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From drugs and gangs to sea barnacles

Dalfrenzo Laing sounds like an academic as he trots out facts about the De Hoop reserve's many treasures, writes Lesley Stones

SEA barnacles have an astonishing sex life. I'll spare you the intimate details, but under that hard, impassive shell lurks a tiny throbbing beast. I know this thanks to Dalfrenzo Laing, an excellent guide who makes marine life even more colourful than it already is.

Laing is impressive with his stargazing too, trotting out the scientific names for each fanciful constellation. Then he makes the fynbos and proteas positively bloom with the fascinating facts he tells about them.

All done with the glint of several gold teeth, a couple of scars, a cheeky grin and an entertaining accent.

Laing is the head guide at De Hoop Nature Reserve, on the south coast's whale route, and he's so knowledgeable that you imagine he must have a solid academic career behind him.

"Naah," he says. "I used to be a petrol pump attendant."

Laing's first 20 years didn't augur well for a successful lifestyle, with a background of poverty, drugs and gangs. But he's made up for it in the past four years, and is now one of SA's best marine guides, a breed even scarcer than the whales he's pointing out. He's also a level-one nature guide, earning both qualifications from The Field Guides Association of Southern Africa.

Laing was born in Robertson, but grew up in the quiet town of Napier, and still plays rugby for the local team. He matriculated from Napier High School in 2008 in second place overall, beaten only by his friend, Clayton. Jobs were limited so he became a petrol-pump attendant, until the recession tightened and he was retrenched nine months later.

"The manager brought me into the office and said you are young and don't really have any responsibilities so I have to let you go," Laing remembers. "I hadn't walked more than 100m when a woman approached me. She worked at Napier Tourism Office and she asked me if I wanted to join a guiding course. I didn't know what that was because I'd never been to a nature reserve in my life."

Laing isn't sure whether the tourism officer bumped into him by accident or by design. Her office was next to the petrol forecourt, and she probably knew jobs were being cut.

Perhaps she also knew Laing had studied tourism at school.

"It was lucky she bumped into me that day. It was a perfect opportunity, so I said I'd love to attend," he says.

Laing had been recruited for the first marine guiding course to be offered in the country, but first he had to convince the trainer he was a good candidate.

"I had to explain to him why I wanted to do the course. The only thing I could say is I want to improve my lifestyle and get out of the poverty I'm in, so this



GOING PLACES: Dalfrenzo Laing is one of a handful of trained marine guides in SA, a great step upwards from becoming a petrol station attendant when there was no other work to be found. Picture: LESLEY STONES

is an opportunity I can make the best of. He said fine, he'll accept me, and did I know anybody else who could attend? So I called my friend Clayton."

The pair of them took an eight-month course at De Hoop with recruits from vastly different walks of life. "There were about 16 on the course, with ex-lawyers, ex-real estate agents, a priest and me, an ex-petrol-pump attendant."

Laing's participation was funded by Agulhas Bio Initiative, which sponsors people from local communities to improve themselves and strengthen conservation. His training included practical experience at various nature reserves and working in restaurants to learn hospitality skills.

After eight months, Laing gave a final presentation to the course directors and William Stephens, the owner of the De Hoop Collection, which runs the accommodation on the reserve. Laing spoke about how De Hoop could be improved. He suggested that it needed some trained guides, and promptly found himself employed. He is now the head guide with a team of four.

"There are not a lot of marine guides in the country, maybe only 50," he says. "I wouldn't say I'm the best in the country, but me and Clayton are the only marine guides who have been active for the past four years so we have more

conservation experience than the others."

Every year he takes a field trip to different marine protected areas and nature reserves to assess the conservation status and discuss new developments in nature conservation.

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He also leads land and coastal tours around the reserve and gives talks to groups, including schoolchildren, encouraging them to protect and enjoy wildlife and perhaps consider it as a career.

His own school days were troubled, before he found his direction. "I struggled with diseases when I was much younger. I had an accident and fell on my head when I was six and I struggled with epilepsy until I was 13, so I always think I could have been more clever than I am now."

He outgrew epilepsy at just about the same time as his father left the family. "At that point I just had to be the man of the house," he says. His mother moved them back to Robertson, where Laing got involved with

drugs and gangs. "For three years, I was involved in heavy stuff. Then I made a mess of one year of my school career and got slapped by my mother. We came back to Napier to get me away from the gangs and the drugs, and from that time I was mostly on the straight and narrow."

In Napier, he attended a Model C school, but the family ran out of money and he had to study for matric by candlelight. He tells his story with humour, humility and no self-pity. Instead, there's a layer of wisdom that combines with his extensive knowledge to make him seem far older than 24.

One very important moment in his life came when the school principal addressed the pupils at the end of his final year, he says. "The principal says a long speech and you have to take something out of it, and he said life gives you 1,000 chances.

"All through your life you have 1,000 chances on average, and the only thing you need to do is grab one and commit and make a success out of that one. So for me it's like a motto I have and I try to do the best I can."

He's making up for his earlier lack of ambition with determined plans to increase his guiding qualifications and move up the conservation ladder.

He's studying for his level-two nature guide qualification and plans to begin a nature conservation diploma next year. That's usually a three-year

course at university but Laing plans to study part time through Unisa so that he can remain at De Hoop.

"I'm going to study for both qualifications at the same time and that's a lot of work, but guides who get that are in demand outside the country. I'm also working towards becoming the general manager of De

Hoop," he grins. "By character I'm a dreamer so I always have a few ideas in my head which I want to achieve and where I want to be."

He'd like to bring his mother to the reserve to show her where he works and what he's achieved. But he'll probably get a slap if he tells her about the sex life of the barnacle.

City's less obvious delights revealed

HIDDEN CAPE TOWN
 Paul Duncan and Alain Proust
Struik Lifestyle

IT'S easy to get distracted by Cape Town's natural beauty. There's a mountain towering over the city, beautiful beaches nearby and one of the world's most magnificent botanic gardens just 13km from the centre. But Cape Town also has a rich architectural heritage. You only have to walk down Adderley Street, up Wale Street and through Long Street, and look up at the buildings along the way to realise this. But have you ever wondered what lies behind the doors?

I've lived in Cape Town for almost 30 years but, as I paged through author Paul Duncan and

arts, writes with authority on buildings, interiors and art.

His research and writing on the history of each building is also interesting and convincing without being overly detailed and laboured.

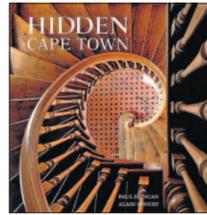
Proust's photographs are characterised by their deep, warm and sunny colours. Hidden Cape Town includes a pleasing selection of panoramic and close-up photographs, which give a good sense of space and detail. There are also several shots of artwork in the buildings, accompanied by interesting captions written by Duncan. It's the combination of intriguing photography and unexpected information that makes it more engaging than an average coffee-table book. Who knew, for

example, that the walls of the children's ward of the "Gothic Revival cake" that is the New Somerset Hospital (opened in 1862) near the V&A Waterfront still feature depictions of traditional English nursery rhymes painted in 1900 by "benevolent citizens ... in Sunday art circles".

Duncan writes that the real surprise for him was the interior of the Old Mutual building in Darling Street. The Old Mutual rooms are among the few featured in the book not generally open to the public. This, says the author, is a pity. Most of the places included are, however, and it's up to us "not to simply rush past".

Hidden Cape Town is a gem for anyone who wants to get to know the city better. It should be compulsory reading for Cape Town tour guides and for anyone who thinks there's not much to do in the Mother City on stormy days.

Penny Haw



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Mixed homage to Melville's heyday

THE LEOPARD
 63A 4th Avenue (corner 5th Street), Melville, Johannesburg; Lunch: 11am-10pm, Friday and Saturday; Dinner: 6pm-10pm, Monday to Saturday; 011 482 9356
 ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

THE Leopard was located in Parkhurst but now it occupies a typical early 1900s Melville house with generous spaces and a pressed-tin ceiling. There's a wide verandah that works well during the day and is secreted from the street at nights by cheerful candy stripe screens in red and white. The interior is a playful collection of mix-and-match furniture along with similarly eclectic lampshades. It has personality, and fits my recollection of Melville's heyday, when such places were more plentiful than they are today.

The floor is managed by charming waiters and waitresses who really know what's what and can tell you without pretension; and the wine list is a small but fun collection of interesting bottles. The menu is similarly playful – many Asian flavours matched to café-bistro cuisine. Andrea Burger's kitchen is constantly playing with ideas, and few dishes get long "tours of duty".

The menu has kept its exhort-

ation to limit the use of words such as "foodie, kiddies, objet, waitron", as these "may affect our cooking abilities"; while one menu item that has become something of a standard is the "son of Caesar" salad (R75), with cos, parmesan, a "Caesareque" dressing, but also chilli. It's delicious.

A number of starter options revolve around cured meats – for

example, the Knysna coppa with aged local Asiago cheese, greens and rustic bread (R68) and the addition of braesola to a celery, chickpea and Asiago salad. Other options are anchovies with parsley, lemon rind and Spanish onion on toast, and a couple of soups of the day. As these options suggest, starters are straightforward, relying on high-quality ingredients.

On this night, they were a hit and portions were generous.

Mains include the exotic "pata plate" of taro leaf masala rolled up with tzatziki, apple atchar and flatbread, with optional smokey chicken (R65); or braised chilli, cummin and mint brinjal with peanuts, apple pickle and rice (R75). Or you can go for the more recognised options of steak tartare (but with some Ethiopian flavours) or a rib-eye (with peri-peri and olives) and mashed potato – very flavoured. My main was the "Little Cough" quail stuffed with nuts and herby breadcrumbs on a peri-peri sauce – the quail was perfectly cooked but rather overstuffed and oversauced, so the bird's natural flavour did not shine.

The menu suggests that a table shares plates and this would be a great way to eat here, though people who don't like spice might struggle to choose.

For: Great personality and interesting food, good wines.

Against: Always busy, can get very noisy. Don't forget to book.

JP Rossouw
 JP Rossouw is editor of *Rossouw's Restaurants*, the independent guide to dining in SA. All visits are made unannounced and are paid for. www.rossouwsrestaurants.com

How to locate Spain in SA

SPANISH CUISINE | When it comes to Spanish cuisine in SA, our choices are not plentiful. In Johannesburg, I have had a few good meals at Parktown North's Fino. They also served me some good Spanish sherries and wines, and a huge pan of paella on the weekend is a great option for group dining. (011) 880-6808.

In Cape Town, the most authentic eatery for Spanish dishes has, for some time, been Sea Point's La Bruixa, which sits alongside La Boheme as a sister restaurant. Co-owner Anna is a Spanish native and her touch with seafood is very sure, along with plenty of good meaty options on the fun tapas menu (as one expects from this carnivorous culture). (021) 434-8797, labohemebistro.co.za.

A relative newcomer is La Parada, which now has two branches, one on the main road of Kalk Bay and a new one on Bree Street. The spaces are great fun – Kalk Bay is cosy, while town is expansive and has tables for groups as well as counter seating in a "shabby-chic" room with parquet floors and pressed ceilings and Spanish posters on the walls. The small menu offers plates in small and larger portions, but I have found the quality for the price on the too-plain side. It is also odd that staples such as paella, are often unavailable. Still, the dishes are very Spanish, so it's a fun alternative. (021) 424-2235