

Rising tide

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Durban is a growing gateway to South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal region

The large sign erupting from the volcano-shaped mountain of red powder reads "Mother In Law Exterminator".

But the smiling lady at one of the stalls in Durban's Victoria Market isn't inciting me to commit a crime - it's just one of the more inventive names for the huge range of spices on offer here.

Because Durban, the sunny city known as the gateway to South Africa's north-eastern KwaZulu-Natal province, is also the country's cultural and culinary melting pot. Here, visitors will find a large Indian community and a strong Zulu presence, giving their stay a different flavour from Cape Town or Johannesburg.

Durban has more to offer than just its sandy beaches, or as a gateway to the battlefields and safari regions further north, so rather than rushing through, convince clients to stay for a day or two and get a taste of Durban.

▶ WHAT TO DO

Durban's domestic tourists come for one major reason - the flat, wide, sandy beaches that line its Golden Mile. They can easily provide the location for a welcome few days of beach relaxation within a Brit's wider tour of South Africa too, but there's more to see.

Durban is home to a huge Indian community - the highest Indian population of any city



Durban is South Africa's cultural and culinary melting pot, so there's more to see than the beaches

outside India - and so the food here has a spicy kick and is definitely worth tasting. The most famous dish is bunny chow - curry served in hollowed-out bread - and clients shouldn't miss out on the chance to sample it while they're here. Recommend Freedom Café, a friendly spot serving a light, upmarket version

of the dish at tables under a tree-shaded courtyard, or within glass-walled converted shipping containers. Victoria Market is the place to pick up not only a selection of spices to take home - from rubs for flavouring meat to mixes for bunny chow, the classic potjiekos stew, and the locals' favourite 'the full mix' which means a bit of everything - to local arts and crafts.

Another side of Durban culture and food can be experienced on a township tour. During Apartheid, South Africa's black communities were segregated in townships and these areas are still lively, thriving black neighbourhoods. Durban's Umlazi is the second biggest township →

TOP TIP

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➔ in South Africa, after Soweto, and a tour is a fascinating window into an un-touristy side of city life. We stopped at Max's Lifestyle for a cooking lesson and brai – a traditional barbecue.

The downtown city skyline is dominated by the curving arch of the Moses Mabhida Stadium, one of the host stadiums for the 2010 World Cup and now the spot for thrills and spills. The Big Rush Big Swing, jumping from an 80m high platform into the stadium below, is only for the brave, but anyone can stomach the SkyCar, a glass lift that crawls up the side of the arch to a viewing platform at the top. For an even better view, suggest a helicopter tour over the Durban coastline, offered through BAC Helicopters.

At the other end of Marine Parade are thrills of a different kind, in the form of uShaka Marine World. The marine theme park offers everything from cage diving in the shark tank and dolphin shows to water slides and pools.

▮ WHERE TO STAY

In downtown Durban, hotels line the beachfront. When it comes to being at the centre of everything, African Pride recommends the Southern Sun Elangeni & Maharani, where the towers are home to 734 rooms, and



there are three swimming pools, a spa, and a range of dining options from Japanese to grills. A quieter, more low-key alternative is Quarters Hotel Florida Road, a boutique guesthouse in the Morningside area, known for its restaurants, coffee shops and bohemian vibe.

However, operators often find British clients like to stay in the quieter suburbs outside the centre and head into the city solely for sightseeing.

In Umhlanga Cox & Kings recommends the upmarket Oyster Box, (see *Tried & Tested*) and the

stylish 88-room Beverly Hills Hotel, and further along the coast the Fairmont Zimbali Resort, which is surrounded by milkwood forest, lagoons and a golf course. This 154-room property is 30 minutes from Durban, with its own spa, kids' club, and a range of restaurants.

▮ MOVING ON

The KwaZulu-Natal region may be best known to British tourists – especially those of a certain age – for its battlefields. It was a theatre of conflict in both the Anglo-Boer and Anglo-Zulu wars. ➔



ASK THE EXPERT



Claire Farley, *2by2 Holidays*:

"It's the warm golden beaches that bring people to Durban, as these are generally good all year round and ideal for relaxation after a safari or touring holiday elsewhere in the country. In terms of sightseeing, start with a city tour to take in lovely colonial buildings, such as the City Hall. Gandhi lived in Durban while evolving his strategy of passive resistance, and you can visit his house, which is now a museum. The Natal Shark Board offers interesting tours of their facilities and the bird park at Umgeni is worth a visit. The lush Durban Botanical Gardens are renowned, and the Japanese Gardens offer a peaceful retreat."



TOP: Moses Mabhida Stadium
LEFT: Fairmont Zimbali Resort
BELOW: Bunny Chow at Freedom Café





ABOVE: Battlefield memorial at Isandlwana
RIGHT: iSimangaliso Wetland Park



→ The Drakensberg Mountains – known as the Barrier of Spears by the Zulus – are home to the famous Anglo-Boer war site of Spion Kop, and far more ancient Bushman paintings, which have made the landscape a World Heritage Site. 2by2 Holidays' Claire Farley recommends ascending the Sani pass in a jeep, "a hair-raising experience, and so long as you take your passport you can enjoy a drink at the highest pub in Africa, in the kingdom of Lesotho."

Cox & Kings recommends foodies head to Drakensberg via the Midlands, a region known for its artisan producers, from cheese to craft beer.

Isandlwana Lodge, a four-to-five-hour drive from Durban, is the perfect stay for battlefields of the Anglo-Zulu war. The beautiful lodge is set into the hillside with panoramic views from the rooms, pool and public areas, and a specialist guide to take guests on tours of the neighbouring battlefields of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift – the latter being the battle the Michael Caine film *Zulu* is based on. It's in Zulu heartland and has strong ties with the local community, so guests can visit the local school,



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homesteads and even a sangoma – a traditional medicine man.

The KwaZulu-Natal region has great safari opportunities too, with the big five on offer at state-run Hluhluwe, once the hunting grounds of King Shaka of the Zulus and particularly famous for rhino, and private reserves including Phinda, Amakhosi and Mkuze Falls. Close by is the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a diverse ecosystem which is home to hundreds of species of birds plus elephant, rhino, buffalo, dolphins, whales, and turtles.

African Pride combines many of the region's highlights on a six-night escorted tour of KwaZulu-Natal out of Durban from £1,189, including two nights in the Drakensberg Mountains, two nights in Isandlwana and two nights in Hluhluwe. 

Tried & Tested

THE OYSTER BOX, UMHLANGA

British guests at The Oyster Box stay an average of four to five nights and many don't leave the grounds – a shame, as Durban has lots to offer, but understandable when you see this hotel. Many of the 86 rooms – all white wood and walls, with a faintly nautical air – overlook the beach, with its dramatic rocks and picture-perfect red and white lighthouse. Two pools – one by the spa and fitness centre, the other by the beach – feature the same red and white candy stripe colour scheme, as do the chairs in the breezy Ocean Terrace restaurant, where guests can take breakfast, lunch and dinner within earshot of the sea. When

it comes to restaurants and bars, there's a choice of fine dining in the Grill Room, a legendary afternoon tea in the Palm Court and three bars – classic cocktail elegance in the Oyster Bar, teak and leather-styled tradition in the Chukka Bar, and fine views from the rooftop Lighthouse Bar. Tell clients not to miss the Curry Buffet at the Ocean Terrace, with a choice of up to 11 spicy dishes, and to look out for the resident cat, Skabenga, who enjoys so much attention that you can befriend him on Facebook, buy his children's book and even attend his birthday party. Book it: A night's B&B starts at £274, based on two sharing



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