

Best place to watch whales – that's awesome

STOEP TALK

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Where on earth would you go to get as far below sea level as possible?

I HAVE come across the oddest book. It is uninhibited in its design and so filled with facts and pictures and ge-whizzery about South Africa that one is overwhelmed.

The book, *Awesome South Africa*, is not a book for relaxed reading – in fact I'm stuck for a word to describe it because every one of its 225 large-format pages is so scattered with interesting items that one finds one's eyes fibrillating.

Where on earth would you go, for instance, to get as far below sea level as it is possible to get? Carletonville – 1788m *above* sea level – that's where. There you'd descend the world's deepest mine (Mponeng Gold Mine) which goes down nearly 4.5km – that's well over 2km below sea level.

An aim of the book is to balance the good and the not-so-good – but one is left feeling decidedly and genuinely good about South Africa and about being a South African. I just wish I could afford to see that every South African and visitor gets a copy.

There's no discernable sequence, so at every turn of the page there is a surprise in store: a vivid double-page spread of photographs showing how close elephants and lions get to cars in Kruger Park, elephants with their trunks wrapped around cars and lions popping tyres with their teeth; a fascinating page on the make-up of the population; our unique plantlife; sporting triumphs; what South Africans eat; samples of our 11 different languages; famous South Africans.

Somewhere among the potpourri there's a spectacular display about whales. We have the best land-based place on earth to see them – Hermanus.

There's lots of superlatives: such as Lesotho in our midst being the most mountainous country on earth, its lowest point being well over a kilometre high.

There's the world's longest par-three hole at a golf course. It's in the Soutpansberg not far from Louis Trichardt. One needs a helicopter, though, because the tee

is on top of Hanglip Mountain and the hole ("the 19th) is 500m below.

And somewhere in the book I read about the fastest game of golf – I think it took less than half-an-hour, but I'm darned if I can find it again because in looking for it I became hopelessly and happily distracted by what's on other pages.

There's a lot, of course, that South Africans will already know and just one or two with which I, for one, would argue.

But overall this is a remarkable book that will delight South Africans and gobsmack visitors.

It is well timed, too, because the World Cup's positive impact on national pride needs to be sustained afterwards. One of this country's greatest handicaps is the lack of patriotism among millions who feel loyalty only towards their own language group or political party.

Derryn Campbell, who produced this book, decided to do something about our flagging self-esteem.

She forsook a promising corporate career to devote her life to instilling in South Africans a sense of pride by co-founding a non-profit organisation called Awesome South Africa (www.awesome.co.za). The goal is to create an awareness of South Africa here and abroad, and what this country is. Here I am not stuck for a word – it's awesome.

ASHES TO ASHES

Karl Jensen, veteran Joburg airline pilot, forwarded a message to me saying it was still too soon to make jokes about the Icelandic eruption and the grounding of airlines.

"We should at least wait for the dust to settle. Anyway, it was Iceland's wish that their recently dead economy should have its ashes scattered over Europe."

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