

Riding the Sky: Cape Town's Table Mountain Cableway where air becomes fresh

The cable car begins its ascent with the polite little hum of a machine doing its best not to alarm anyone. Within seconds, Cape Town slips away beneath you — the busy roads, the bright rooftops, the improbable number of people who seem to be outdoors doing something athletic — all shrinking into a rather handsome model village. The sea flashes like polished metal. The air becomes startlingly fresh, as if the mountain has an exclusive contract with a better brand of oxygen.

Inside the rotating cabin (a feature that seems specifically designed to prevent you from hogging the good views), faces press cheerfully against the windows. With each slow turn, the landscape rearranges itself: the ragged procession of the Twelve Apostles, the perfect lion-curl of Lion's Head, Robben Island drifting on the horizon like a political footnote someone forgot to tidy away. A gull floats past at eye level, giving you a look that suggests it does this sort of thing all the time and isn't particularly impressed.

Then — a gentle bump, a sigh of machinery — and you're released onto the summit, 1,067 metres above the city, into a world composed almost entirely of wind and astonishment.

A Mountain Older Than the Continents

Table Mountain is not just a mountain; it's a sort of geological grandparent — venerable, reassuringly solid, and cheerfully unimpressed by the fads of younger landforms. Its sandstone crown is about 260 million years old, which means it predates the Himalayas by a margin so large that even the Himalayas would be embarrassed by it.

The Khoisan called it Hoerikwaggo, "the mountain in the sea," a name that feels exactly right, because from up here you get the distinct sense the mountain decided long ago to sit precisely where it pleased and hasn't budged since.

The air on top has a purity to it that seems almost implausible. It tastes faintly of salt and fynbos and something else — perhaps smugness. Paths meander over the plateau through rock gardens that look as if they were arranged by an enthusiastic but slightly absent-minded botanist: proteas, ericas, silverleaf shrubs. Dassies (animals that resemble overfed guinea pigs but are inexplicably related to elephants) sun themselves on boulders with the supreme confidence of creatures who know they're adorable. Sunbirds flicker about in metallic flashes. At every few steps, the world opens out again, an absurdly vast panorama of sea, sky, and atmospheric drama.

Exploring the Summit

Choose almost any trail — the Dassie Walk, the Agama Trail, something involving a ridge or a corner — and you'll soon find yourself stopping every twenty metres to exclaim, "Good heavens, look at that," even if no one is around to hear you. In summer, the place erupts with tiny flowers in cheerful colours, as if the mountain is trying to make up for

centuries of being mostly grey. In winter, the mists arrive: great slow billows of cloud that drift across the plateau and make you feel as though you've wandered onto the set of a gothic novel.

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There's a café at the top, which is exactly where cafés ought to be. It serves strong coffee, pastries (milk tart is a must!), and local wines that are much too pleasant for such altitudes. From the deck, paragliders occasionally drift past like brightly coloured laundry that got loose and decided to enjoy life. There is, of course, a gift shop, because modern civilisation demands it, but it's the views that keep people lingering, leaning on the railings, reluctant to return to a world where horizons are smaller and gravity more insistent.

The Descent

Eventually, the afternoon light softens at the edges, and you join the polite queue for the downward trip. The cable car tilts, hums, and resumes its slow pirouette. Below, Cape Town unfurls again, all sunlit buildings and sparkling sea, while the summit retreats behind you — first a cliff, then a silhouette, then simply a reassuring bulk in the rear-view mirror of memory.

At the bottom, the air feels thicker, warmer, slightly disappointed in itself. You step out, and the mountain looms above, vast and immovable. A reminder that in a world vastly preoccupied with rushing about, some places remain obligingly still — holding up the sky, keeping watch, and waiting for the next cable car full of astonished humans to arrive.

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The Legend Beneath the Tablecloth

Cape Town has many stories, but few are as enduring — or as delightfully peculiar — as the one involving a retired sea captain, the Devil, and a smoking contest. It's exactly the sort of tale that makes you suspect early settlers may have had rather a lot of time on their hands.

The Tale of Van Hunks and the Devil

Once upon a time — back when Cape Town was little more than a scattering of houses and an optimistic vineyard or two — lived a Dutch sea captain named Jan Van Hunks. Van Hunks was widely admired for his seamanship, his stubbornness, and his unfathomable dedication to pipe smoking. According to local lore, if you wanted to find him, you simply followed the smoke trail until you either located Van Hunks or coughed yourself into unconsciousness.

His wife, understandably weary of living in what must have felt like a poorly ventilated chimney, routinely banished him outdoors. So Van Hunks developed the habit of wandering up the slopes of Table Mountain to enjoy his pipe in peace and admire the view, presumably through a fragrant haze.

One afternoon, as he settled into his usual smoking nook, he discovered it occupied by a tall gentleman in dark clothing, whose eyes glowed faintly as though he'd swallowed a pair of embers.

"Mind if I join you?" the stranger asked, producing a pipe with the casual elegance of someone who knows how to make an entrance.

They smoked together amicably until the stranger proposed a contest — a smoking duel. Van Hunks, never one to miss an opportunity to boast, accepted with what must have been heroic enthusiasm.

They smoked. Then smoked some more. Hours passed. Days. The mountain disappeared beneath an ever-thickening fog of tobacco. Birds got lost. Sailors out at sea may well have mistaken it for a weather event. Finally, Van Hunks leaned back, wheezing triumphantly. "I've beaten you!"

At which point the stranger removed his hat to reveal a pair of horns, which is rarely a good sign. Thunder roared, lightning flashed, and the Devil — for of course it was he — vanished in a suitable burst of dramatic flair... taking Van Hunks with him.

The pipe, naturally, was left behind, as all good relics are.

And so, locals say, whenever the southeasterly wind whips up, and a great white cloud spills over Table Mountain like a tablecloth being shaken out for lunch, that's Van Hunks and the Devil at it again — two stubborn souls locked forever in a contest no one else asked for.

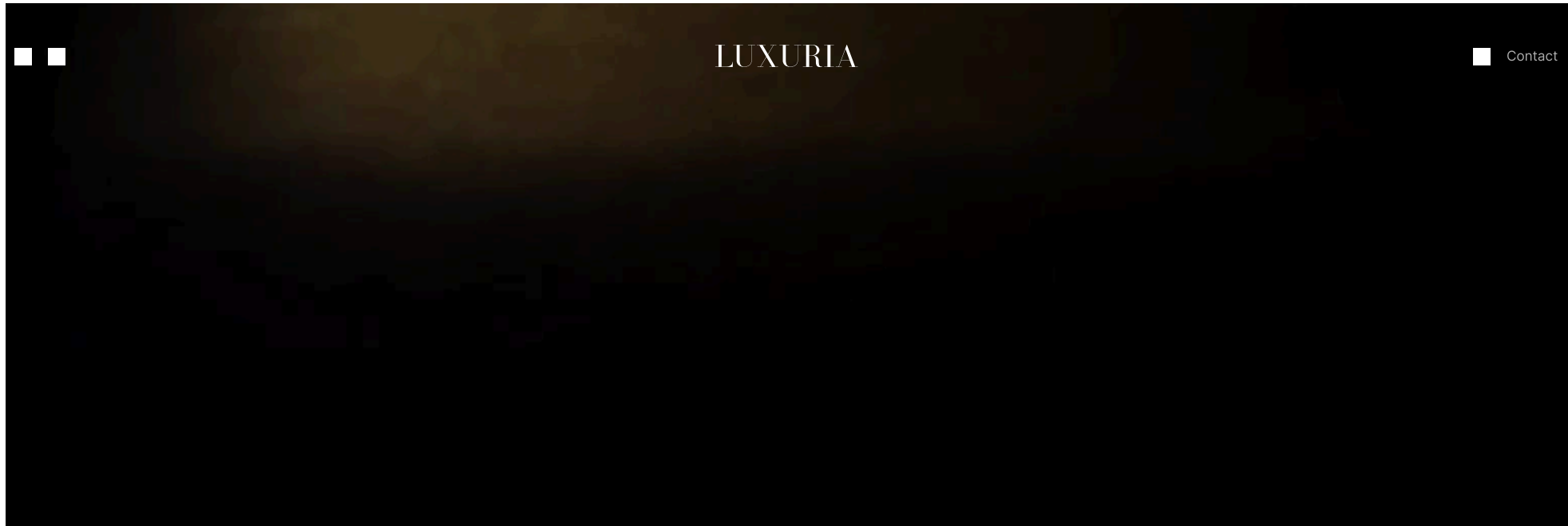
Meteorologists, rather dryly, call it condensation. Capetonians call it a story.

And if you ever stand on Devil's Peak and see the cloud curling upward, you may swear you smell a faint whiff of tobacco... or at least hear, somewhere in the wind, the ghostly flick of a match. Or a cough.

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