



**Jill Bradley**  
discovers the  
civilised South  
African way of  
getting close  
to a whale.



## FACT FILE

A ten day self-drive itinerary including two days in the Hermanus area and the chance to visit De Hoop Nature Reserve costs from £1,700 per person. For further details please call Jill, Emma, Melissa or Michael on 01869 276 220.



# Wine & Whales on Walker Bay

Think of whale watching, and the image that often springs to mind is bouncing over a lumpy sea under a leaden grey sky, wrapped in warm, waterproof clothing whilst being lashed by spray carried on a gusting wind. However, what if there was a way to enjoy whale watching under blue skies, where the occasional spray flying back from the bow of your boat was almost a relief from the sun? What if there was a place where you could sit on a clifftop under the same sun, sipping a world-class, cool, crisp Chardonnay watching southern right and humpback whales surfacing within 30 metres of the shore? Both these scenarios are regularly enjoyed by Audley clients at Walker Bay, not far from Cape Town.

Each year, starting as early as June and tailing off in December, all nine species of great whale (but predominantly the southern right whale) swim up from their cold southern waters to the coast of South Africa to calve. They frequent sheltered bays such as Walker Bay, and because these bays shelve very steeply from the cliff edges the whales come in remarkably close to the shoreline. It is this aspect of coastal geography that makes Hermanus (Walker Bay's harbour town) the worldwide capital of land-based whale watching. A pretty town, it boasts a picturesque little fishing harbour and the world's only whale crier. Blasting loudly on a kelp horn, and sporting a sandwich board of information on the latest sightings, he allows visitors to make their way along the clifftop paths to get the best views of these majestic creatures as they breach (launch themselves out of the water before crashing down in a torrent of spray), sail (hang vertically in the water with just their tails above the surface acting as sails), and spy-hop (again, hanging vertically in the water, but with just their heads above the surface, seemingly allowing them to eyeball all that is around them).

Watching the whales from the shore is best done with a pair of good binoculars. However, these are often unnecessary if you take a boat trip out to get in amongst the activity. Strict rules mean that boats are not allowed to approach too close to the whales, but if the whales choose to approach the boat, there is no obligation for the skipper to retreat. And being inquisitive, more often than not they do approach the boat, swimming alongside to take a good look at you, ducking beneath the hull and spectacularly breaching within yards of you. The word that most people use to describe the experience of being eyeball-to-eyeball with a whale is 'mystical', and there is something profoundly touching about looking into the eye of a 16-metre, five tonne gentle giant and seeing the intelligence it conveys.

In season, your chances of seeing whales anywhere along the coast from Cape Town to Plettenberg Bay are excellent: indeed most boat operators will guarantee it. Hermanus and Plettenberg Bay have the greatest concentration of boat operators, and although Walker Bay is wonderful for land-based watching, De Hoop Nature Reserve is thought to be even better: an off-the-beaten-track nature reserve between Cape Town and the Garden Route, it is a beautiful area of grassy sand dunes, with a long, white-sand beach which the whales are said to breach off more often than anywhere else. All of these locations fit easily and logically into a classic touring itinerary of South Africa, so you do not have to go out of your way to enjoy one of the most remarkable experiences nature has to offer.

**Jill Bradley**  
South Africa Specialist

### WEB PLUS

[www.audleytravel.com/whalewatching](http://www.audleytravel.com/whalewatching)  
See more whale images from Walker Bay



Humpback whale breaching



Clifftop view, Walker Bay



Southern right whale, Hermanus