

## Exploring South Africa's Cape Winelands



You'll find no better way to round out a trip to Cape Town than to ramble out to the Cape Winelands. Less than an hour's drive away, the countryside offers a welcome counterpoint to soccer's fever-pitched intensity. Three Cape Wineland villages — Stellenbosch, Franschhoek and Paarl — form the ideal triumvirate for exploration and tastings. Besides the great weather and gorgeous mountains, there are spectacular examples of Cape Dutch architecture and fertile valleys ripe with scented orchards and vineyards. Each village is a world unto itself, offering a diverse network of well-marked tree-lined wine trails.

Over two sun-filled days in September, I sampled superb local cuisine and stunning wines, some of which are available in the United States.

Here are my recommendations beginning with the three most-visited villages, as well as two closer-in destinations.

### Stellenbosch

Stroll Stellenbosch's tree-shaded streets lined with ancient oaks and take in its Cape Dutch architecture. Join one of two daily guided walking tours that start at the town's tourist office on Market Street. A university town and South Africa's second oldest settlement, Stellenbosch is also the starting point of a major wine route that encompasses more than 20 wine estates within an eight mile radius.

One of the most prominent is the **Delaire Graff Estate**. Acquired by Lawrence Graff of famed Graff Diamonds in 2003, the winery has been remarkably rebuilt and freshly re-opened in 2009.

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[www.leedaleytravelwriter.com](http://www.leedaleytravelwriter.com)

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Delaire's dramatic location at the crest of a panoramic mountain pass is a destination *par excellence*. Consider your visit here a major cultural and environmental experience where the beauty of the panoramic setting, the architecture and the artwork rival the stunning restaurant and tasting lounge. Graff enlisted preeminent interior architect David Collins of London's Connaught Hotel fame to translate his personal vision into a display platform for an incredible collection of works by outstanding contemporary local artists. As such, it is already an important and relevant center for African art.

Delaire is a working farm growing its own organic vegetables in gardens and hot houses on the grounds. Naturally, the restaurant's menu features fresh home-grown produce. Reaping the rewards of its high mountain altitude, cool sea breezes, excellent soils and a state-of-the-art wine cellar, the estate seems perfectly poised to achieve its promise

of long-term superior wine-making. ([www.delaire.co.za](http://www.delaire.co.za)).

### **Ernie Els Winery**

At his state-of-the-art winery, I found ample proof that champion golfer Ernie Els excels at more than one on-the-ground sport. The South African native's reds are some of South Africa's most impressive. [www.ernieelswines.com](http://www.ernieelswines.com).

Be sure and taste the 2007 Engelbrecht Els Proprietors Blend, their most popular here in the U. S. Crimson red in color, its aroma reveals prominent Cabernet Sauvignon character with nuances of sandalwood, leather and tobacco. Underlying shades of spices from Shiraz support a strong blackberry core. On the palate, it integrates hints of juicy plum and black cherry concluding with a smoky coffee aftertaste.



### **Franschhoek**

From Stellenbosch, drive along the splendid Helshoogte Pass to the country village of Franschhoek. Founded by French Huguenot settlers, Franschhoek still demonstrates a French flair that includes its annual Bastille Day festival.

In town, art galleries and antique shops rub shoulders with chocolatiers and bakeries.

Just outside of town on Happy Valley Road, Moreson Wine Estate is a great place to taste wine. Reflecting a commitment to terroir, the estate produces two table wine ranges labeled Pinecrest and Pinehurst, both sold internationally along with their signature award-winning Moreson wines ([www.moreson.co.za](http://www.moreson.co.za)). Set aside an hour for lunch here at their vineyard restaurant, Bread and Wine. Or chat with the staff behind the tasting counter, each one a font of knowledge on the local wine scene.

### **Paarl**

Birthplace of the Afrikaans language, Paarl produces almost one-fifth of South Africa's wine crop so you'll be spoiled for choice. Like its neighbors, the town is steeped in history. Three hundred years ago, Dutch and French Huguenot settlers brought their architectural and agricultural savoir faire to this idyllic environment. It was here that Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990. Today's Paarl, a peaceful village, reflects the beauty of its namesake, a pearl-like granite rock atop the spectacular mountain which overlooks the town.

Just off the town’s main street, the **Grande Roche Hotel**, an elegant country house, sits amidst the vines of a thriving vineyard. Dine in the hotel’s Bosman’s Restaurant and you’re in for a treat. Working with the house sommelier, Chef Roland Gorgosilich often tweaks recipes to marry the ingredients’ flavors with a particular wine. From Grande Roche’s wine cellar, he has the luxury of choosing from a cache of more than 600 wines.

I hope to return soon. The mountain and wineland vistas, the hiking trails through the vineyards, the two floodlit tennis courts, the heated swimming pool and sanctuary-themed suites call for a longer stay ([www.granderoche.com](http://www.granderoche.com)).

### Steenberg Hotel and Vineyards

Closer still to Cape Town, the verdant Constantia Valley is but a 20-minute drive, making this wine region an easy day trip. Keep it in mind as a possible home base for the World Soccer Cup matches. Now a five-star hotel, Steenberg’s restored buildings date back to 1682. Sitting against the slopes of the Steenberg Mountains with wide views over False Bay, the property boasts a state-of-the-art winery. Complete a day here with dinner at the Catharina Restaurant where Chef Garth Almazon presides over the kitchen. Enjoy the Sauvignon Blanc, the farm’s flagship wine. It consistently receives five-star ratings.

South Africans traditionally drink white wines when they are young. Local vintner’s lore is: “Launch it. Drink it.” Over lunch, I tasted the crisp “Steenberg 1682 Chardonnay Brut” which was bottled two weeks earlier. Supposedly, Nelson Mandela drank Steenberg’s sparkling wine the night he was elected South Africa’s president and again at his inauguration dinner. Website: [www.steenberghotel.com](http://www.steenberghotel.com).



### Where to Buy South African Wines:

Search [www.wine-searcher.com](http://www.wine-searcher.com) and [www.winezap.com](http://www.winezap.com) for wine outlets in your area. South African wines are very reasonably priced. The U S dollar’s relative strength against the Rand makes these imports a good value.

### If You Go:

Prior to my departure, Cape Town’s Gilt Edge Travel arranged all hotel stays and a driver — [www.Gilt-Edge.com](http://www.Gilt-Edge.com). They also arranged transport through Hylton Ross with the very knowledgeable Andrew Penn as driver — [www.HyltonRoss.co.za](http://www.HyltonRoss.co.za).

### Getting There:

Cape Town Airport won Best Airport in Africa seven years running at the World Travel Market Trade Show in London. An even more recent face-lift upgraded the transport system from the airport to the city center and the new stadium.

South Africa Airways flies direct from its major U.S. gateways in New York and Washington, D. C. connecting in Johannesburg to Cape Town. If at all possible, choose Business Class for the long haul portion of your flight. South African Airways consistently rates higher than most U. S. airlines for service, comfort and all around convenience when flying to the African continent ([www.FlySaa.com](http://www.FlySaa.com)), or toll free (800) 722-9675.

