

# A Walk on the *Wild* Side

by Dr Yuen Sok Wei Julia, Editorial Board Member

I was 20 the first time I went on a completely self-planned trip to Japan with my medical school friends. I fondly remember the meetups we had prior to the trip, huddling over computer screens, scrolling through pages of accommodations, flight tickets, attractions and food options. We were medical students without deep pockets. We waited for the cheapest air tickets, stayed in hostels, took the Japanese rail, pedaled our way through the city on bicycles and ate where locals eat. I was sold.

Fast forward 10 years, I've been fortunate to have travelled to many beautiful cities and countries. But perhaps the trip that left one of the deepest impressions on me was the one to South Africa; Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Cape Town is truly one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Towering majestic mountains and the glistening blue ocean certainly make for picture perfect moments. What better way



to enjoy the amazing view than from the sky in a helicopter? It was my first time in a helicopter. With the spinning rotor blades overhead and amidst all the noise, I slid into the seat beside the pilot, fastened my seatbelt, put on my noise cancelling headphones, and then we were off! It was an exhilarating experience as I enjoyed the aerial view of Cape Town, flying over several well-known areas such as the City Bowl, Green Point, Sea Point, Clifton and Camps Bay.

One of my pit stops was the Cape Town Ostrich Range. I went on an educational tour about the Ostrich, the largest bird in the world, learning

about its behaviour, ecology and a little on physiology. Did you know that an Ostrich egg is roughly the equivalent of 24 chicken eggs and contains approximately 2000 calories? While I was still trying to absorb all the facts about this truly remarkable animal, I met Tom Thumb! (photo: tomthumb) Isn't he adorable? He holds the Guinness World Record for being the smallest fully grown living ostrich, standing at 1.27 meters, compared to an average male ostrich which is usually 1.8 to 2.7 meters tall.

The Boulders beach is home to about 3000 adorable African Penguins, which are an endangered species.



I took a boat ride to Seal Island, aptly named for the more than 60000 fur seals that occupy this piece of land measuring about 2 hectares in area.

I visited the Ukutula Conservation Centre which specializes in predator conservation by captive breeding, reproductive and genetic research, conservation programs as well as by education. It was an afternoon well spent, learning more about these African predators. I had the opportunity to get up close and personal with cheetahs and four rambunctious lion cubs that

seemed intent on chewing on anything they could get their little fangs on. But the most unforgettable wildlife experience had to be the guided bush walk with lions. We were allowed to walk with African lions, observing their behaviour and interactions in their natural environment. Although lions are not commonly known to climb trees, I was surprised to witness how these powerful cats could climb with ease and agility. My thoughts of climbing up a tree should the need arise instantly vaporised. It was indeed a walk on the wild side and truly a walk to remember.

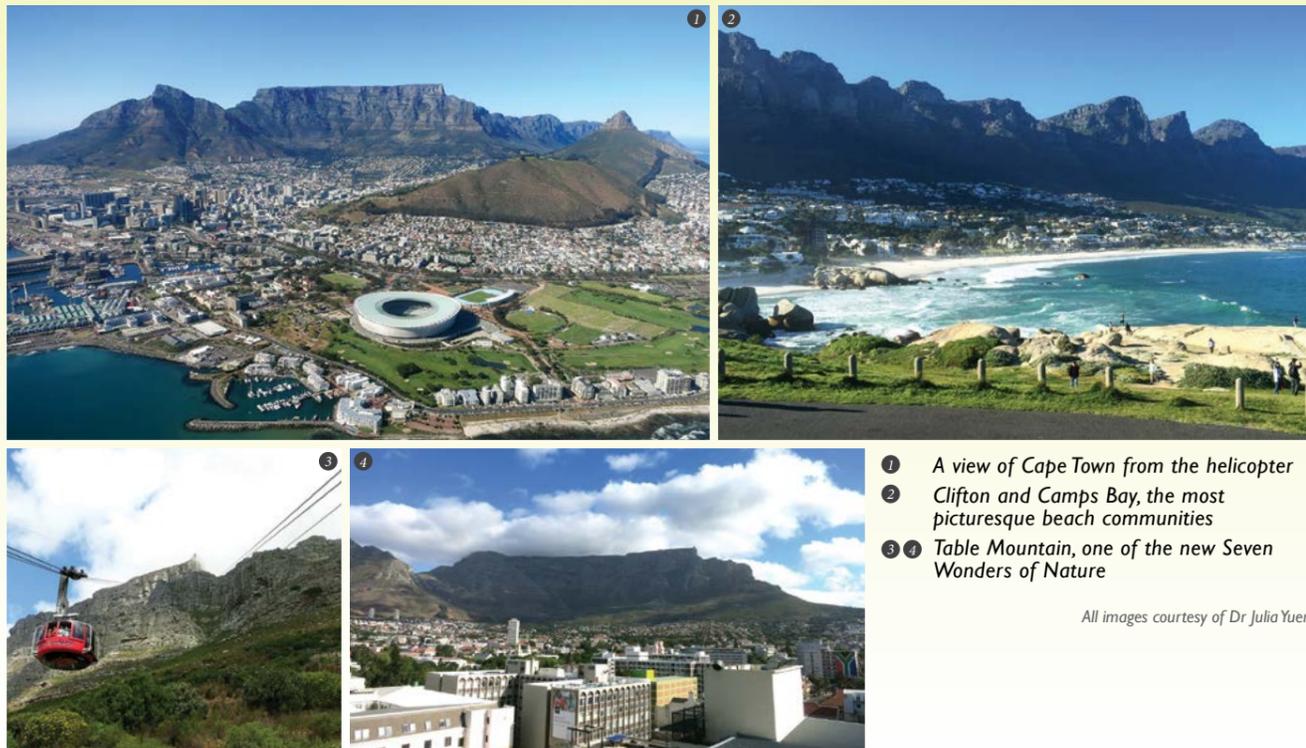
Without a doubt, the highlight of the trip was the game drives! Game drives are the quintessential safari activity to do in Africa; venturing out into the bush in a vehicle and hunting down the best spots to view wildlife in their natural habitat. I went on 3 game drives during my stay, twice at dawn and once at dusk. My best experience had to be the one at Pilanesberg National Park. I was fortunate to be able to see the

majestic big five of Africa, namely the lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant, and Cape buffalo. It's hard to describe the feeling of locking eyes with an approaching lion and seeing it saunter by just in front of your vehicle.

I even witnessed a cheetah stalking a wild boar followed by a high speed chase! Fortunate for the wild boar, it got away. There was such abundance of wildlife, such as the zebra, giraffe, hippopotamus, crocodile, coyote, kudu, impala, etc. To me, it literally felt like National Geographic from behind the computer screen and television coming alive in real time. For all those National Geographic and wildlife lovers out there, you really have to experience it for yourself.

Watching the incredibly beautiful African sun rise and set across the plains, there couldn't be a better way to conclude my unforgettable experience in South Africa.

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1 A view of Cape Town from the helicopter  
2 Clifton and Camps Bay, the most picturesque beach communities  
3 4 Table Mountain, one of the new Seven Wonders of Nature

All images courtesy of Dr Julia Yuen

