

Where Two Oceans Meet: Exploring Cape Agulhas

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Most people know **Cape Agulhas** as the official dividing line between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, but the southernmost tip of Africa is more than a place of geographical extremes... It is a place rich in stories, many involving shipwrecks, castaways and ghosts. In the 15th

century, seafaring Portuguese vessels would round the Cape and discover that their compass needles would swing, unable to determine true north from magnetic north. It is for this reason that Bartholomew Dias named this ocean site ‘

Capo das Agulhas’

(Cape of Needles). For its mystery and adventure, Cape Agulhas still captures the imagination of contemporary explorers.

The legendary ‘Cape of Storms,’ wrecked many ships en route to the east via Cape Agulhas. Historically considered to be particularly hazardous, the cape is notorious for winter storms and spectacular waves (some reaching a height of 30m). When the cold Benguela and the ‘Roaring Forties’ winds meet with the rising warm Agulhas current, the collision can turn dangerous. Add to the mix the shallows and reefs of the Agulhas Bank (which bears the fearsome title: ‘Graveyard of Ships’), and it’s no wonder the coastline is littered with shipwrecks. The *Zoetenda I, Birkenhead and Arniston*

are only a few of the many shipwrecks to be found along the Agulhas coastline. Although not much gold was ever salvaged from these wrecks, showpieces are on display at the Bredasdorp Shipwreck museum. Visitors to the area can still see the remains of the

Meisho Maro

, which ran aground in 1982.

In 1848 the Cape Agulhas Lighthouse was erected in an attempt to warn ships of the conflicting currents and perilous waves. Today the red and white striped lighthouse is the second oldest working lighthouse in Southern Africa, and has been declared a national monument. It is the only lighthouse museum in Africa, and displays (among other interesting artefacts), ancient stone fish traps used by the Khoi-Khoi people thousands of years ago. Seventy-one steps lead up to the top, and to a breathtaking view of the wild ocean beyond.

The Agulhas Plain has a great diversity of flora, containing nearly 9000 species of fynbos, including the unique limestone fynbos. Although most species bloom between May and September, there are flowers to be enjoyed all year round.

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The region, which includes the towns of Arniston, Bredasdorp, L'Agulhas, Napier, Elim and Struisbaai, has several attractions which draw tourists to its shores each year. The waters of the Agulhas Bank off the coast are renowned as one of the best fishing grounds in South Africa. Locals catch yellowtail, kabeljou, Cape salmon, red roman, stumpnose and musselcracker, depending on the season.

Nearby Struisbaai offers roughly 25km of uninterrupted, pristine beach, with warm Indian Ocean swimming and excellent walking and fishing opportunities. Some of the area's original thatched fishermen's cottages are close by and there are 4x4 beach safaris, nature reserves, hikes and horse rides to enjoy.

Between June and November, the area offers ample opportunity for whale watching. Southern Right, Humpback and Bryde's whales frequent the coastline. The African black oystercatcher is protected along many of the beaches. There are also dolphins, porpoises and Cape Fur seals that inhabit the area, as well as an abundance of birdlife, tortoises and smaller mammals like caracal to spot.

This windswept, ruggedly beautiful coastal plain at the southern-most tip of Africa, with its rich cultural and natural heritage, has recently been proclaimed as the Agulhas National Park.

- Other shipwrecks along the coastline include *Geortyrder* (1849), *Queen of the Thames* (1871), *European* (1877), *Elise* (1879), *Cooranga* (1964), *Gwendola* (1968) and *Federal Lakes* (1975)

- The ghosts of those who died have been seen wandering the coastline so regularly that the sheltered bay at the Cape Agulhas town entrance has been named Spookdraai (Ghost's Corner).

- According to local legend, the bloody handprint of Jacoba van Breda (who was shot dead

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by her husband in 1871) reportedly appears on the walls of the van Breda homestead.

- Built in 1824, Greenpoint Lighthouse is the oldest lighthouse in South Africa