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"The stout ship Birkenhead lay hard and fast, Caught, without hope, upon a hidden rock; Her timbers thrilled as nerves, when through them passed The spirit of that shock."

"So we made women with their children go; The oars ply back again, and yet again, Whilst inch by inch the drowning ship sank low still under steadfast men."

- Sir Francis H. Doyle, *The Loss of the Birkenhead*

The Overberg District is located in the southern part of the Western Cape, sharing shores with the Indian and Atlantic Oceans to the south, while adjoining Cape Town, Cape Winelands, and Eden to the west, north, and east, respectively. It encompasses distinct regions, including Theewaterskloof, Cape Agulhas, Overstrand, Swellendam, and the Overberg district itself. This region is characterised by picturesque mountain ranges, a vast rolling inland plateau, a coastal plateau, and a segment of the Karoo landscape to the north. Overberg, often referred to as the 'Golden Gateway' to the renowned Garden Route, relies significantly on tourism as a key economic driver. The Dutch named it Over't Berg, meaning 'over the mountain', referring to the Hottentots Holland Mountains.



Connections Through Cattle

The region was inhabited by the Khoi and San, who were semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. They had great respect for the land, using it in balance with the rest of the ecosystem, never dwelling but rather visiting.

Occasionally, the San hunters would smoke out animals in certain bushed areas, which may have been the cause of some forest fires in the past, leading to fragmentation of the forests. The Khoi people were pastoralists who used fire to burn large areas of land to promote good grazing areas for their cattle. After the arrival of the European settlers, by the late nineteenth century, the Khoisan communities became increasingly fragmented, and most tribesmen and women wound up working for the settler farmers.

In 1488, the first European who explored the Overberg (and famously navigated the southernmost tip of Africa) was the Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Dias. Before returning home with a disgruntled crew, he made a stop on the west side of the Breede River mouth.

In due course, the first Europeans documented to have settled in the vicinity were a band of Portuguese sailors who found themselves stranded in Plettenberg Bay (at that time referred to as Bahia Formosa), following the wreck of their vessel in 1630. While the Portuguese were pioneers in navigating the Cape of Good Hope during the late 15th century, it was the Dutch who established a lasting colony in the area.

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) played a pivotal role in establishing much of the infrastructure of European presence at the Cape within a century of the arrival of its colonial administrator, Jan van Riebeeck, at Table Bay in 1652. Upon reaching the Cape, the Dutch were intent on initiating trade with the Khoi people, leading Van Riebeeck to dispatch a VOC expedition to what is now Baardskeerdersbos, in 1660. Subsequently, the VOC established contact with other Khoi groups, and in exchange for their livestock, the Khoi traded copper, tobacco, beads, and arrack with the Dutch.

From 1663, the Dutch East India Company intensified its efforts to acquire cattle from the Overberg. Explorers meticulously mapped out the area, assigning Dutch names—some still in use today—to its rivers and mountains. The Dutch were aware of the Overberg forests as early as the 17th century. In October 1688, during his expedition, Simon van der Stel traversed the ravine between the Bergrivier and Sonderend River.

Grazing becomes Greed
Due to the Dutch East India Company's (VOC) increasing demand for livestock, the Khoi-na people could no longer meet the requirements for trade. As a result, the VOC claimed grazing rights

throughout the Overberg region. Governor Willem Adriaan van der Stel set an example by granting himself grazing rights for 18 uninterrupted farms.

In the beginning of 1707, Van der Stel was ousted from his position due to corrupt practices and repatriated to the Netherlands. Consequently, his extensive private property, Vergelegen, was auctioned off and subdivided into four distinct farms, leading to the collapse of his agricultural domain.



Field of sheep on green pastures of The Overberg

This event marked a significant turning point as the VOC withdrew from direct trade in the Overberg and instead relied on local burghers (settlers) as intermediaries. As the colony expanded, government posts were established which resulted in significant growth in the Overberg's agricultural industry.

In the initial development of the Cape settlement, the primary aim was to maintain control over the land and discourage colonists from venturing too far into the hinterland. The earliest European community in the Overberg region emerged alongside the Sonderend River. Regardless, Cape farmers gradually expanded their reach inland, and by 1700, they were settling in the region between the Cape and the natural barriers of the Hottentots Holland and Sonderend mountain ranges. After 1720, a wave of settlers migrated to the Overberg, attracted by its plentiful grazing lands for livestock, fertile soil for

The Cursed Coast

The Overberg has witnessed numerous shipwrecks, too many for just one guide. Since the first recorded shipwreck on this coast – the Zoetendal sinking off Struisbaai in 1673 – over 250 shipwrecks and more than 2,500 lives have been lost. Notably, survivors of the Zoetendal received assistance from the Khoi-na people, save for one individual who was tragically killed by an elephant.

The sinking of HMS Birkenhead stands out as a prominent maritime disaster in South Africa's past. On 26 February 1852, it sank off Danger Point close to Gansbaai. Striking an uncharted rock, the vessel swiftly descended into the depths. Approximately 445 military personnel and civilians perished in this tragedy. Notably, the incident is remembered for the noble adherence to the "women and children first" principle, wherein the crew courageously relinquished their places on the lifeboats to prioritise the safety of women and children. This noble act of courage was immortalised in *The Loss of the Birkenhead* by the British poet, Sir Francis H Doyle, two stanzas of which appear at the beginning of this guide.

Valley of Grace

The early 18th century brought with it an influx of settlers, a depletion of natural game and a smallpox outbreak. During all this, the Khoisan found themselves squeezed into unsustainable areas between farms and as a community, they stood at the brink of disappearance. In 1738, a young Moravian missionary, Georg Schmidt, formed a small congregation and taught the Khoisan to read and write. It was here that the mission station Genadendal, which means "Valley of Grace", was formed.

Over time, the mission station flourished. Local farmers gradually accepted the community and even attended their church services. In 1995, Nelson Mandela famously renamed his official residence in Cape Town as Genadendal, paying homage to this historic site.

Patriots without a Nation

In 1795, Swellendam found itself at a turning point. Local farmers, identifying as the "Patriots", had grown weary of the oppressive and corrupt rule of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). They removed the landrost from his position and established a new constitution. However, merely four months later, the British launched an attack on Dutch forces at Muizenberg. The Cape fell into British control, leading to Swellendam also coming under their authority. Settlers who opposed the new rule were ousted from the area.

The Birth of a Woolly Icon

One of South Africa's most notable agricultural achievements is that of the development of the Merino sheep (the *Vaderlandsche skaap* - Fatherland sheep).



1. Elandspad and Sir Lowry's Pass
2. Kleinmond
3. Hermanus
4. Stanford
5. De Kelders
6. Hemel en Aarde
7. Gansbaai
8. Danger Point
9. Kleinbaai
10. Dyer Island
11. Cape Agulhas
12. Struisbaai
13. Arniston
14. De Hoop Nature Reserve
15. Zoetendalsvlei
16. Napier
17. Elim
18. Salmonsdam Nature Reserve
19. Caledon

20. Botrivier
21. Elgin
22. Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve
23. Greyton
24. Riviersonderend
25. Swellendam
26. Suurbraak
27. Buffeljagsrivier
28. Tradouw Pass
29. Bontebok National Park
30. Malgas
31. Cape Hangklip Lighthouse
32. Cape Infanta Lighthouse
33. Cape Agulhas Lighthouse

34. Greyton Farm Animal Sanctuary
35. The African and Penguin Seabird Sanctuary
36. Elgin Railway Market
37. Bredasdorp Shipwreck Museum
38. Drostdy Museum
39. Hermanus Golf Estate
40. Klipgat Caves

Did you know?

Struisbaai has an unusual resident named **Parrie the Stringray**. He is the town mascot and can be approached by locals and fed fish.



41. Hermanus Whale Cruises
42. Rossi's Italian Restaurant
43. Panthera African Big Cat Sanctuary
44. Napier Farm Stall & Restaurant
45. Ianhoe Whale Watching
46. Long Shadows Farm
47. Catch Cook Restaurant & Beach Bar
48. White Shark Projects

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HISTORY

In 1795, Colonel Robert Gordon unsuccessfully commanded the Dutch forces during the Battle of Muizenberg. This humiliation, along with accusations of treachery, ultimately lead to his tragic suicide. Some years before, in 1789, Gordon cunningly orchestrated the import of six Merino sheep (comprising two rams and four ewes) from his native land Holland. At that time, the exportation of sheep was punishable by death so in 1791 Gordon was instructed to return the sheep. Gordon followed through with the request by sending back the six sheep while tactfully neglecting to disclose any information regarding the offspring.

Following his suicide however, Gordon's bereft wife sold the majority of the sheep to an Australian traveller and the remaining three to friends of the Gordon's, the Van Reenen brothers of Cape Town.

After five generations of careful breeding, they successfully developed the ideal Merino sheep we know today.

Wealth flows, then dries up

Joseph Barry & Nephews were not the first to establish a sea link to Swellendam via the Breede River. But they were the most successful. Barry forged his goods transportation business by successfully navigating the treacherous sandbar at the Breede River's entrance and docking 48km upstream at Malgas. His commercial empire, based out of Swellendam, grew to such an extent that he even issued his own currency. However, a series of calamities, along with Barry's untimely death, meant an end to his empire, as well as the golden years of Swellendam.

A Land for all Seasons

The fertile Bokkeveld shale has shaped the Overberg into a predominantly farming region. This nutrient-rich soil has been instrumental in cultivating commercial crops such as barley, oats, wheat, and canola. Additionally, the area has gained recognition for its thriving wine, fruit and livestock farming. Tourism has also played a significant role in the development of the Overberg. The therapeutic properties of the Caledon springs have attracted travellers for decades. In more recent times, the Overberg has embraced its potential for outdoor adventure tourism, with whale watching and shark cage diving just some of the activities on offer.



Canola Sweeping Fields of the Overberg

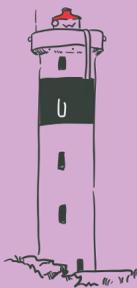


Inside the Waenhuiskrans Cave near Arniston

Lighthouses of the Overberg

31-Cape Hangklip

The most powerful lighthouse in South Africa, Hangklip (hanging rock) was constructed of concrete in 1980 with a height of 22 m. The light has a range of 25 nautical miles, with one flash every 10 seconds.



32-Danger Point

Danger Point can be found near Gansbaai. The 45 m masonry tower was commissioned in 1895 and has a light range of 27 nautical miles, with a group flash of 3 every 40 seconds.



33-Cape Infanta

Located in the De Hoop Marine Reserve at the mouth of the Breede River, Cape Infanta lighthouse is built of aluminium lattice work and stands 15 m high. It has a group flash of 3 every 20 seconds with a light range of 24 nautical miles.



34-Cape Agulhas

This is the southernmost lighthouse in Africa. Designed by Charles Michell and built of limestone in 1849 in the Egyptian revival style, the present lighthouse stands 27 m high. The light has a single flash every 5 seconds.



Did you know?

Sponsor-a-Farm-Friend Programme allows you to 'virtually adopt' an animal, and contribute to their care. **A 12 month commitment entitles you to extra benefits, including a VIP behind the scenes experience of the sanctuary. Sponsors are entitled to discounted merchandise, have first notice of any events, discounted tickets and will receive Christmas and Birthday cards from their animal.** (greytonfarmsanctuary.org/sponsor)

NOTABLE SITES

Biosphere Reserve in Southern Africa in 1998.

Kicking off the Whale Route, Clarence Drive treats you to stunning views of the majestic Hottentots Hollands Mountains on one side, while the ocean sweeps ashore in False Bay on the other. Betty's Bay boasts the Harold Porter National Botanical Gardens as well as the Jackass Penguin Colony at Stony Point.

3-Hermanus

Renowned as one of the best land-based whale watching sites in the world, Hermanus remains a popular holiday destination. Southern Right Whales visit the area from July until December annually. Residents and tourists are blessed with close-up views of these majestic beings who come to within 10 metres of the shore. Whale watchers along the quayside have great fun shouting "that she blows" at the sight of a whale spout.

4-Stanford

This village is named after Captain Robert Stanford, a Royal Navy officer turned local farmer, who still had some obligations to the Royal Navy. When the British government attempted to drop off 300 Irish agitators at the Cape, Stanford was coerced into supplying their royal vessel, the Neptune, with provisions. Subsequently, he was ostracised by the people of the Cape,

losing his friends, businesses, and wealth. The Irish agitators were eventually offloaded in Australia, while Captain Stanford left the Cape and never returned.

5-De Kelders

which means "the cellars", is known for its rugged coastline and caves, and features one particular cave that has been a tourist attraction since the 1700s, due to its impressive dripstone pillars. A dripstone pillar is a column that forms when limestone stalagmites and stalactites meet to form a single pillar. Hendrik Cloete of Constantia offered a substantial reward to anyone who could extract a dripstone pillar from this cave and deliver it to him. Matthey Beukes successfully accomplished this task. Today, visits to the cave can be arranged, although many dripstones have been removed over time. Excavations at another popular cave, Klipgat Cave, have revealed evidence of human habitation dating back over 70,000 years. This cave is open to visitors every day.

6-Gansbaai

which means Bay of Geese, derives its name from the Egyptian geese that tend to flock around the fresh-water fountain in the vicinity of the harbour. This fishing town, known as the Great White Shark capital of the world, offers world-renowned shark cage diving all year round, as well as whale-

watching opportunities from July to December. Local legend has it that bountiful blessings were granted to Gansbaai when the Bulwark ran aground in 1963 and much of her cargo, umpteen barrels of wine, washed ashore. Apparently, the locals suffered a collective hangover in church the following Sunday, but most agreed that gifts from an high ought not to be shunned.

7-Danger Point

The lighthouse, which is erected at the tip of the peninsula overlooking the Birkenhead, was inaugurated on January 1, 1895. The lighthouse stands 18.3 metres high, and is protected under the National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999. The lighthouse was originally erected because, not only did the Birkenhead sink here after striking a submerged rock, but this is also the site of the first "official" sighting of the infamous ghost ship, the Flying Dutchman.

8-Kleinbaai

The strip of sea between Geyser Rock and Dyer Island is known as "Shark Alley" because of the multitude of sharks who feed off the local seals. So the small harbour offers many boat-based tours that specialise in Great White Shark expeditions, and tours to Dyer Island. Legend has it that Black Sophie, a rock about 200 metres offshore, is named after the first ever "madam" of a brothel in the Overberg. A blend of folklore and

history maintains that the presence of Sophia Werner and her ladies averted the first major strike among guano harvesters on Dyer Island, due to the nature of the entertainment they offered.

9-Dyer Island

is named after Samson Dyer, an African American whale harpooner from Newport who successfully harvested guano on the island and sold it to mainlanders as fertiliser. During his time on the island, Dyer also engaged in seal harvesting, mainly from the Cape Fur Seal colony situated on the nearby Geyser Rock. Some signs of his occupation, such as cooking pots and fireplaces, can still be found near the residential area. It is worth noting the abundance of steel and wooden debris along the coastline which serves as a testament to the maritime catastrophes caused by the infamously dangerous reefs surrounding the island.

12-Arniston

This treasured retreat and vacation spot sports two names: Arniston and Waenhuiskrans. The name, Arniston, derives from the British transport/hospital ship, HMS Arniston, that sank off the coast in 1815. Only 6 of the 378 passengers survived the tragedy. Waenhuiskrans (which means wagonhouse cliff) reflects a local geological marvel – an enormous limestone sea cave, which legend claims is big enough to turn a wagon with a full span of oxen. This sea cave is a must-see for visitors. Be on the lookout for pumice stones on the beaches, said to be flotsam from the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883 some 7000 kilometres away. Also explore the traditions and culture of the 200-year-old fishing village Kassesbaai, now declared a national heritage site.

10-Cape Agulhas

the southernmost town on the African continent, is also the point at which the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. Cape Agulhas means "Cape of Needles" and there is some debate as to why the Portuguese explorers of yesterday settled on this name. Possibly the name derives from the sharp and rugged cliffs along the shoreline or it is because a compass needle shows no variance between true north and magnetic north at that southernmost spot. With

its iconic red and white lighthouse, L'Agulhas gets its multifaceted heritage from the diverse nationalities of its shipwreck survivors.

11-Struisbaai

According to local townsfolk, the most beloved and famous resident of Struisbaai is Parrie the Stingray, who has been visiting the shallow harbour for more than 30 years and is regarded as the town's mascot. He even has his own Facebook page. The harbour is an attraction for visitors because it is open to leisure boats as well as local fishing boats, and when traditional fishermen bring in their daily catches, affordable fresh fish is on sale.

14-Soetendalsvlei

wetland ecosystem is Africa's southernmost freshwater lake, serving as a crucial biodiversity hotspot and sanctuary for birds. The vlei derives its name from the Dutch vessel Zoetendal, wrecked in 1873, while en route from Jakarta to The Netherlands. It is from this vlei that survivors of the shipwreck were able to replenish their fresh water supplies for the long trek back to Cape Town.

15-Bredasdorp and Napier

situated in close proximity, were originally intended to be a single town, but intense rivalry between two leading merino sheep farmers in the area, Michiel van Breda and Pletier van der Bijl, led to the construction of two separate churches in order to appease both parties, and thence two different towns. Van Breda's town came to be known

13-De Hoop Nature Reserve

The Reserve is approximately 34 000 ha and forms part of the Cape Floral Kingdom, renowned as one of the world's smallest and most endangered plant kingdoms. It has an abundance of wildlife, and offers an unspoiled sanctuary for nature enthusiasts, especially those who are keen for a sight of the rare bontebok. The long narrow lake offers superb birding opportunities, and the reserve is also where Southern Right Whales migrate from Antarctica to mate and calve along its shores.

20-Grabouw and Elgin

Only locals know where the boundary lies between Grabouw and Elgin. Visitors can be forgiven for thinking it is the same place with two different names. Sir Antonie Viljoen, a medical doctor, purchased Oak Valley farm in Elgin in 1898. He planted over 4000 oaks and 1000 fruit trees, kick-starting the decaduous fruit industry in the valley. Here you can find one of the oldest remaining buildings in the area, the Elgin Apple Museum. Elgin/Grabouw is also the starting point of the Hottentots Holland Hiking Trail.

17-Salmonsdam Nature Reserve

Named after the British captain of the sunken Birkenhead, Robert Salmond, the reserve offers a home to various antelope. One might come across grey duiker, klipspringer, bontebok, baboons and other small mammals.

18-Caledon

named after the Earl of Caledon, is situated to the east of Cape Town and known for its natural hot springs on the slopes of the Klein Swartberg. Today, the mineral baths form part of the world-renowned Caledon Casino Hotel & Spa boasting many features.

21-Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve

became South Africa's inaugural biosphere reserve registered with UNESCO in 1998. With an expanse exceeding 103,000 hectares, larger

ARTS & CULTURE

To experience culture in the Overberg can be as simple as walking through the well-preserved Cape Dutch architecture in towns like Swellendam and Stanford. But there is so much more to explore. The region boasts several art galleries and studios, all featuring the work of local artists across various mediums. Markets and craft fairs are littered throughout the Overberg, with the Elgin Railway Market a must-visit for those looking to sample the work of local crafters and artisans. History buffs can revel in the region's many museums, each one offering a unique glimpse into the past. Places like the Overberg Maritime Museum in Hermanus and Bredasdorp Shipwreck Museum provide insights into the maritime history of the region. Additionally, the Drostdy Museum in Swellendam offers a glimpse into the town's colonial past.



A coastal view of Hermanus

ADVENTURE

The Overberg is an adrenaline junkies dream, with a plethora of adventure activities on offer throughout the region. Quad-biking, kayaking, zip-lining and many others can all be enjoyed. Hermanus and Gansbaai are home to several boat tours during whaling season (June–November), providing views of the majestic southern right whale that can't be beat. Gansbaai is particularly well-known for its shark cage diving experiences, where adventurers can get up close and personal with great white sharks. For those who prefer a slow adventure, many guest farms and lodges offer horseback tours through the region's beautiful landscapes. There are also several hiking and nature trails available. Whether you're up for a multi-day hike along the coast or just a gentle meander, one of the best ways to experience the natural beauty of the Overberg is on foot.



Kleinmond

than the Republic of Singapore, the core of this biosphere remains pristine and unspoiled. It serves as a habitat for 1,880 species of fynbos, making it a focal point of the Cape Floral Kingdom. Moreover, the coastal landscape incorporates a marine component spanning 24,500 hectares, harbouring over 3,500 endemic marine species. This coastal stretch and Marine Protected Area provide sanctuary for highly endangered abalone and serve as breeding grounds for numerous fish and other marine creatures.

22-Greyton

Originally, the entire area around Greyton was home to the Hasseguus Khoikhoi tribe. With the arrival of settlers, it became a farm. After 1854, when Greyton was established, the village gradually transitioned from farmland to individual plots. Today, this little town is awash with old-world charm. What is more, a river runs through it, the Gobos River to be precise, with very pleasant picnic areas on its banks. It has become known as a favourite weekend refuge for stressed cityfolk. Greyton's Saturday farmer's market is, arguably, one of the best in the country. The Farm Animal Sanctuary, about 7 kilometres outside the village, was founded in 2014, and is home to about 200 pigs, sheep, goats, cows, geese, chickens, peacocks, a duck as well as elderly and afflicted dogs and cats.

24-Swellendam

known as the capital of the Overberg is the country's fourth-oldest town, and is perched upon seven hills alongside the Breede River. There is, therefore, no shortage of water for the town's diverse agricultural pursuits. The town's name is a marriage of two names, that of former Governor Hendrik Swellengrebel, and that of his wife, Helena ten Damme. Traces of the once-mighty forests of the region can still be found within the Marloth Nature Reserve. This area offers the scenic six-day Swellendam hiking trail and is a treasure trove of historical buildings that provide a glimpse into the town's rich past.



CONTACT

Ask us to style and plan your unique African adventure!

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