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GOLD Restaurant, Cape Town

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Found inside the GOLD Museum in the heart of Cape Town, a visit to GOLD Restaurant is not just about eating, as guests are also treated to an interactive African drumming session, a hand washing ceremony and entertainment in the form of singing and dancing.

Let's face it, you don't really expect much if you know you're going to eat at a museum restaurant. Micro-waved, unseasoned food in an unimaginative space is usually the order of the day. Although GOLD sounded like a lot more fun than previous unremarkable museum experiences, my expectations still did not amount to much. Walking into GOLD, however, would have been a great scientific study into how quickly a person's preconceptions can do a U-turn. The result of which, was rather rapidly indeed, in my case anyway.

Staff are dressed in bright African dress, welcome guests warmly and lead them into the first courtyard area, where seats and drums are laid out in anticipation for the first instalment of the evening. We sit drinking our Windhoek beers and tapping our drums with high hopes for the 'lesson' to come. Before long, the increasingly raucous crowd is treated to the arrival of a pair of French-speaking, West African djembe drummers. While one maintains the beat, the other attempts to teach the unruly crowd. We play a ditty or two and do a fantastic job; perhaps we will all take up drumming as a hobby or career. But when our teachers try to step it up a gear and take us to the next level, we fail miserably and laugh at our lowly skills compared to our exceptionally talented teachers. No giving up the day job just yet.

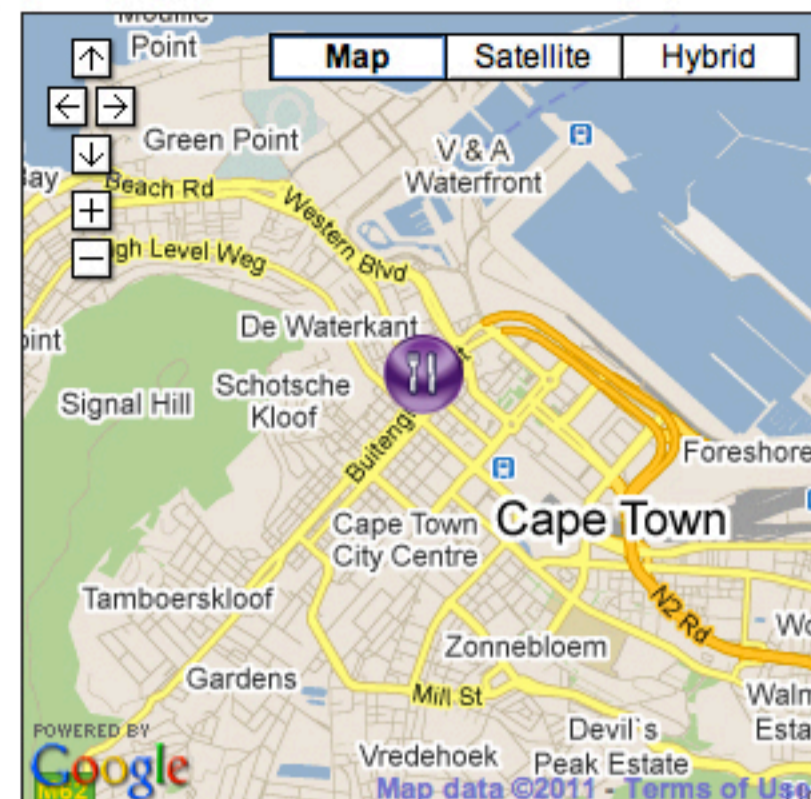
After the drumming, everyone is led into the second courtyard area, which is also the dining room. En route, our hands are washed, and then the feast commences. GOLD puts on a whopping 15-course set menu filled with Cape Malay and African favourites. As each dish arrives, the waitress also explains the dish's roots, and you find yourself learning fascinating facts about South Africa and the continent as a whole, as well as enjoying the "taste safari". The Xhosa corn pot bread and smoked fish pate are served first, kicking the meal off to both a typical and tasty start. Subsequent dishes include African imifino patties (mealie meal and spinach), baby beef bobotie, lentil dhal with butternut and Cape seafood curry, which is both rich and delicate. The food just seems to keep on coming and you'd be wise to come very hungry to make sure you're not too full to at least taste everything.

While dinner is being served, diners are administered the next dose of entertainment. Alongside the drummers tall Mali Puppets dance around the tables and the immense, enchanting voice of the female singer sings typical African songs. The puppets take an especial liking to some diners and some guests are even encouraged to join in the dancing later on. Tip: hiding under the table does not reduce your chances of being one of the lucky chosen ones.

It's a multi-sensory experience through and through, and set to the backdrop of the lush and moodily lit courtyard, it certainly is a distinctive African encounter in Cape Town. While there's no doubt it's very much an evening put on for tourists, it's still an opportunity to gain some insight into the cuisine and culture of the continent. There's no shame in that.

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