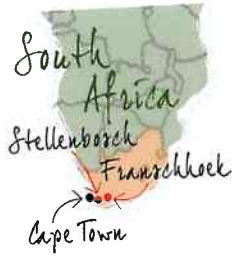


Travel





LAND OF PLENTY

Lisa Grainger samples the cultural, gastronomic and vinicultural delights of South Africa's wine lands

'I knew that you were from England when you started looking at that piano,' said our guide at Stellenbosch Village Museum. 'English people always ask about that - and those boxes.' The little shoe-size boxes were common in the area, she said, and used to be filled with coal to warm ladies' feet. But the piano was one of only five in the world: a clavicytherium-style, English-made Kirkman instrument, with its strings mounted vertically.

When planning a holiday to the Cape wine lands, I had never envisaged that a great deal of my time might be spent in museums, covetously admiring furniture. But Stellenbosch is a living, breathing museum, a town whose walls ooze history, from the country's oldest remaining, restored house, built in 1709, to Mandela's last prison.

While the main reasons to travel to South Africa's wine region are to eat - Stellenbosch is home to four of the country's top ten restaurants and Franschhoek three - to drink, at a choice of over 100 vineyards; and to explore the spectacular, mountainous scenery, there is also history aplenty to imbibe, from the elegant, gabled Cape Dutch colonial houses in Stellenbosch to the fascinating Huguenot museums of its neighbour, Franschhoek.

Marvellously for travellers coming to sample the considerable riches of this area, the old Cape Dutch traditions of fine living have been not just continued, but embraced. While many vineyards are still run by families whose ancestors planted them generations ago, others have been turned by wealthy newcomers into state-of-the-art wineries, with gourmet restaurants, galleries, museums and shops in which to browse and graze.

Hanneli Rupert, daughter of the late Richemont tycoon Anton, has turned La Motte vineyard into

a super-glamorous destination, which offers some of the best cuisine in the Cape - linefish with Shiraz risotto and beetroot; fish curry with pineapple atjar - before wine tasting or browsing in her Daylesford-like farm shop. At the family's pristine L'Ormarins vineyard, Hanneli's brother Johann has built the elegant Franschhoek Motor Museum to showcase his late father's classic cars.

Meanwhile, the Swiss-based Hess family have constructed a modern art museum on their Glen Carlou wine farm to house some of their extensive collection, so wine lovers can browse art before lunching on a terrace with views over miles of vineyards. And the Graff family last year opened what has to be the most exciting modern hotel in the Cape, Delaire Graff, filled with jaw-dropping South African art and housing a stylish restaurant run by talented chef Christiaan Campbell.

What makes Delaire Graff so appealing is that, although the interiors are by British designer David Collins, it feels authentically African, mixing Cape Dutch styles, local stonewalling and vernacular art, leathers, colours and woods. With the current unfavourable rand-to-pound exchange rate, it's not a bargain for Brits - from almost £600 a room, B&B - but its airy, poolside spa, restful indigenous gardens, rooms with private pools and super-friendly staff make it a treat worth saving for.

Besides, not all accommodation here costs this much. One of the joys of driving in this small area, 40 minutes from Cape Town airport, is that you can sample a range of hotels in a week's holiday. One night I spent in the heart of Stellenbosch at the inexpensive River Manor, with its 18 big, comfy rooms, pretty pools and homely atmosphere, so I could explore the town on foot. The next day I enjoyed the intimate warmth of Le Quartier Français in Franschhoek, with its airy garden-view rooms and award-winning

food - there can't be more delicious comfort food than Parmesan French toast with Serrano ham, or a more smiley butler than Thembo to deliver it.

And, for the second time this year, I went to Babylonstoren, the eighteenth-century Cape Dutch farm converted by former magazine editor Karen Roos and her tycoon husband into a supremely stylish B&B. Accommodation consists of chic former workers' cottages with glass extensions, or a 1777 manor house where parties of up to eight can sleep amid antiques and modern Italian pieces. The white-washed lunch restaurant is a former cowshed that serves just-picked produce with great panache. And, best of all, Karen has planted a Versailles-style garden of edible plants, while her husband has cultivated acres of vineyards in which to walk and cycle.

If you embrace the gourmet delights of the Cape as heartily as I did, you will need all the exercise you can get. It's a foodie heaven - from the deli at Tokara winery, the cheese at Fairview, the charcuterie-and-Champagne tasting at M&reson, and the picnic lunches at La Petite Ferme, which also has gorgeous rooms from £90 for a double, to dining at Delaire Graff, Terroir at Kleine Zalze and Pierneef à La Motte. One tip: leave any tight-fitting clothes at home □

WAYS & MEANS

Lisa Grainger travelled as a guest of Bailey Robinson (01488-689700; www.baileyrobinson.com), which is offering a seven-night holiday in the Cape wine lands from £2,445 per person, based on two sharing, including one night at River Manor, two at Babylonstoren, two at Le Quartier Français and two at Delaire Graff, all B&B, including car hire with satnav, a VIP meet-and-greet on arrival, return flights and taxes.



OPPOSITE FROM TOP Delaire Graff offers alfresco dining with views of the Stellenbosch mountains. A gaggle of geese at Babylonstoren. THIS PAGE FROM LEFT The menu at Terroir is presented on a blackboard. The Lodge at Delaire Graff. The deli at Tokara winery. The cottage, restaurant and just-picked produce at Babylonstoren