

VANITY FAIR

ON TRAVEL

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PANAMA

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

By STEVE KING

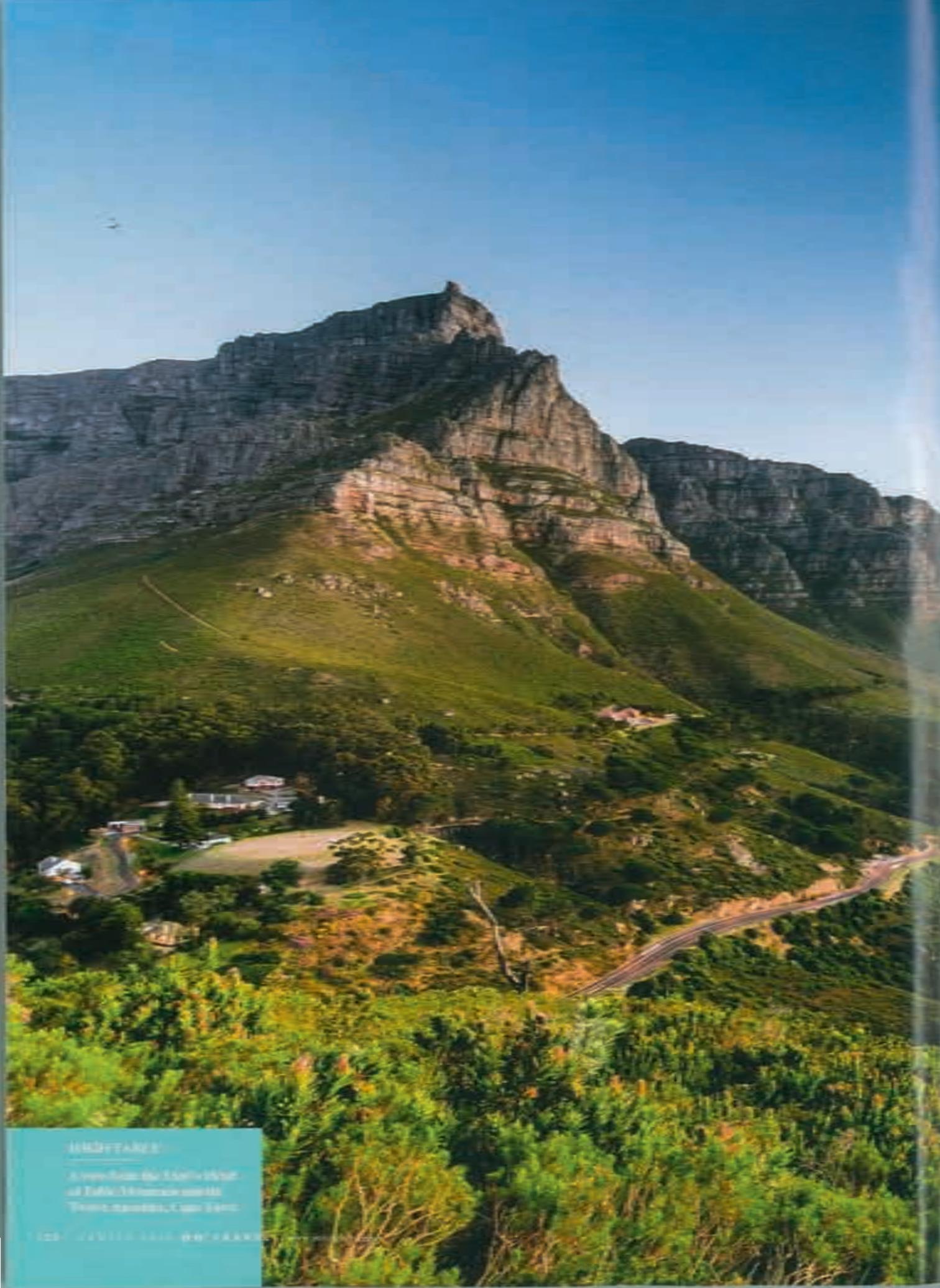
KASHMIR

BEAUTIFUL BEYOND DISPUTE

By TREVOR FISHLICK

plus

Tom Parker Bowles *HITS THE ROAD* in Search of *STREET FOOD*
Nigel Tisdall *GOES OFF THE RAILS* in *STATION HOTELS*



INDUSTRIES

A view from the Table Top of Table Mountain with
Trent, Sandton, Cape Town

The Cape Escape

The landscape is delicious, the food and wine even better. The transformation of South Africa since the end of apartheid has been remarkable, and, though tensions remain, the Cape Winelands have evolved into one of the world's most attractive, easygoing, epicurean getaways, says MAX HASTINGS





Almost 40 years ago, when I first visited South Africa, its foremost culinary delicacy was biltong, the dried meat favoured by Boer commandos fighting the British in 1900. As late as the 1970s Afrikaansers with the social graces of rhinos thought it screamingly funny to shoot black people wholesale. My own early experiences as a journalist in the country ended abruptly in deportation by the apartheid government.

It is a weird contrast nowadays to sit down to a five-course dinner in the Cape Winelands, starting with some such exotic delicacy as Cajun-spiced squid with sour cucumber salad, lime and herbs. The small town of Franschhoek, 50 miles northeast of Cape Town, has become one of the world's culinary Meccas, boasting scores of hotels, restaurants and wineries where anybody offering less than a five-course menu is deemed a cheapskate.

We last holidayed in South Africa 12 years ago. My wife Penny hated it then, because she found the security oppressive. Walking from Cape Town's Mount Nelson Hotel, we had to be escorted to a restaurant a hundred yards down the street. She demanded: "Where's the fun in sea, sun and cut-price villas if you have to be surrounded by electric fences and guard dogs to enjoy them?"

About that time, a Johannesburg tycoon friend of ours was attacked leaving his home one morning; his driver was shot dead. Penny declared that it would take whole herds of wild horses to drag her back to what South Africans now call the Rainbow Nation.

During British winters since, we have rented a ranch in Kenya, living for happy weeks far from tarmac amid elephants on the lawn, in what is still pretty wild Africa. However, the Cape has had such enthusiastic reviews lately that we decided to give it another go. This is tame Africa, lacking spectacular wildlife—except whale-watching between August and December, which alas we missed.

the young, you're going to have crime," a Cape resident said to us resignedly.

Everyone who knows South Africa recognises that it stands on a knife-edge between holding its status as the richest, most dynamic and successful society in Africa and lapsing into economic decline, social anarchy and institutionalised corruption. But none of this prevents travellers from cherishing the country, and especially the Cape, as one of the world's most inviting destinations.

At one of many lunches with a peerless terrace view—this time at Grande Roche, looking over vineyards towards the mountains above Paarl—I asked a friend who spends two months there every winter why he keeps coming back. "First," he said, "everything works."

I endorse that from our experience. Take driving. Across most of the African continent drivers appear to be on parole from asylums. On the roads of Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, at every moment one expects to die. I have crawled from wrecked vehicles (not driven by me, thank goodness) from Ethiopia to

THEATRE, ART, PERFORMANCE

The Tasting Room at Le Quartier Français, which features a surprise eight-course dinner with wines to match, is booked a month ahead in summer (the northern hemisphere's winter season), with customers fighting for the privilege of exploring rabbit ballotine with Madagascan pepper, salt-baked yellow swede and fermented garlic nougatine, followed by slow-cooked Botrivier kid leg, cauliflower, amasi and radish.

Up the road at Grande Provence, our dinner started with open tomato, olive and eggplant tartlet with sauce vierge, followed by carpaccio of beef with tuna bûche, bang-bang duck salad with candied ginger, risotto of Tom Yum Goong with shellfish cream. By now you will have got the message. The Cape Winelands have embraced food as theatre, art, performance. If steak and fries is your thing, save yourself an airfare—though at Mont Rochelle hotel we did once have a delicious simple mushroom risotto with an excellent glass of rosé, looking out from the terrace upon one of the finest mountain views in the world.

Holidays there should be compared to a Caribbean or Mediterranean experience, rather than to any bush destination.

There is air-conditioning, natural beauty, impeccably manicured lawns and brilliant weather, together with razor-wire and security guards to keep reality at a safe distance. If the last bit sounds a trifle cynical, I should emphasise that we adored our South African fortnight, and encountered nothing to make us frightened except galloping dyspepsia, brought on by overeating.

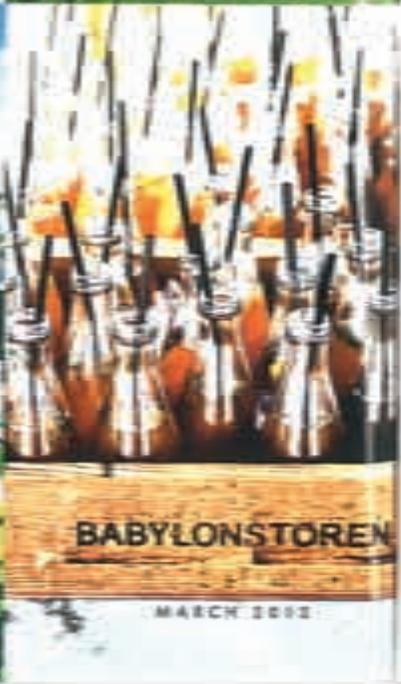
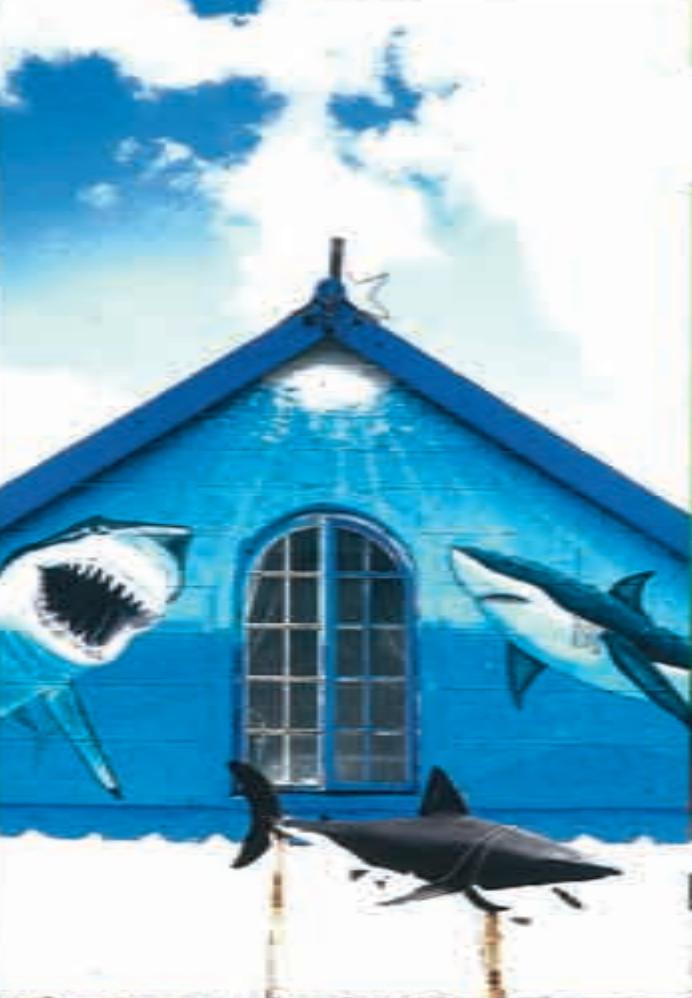
But only the least sensitive tourist, idling in the sun or taking a long putt at the tenth, can wholly ignore what is going on in the country beyond its pampered, protected, still white-dominated compounds. South Africa is home to 0.06 percent of the world's population, but 17 percent of its AIDS victims. Violent crime is a chronic threat, even in the dinkiest Cape villages. No prudent person uses an ATM after dark, or stops a car in wild places. Beggars masquerading as "car parkers" are an irritant. "Anywhere you've got 25 percent unemployment, higher among

Angola. In South Africa, by contrast, roads are excellent; white, coloured and black people alike drive better than our homegrown, deranged West London mothers in their 4x4s.

My friend continued his hymn of praise. South Africans, he said, treat visitors like royalty. If you go back to any restaurant a second or third time, they will remember and greet you as an old mate. He is right about that too. Nowhere in the world have we met such unfailingly enthusiastic and smiley hotel and restaurant staff, who seem to regard it as a genuine pleasure to entertain you.

They know their country is on trial. It has huge problems with crime, youth unemployment and an erratic president. Many young white South Africans complain that they are obliged to quit the country to pursue careers, amid institutional pressure on employers to hire more blacks.

Millions of young blacks are sick of being told to be grateful for having votes, as their fathers did not: they want the



cars, swimming pools and fancy houses the whites have—and quickly. No one yet knows whether their frustrations can be contained or peacefully satisfied.

The consequence of all this, in the Cape anyway, is to inspire the hospitality industry to pull out every stop to encourage visitors. And not only the hospitality industry. A splendid character named Manfred Jacobs told us with infinite pride: "Everybody expected the worst in 1994, when the new black government assumed power—and look where we are now."

There is still an undercurrent of deep resentment among some older whites, especially Afrikaaners in the north of the country, but there has been no outright racial bloodbath. Many of the young of all races seem committed to making the new South Africa work, and

with an entirely unaffected reverence, to walk out of the garden through the very same gate from which his idol stepped forth to freedom a generation ago.

I reflected, as Jacobs talked, that he told stories of Mandela much as medieval religious zealots described saints and the miracles. But then I thought: Mandela, with his unflinching commitment to racial reconciliation, is indeed a secular saint, without an obvious peer in today's world. If he later became a less than effective president, his moral example still towers over his society.

We stayed our first few days in the Cape at Babylonstoren, widely celebrated as the new wonder holiday refuge. It is the creation of Karen Roos, a tycoon's wife and design guru, who has spent tens of millions on restoring and transforming one of the oldest farm-

bikes a couple of times to explore the 500-acre model farm, feeling virtuous about struggling up the hills. We admired the little round pool, which is designed to look more like a big farm tank than a conventional swimmery, but we were disappointed that there was nowhere pretty to sit and relax outside the cottage. The whole place could do with more boring but user-friendly grass.

We were also underwhelmed by our restaurant dinner, by comparison with the delicious things we had at other nearby places. But Babylonstoren is new, and when Karen Roos matches her design brilliance with a touch more human comfort, it could become terrific.

Among memorable trips in those first few days, we did a horseback wine-tasting, which was original and fun. A jolly young girl named Belinda took us

THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA WORK

it is inspiring, indeed moving, to watch them set about it. Manfred Jacobs has served for the past 17 years as warden of Drakenstein prison, near Franschhoek, from which, on February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela walked to freedom after 27 years of imprisonment by the white apartheid regime.

Jacobs now conducts regular tours organised by Le Quartier Français, to visit the unprepossessing single-storey pink house where the most famous prisoner in modern history spent his last 18 months before liberation. He is a superlative guide, who tells the Mandela story with all the passion and vivid anecdote of a South African coloured man old enough vividly to recall the horrors of the segregated past. He says: "I was one of the frenzied crowd standing outside this place on that Sunday when Mandela was released. We are very proud of the fact that the new South Africa was born here."

He tells how each time Mandela was moved from prison to prison without explanation, the prisoner feared that it presaged his execution. He points up at Simonsberg, the mountain Mandela gazed upon each morning for so long, discerning in its shapes a fanciful resemblance to a reclining South African man with a big beer gut. Jacobs invited us,

steads in the Franschhoek area. Dutch and French Huguenot immigrants began making wine there in the 17th century, and Cape vineyards have been famous ever since, albeit some for the quantity rather than quality of their output.

Guests stay in what were once Babylonstoren's workers' cottages, set alongside an eight-acre show garden, dominated by fruit and vegetables, which is the property's big selling point.

Restaurant menus are dominated by homegrown organic produce, a theme established on arrival by a handsome basket of carrots, beetroot and greenery set out on the kitchen table in our cottage. The design standard of Babylonstoren is awesome—a feast for the eyes. Like many Cape hotels, this one offers only bed and breakfast, and access to the restaurant, which is open for lunch and dinner on Fridays and Saturdays.

In between, guests can order raw meat, fish and vegetables to cook or barbecue for themselves in the cottages. This makes the place ideal for travellers sick of being waited on hand and foot at home—the Prince of Wales would love it, even on one of his sane days. Penny, however, who deplores my enthusiasm for home cooking back in England, was unenthusiastic about the self-catering deal, and preferred dining out.

We used Babylonstoren's mountain

out from the Paradise Stables for a three-hour roam around the mountains, dismounting twice to try the vintages at wineries we passed. Some of the wines are not good enough to justify all the lip-smacking that goes on, but then what do you expect when most retail for around £5 a bottle, and a tasting costs little more than a pound a head? Most South African wine represents easy drinking rather than rivalry to French chateau-bottled claret. But for anybody not allergic to horseculture, I urge sampling from the saddle.

We moved on from Babylonstoren to the owner's cottage at Grande Provence. Having previously stayed at Alex van Heeren's sublime Huka Lodge in New Zealand, we arrived with our tongues hanging out, and were not disappointed. The cottage, which can sleep six in superb comfort created by Virginia Fisher, the New Zealander who also designed Huka, was a delight from arrival to departure.

Three days is the average stay, but with its own pool and charming garden, it is a perfect setting for the adulterous romp or virtuous idyll of a lifetime. A maid is on hand, and though we chose to eat at Grande Provence's excellent restaurant, those who prefer to play Garbo can eat in solitary splendour in the cottage.



Franschhoek, which has a strongly New England-resort flavour, with lots of white-painted timber, is a pleasant little place but not a bargain shopping destination, as long as the rand is pegged so high. The Hastingses are not heavy on political correctness; nevertheless we were amazed to find one shop selling wooden blackamoor figures in the old, supplicatory hand-outstretched pose, for up to £1,000 apiece. Penny expostulated: "They're so absolutely out of key with the message the rest of this country is selling."

Many of the surrounding wineries are owned by billionaires whose competing vanities cause them to lavish fortunes on making every wine barrel glitter, every blade of grass align like guardsmen. The sound of clashing tycoons' egos echoes off the hill like brontosaurus sparring. We liked most the La Motte vineyard of the late Anton

Rupert, the tobacco king, with its fine art collection and splendid 2009 shiraz, of which I brought a dozen home.

A aficionados of vintage cars salivate about the vast collection Rupert assembled, now displayed at a museum a few miles down the road from La Motte. Close by, the white owner of Solms-Delta farm has created another remarkable museum, founded upon stone-age fragments discovered on the site, which seeks to promote black and coloured South African pride in their own heritage.

Research has identified many of the slaves who worked on the farm over centuries, with names that identify their places of origin—Lena van der Kaap and November van Batavia are matched by men and women sent down in chains from Mozambique. Slaves were forbidden to wear shoes, whatever their

working circumstances. Their names, recorded in legal documents, are almost the only traces they left behind. It is sobering to recall that apartheid sustained a kind of slavery into the last decade of the 20th century.

Solms-Delta offers travellers a charming picnic facility, which is also available at other Cape wineries. For 145 rand a head a visitor can pick up a basket of good things under a gleaming napkin, take a bottle of wine and enjoy it at tables under the trees. Other countries should do the same.

We were taken to Solms as a part of a private tour guided by a retired wine-industry executive named Pietman Retief, an experience that we loved and would urge on anybody who wants to learn something about the Winelands, rather than merely idle at successive troughs in the sun. Pietman is another passionate enthusiast for his country, who talks wonderfully well about it.

A stroll through the streets of the university town of Stellenbosch is a must. Pietman explained how the 17th-century French Huguenots, who first came to Franschhoek to escape religious persecution at home in the company of Dutch co-religionists, named their properties after the places from which they came—hence, for instance, Grande Provence. Meanwhile, over in Stellenbosch, pioneers opted instead for naming their farms for sensations: these translate into "Beyond Expectations", "Never Thought This Would Happen", "Everything Lost".

One morning we played golf. Because we are complete duffers, we could only gain access to the Stellenbosch city club, pleasant enough, but a suburban course offering no scenic wonders. It cost us over £100 for a round, including hire of clubs, but that reflects the huge visitor pressure—at high season queues form at most tees, and some locals behave in a fashion that emphasises how few Afrikaaners attend recognised charm schools.

We spent a couple of hours doing the instant breadmaking course at Bread & Wine, the popular restaurant and charcuterie owned by the family of Susan Huxter of Le Quartier Français. I never realised kneading dough was such hard work, but this essay into edible mud-pie construction was jolly good fun, and the product even tasted pretty good, thanks to the expert tuition.

Our last two nights in Franschhoek were spent at La Residence, one of a chain of five-star hotels designed and owned by Liz Biden. All the accommodation is themed and we found ourselves in the "Elton John" room, a riot of extravagance in which one needed sunspecs to avoid being dazzled. At first glance we fancied we had wandered into a Russian oligarch's brothel. But once we got used to the décor we adored the setting at the foot of a sheer mountain, as well as the superbly friendly staff and some fine cooking. La Residence also has some detached villas with their own pools and catering facilities, which looked even more appealing—and no more expensive—than the main building. We would love to go back, to a less exuberantly styled suite.

For a change of scene, we made the stunning 90-minute drive over the mountains to Grootbos Forest Lodge, on the coast beyond Hermanus. Its name is misleading, because the joy of its detached modern cottages is their view across a mile of low vegetation to the sand dunes and breakers beyond, with scarce a tree in sight.

Penry and I first strolled on the sands, then spent a happy afternoon exploring on horses the miles of Walker Bay Nature Reserve's beach. As we are getting older, we took what might well prove our last ever canter through sea shallows, splashing among the dying wavelets. The food and staff at Grootbos were as pleasing as everywhere else we visited. In whale season they recommend a flight from the nearby airstrip to ogle those peerless mammals, at a cost of just £200 for three passengers for half an hour.

One day we drove into Hermanus for a delicious crayfish lunch at the Marine Hotel, which is strongly reminiscent of 1950s Cornwall, as are its patrons. The town is nothing very special, but the young, especially, love the coast at Grootbos and the sea excursions. My daughter went on a shark-viewing trip from cages a few years ago and adored it.

We flew home from Cape Town in a glow of goodwill towards South Africa. It is not a cheap destination, but seemed to us very good value for money. Nobody gets ill there that I ever heard of, and never for a moment—admittedly, in a closely secured environment—did we feel at risk.

Heaven knows what the next decade or

two will do to the country, whose future and governance still hang in the balance. But the Cape is today a genuine tourist paradise, especially for foodies, as long as you are not squeamish about partying behind electric fences. I suspect that in the years ahead, at resorts all over the world, it will become increasingly necessary to protect fortunate travellers from the rage of the disadvantaged and disaffected outside.

Puritans might complain about culinary overreach in the Cape. Menus have

a high rhetorical bull-manure content, and some of us find three hours too long to spend on dinner. I am all for catering originality, but disagree with the belief of Babylonstoren's chef that olives and chocolate make a great parfait combination. But our fellow visitors, and, again, especially the young, seemed to love it all. We found our trip blissfully relaxing, as well as fattening. Penry said when we got home: "Now you'll be grateful to live off soup and cheese for a while, won't you? Won't you?" □

Vanity Fair TRAVELS TO...

CAPE TOWN

WAY TO GO

Red Savannah (redsavannah.com) organises the best bespoke African adventures. A nine-day Winelands itinerary costs from £4,995 per person including flights with BA (britishairways.com), transfers, hire car, three nights at **Babylonstoren** (babylonstoren.com), two at **Grande Provence** (grandeprovence.co.za), two at **La Residence** (laresidence.co.za) and three at **Grootbos Private Nature Reserve** (grootbos.com). Many meals and activities are included. Franschhoek's **Le Quartier Français** (lqf.co.za) is justly famous, and the Owner's Cottage at Grande Provence an idyll.

NEED TO KNOW

DO book the Tasting Room at Le Quartier Français a month ahead of time, or when you get there you won't have a chance to find out what the fuss is about. **DONT** fail to notice the fabulous tiling on the wall of the restaurant at Babylonstoren, made by Ceramica Sant'Agostina of Italy. **DO** visit the leather boutiques in Franschhoek and Stellenbosch, which feature ostrich purses and bags in rainbow colours, funky buffalo-hide belts and wallets. **DONT** think about calories or you will miss the point of some of the world's fanciest dining.

READ ON

Three great works of or concerning the apartheid era are Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Barbara Tropp's *Frankie and Stankie*, about sisters growing up in 1950s South Africa, and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*.

PS

Everybody should experience the magic of Rorke's Drift, the mission station where British troops held off the Zulu army and 11 Victoria Crosses were awarded. Stay at **Fugitive's Drift Lodge** (redsavannah.com). Here the late David Rattray's son, Andrew, brings a dramatic episode of military history vividly to life. The Battle of Isandlwana, on January 22, 1879, was one of the British Empire's most shocking defeats. The battle that immediately followed, at nearby Rorke's Drift, in which some 150 soldiers repelled 4,000 Zulus, was one of the most heroic of victories. History in the field, minus the PowerPoint presentation, and all the better for it.

VANISHING POINT

A view from the road near Sossusvlei, Namibia. *Opposite page, clockwise from top: Somalia's Acacia camp, in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe; a herd of zebra and a lone leopard in the Okavango Delta, Botswana.*



GOING, GOING

GRAHAM BOYNTON on the urgency of preserving Africa's wilderness

Cry, the beloved country. Or rather, the beloved continent. There is indeed the deluxe, delovely South Africa of which Max Hastings writes (see previous article): a contemporary, alternative Africa providing employment for a needy population and sophistication for the gourmands and golf players, the “swallows” migrating to stock up on winter sun, now hotter in travel terms than the hectic fled-to-the-Med crowd in summer.

The traditional African adventure was hitherto the safari, a dream enhanced by the Discovery Channel and Meryl Streep, she who impersonated a woman who had a farm in Africa. It's still dreamy, probably the most life-enhancing experience you can have, but Africa's wildlife is in grave danger of dying, disappearing, diminished by human greed. The African rhino is being poached at unsustainable levels; over the past 12 months more than 25,000 elephant have been killed illegally for their ivory; and in the last 30 years the lion population has fallen from 400,000 to fewer than 25,000.

And yet if you were to travel to any of the continent's great wildlife areas—to Botswana's Okavango Delta, Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park, the remote parts of South Africa's Kruger—at first glance you wouldn't know that anything was amiss. You will see elephants everywhere, lions frequently and, unless you are unlucky, black and white rhino.

It is this conundrum that makes travelling through Africa's wilderness the most sybaritic and yet profound travel experience you will find in the modern world: sybaritic in that it removes one dramatically from the anxious daily routines of 21st-century life and transports you back to a time when homo sapiens had not crowded other species into distant corners; profound because out there are all the warning signs we need that the end of planet Earth as we know it is nigh. The bush is a WiFi-free world of endangered species and disappearing natural habitats that ought to provoke every traveller into contemplating the future of the human species.

The warning signs of our demise, our

death by overpopulation, are as clear in this empty wilderness as they are in the urban agglomerations. From the earliest evidence of human civilisation, around 150,000 years ago, until the industrial age, our population did not pass a billion people. Our second billion took just 123 years to appear; the third only 33 years, taking us to 1960; and since JFK was assassinated in 1963 our population has risen to seven billion and beyond.

Now we are living on environmental credit and the pressure in Africa is most serious. The population grew from 100 million at the turn of the 20th century to 700 million at the end. By midway through this century it will have ballooned to two billion, and although the massive concentrations are to be found in the cities, the wilderness areas are increasingly under pressure from burgeoning rural populations and their domestic animals. The disappearance of wildlife and their shrinking habitats is visible and immediate evidence.

I have just returned from my third African safari in a year, and can confirm

that this transformative experience is deep and powerful. At Botswana's Duba Plains camp I watched lion prides and buffalo herds engage in three-hour-long theatrical pieces that were as compelling as anything I've seen at the National Theatre; at South Africa's Phinda Game Reserve I took part in a rhino-darting exercise as part of the desperate conservation drive to save the species; and at Zimbabwe's Somalisa Camp I sat talking to the owner, Beks Ndlovu, while a breeding herd of 30 elephant wheeled and trumpeted all around us. Each encounter has been etched onto my cerebellum for eternity.

When applied to modern Bushveld tourism, "safari" is a misnomer. Safari is what grizzled old Victorian explorers such as Selous and Gordon-Cummings did in the days when blackwater fever and malaria were common afflictions and buffalo charges and lion attacks were frequent inconveniences. What we do these days is travel within a pharmaceutical *cordon sanitaire* keeping those dread diseases at bay, and we witness the wild exchanges of ferocious animals from the safety and comfort of a Land Rover. Maybe with a G&T (with ice) in hand. The occasional elephant charge may add a frisson of adventure but by and large you're safer than you would be on a Saturday night in Soho.

But that doesn't make the African wilderness any less intoxicating. As you sit under the most intense canopy of stars you will ever see, sipping a South African cab sav around the campfire, your conversation with fellow travellers and the ecologically literate guides you are bound to be travelling with will inevitably turn to the fragility of these beautiful places and whether it's already too late to save them.

And these are complex issues.

For example, for all the terrible stories of elephant poaching in central and east Africa, if your campfire chat is taking place in Botswana you will be told that there might be too many elephants there and that if their population continues to grow apace they may destroy most of the ancient woodlands. Or if your campfire conversation is taking place in South Africa—where the elephant population in Kruger National Park is estimated to be heading for three times the carrying capacity of the environment—you may turn to a genuinely threatened species,

the African rhino. They are now losing two rhino a day to poaching gangs that are being led by Asian gangmasters and using local villagers and dirt-poor Mozambicans from across the border. Now they are talking about legalising the trade in rhino horn and farming animals for horn. Which raises the questions: when do rhinos become cattle, and would tourists in search of wildness really pay top dollar to stare at de-horned rhino standing around in a fenced field?

At the moment these wilderness areas are still mostly wild, although not all. Richard Branson's much-trumpeted Ulusaba Lodge in the Kruger National Park, for example, overlooks a large African village that is separated from the animals by a fence. But the camps and conservancies in the parts of Southern Africa—Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe—where I've been tra-

velling over the past year or so, are considerable distances from the seething masses, and thus provide the solitude and space required for deep reflection. As the great Botswana guide "Map" Ives says, the more remote your bush destination, the smaller the planes that will take you there, so ideally the last leg of your journey should be in a six-seat Cessna 206.

Can there possibly be pleasure in taking a trip to witness man's self-destructive folly at first hand? I would argue that it is the thinking traveller's duty to visit Africa's great wildlife areas because wildlife tourism plays a significant part in the salvation of diverse species and ecosystems.

If we ignore Africa's wildlife, it will disappear. If we embrace wildlife tourism, there is a small chance we will save it—and in doing so save ourselves. □

