), full board.
- The Marine (00 27 28 313 1000; www.marine-hermanus.co.za), in a substantial historic building right in town, has great views over Walker Bay, 42 traditional, gracious bedrooms and a very good restaurant. Seafood at The Marine. Doubles from about R2000.
- Also centrally located is the distinctly Provençal-style guesthouse Auberge Burgundy (00 27 28 313 1201; www.auberge.co.za), opposite The Burgundy restaurant (see below). It has 16 bedrooms set around peaceful, shady courtyards. Doubles from about R300.
- Sea- and land-based activities can be arranged through Walker Bay Adventures (www.walkerbayadventures.co.za). One of the original shark-cage diving companies in town is Shark Lady Adventures (www.sharkladycaptain.com).
- Whale Coast Collection (00 27 28 312 326; www.whalecoastcollection.com) is recommended for villas to rent.
- The most popular restaurant for lunch is The Burgundy (00 27 28 312 2800; www.burgundyrestaurant.co.za). The Harbour Rock (00 27 28 312 2920; www.harbourrock.co.za), overlooking the new harbour, serves great sushi with sensational views. The Bistro (00 27 28 313 1293; www.justpure.co.za) is good for an organic coffee or light lunch.
- The Hermanuspietersfontein Food & Wine Market (www.hpff1355.co.za; Sat 9am–10pm) is where most of Hermanus hangs out. Nearby Wine Village (00 27 28 316 9988; www.winevillage.co.za) is the best shop for local wines; and Eat (00 27 28 316 2348) is a fun place for lunch.
- Winery restaurants La Vierge (00 27 28 313 2007; www.lavierge.co.za) and Heavens (00 27 21 200 2148; www.newtonjohnson.com) serve great food (and wines, of course) and have views over the vineyards to the sea.

STANFORD
- If you stop for lunch in this pretty, sleepy town, Mariann's restaurant (00 27 28 341 0272) is recommended.

ARNISTON
- The Arniston Spa Hotel (00 27 28 445 9900; www.arnistonhotel.com) is the only hotel in town. Doubles from about R955.
- Family-run Kassies Kove restaurant (00 27 83 937 8293) is in a fisherman's cottage in the protected Kassiebaai fishing village. It's fun, and the decor is completely kitsch, but the prices are surprisingly high.

DE HOOP NATURE RESERVE
- For trails and walks, contact CapeNature (www.capenature.co.za). For information on accommodation, contact the De Hoop Collection (www.dehoopcollection.co.za).
Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of Africa. Clockwise from above: a bedroom and the central courtyard at Koppie Alieen in De Hoop Nature Reserve; the restaurant at Black Oystercatcher winery.
Getting to the Cape

The writer travelled to South Africa with Africa Travel (020 7843 3587; www.africatravel.co.uk). An 11-day break to the Cape, with three nights’ B&B at Kensington Place in Cape Town, three nights’ B&B at Paternoster Dunes Boutique Guesthouse and three nights at Seagull Cottage in Churchhaven, costs from £1,995 per person, including British Airways flights and car hire. A seven-night trip to Cape Town and the Overberg Coast, with three nights’ B&B at Sea Five in Campos Bay, two nights’ full board at Birkenhead House and two nights’ B&B at Opstal Manor House in the De Hoop Nature Reserve, costs from £2,095 per person, including British Airways flights and car hire.

Journey time Flight time from London to Cape Town is 12 hours. Paternoster is about two hours’ drive from Cape Town, as is Hermanus if you take the scenic, coastal route.

Weather to go

The West Coast is at its best when the spring flowers are in bloom (August–September). Visit the Overberg Coast any time from November to March; Christmas/New Year is the peak holiday period.

opened a sophisticated roadside restaurant and wine shop, and others are sure to follow; wine buffs are already excited about the Sauvignon Blanc produced here, in what are billed as Africa’s most southerly vineyards.

Cape Agulhas is the southernmost tip of Africa, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. It is a wild place of moody, forbidding seascapes, free of any tourist paraphernalia. The division of oceans is marked with a monument, in front of which everyone who makes it down here likes to be photographed. A little further east is Arniston, one of my favourite places on the Overberg Coast. It is in a more beautiful and approachable setting than Agulhas, with a picturesque old fishing village, Kassiesbaai, next to the harbour from which Cape Coloured (mixed-race) fishermen set out each day to catch suppers.

From Arniston I drove to the farm-supply town of Bredasdorp before turning east on the last stretch of tar mac road I would see in a while. The final 60km to the entrance of De Hoop Nature Reserve is on nerve-jangling gravel; and in the reserve the roads get even worse. But rich rewards await: 36,000 hectares of protected sand dunes, plains and limestone hills fronted by 45km of dramatic, Indian Ocean coastline.

I stayed at Koppie Aleen, a huddle of four whitewashed, thatched cottages set around a central courtyard in the midst of 1,000 hectares of towering sand dunes. It is the most remote place to stay on De Hoop, without electricity or pretension but recently refurbished by the De Hoop Collection, a consortium of private investors which also established the Madikwe Game Reserve in South Africa’s North West Province. All the old farm buildings and government chalets are now being restored and redecorated, and the De Hoop Collection has opened a good restaurant. The Fig Tree, at the Opstal (homestead). Here there are also cottages, rondavels and a manor house adjacent to a brackish lake, home to fish eagles and 150,000 flamingos in the summer months. On the other side of the lake is the Melkkamer, the latest addition to the Collection, a meticulously restored sandstone manor house built in 1907 by John Anderson, who bought De Hoop farm, as it was then, to breed racehorses. The most remote house in the reserve, and next on the list for restoration, is Lekkerwater, the former holiday home of FW de Klerk, the last president of apartheid-era South Africa.

De Hoop Nature Reserve started out in the late 1950s as an experimental wildlife farm, breeding endangered bontebok antelope and Cape mountain zebras; both species are still around, as are eland, ostrich and even leopard. Given the state of the roads, the best way to experience the reserve is on foot, and there are organised and informal trails and hikes, including a five-day Whale Trail: the reserve extends three nautical miles offshore, where the placid southern right come to mate, calve and rear their young, as they do at Hermanus.

De Hoop is majestic and elemental, a raw and savagely beautiful place, gloriously estranged from the rest of the world. It won’t be long before the roads are improved and more visitors start arriving — indeed, the process has already begun — but the reserve will never feel overrun. With luck, too, the back roads of the Western Cape will continue to surprise and delight visitors for generations to come.