

# NEW YORK TRAVEL

## Curry Buffets, Sunny Beaches, and Africa's Oldest Botanic Gardens in Durban

*By Kristan Schiller*



Photo: [jit bag/flickr](#)

## Getting There

South African Airways flies from JFK to Durban's King Shaka Airport, via Johannesburg. The flight from JFK to Johannesburg is 14 hours, 50 minutes, and the flight from Johannesburg to Durban is 1 hour, 5 minutes.

## Where to Stay

Poised on the upscale Umhlanga beachfront, 15 minutes north of downtown Durban, is the Oyster Box hotel (from \$459). Built in 1863 as a beach cottage, the hotel, with its signature bright-red awnings and a neighboring lighthouse, was historically used by mariners to navigate their way to shore. In the 1930s, Prince Albert II and Princess Charlene of Monaco honeymooned here, and for decades since, locals have flocked to the Indian curry buffet at the hotel's restaurant. It reopened in 2009 after a multimillion dollar renovation by Red Carnation Group, and the now-86-room luxury hideaway maintains many of its original features, including a black-and-white terrazzo-tile reception room and palm-frond ceiling fans. Walls display African art from the hotel's 741-piece collection; there are two swimming pools, a library with a telescope, a 24-seat movie theater, and a rooftop bar with views of the Indian Ocean coastline.



Endless Horizons offers 180 degree views of the Indian Ocean. Photo: Courtesy of Endless Horizons

Durban's most under-the-radar — yet exquisite — boutique hotel is the five-star, 12-room Endless Horizons (from \$202), located in the suburb of Durban North under two miles from the beach and 20 minutes from King Shaka International Airport. With its pair of koi ponds, Chinese wall art, and stainless-steel and wood finishes, the place has a Zen-like feel that makes for an unpretentious, comfortable stay. Sun-worshippers will love the expansive outdoor terrace, infinity pool, and sea-facing rooms with balconies.

Set in Durban's lush Morningside, the St. James on Venice (starting at \$117, including breakfast) four-star guesthouse has 15 classically decorated rooms just a mile from the beach. Originally the home of Corobrik's Robert Storm, who discovered clay deposits on Clairwood Flats in Durban at the turn of the 19th century and founded what is now South Africa's largest brick manufacturer, the 1892-built home is steeped in old-world charm. Some rooms overlook the century-old St. James Anglican Church, while others peer out over the hotel's garden terrace. The hotel also has a farm-to-table restaurant, Fig & Koi, with creative takes on South African specialties such as ostrich and springbok (an antelope) and an excellent afternoon high tea.

## Where to Eat



Dig into modern gastropub fare and craft beers at 14 on Chartwell. Photo: Courtesy of 14 on Chartwell

Take a 45-minute drive north along the Dolphin Coast to Ballito and enjoy breakfast or lunch at Delish Sisters at Litchi Orchards. The weekly changing seasonal menu, helmed by a pair of spirited sisters, who frequently share their recipes on local talk radio, might include a sticky pork sausage with onion marmalade, mushroom-and-thyme phyllo-pastry cigars, or beetroot gnocchi in a creamy dill-and-lemon sauce. Don't miss the excellent local wine list.

You can't visit Durban without at least sampling bunny chow, the traditional South African dish consisting of a hollowed-out quarter- or half-loaf of bread filled with either vegetarian or meat-based curry. The dish's origins are a topic of great debate, but one theory suggests that migrant workers from India toiling on the sugar-cane plantations in Kwazulu-Natal created bunny chow because it was a convenient way to transport their (then always vegetarian) curries to work. Whatever the origins, you will find authentic Durban-style curries at Cane Cutters, a casual eatery in Glenwood, as well as daily specials, served in famously generous portions.

Modern bistro 14 on Chartwell in well-heeled Umhlanga is a favorite among locals for its gastropub-style menu, craft-gin selection, and Chef's Harvest Board, piled with cheeses, candied walnuts, fruit, and cured meats. A beautifully appointed space with a cocktail bar in the center flanked by tables both inside and out on its buzzy patio, 14 on Chartwell is known for its classic comfort foods: lamb shank pie, pork belly with mustard mash, and lobster mac and cheese. For dessert, the white-chocolate-and-cranberry bread-and-butter pudding will make you think twice about calling an Uber, opting for a jog home instead.

## **What to Do**



Take a walking tour of the port city's hidden gems with Beset Durban.

While “Durbs,” as the locals call it, is transcending its beach-town image with a budding cultural renaissance, there’s still no better way to kick off your stay than sunrise cycling by the water. Rent a bike for an hour for about \$5 at one of several spots along Durban’s 3.5-mile promenade, popularly known as the Golden Mile, then cruise the beach as you watch the sun rise over the Indian Ocean. After you’ve worked up an appetite, pop into Circus Circus beach café for a full farmhouse breakfast for about \$5.

Join a walking tour led by Beset Durban, run by three young architects who explore the hidden neighborhoods and architectural gems of the city, including famous Art Deco and mid-century façades. Beset arranges monthly walks and will customize tours. Another local tour company, Street Scene, runs street-art tours and walks through Durban’s colorful spice markets. Home to the largest Indian population outside India and also the largest port in Africa, Durban has an especially vibrant market culture, with Zulu, Indian, and English influences.

At the Durban Botanic Gardens, established in 1849 and now Africa’s oldest surviving botanic gardens, enjoy a picnic in the heart of the city. Put your hotel concierge to work packing a gourmet repast with a bottle of local wine, then

relax in a lush green setting surrounded by manicured gardens, wide walkways, and gorgeous orchids.

A few years ago, the reinvention of Rivertown, with its go-to market, beer hall, and outdoor shops, was all the rage in Durbs. Today, Durban's burgeoning Station Drive Precinct, near the city's railroad station, is the "It" enclave. The district consists of a cluster of old warehouses turned into working studios, with retail shops for creative types and entrepreneurs, among them jewelry designers, internet startups, antiques shops, and a bespoke bridal-gown boutique. There's even a craft brewery and gin distillery (see Expert Tips) for those wishing to kick back at the end of the day. At the center of it all is Parkside Café, opened by a Namibian transplant with a flair for strong coffee. The neighborhood maintains some of its former self, as evidenced by the train that regularly thunders through it and the manufacturing companies that operate in Station Drive buildings alongside established brands like Holmes Bros surfwear, known for its T-shirts that offer unusual glimpses of South African culture. Hit Station Drive the first Thursday evening of every month for live music, refreshments, and a gallery walk.

## Expert Tips



Check out contemporary art at KZNSA.

*Andrew Rall, master distiller and founder of Distillery 031 in the Station Drive Precinct:*

I was born in Cape Town, and I moved to Durban after living in Europe because I was offered a job here. I've been here 19 years now and consider myself a Durbanite.

A steamy Sunday jazz session at the Rainbow Restaurant in Pinetown is what got me hooked on Durban. Rainbow was started in 1981 in the midst of Apartheid South Africa. It's in an industrial borough of Durban, near the taxi rank. What made Rainbow unique is that it was one of the few venues in Durban where people of all races could enjoy great music, though they were breaking the law. Because of this, it attracted – and still does – the absolute best South African jazz legends. In the working-class South African tradition, the jazz and drinking happens on Sunday, the only day off for low-income workers in the 1980s. Music starts at midday and is accompanied by quart beers and chicken and chips. For another jazz session, I recommend The Chairman on a Friday or Saturday night. The décor is incredible, and they have a super collection of whisky.

Durban has always had a strong creative subculture. The KZNSA [Kwazulu Natal Society of the Arts] in Glenwood is the best-curated and most interesting independent art gallery. Others worth visiting are African Art Centre in Station Drive and Elizabeth Gordon Gallery in Morningside. The Phansi Museum in Glenwood has an incredible collection of historical African art.

Summer in Durban is about mornings at the beach and balmy evenings drinking cocktails at venues with outdoor spaces, like Market in Morningside. My favorite surfing spot is Bay of Plenty. I like to jump off the end of the pier and catch an early-morning wave, watching the sun come up over Durban's skyline.