

Beach trail at Walker Bay in a natural paradise

At Cape Town Airport, I'm met with a name sign and also meet my fellow rider Sandra and our guide Howard. This week, it's just the two of us in an intimate setting. We hit it off straight away, so the journey from the airport flies by. At lunchtime, we stop at a typical farm and enjoy fresh apple juice straight from the farm, along with a snack. We then set off along former cattle tracks, crossing the motorway to Hermanus on Walker Bay. This place is famous for its location right on the coast, where whales come seasonally to calve and raise their calves for the first few weeks before the various pods migrate further out to deeper waters with more food. Quite a few whale calves are born here. We walk a short distance along the coast and, of course, scan the water for whales. There seemed to be more here than usual this year. But unfortunately we're out of luck today, as not a single one is to be seen. We drive a little way inland from the coast until we turn onto a gravel track leading up a hill. At the top is the farm where we'll spend our first night. The complex has a homely feel and is very well maintained, and our rooms are huge. The complex features a dining room, a reading room, a fantastic pool with a magnificent view and sun loungers. There are many walking trails in this nature reserve, so we decide to go for a short walk. We enjoy the sunshine and the various species of fynbos. Some are in full bloom and provide a stunning backdrop.

On our return, we make the most of the pool, even going for a swim whilst enjoying the view stretching all the way to the ocean.

At around 7.30 pm, the multi-course dinner is served. The starter of beetroot, goat's cheese and vegetable sticks with hummus is right up my street. The main course of mushroom lasagne with new potatoes and an avocado and tomato salad is also delicious, as is the lime meringue cake.



The next day begins with a sumptuous breakfast. After all the sunshine the day before, the sun is hiding today and, unfortunately, it keeps raining on and off. Howard picks us up and we head

to see the horses. We wait out the brief downpour before our three horses are brought from the pasture and out of the herd. I'm given Princess, a very even-tempered mare. Sandra is given Nemo, who is ridden bitless and has a mind of his own. The horses grew up surrounded by nature on the reserve before being trained as trail horses. They're characterised by sure-footedness and a calm demeanour, undisturbed by birds, noises or objects. We mount up and set off through the fynbos landscape. We ride along narrow tracks, sometimes cross-country, and along paths where not even a jeep could get through. We make good progress at a walk, but also with a few sections of trot and canter. Various plants, shrubs, eucalyptus trees (which were imported from Australia), as well as numerous bird species such as the yellow bishop, call this unique biotope home.



Today's ride lasts a leisurely 4 hours – the ideal way to start before we reach the cottage where we'll be staying. A herd of Shetland ponies is already waiting for us, forming the welcoming committee. Our horses are taken to a separate paddock where they roll around to their hearts' content. We guests settle in at the farm: a lovely cottage with a kitchen, a dining area with a fireplace, and two bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, awaits us. We sit on the covered terrace and enjoy our lunch of sandwiches, fruit and crisps whilst observing the natural surroundings.

Howard joins us for dinner, which we share with the farm community. The food here is vegan/vegetarian, made with vegetables from the farm's own garden – everything is fresh: salads, bread, 'lentil casserole', vegetables, etc.



Afterwards, we're given a short tour of the grounds of this historic farm before settling down by the fire in front of the fireplace – what a lovely day!

Breakfast is on the table at 8 o'clock. Afterwards, our luggage is loaded up and we head to the horses. They've had their breakfast by now, and off we go. Princess is a bit sceptical about the Shetland ponies, but can be persuaded to walk past them. We head uphill through scrubland and woodland – our horses carry us up the slope like mountain goats.

After about two hours, the landscape changes completely and we reach the first sand dunes. As soon as you reach the crest of one dune, the next one follows straight away until we finally reach the wide sandy beach. We then enjoy several fantastic gallops along the beach – a real treat!



In between, there are sections where we ride at a walk. We stop on a dune for a snack from our saddlebags. We share the apple with the horse and, of course, scan the sea for whales. We're lucky and spot a few spouts, fins and even a humpback whale breaching – an absolute highlight. We've also spotted some from horseback – a magnificent experience. I could watch them for hours, but our guide eventually urges us to set off (my camera has already overheated). We ride a short way along the beach, then head into the hills and further inland. We ride cross-country towards Stanford. In the distance, we can already make out a lagoon, which is our destination for today. The horses are watered and finally let out onto the incredibly vast pasture. That'll come back to haunt us when we have to round them up tomorrow...

We're staying at this lodge right by the lagoon inlet tonight and tomorrow night. The room is spacious, with a double bed, kitchenette, bathroom, TV and a terrace overlooking the lagoon – and thus plenty of bird species. We make the most of it straight away for our lunch – marvellous!

A hot shower, then some time to relax before heading to the restaurant in Stanford for dinner. Tonight we're going to an Indian/Pakistani restaurant. The food is good and plentiful, accompanied by a cider – the perfect way to round off another wonderful day!



Breakfast is ready in the fridge; we just have to help ourselves – it's very relaxed: yoghurt, muesli, fruit, coffee, tea and juice, jam, etc. Then we're picked up and head to the pasture, which is just a stone's throw away. The horses have already been rounded up; today we're taking Casanova and Luke, two home-bred horses. Part African breed and a quarter Friesian, they're easy to handle and ride on a long rein. Riding alongside the lagoon, we pass an incredible array of flowers, shrubs and trees. The native roitkraanz tree is 200 years old when it reaches medium size! This tree provides shelter for animals, for example, when a short, fierce bushfire sweeps through. It doesn't burn, unlike the introduced eucalyptus and acacia trees, so care is taken to preserve the natural balance.

Continuing along sandy tracks, with a few stretches of trotting and even galloping, is a real treat before we reach the sand dunes. The sure-footed horses eagerly scale the dunes down to the lagoon. There, we wade through the water and then onto the beach. And what could be better than galloping along a wide, deserted beach? I think the horses enjoyed it just as much as we riders did. To top it all off, the sun is shining brilliantly today and, from the dunes, we spot a few whales again – it couldn't be more perfect.



Then we're already riding cross-country through scrubland dotted with fragrant flowers, as well as along paths at all gaits, back to the lagoon. The other horses are already waiting in the pasture and greet ours. Once unsaddled, the rolling around begins, and after a bit of grooming, the horses trot off to the watering hole.

We riders are once again served our lunch on the terrace overlooking the lagoon. After a shower, we enjoy a spot of sunbathing on sun loungers right by the lagoon. Anyone who fancies it can also go for a paddle or simply watch the birds. We even catch a glimpse of the blue crane, South Africa's national bird.

Later, we're picked up and visit the local stables, where the horses graze together in the pastures. Then we head off for dinner in a cosy, family-style setting, before another eventful day draws to a close.



After breakfast, Reynold picks us up and we head to the horses: today means an early morning workout, as it takes quite a bit of stamina to round up the horses in the huge pasture

. But we manage it, and off we go. Several stretches of trotting along the path await us before we head onto the Fisher Trail in Walker Bay. This takes us over sand dunes down to the sea. The sun is shining, the water is azure blue and the firm sandy ground practically invites us to gallop – which is exactly what we do. Nemo, Casanova and Luke seem to enjoy it just as much as their riders. The wide beach also allows us to gallop side by side for a while; here too, the horses are easy to steer. A few seals are sunbathing and seagulls are scouring the beach. We enjoy one last gallop before heading along the coastline over dunes and rocks. From up there, we even catch a glimpse of a whale! Then it's time to ride over the dunes towards the inland and later through scrubland, where the horses almost disappear at times. We climb one final hill, at the summit of which lunch awaits both horse and rider. The horses are put out to pasture and given feed and water, whilst we are served sandwiches, snacks and drinks.

After a good half-hour's break, it's time to saddle up and set off again. We ride over hills into the Valley of Flowers. Normally, you'd spend the night here and have another full day's ride before heading back to the accommodation from the first night. We're doing a slightly shorter version and ride straight on. A few more hills, through plenty of fynbos, and finally we reach our accommodation. Hay and concentrated feed are ready for the horses; we unsaddle them, and they'll stay in the huge nature reserve for a week or two to rest and recover.

We enjoy a cold drink together. Then we check into our rooms and head back to the pool one last time before dinner is served.

The next day brings an early breakfast before it's time to say goodbye and head back to the airport or hotel in Cape Town.

On the flight to Johannesburg, I reflect on this fantastic nature trail and am particularly impressed by the natural surroundings and the whale-watching on horseback. Thank you, Howard – the tour was brilliant.



For more information, see: www.reiterreisen.com/wal007.htm

A report by Julia Wies