
ttg LUXURY



CAPTIVATING CARIBBEAN

New openings and lavish reimaginings of iconic hotels and resorts have given Brits more reasons to return to this spectacular region – or add it to their travel bucket lists

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In person: South Africa

Dynamic duo

One of the oldest working Cape Dutch farms and a renovated Cape Town icon make for an impeccable twin-centre pairing that beautifully showcases South Africa's wine, gastronomy, history and wellness offering

AUTHOR: MADELEINE BARBER

If I was anywhere else in the world, I would turn my nose up at carrot and turmeric juice. But I'm standing in a rural farm shop filled to the brim with fresh produce, and I think if there's anywhere my taste buds will get onboard with the concoction, it's here. Shop worker Natasha hands over a sample, beaming "enjoy yourself and spoil yourself", and I knock it back in one; I'm very pleasantly surprised.

This is a frequent feeling at Babylonstoren. An institution renowned for being one of the oldest working Cape Dutch farms in South Africa's winelands, it dates back to 1692 and has simultaneously retained its rustic charm and transformed into an exceptional luxury escape. The now high-end hotel, expansive eight-acre vineyard, garden, farm, spa and dining destination is a mere 40-minute drive from Cape Town, and so is perfect for combining with a stay in the Mother City.

Taste the difference

I sampled 10 types of white, rose and red during Babylonstoren's Cellar Tour, which takes place beside its Story of Wine Museum in a cool barn packed out with wooden barrels stacked from floor to ceiling. Sampling seven wines with food pairings is standard, but for a small additional fee (around £2) guests can add three flagship wines to the menu: a biscuity Chardonnay; a sparkling Sprinkle; and four-grape Nebukadnesar, which is a limited-release, Bordeaux-inspired blend and Babylonstoren's most prized bottle.

Taste buds are consistently tickled at Babylonstoren, where 70% of all food varieties served in the destination's three restaurants – Babel, the Greenhouse and the Old Bakery – are grown or produced on site. Take vegetables, for example: all are harvested and plated up within three days or, in the case of lettuce varieties, move from farm to fork in just one day. Food does not come fresher than this, and it shows not just in the facts, but in the flavour too.

During a special collections garden tour (11.30am Monday-Friday) with Babylonstoren's master – and original – gardener Gundula Deutschlander, I take the farm-to-fork concept one step further and taste plants pulled directly



from the sun-dried earth. A succulent shrub known as "elephant food", or *spekboom* in Afrikaans, packs the biggest punch, surprising me with the lemony tang of its fleshy leaves. Gundula explains it's popular with doctors for its ability to help soothe the heat stroke, rashes and sore throats.

"The power is in the petals," she says, pointing at fiery marigolds that can help heal wounds and reduce the appearance of scars. Guests over 10 years old should pop into the Healing Garden to learn about the real medicinal magic makers said to be tackling cancer and coronavirus among other life-threatening illnesses.

This garden tour is one of Babylonstoren's collection of included activities, which also

How to book it

Carrier offers seven nights from £3,740pp, based on two adults sharing (1 June 2025 departure). Price includes three nights at Babylonstoren in a one-bedroom suite with breakfast and a selection of activities such as canoeing and wine tasting, plus four nights at Cape Grace in a Fairmont Harbour View room with breakfast. Also includes flights with British Airways from Heathrow, private transfers and VIP Meet and Greet in Cape Town. Tel: 0161 492 1353, carrier.co.uk

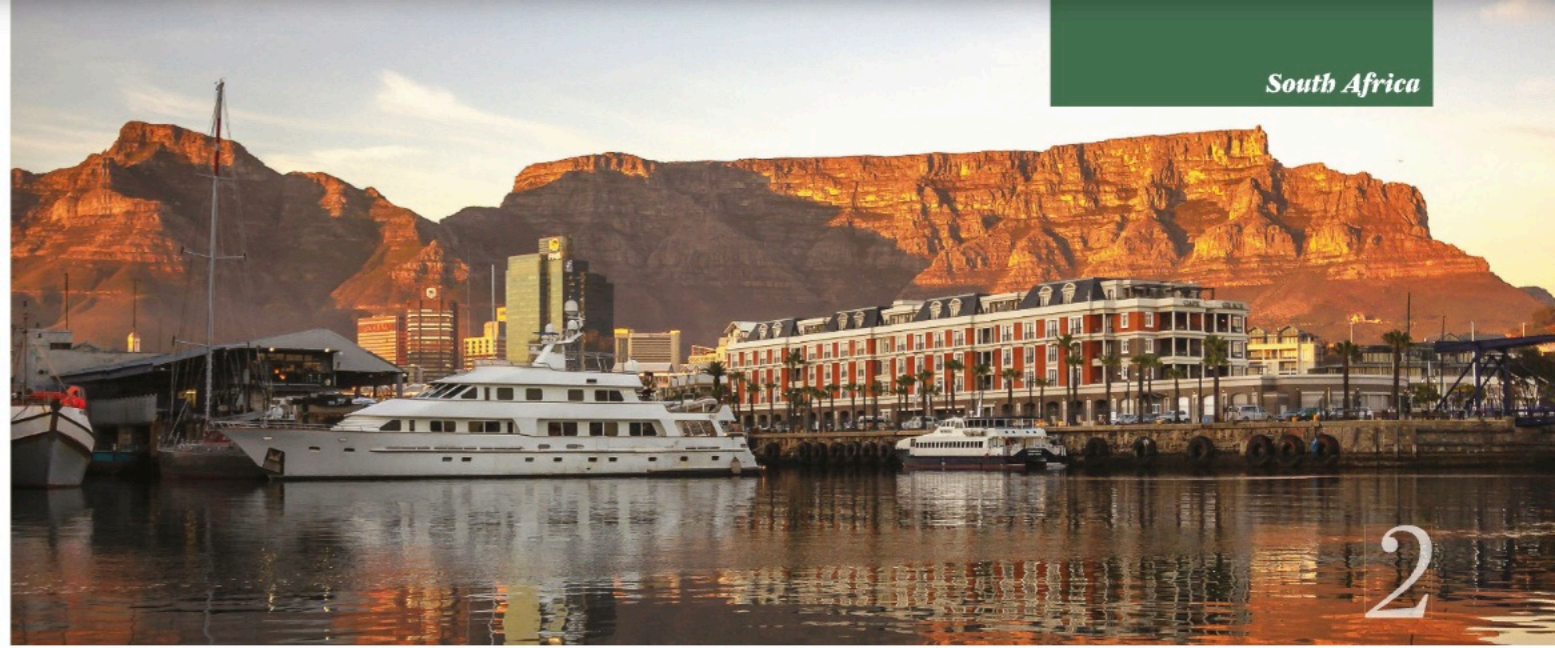
include a Sunset Mountain Drive, craft workshops and early morning excursion to Rietvlei. During the latter, guests meet some of the farm's 200 water buffalo and, afterwards, taste their mozzarella, yoghurt and butter at Babel's comprehensive breakfast buffet, or water buffalo ice cream in the Gelato Room.

The destination's newest experience is Soetmelksvlei: a recreated 19th-century farm, where visitors try their hand at using traditional methods to turn milk into butter, learn the inner workings of a water mill producing flour and meet the resident farmyard animals (this one is great for kids).

Making a house a home

The 33 one- to five-bedroom accommodation options at Babylonstoren are divided between a hotel, farmhouse, family house, garden cottages and fynbos cottages; all seamlessly combining velvety white linens and glossy oak flooring with rattan furnishings and modern touches such as glass-cube extensions.

Our group stayed in the five-bedroom, five-bathroom Fynbos Family House, which, tucked into the base of the Simonsberg and Franschhoek mountains, offers vistas that made me go weak at the knees. Plus, its own grassy courtyard with crystal pool and comfy, cushioned loungers makes it feel like a traditional-yet-contemporary home away from home.



Another Babylonstoren space oozing relaxation is its Garden Spa, which is made up of pools, a hammam, chill room, hot spa and gym; and can be found immersed in a forest of bamboo. I had to try the signature treatment – a private hammam water ritual (£150) that takes place in a traditional mosaicked Rasul chamber with an interior resembling an upside-down swimming pool. Sprawled out on a marble slab, my body was exfoliated, flexed and massaged from head-to-toe by my smooth-voiced therapist Natsy, who even gave my hair a wash, and after an hour had me emerging from the steam feeling like a new woman.

Beauty and Grace

A few days later at the iconic Cape Grace hotel in Cape Town, I found myself reborn yet again thanks to a 60-minute Swedish massage in its recently upgraded Fairmont Spa. While a Deep Relax essential oil wafted through the treatment room, I melted into a cool gel face pillow and heated blanket as a therapist kneaded hot, black, shiny stones into my muscles until I slipped into a deep slumber.

During recent nine-month, multimillion-pound renovations (completed May 2024) this spa was migrated from the fourth to the first floor, so it could sit more practically next to the pool. I soon found myself there, poolside, gazing out to the V&A Waterfront yacht marina and Table

Mountain beyond, sipping Moët & Chandon and sampling freshly shucked oysters from South Africa's west coast... bliss.

Downstairs there's an alternative spot for tasting a tippie or two. Bascule Bar, open from 12pm until late, is where guests can settle into the cosy, low-lit atmosphere to sample 570 whiskies from 170 distilleries spanning 12 countries (though please, advise not all at once).

The bar's collection includes rare vintages dating back to 1953 and sought-after libations from discontinued casks. And there's even a temperature-controlled cellar out back where, for a price, guests can store special-occasion bottles of wine or spirits.

Sitting down to dinner at Cape Grace's flagship restaurant – Heirloom – is a welcome moment after F&B director Bryan Peterson promised revolutionary things from the hotel's family-style dining concept. "Fine dining has run its course," he said as we lifted tender ostrich tartare and melt-in-your-mouth seabass collars from gigantic serving plates. My eyes widened and my stomach expanded as we worked our way through three multi-dish courses – there's no eight-course tasting menu of puny portions here, just carefully curated and expertly executed fare.

On a high

Although tempting, we didn't just eat and drink during our stay at Cape Grace; there were

a few adventures outside the hotel walls on the agenda. One windy morning we kitted up and headed out for a drive with Cape Sidecar Adventures. Choosing to ride pillion behind our local guide Ebie, I was gifted the finest views as we hugged the coastline alongside Sea Point Promenade and rolled through the kaleidoscopic neighbourhood of Bo-Kaap. This is a historic area that in the 1760s was made home to Cape Malay slaves brought from Malaysia, Indonesia and elsewhere in Africa to work.

Today the community's creative core shines through in brightly coloured houses decorated with powerful murals projecting Muslim culture and values (the majority of Bo-Kaap's residents still follow Islam). The tour ended with Cape Grace refreshments atop Signal Hill, which is a peak with Instagram-worthy panoramic vistas of Table Mountain and the city below.

I'd say the views from Signal Hill are unmatched – if it weren't for my ascent with NAC Helicopters. Our 18-minute flight took in bird's-eye views of the City Bowl amphitheatre, Table Mountain's 12 Apostles and Robben Island, which between the 17th and 20th centuries served as a leper colony, mental hospital, military base and, most famously, a prison for anti-apartheid activists including South Africa's former president and national treasure, Nelson Mandela. Even from above, the island – which was designated a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1999 and now hosts a museum – feels eerie, and I have no doubt stepping foot on the ground is a sobering experience.

However, I was not sober during my time in South Africa. I was love-drunk on my newfound obsession with this country and the unique experiences at Babylonstoren and Cape Grace: two inimitable destinations I'm confident will never fail to impress their astute clientele. ■

Pictured

1. Babel, one of the three restaurants at Babylonstoren
2. Cape Grace is between the V&A Waterfront and Table Mountain
3. Babylonstoren is set within the Franschhoek wine valley
4. View of the marina from Cape Grace's Heirloom restaurant