

# The face of South Africa

Photograph by Kees van de Coolwijk

Visitors to Hermanus on the Cape Whale Coast get to within almost touching distance of whales in Walker Bay. The nature of the rocky coastline which allows this closeness between whales and watchers, has resulted in the town being called the "Whale Capital of the World" and the location offering "the best land-based whale-watching in the world". Other popular viewing spots are De Kelders on the southern side of Walker Bay, and the area at Witsand/De Hoop, the favourite calving site for these huge mammals. Boat trips are also offered from various harbours.

Whales usually start arriving along the Cape coastline, from St Helena Bay on the west coast to Plettenberg Bay on the south coast, from the colder southern ocean in May and June and stay until about November to calve. The most common species is the Southern Right Whale, but Humpback and Bryde's Whales also visit. Southern Right Whales were protected from whaling back in 1935 and humpbacks in 1963, and over the past 30 years the stocks of both these species have been increasing. Until recently, it was assumed that all whales return south in summer, but research has shown that a sizable group head up the west coast to feed (see Village Life No 19).

By a quirk of Nature, the Southern Right Whale, which weighs up to 40 tonnes, feeds on organisms the size of a mustard seed! It has to filter huge quantities of zooplankton through baleen plates in its mouth to get its meal for the day.

