**SOAKING UP THE SUN ALONG THE SHORES**

**OF THE WEST COAST**

**Lazy days along the shore, soaking up the sun and feasting on everything the season has to offer. Sound appealing? Then take a tip from Siberia’s birds and head for the West Coast.**



The water of Langebaan Lagoon is glassy , a still aquamarine stretch among the rose-coloured salt marshes and the darker splotches of fynbos. But the calm surface of the scene is misleading: baby fish dart amid the safety of dense reed beds; in the mudflats molluscs and prawns burrow and   
multiply. For a bird that has flown thousands of kilometers down the length of Africa, the West Coast National Park is paradise. The teeming waters and surounding veld an enormous outdoor buffet.

Every year thousands of shorebirds make the trip to this spot when their Siberian homes grow cold and hostile. It's a journey of up to 15 000 kilometers that takes them several weeks to complete. Along the way they have to weather storms and the vastness of the Sahara Desert, but at the end lies this sheltered lagoon and a seasonal flush of food. In summer the number of birds making their home in the park grows to 40 000 or more, easily 10 times the population in winter.

At the southern edge of Langebaan Lagoon are two hides where visitors can come to view the birds. I choose the one furthest from the “Geelbek“ farmstead, which is now a visitor centre, shop and restaurant. The boardwalk to the hide projects out over the changing landscape of the salt marshes, every few strides bringing plants that can cope with more flooding. When I get to the hide, the tide is high and my lookout is perched over the water.

I'm surprised to learn what I can see in front of me isn't actually a lagoon. "It's really a protected sliver of the Atlantic Ocean, what we call a coastal embayment," explains Pierre Nel, the senior section conservation ranger on 19 June 2018. "It has the same salt content as the open sea, but there's no wave action. 'Twice a day the tide brings in nutrient-rich cold water, which supports a lengthy food chain stretching from tiny phytoplankton to the migratory waterbirds.

It's because of this that Langebaan Lagoon is a massively important area for biodiversity.   
A Ramsar - recognised wetland, it accounts for around 40 per cent of South Africa’s salt marshes and supports more birdlife than any other wetland in the country. Specials include chestnut-banded plover, Eurasian curlew and red knot, but I'm happy with my first sighting of South African shellduck.

Birds aren't the only ones who flock to the West Coast National Park. The lagoon's also a magnet for city folk who come to swim, kayak, windsurf, kiteboard and sail, or simply relax on the beach.

On a summer's day the place to be is Preekstoel, a postcard-pretty bay where soft white sand seams the turquoise water. I notice a striking rock pillar with a broad flat top that juts out of the water; it’s the stone pulpit that earned this spot its name. Elsewhere the wind may be blowing but down on the beach everything is calm, thanks to a vast dunefield that offers shelter from the southeaster. Little kids play in the shallows and a closer look at the sun-dappled water reveals a hermit crab scuttling along the bottom.

SANParks have made the most of the setting: there are seven stone-built braai stands with seating alongside, each with its own view of the lagoon. It’s a lovely spot to spend the day