

Vine and handy

South Africa's new game reserves are just a giraffe's gambol from the country's finest wineries (and seaside cities). Perfect if you like your creature comforts, says **Jill Starley-Grainger**



SOUTH AFRICA

Bread winner:
opposite, tamarillo-
topped slice
with cheese at
Babylonstoren;
below, the
Stellenbosch winery



full-bodied with a grassy nose,

a long woody character and acid-green appearance – the cascade of urine splashing our open-topped 4WD certainly had a distinctive bouquet. The white rhinoceros it was spewing from wanted to make absolutely clear what she thought of us (she had already mock-charged our car when she spotted us spying through the shrubbery), so her finish was smooth yet heavy with a lingering barnyard aroma (that's wine-speak for 'poo').

Thrilling as it was to be within 'could you pass the loo roll?' distance of a rhino, I was hoping for a more pleasing fragrance to accompany the next leg of my trip. On my previous visit to South Africa, I'd had to skip the winelands in favour of a safari, but this time, I'd found a way of combining both – and a city break in Cape Town to boot.

A decade ago, this wouldn't have been possible without a two-day drive or long internal flight. Most of the major game reserves, including Kruger National Park, were in eastern South Africa near Johannesburg, while the seaside city of Cape Town and its adjacent winelands were hundreds of kilometres away in the west. But thanks to conservationists renaturalising the land in the '90s (previously cleared for farming), you can now reach two excellent reserves within three hours of Cape Town: Gondwana, east along the gorgeous Garden Route, and Sanbona, north towards Namibia. Travellers today get the thrill of bounding around a game reserve on the lookout for cheetahs and hippos, then chilling out afterwards in a vineyard, quaffing Chardonnays and Pinots. Tim, my husband, and I are in South Africa for a week, spending two nights at wild Gondwana, three in the elegant winelands, and finishing in chic Cape Town.

We leave the animals in a cloud of terracotta dust, and in no time we're zooming along the leafy Garden Route,

where fynbos and wild flowers dot the roadside, and a marshmallow-cloud sky casts shadows on the tarmac. Three hours later, the landscape changes again and we're skirting epic Threewaterskloof lake. The jagged sandstone peaks of the Hottentots-Holland Mountains rear into view soon after. It doesn't look like the same continent any more, let alone the same country.

Soon the slopes segue from fynbos shrublands into vineyards, a natural signpost that we're entering the Franschhoek wine region. We pull into La Petite Ferme, a little mountainside winery, restaurant and guesthouse, for a late lunch. Its scrumptious aubergine *parmigiano* comes as a pleasant surprise (as a vegetarian, I'm more used to soggy pizza being my sole option) and Tim chooses a juicy springbok loin in herbed Cabernet *jus*, washed down with the restaurant's own award-winning Merlot. After mains, the staff spread out blankets on the sprawling lawn, where we share a dark-chocolate mousse saturated with a Baileys-like Amarula liquor, and drink in the sweeping panorama of the Franschhoek Valley.

Out of the blue, we notice a group of men racing through the vines on a distant hill. As they get closer, it's obvious they aren't humans at all, but a large troop of baboons. They scamper around, jostling vines and generally wreaking havoc. 'Some vintners treat baboons like pests,' explains our waiter. 'But we accept that a certain quantity of grapes is theirs, and let them have their share. After all, they were here long before we were.'

By 6pm, after wandering around Franschhoek's art galleries and upmarket boutiques, we're eating again – this time amid the smart, suited locals in the lounge bar at fashionable Le Quartier Français. It couldn't be more different to Gondwana and it seems scarcely possible >

Bullboard: opposite, clockwise from top left, a waiter at Babylonstoren edits the seasonal menu; a lioness and cub in Gondwana Game Reserve; chefs at Babylonstoren gather ingredients from the garden; a slug of red



We move through the Champagnes and Chenin Blancs, and onto the Cab Sauvs. Only hours earlier we were watching zebras find breakfast

SIP AND CYCLE

Hop on a bike for wine-tasting on two wheels. The R45 road from Franschhoek to Paarl is fairly flat, which makes for easy riding as you vineyard-hop in the valley. Franschhoek Cycles (Franschhoekcycles.co.za) has bikes from £15 a day

that just eight hours earlier we were watching zebras and antelopes wolfing down their breakfast.

The next morning is a late start. On safari, you're in a 4WD before dawn, racing to catch the animals as they frolic at first light. In the winelands, nobody's in a hurry – we laze beside the pool 'til midday then set off. As we motor down the road with no particular destination in mind, Franschhoek's houses give way to mountain-backed vineyards, dotted with a winery sign every few kilometres. We spot a sign for Boschendal, and are tempted by its long, oak-lined drive; this looks dead posh.

But squeals and giggles from outside a trio of white Cape Dutch manor houses let us know this place won't be full of stuffed shirts. Young kids are making up their own rules to *boules* at a sand court beneath a tree, while their boisterous family shares a bottle of bubbly at a table nearby. We follow suit at our own cast-iron table, starting with a tot of Cap Classique (the South African take on Champagne – only with a richer taste, and at half the price). Glugging it rather too quickly, we move through the Chenin Blancs and onto the Cab Sauvs. Sipping these more slowly, we let the sun take the cellar chill off a Merlot blend and ogle the soaring granite peaks looming beyond. Franschhoek has nearly 50 wineries, but we're finding it hard to leave our first.

Eventually, we move on, soon spotting a small winery high on a hill: Haute Cabrière. Moseying into the oval bar in the cellar, I glance at the menu and note that five tastings costs a mere £1.50. This seems to be the norm around here; Boschendal was just a pound more. After swilling these (my favourite is an unusual rich, smooth white-wine blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir), I'm feeling peckish. Do they serve food? Yes, indeed and, astonishingly, there is even a vegetarian tasting menu. I'm sold and the sky turns magenta as my celeriac soufflé arrives. The joyously tiny bill – the wine in the restaurant isn't marked up, so costs the same as in the shop, just £4 a bottle – provides the perfect digestif.

Our sophisticated safari trip isn't turning out to be the contradiction we expected – who knew rhino and Riesling could make such great travel partners? Today, we are off to stylish Stellenbosch, South Africa's most famous wine region, and only half an hour away. Steering into wineries at whim, we sip, slurp and spit (well, one of us spits – somebody has to drive), chatting to Capetonian day-trippers and tourists smiling and sleepy-eyed from too much fine wine and bright sun.

On the advice of the staff at La Petit Ferme, we'd booked lunch at Babylonstoren (00 27 21 863 3852, babylonstoren.com; mains about £9). Slightly off the >

Zebra crossing: a herd of the striped beasts galloping across the South African plain



We watch as dozens of penguins nest, canoodle, groom and bray on the sands – and hundreds more duck, dive and dip in the bay

OMNIVOROUS FEAST

Current darling of the SA food scene is chef Luke Dale-Roberts, whose veggie dishes are as inventive as his meaty ones. Book a month ahead for his Cape Town eateries, the casual Pot Luck Club (thepotluckclub.co.za) and smarter Test Kitchen (thetestkitchen.co.za)

Flippin' lovely: clockwise from above, African penguins on Boulders Beach; lodge at Gondwana; freshly baked bread at Babylonstoren

beaten track in the back roads of Stellenbosch, meals don't come any more 'farm-to-table' than here. To reach the glass-walled barn, where lunch is served, diners pick their way through verdant vegetable patches and blooming fruit gardens, past donkeys, chickens and roosters.

Its menu won't disappoint carnivores, with local beef, quail, duck and more, but the fruit and veg steals the show: the food on our plates matches the rainbow hues of the flowerbeds. My pumpkin fritter is paired with a salad strewn with nasturtiums, while Tim's Caesar salad is speckled with pomegranate seeds and ruby peas. My main course is a 'sandwich' – slabs of Romanesco cauliflower slathered in Gorgonzola with a side of poached guava – and Tim's trout is served with fennel jam.

It's a similar story in Cape Town, where, with just a modicum of effort, I find that vegetarians can eat almost as well as in London – and for half the price. What's more, I discover that vineyards grow right in the city – the Constantia wine region is in the Cape Town suburbs on the slopes of Table Mountain, a mere 20 minutes from the tourist-packed V&A Waterfront. And despite what the French would have you think, South Africa is no naïve upstart in the world of wine. In fact, do you know what Napoleon and Jane Austen had in common? Their favourite tippie was from a Cape Town vineyard: a sweet

white called Vin de Constance, exported to Europe from the three-centuries-old Groot Constantia winery.

Best of all, there's the chance to add to the trip's animal tally – with penguins. Last time I came on safari, 10 years ago, I was 1,700km away from my favourite feathered friends, in one of those Eastern safari camps. This time, I can make the easy 45-minute drive from Cape Town and get within centimetres of hundreds of wild African penguins. (They arrived here on Boulders Beach in the '80s and have never left.)

I'm enchanted. We watch for half an hour as dozens nest, canoodle, groom and bray on the sands – and hundreds more duck, dive and dip in search of fish in the waters of False Bay. We kick off our shoes and walk slowly into the shallows. A couple of penguins drift lazily in our direction until they are so close we can reach out and touch them (although we don't, of course, not least because they have a nasty bite). They are completely oblivious to us – or so I think. I notice a few white speckles appear in the crystal-clear waters, but before I realise what they are, a large blob floats over and clings to my leg. 'That penguin pooped on you!' squeals a nearby child, pointing and laughing hysterically. I might love animals so much that I won't eat them, but my up-close encounters on this trip have taught me one thing: the feeling isn't mutual. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: 4CORNERS, AWL, GETTY



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

BA (ba.com) is the only airline to fly non-stop from London to Cape Town year-round, with return flights from Heathrow from £784. **South African** (flysaa.com) flies year-round from Heathrow, via Johannesburg, from £718. **Virgin Atlantic** (virgin-atlantic.com) flies direct from Heathrow from September to April from £799.

Where to stay

Franschhoek Country House Hotel (00 27 21876 3386, fch.co.za) has flouncey faux-French-Italian decor and doubles from £75, B&B. Honeymooners and celebs, including Elton John, splurge on the exclusive **La Residence** (00 27 15 793 3977, laresidence.co.za), set in its own spacious grounds in Franschhoek, with doubles from £417, B&B. In Constantia, **Alphen** (00 27 21795 6300, alphen.co.za) is a historic Cape Dutch estate near Groot Constantia and Kirstenbosch Gardens, set on the slopes of Table Mountain, with doubles from £135, B&B.

Go packaged

Africa Collection (01403 256655, africa-collection.co.uk) has a 14-day trip taking in Cape Town, the winelands, the Garden Route and Gondwana Game Reserve, from £1,695pp, B&B (full board on safari), with Heathrow flights and car hire. Or try **Audley Travel** (audleytravel.com) or **Bailey Robinson** (baileyrobinson.com).

Safaris

Beware the so-called 'safari parks' and their ilk that proliferate near Cape Town and along the Garden Route. Most are little more than zoos, where the animals are kept in enclosures. The nearest proper game reserves to Cape Town are **Gondwana** (00 27 21555 0807, gondwanagr.co.za; doubles in luxury lodges from £135pp, full board, including game drives) and the larger **Sanbona** (00 27 41509 3000, www.sanbona.com; from £230pp, full board, with game drives), although the latter is further from the Garden Route and beaches.

Further information

CapeTown.Travel and SouthAfrica.net.