

OLD-SCHOOL GREETINGS

A list of the best paper cards to pick up this holiday season from indie Canadian designers, **T4**



TRAVEL & LIFE



PHILIP PLISSON/PONANT

Ponant's nine-day South Africa itinerary sails from Cape Town to Durban on its newest ship, Le Lyrial (categorized as a "super yacht" since it's smaller than a cruise ship).

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

PORT ELIZABETH, SOUTH AFRICA—I found myself in the middle of a bachelor party — but it's not the kind you're thinking of. After all, this isn't Vegas. It's South Africa.

I was observing a "bachelor herd" of male elephants at a watering hole, cooling down from the midday sun (elephants live in matriarchal groups, and young males are booted out when they become "teens," left to wander alone or find other males). One of the elephants was blowing bubbles in the water, using his trunk like a straw. I'm sure there's a biological explanation for this, though I like to think he was just having some fun.

I was on an excursion on Ponant's new sailing itinerary in South Africa, on its newest ship, Le Lyrial, which is technically categorized as a "super yacht" since it's smaller than a cruise ship, has room for only 200 passengers and 140 crew.

It also offers everything you'd expect of a luxury French ship, including stylish rooms, piano bars, a top-notch wine collection, a killer cheese plate at every meal and a spa with skin-care products by French brand Sothy. On the eight-night trip, Le Lyrial sails from Cape Town to Durban along the "Wild Coast."

One hundred years ago, I wouldn't have seen the elephants. The elephant population here, near Port Elizabeth, had been decimated by hunters, to the point where there were only 11 elephants left. Local farmers and conservationists decided to do something about it and opened a sanctuary called Addo Elephant National Park in 1931. Addo has since grown in geographic size and in elephants.

There are now more than 700 elephants here, along with zebra, cape buffalo and plenty of antelope, such as kudu and hartebeest. Still, it's not that easy to spot one of those 700. "Five thousand kilograms of elephant can be incredibly well hidden in the thicket," said independent tour guide Peter Giddy.

The bush here is dense; there's no guarantee you'll see any animals — and that's just how I like it. To me, seeing those elephants was a privilege, not a right.

The previous day, I had gone on a game drive in nearby Pumba Private Game Reserve, which, as its name implies, is a private reserve. I saw a laundry list of animals, including white lions.

In private reserves, owners can bring in any animal they want, even if they're not native to the region. They're designed so tourists can see the "Big Five" (African lion, African elephant, African leopard, cape buffalo and rhinoceros) in a one-stop-shop environment.

"Addo is completely different," Giddy said. "It's a reserve that is established to look after elephants, not after clients, so it has a whole different look and feel, and is far more of a

CRUISING AFRICA'S WILD COAST

Passengers aboard Ponant's 'super yacht' sail from Cape Town to Durban, with stops for animal encounters



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Aside from elephants, Addo Elephant National Park is also home to zebras, cape buffalo and plenty of antelope.

searching safari than (a private reserve)."

This is the third-largest national park in South Africa, though you've likely never heard of it.

Tourists come to this part of the

world to see Kruger National Park — the most famous, and the largest, in the country (it's basically the size of Belgium). While Addo is much smaller, each of the country's many national parks and reserves hold

their own unique charm.

Though I prefer the national parks, where sightings aren't guaranteed but there's a more authentic feel, the private reserves do have their appeal. There are 12 lions in Addo; you'd be

lucky to see one (I didn't). In Pumba, lions are practically a guarantee.

"C'est magnifique!" The tourist sitting behind me in the 4x4 jeep couldn't contain himself, even though we're supposed to remain silent when viewing the animals. Still, it's hard not to gasp and utter exclamations (in any language) when you see a white lion.

National parks can be explored with a guide (recommended) or on your own with a rental car, while private reserves have their own jeeps and guides (and usually require a stay of at least a few nights). You can also see them as excursions with Ponant.

The excursions on the "Wild Coast" itinerary aren't your typical city bus tours; in Cape Town, choices include a day trip to the Cape of Good Hope or a tour of the wine region, and in Port Elizabeth, you have two full days to explore both Pumba and Addo. Other stops include Richards Bay, for a chance to see the rhinos in Hluhluwe Game Reserve or hippos in Isimangaliso Wetland Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, before sailing to Durban with its golden beaches.

"This is notoriously rough water," said independent guide Margaret Gibson, who sailed with Ponant to provide French translation services. "But the coast along here is absolutely stunning — there are beaches for miles and nobody on them. That's why they call it the Wild Coast; there's scenery that hasn't changed since before the Europeans arrived."

In Isimangaliso, you'll find the second-highest vegetated sand dunes in the world, after Fraser Island in Australia. Gliding down the muddy waters of the estuary in a flat-bottomed boat, we saw a couple of hippos. Our guide laughed when everyone scrambled to get a photo. After all, there are 800 hippos here, so we were going to see a lot more.

This park, we were told, is the oldest in Africa, established in 1876. "Isimangaliso" means "place of wonder" in the Zulu language. It applies to this park, but the word could technically apply to the entire Wild Coast — it's wild, and it's full of wonder.

Vawn Himmelsbach was hosted by Ponant, which didn't review or approve this story.

> WHEN YOU GO

Do this trip: Ponant (en.ponant.com) offers a range of sailing itineraries in Africa, from the Cape Verde Islands to the Seychelles. Along the South African Coastline, from Cape Town to Durban, is available for bookings in 2018; fares start from €2,740 (about \$4,080 Canadian) for nine days/eight nights.

Get there: Air France (airfrance.ca) and KLM (klm.ca) fly to Cape Town from hub cities in Europe.

Do your research: en.ponant.com