



Cape Winelands. Below: The Dutch Reformed Church in Franschhoek.



# The best wine route on rails

Take a tram through the valley and spend a night among the vines in South Africa's stunning Cape Winelands district



Emily McAuliffe was keen to go in search of elephants on a South African safari but hadn't realised elephants would also lead to one of her new favourite wine styles.

The elephants charted the path. The mountain pass that leads out of Franschhoek follows the trail of the grey giants that once called the area home, and explains why the South African town was formerly known as Oliphantshoek or "Elephant's Corner".

As the elephants plodded between their summer and winter pastures, firming up a track through the craggy mountain range, the grapevines planted in the region in the late 1600s by the Dutchmen who founded Cape Town started to take root.

The vines then prospered in the hands of the Huguenots – French Protestant refugees who had fled to the Netherlands and were subsequently sent to the small South African colony governed by the Dutch East India Company, eventually leading the district to become one of South Africa's, and the world's, best wine regions.

## INTO THE VALLEY

The Elephant Corner was renamed the French Corner (Franschhoek) and it's where we're headed, as we cruise along the highway out of Cape Town with driver Irshaad Gaffoor from Escape to the Cape.

As the city shrinks behind us, an imposing mountain range appears ahead like a pale blue silhouette, and a low fog creates an ethereal feel. When we enter the valley 45 minutes later, we see the mountains are flanked by vineyards, crispy and golden in the autumn sun, and rows of oak trees neatly skirt the roadside.

This is an affluent area known as the Cape Winelands district. Along with Stellenbosch and Paarl, Franschhoek (regarded as South Africa's culinary capital) sits pretty in the valley, with a main street lined with galleries and boutique shops. The town's white and grey building facades are laced with Victorian-style detailing and trim hedges add a pop of greenery. Ahead, a man bumps along the road in a tractor, towing a large crate of green apples – a nod to the farms that still operate. Once produce was moved by ox-drawn cart, until a train was built in 1904. Though the train has since been replaced by road transport (including the odd tractor), the line remains, now providing a convenient means of travel between wineries. [escapetothecape.co.za](http://escapetothecape.co.za)

## ALL ABOARD

We arrive at the Franschhoek Wine Tram terminal soon before 10am. When we board the double-decker, open-air tram, with a welcome cup of wine in hand, we're faced with a steep spiral staircase, which I imagine will become increasingly hazardous as the day goes on.

After pulling out from the station we have just enough time to down our rose before reaching our first stop, where we shuffle off and climb on to the long bench seats of a tractor dubbed the "safari Ferrari" by jovial conductor Simon Theron. Simon leans over the tram's railing and waves us off enthusiastically with a broad grin, "See you at 11! Enjoy!"

We're shuttled down the driveway of Grand Provence, where we're met by host Charlie Van Zyl for a wine and nougat pairing at a table under the trees, surrounded by vibrant purple lupin flowers. The estate is best known for its sauvignon blanc, and, under Charlie's instruction, we alternate sips of the crisp, fruity drop with nibbles of pistachio and apricot nougat. I hadn't expected to be devouring alcohol and sweets so early in the day, but I'm glad I am.

The hop-on, hop-off Franschhoek Wine Tram has eight coloured lines which pass different wineries, and on the grey line we then stop outside Rickety Bridge, where we're once again transported by tractor down a long driveway (and across a seemingly sturdy bridge) surrounded by golden grapevines. In the distance, the word Franschhoek is etched into the side of the mountain.

Our tasting at Rickety Bridge is enjoyed on a deck with mountain views and the smell of a log fire. I discover I'm partial to South Africa's signature red wine grape pinotage (a cross between pinot noir and cinsault, or hermitage) as we sip a velvety 2018 vintage. "What's so special about this wine in particular," says our host Cara Van der Vyver as she pours our tasting, "is that we have a big baboon colony in the mountains and in summertime they all come down and eat the grapes. We harvest in February when it's very hot, so the farm has to employ extra people to go into the vineyard literally just to chase the baboons away." How very South African, indeed. [winetram.co.za](http://winetram.co.za)



### FARMLAND LUXURY

After our sojourn on the tram and more pre-noon wine than we're used to, Irshaad picks us up for lunch and we wave goodbye to the guests continuing their journey along the rail line. Our destination is Protégé, a bright and airy restaurant in Le Quartier Francais hotel that nurtures the talents of up-and-coming chefs. On the back deck we enjoy what will be remembered as one of the best meals of our trip – sourdough with smoked bone marrow, Cape Malay seared tuna with curry leaves and sultana chutney, and grass-fed beef with pepper truffle cream. I pair my meal with chenin blanc, another of South Africa's signature wines, made with grapes that originated in France's Loire Valley and produced in nearby Stellenbosch.

At its core, the Cape Winelands district is a celebration of wine and fresh produce against a backdrop of sprawling vineyards, towering mountains and lush farmland, which honours the area's history as a fruit and vegetable stop for ships travelling between Europe and Asia.

Farm life is still embraced by one of the area's most lauded hotels, Babylonstoren, which sits on a property that grows more than 300 varieties of plants with nutritional or medicinal value. If that's not impressive enough, there's also a cellar, an essential oil distillery, a soap factory, a honey room and an olive oil plant, all open to guests for tours and workshops.

Arriving late afternoon, I pick up one of the communal bikes resting against one of the hotel's crisp white buildings and ride along a gravel road through the orchards



Clockwise from far left: Protégé in Le Quartier Francais, Franschhoek; red grapes in a Cape Winelands vineyard; Franschhoek; the tram arriving at Ricketty Bridge Winery Railway Station.

in search of the lake marked on the property map (yes, this place is so big you need directions). Up a small incline I find it, shimmering gold in the afternoon sun as the mountains in the background turn a dusty pink.

To my left are rows of deep purple shiraz grapes and ahead is the road that will lead me back to my spacious farm-style room, fronted by a warm plunge pool, steam room and sauna.

While the path of the elephants who used to call this area home was harsh, all paths in and around the Winelands now seem to lead to beauty and indulgence. And plenty of wine, of course.

*The writer was a guest of South Africa Tourism*



### Escape route


#### • Getting there

Qantas flies to Johannesburg and FlySafair offers connecting flights to Cape Town.

#### • Staying

Rooms at Babylonstoren start at \$780 a night (ZAR 8700) and cottages start at \$1000 a night (ZAR 11,200).

[babylonstoren.com](http://babylonstoren.com)

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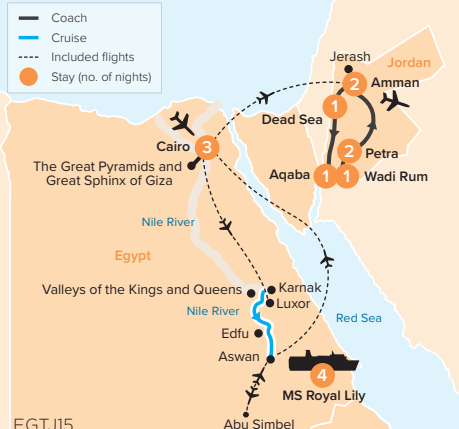
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