

THE NEW OLD WORLD

A corner of South Africa's Cape that wants to be forever France

Justin Cartwright

Franschhoek — French Corner — is a place which serves South Africans as a kind of sophisticated fantasy, an alternative version of what life could be. The small town is enclosed by wild mountains, at this time of year blue and dusty green. Shy leopards live up there. Vines climb the mountains, some of the oldest and most beautiful Cape Dutch houses in the country stand in the vineyards, olive trees suggest Provence,

the hotels and guest houses are beautiful and immaculate, and the restaurants are among the best in South Africa.

Franschhoek valley was in recent memory a simple place with some notable vineyards and two or three streets of Victorian cottages and a few older, thatched houses. The valley was settled early in the 1680s by Huguenots fleeing repression. At that time the valley was called Olifantshoek,

(Elephants' Corner) and the last elephant, legend has it, left the valley in the mid-19th century. The steep pass out of Franschhoek, a wonderful drive, was apparently once an elephant track. I have seen the track down to the bottom of Ngorogoro crater, still used by elephants, so it is at least a plausible story.

Not so long ago, the town rebranded itself as French, and now virtually everything has a Gallic monicker, including La Laundry (sic). Although none of the local people speak French, many do have Huguenot names like De Villiers or Du Plessis or Marais. I love Franschhoek, and straight off the plane I went to the incomparable Quartier Français, on the main street, for breakfast. This small hotel and restaurant is regularly near the top of every poll for best hotel and restaurant in Africa.

But if Franschhoek has a fault, it is in the lavish refurbishment of wine farms and estates which has reached absurd proportions. Some, like Graf Delaire Estate, are brand new, with jewellery shops, indoor streams and very high-end lodges for rent



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Opposite: Vineyard in Franschhoek

Below: Wine cellar, Grape harvest, Cape Wine Route, Franschhoek



at prices not many South Africans can afford. Grande Provence and La Motte have also had spectacular makeovers, with restaurants and shops selling olive oil and wine, art galleries and plush tasting rooms offering their wines.

What is being lost is the sense of what these places were once like, with a dusty farmyard — *werf* in Afrikaans — surrounded by low, whitewashed walls. But I had heard great things of a old farm not far from Franschhoek, called Babylonstoren (Tower of Babel). It was taken over by a very wealthy Afrikaans family, and what they have wrought there, I was told, is truly miraculous.

As I approached on a dirt road I got a glimpse, first of a conical hill, which reminded the early Dutch settlers of the Tower of Babel, and then of the old farmhouse of 1777, standing at the end of the road, surrounded by its *werf*, where turkeys, chickens and donkeys wandered amiably. A farm shop, a restaurant, a bakery and a butcher are all in the old farm buildings, although the restaurant has a glass wall opening onto a courtyard, which was once the pig and sheep pens. But the true revelation is an immense kitchen gar-

den stretching at least 250 metres, planted with espaliered fruit trees, vegetable and herb gardens, chamomile lawns, parterres, walks shaded by vines, a berry arbour, a spreading indigenous tree providing a cool resting point, and even a few hen and duck houses tucked away. The paths were strewn with something crunchy, which on inspection was revealed to be dried peach pips. Little channels of water ran throughout the garden. To one side was a stream trickling down from the mountains, bordered by indigenous trees, loud with birds. Underneath the trees and all along a path were great drifts of clivia, a Cape plant, rather like an amaryllis, with lovely yellow to red flowers.

The produce from this astonishing plot is used in the restaurant and in the Glass House café at the far end of the garden. The salads are truly wonderful, and come themed by colour. Artichokes and figs and beetroot are often pressed into service. Refreshing drinks of improbable blends of vegetable and fruit juices are delicious. The restaurant also does steak and chops and fruit sorbets on a stick and, I heard too late, fantastic breakfasts. The puddings use the homegrown apricots and peaches and

lemons: the apricot tart with ricotta and *crème pâtissière* will linger in my memory for ever. The coffee, by the way, is excellent — the coffee revolution having finally hit this part of the world.

There are eight very luxurious cottages, built in the Cape Dutch style, with a contemporary version of the farm dam as a swimming pool. These cottages combine traditional architecture with glass walls and eclectic modern furniture.

But what to my mind is unique about Babylonstoren is the impression you get of the history of the Cape. The garden recalls the Dutch East India Company's Gardens in Cape Town, and the deceptively simple buildings and yard have captured exactly and artfully the sense of deep quiet and isolation that the first settlers perforce experienced. This really is an enchanting place. I had to come back for the breakfast a few days later, and it was the best I have ever had, with a heart-stopping view of the mountains, beyond the poached eggs with paprika-flavoured hollandaise.

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