When you think about Africa’s wild animals, there’s absolutely no chance that you’re picturing penguins. Which makes the large and lively penguin colony at Boulders Beach a surprise as well as a delight. The adorable, waddling, tuxedo-suited creatures sensibly picked this beach as their home because the soft white sand is protected by large granite boulders that shield it from wind and stormy waves. They first arrived in 1982, and the population is now 2,000 to 3,000 strong.

Years ago you used to be able to stroll on the beach among them, and if you took a few titbits to feed them you’d be mobbed by the inquisitive little beings. Since then the African Penguin has been classified as endangered due to habitat destruction, over-fishing, pollution and irresponsible tourism. Now you’re kept a respectful distance away, on sturdy boardwalks that lead from a visitors’ centre down to the beach and split left and right so you can view the action from above.

This is the only place in the world where you can get close to African Penguins in the wild, and route R65 gets you in. Boulders Beach is part of the Table Mountain National Park Marine Protected Area, and the entrance fee goes towards South African National Parks (SANParks), which looks after all the national parks in the country.

African Penguins were previously known as Jackass penguins due to their noisy braying, and they’re the only variety found on the continent. There are colonies along the coast from southern Namibia to Port Elizabeth, but they like Boulder’s Beach best because of its shelter and because it’s on the Indian Ocean side of the Cape Peninsula, where the water is a little warmer than the icy Atlantic Ocean. Boulders Beach is in False Bay, just outside Simon’s Town and a scenic hour’s drive from Cape Town.

You might think watching penguins at play won’t take long, but you’ll soon be enchanted by the comical little fellows being affectionate with their partner, squabbling with the neighbours, paddling in the waves, or suddenly setting off on a fish-foraging expedition, transforming from an ungainly blob of feathers into a sleek hunting machine.

You can also find a spot on an adjacent beach away from the boardwalks, and hopefully share the sand with a few penguins who are taking a break from the main colonial home.

Be careful when you drive towards or away from Boulders Beach, as the curious birds sometimes take a stroll along the road.