

# **The End of the World**

*by John Farrow*

The end of the known world. For centuries, the southern tip of Africa was the mysterious, forbidding, unknown end of the world. Over the years, explorers had sailed down its Atlantic coast, only to turn back due to lack of food or water, disease, bad weather or simply the sheer distance they had traveled without coming to a foreseeable end.

It wasn't until 1488 that Bartholomeu Dias finally persevered and rounded what he called the Cape of Storms. It would later become known as the Cape of Good Hope, but he had proved that in fact one could sail around the southern tip of Africa without falling off the earth.

Today the distance is no less daunting, but considerably more comfortable – three full-length in-flight movies with plenty of time for lunch and dinner. And that is just the last leg of a trip that spans an ocean, nine time zones and the better part of three continents.

But is it ever worth it.

Africa is unique, and South Africa is no exception. More than twice the size of Texas, it has eleven official languages. Johannesburg, in Gauteng Province (“Place of the gold”) is the largest city and modern in every aspect despite the fact there are mine tailings everywhere. And at more than a mile above sea level, it is a great place for runners to train.

But most people come to South Africa for the animals that can be seen in its 20 national parks. The oldest, largest and perhaps the best for game viewing is Kruger National Park, along the eastern border with Mozambique.

In Kruger, there are more than 150 different species of mammals, including the “Big Five” – lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and cape buffalo. The park is dotted with fenced campsites that provide everything from a simple place to pitch a tent to luxurious bungalows. We checked in at our campsite, stowed our gear in a tent, shooed the vervet monkeys away from the Land Rover and headed out on our first game drive.

Not 20 minutes later a rhino lumbered across the road directly in front of us. You have no earthly idea how truly insignificant and fragile one can feel sitting next to such a huge animal in a vehicle half its size. It is then that you sincerely hope he continues to concentrate on his dinner. Soon after there were elephants, warthogs, kudu, springbok, zebra, wildebeest and so many more animals in bewildering numbers.

Everywhere signs warn against getting out of your vehicle, and a golf course in the nearby town of White River is said to be the most dangerous in the world. It is unfenced.

But one morning, at a second campsite further to the north, we were able to get out of the Land Rover and walk into the bush with our guide, who was armed with a .457 caliber rifle. When asked if he had ever had to use it against an animal, “Not yet,” was his terse reply.

Our guide showed us how to identify tracks in a sandy area – lions, rhino, giraffe, buffalo, elephants and hyena had all been this way. We learned to identify them by the dung, too – elephant (huge mounds of grass and bark the size of soccer balls); hyena (white, from all the bones they crush in their powerful jaws and eat; rhino (just a huge mess).

Not long afterwards a herd of giraffes drifted by, munching on the tops of trees. They eyed us warily but continued with their meal.

During breakfast, an elephant began meandering towards our camp, ripping up clumps of grass and stuffing them into his mouth with his incredibly flexible trunk. Soon he was no more than ten feet behind our tent, still foraging and paying neither us nor our camp any mind.

To some runners, South Africa means one thing: the Comrades Marathon. It is run each June (mid-winter in the southern hemisphere) between Durban and Pietermaritzburg – 89 kilometers (56 miles) long. (They do things in a big way in South Africa, and just because a race is called a marathon, don't assume that it will be a "mere" 26.2 miles.) The start and finish cities alternate each year, as does the route, downhill one year and uphill the next (the easier route, according to veterans).

Over in Cape Town, there is the Two Oceans Marathon (56 kilometers, about 35 miles). Said to be the most beautiful race in the world, it is run among some of the most dramatic and rugged mountains anywhere on the planet and passes near the place where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet off southern Africa. The finish is near Groot Constantia, the oldest vineyard and winery in the world, still making award-winning wines since its founding in 1685. Try the Cape Ruby Port. It is delicious.

From Cape Town it is an easy drive south, past Boulders Beach and the only colony of penguins in Africa, to the Cape of Good Hope. But we had to work our way through three groups of baboons to get there.

The landscape is other-worldly, with strange plants and trees everywhere accentuating the extremely rugged landscape punctuated by sharp peaks and huge granite boulders. This was once what scientists call Gondwanaland, a land mass that broke apart some 200 million years ago to form Africa, South America, Antarctica and Australia. This place is old, and it looks old.

It is only a short walk to a viewing area below an abandoned lighthouse and I am struck by the panorama sweeping before us. In those waters once sailed legendary explorers such as Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan and Sir Francis Drake, as well as Dias. Over the horizon is the South Pole. To the right is Argentina and to the left, India. But closer to the point, this is the place once believed to be the End of the World.

*It's the end of the world as we know it.*

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*It's the end of the world and I'm feeling fine.\**

\*R.E.M., "It's the End of the World as We Know It" (1987).