

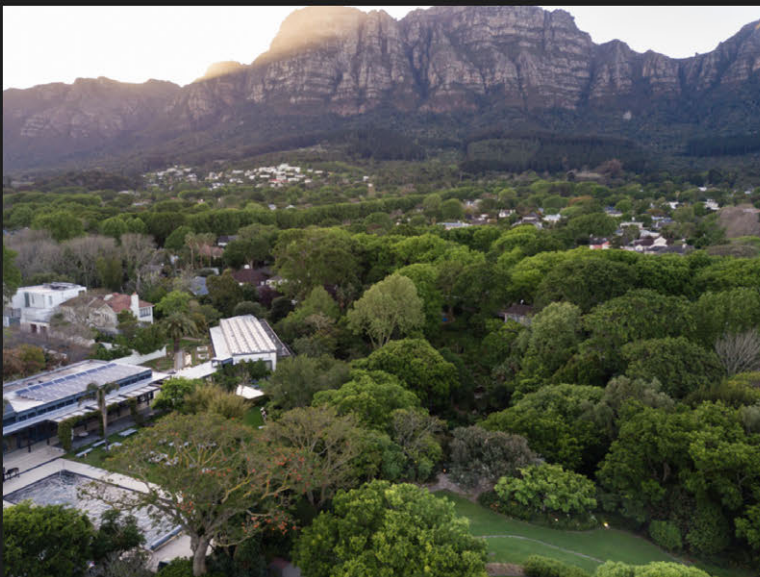
ESCAPE TO SOUTH AFRICA'S VINEYARD HOTEL

By Caroline Phillips



In the foyer, there's an antique copper consommé pot large enough to please the most exacting cannibal. The patio flooring is the ballast from a shipwreck and the bar is made of wood salvaged from another wreck. Everywhere there are antique nick-nacks and curiosities. 'Brass navigational divide 1740' and 'Brass taps 1830' are just two of the curios in the display cabinets.

But it's the nature that has everyone bagging Insta opportunities. The shafts of sunlight cut through the mountain peaks and there's the sound of the river rushing by. We admire the sheer rock-face — its brown-grey mightiness covered by the greenery of trees on its lower slopes — in the rising morning light. We gaze later in wonder at the same mountain as dusk falls, the sunset lighting its faces and the mist settling on its upper reaches.



Then suddenly there's a cloud bursting behind the mountain peaks. It's possible to appreciate Table Mountain in all its splendour at all times of day and night. Short of camping on it, we could hardly be any closer.

My family and I are staying in a deluxe apartment in The Vineyard Hotel in Cape Town, South Africa, with the eastern slopes of Table Mountain virtually on our balcony. The hotel — in

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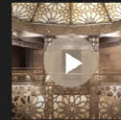
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Newlands, an affluent and leafy suburb — is set amid seven acres of landscaped gardens, bordered by the Liesbeek River and with a vineyard with 128 vines.



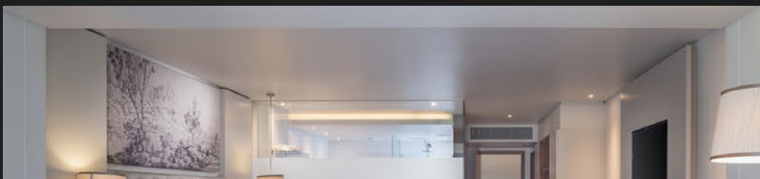
Yet the hotel is just moments away from the upmarket shopping of Cavendish Square; a five-minute Avis rental car drive (or pop on a Hop On, Hop Off open-topped bus and do a full circuit) to Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens — with its mint-clear air, extraordinary plants, ravines and trails for walkers; close too to the world-famous Constantia wine route; and just 20 minutes by car to the shopping and galleries of the V&A Waterfront: for everything from sushi to decorated ostrich eggs and tribal artefacts, plus the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, the largest museum of contemporary African art in the world.

Are you ready for a little bit of history now? The Vineyard Hotel has been evolving since 1652 when it was first created as a refreshment station for passing ships, contracted to the Dutch East India company. It was rebuilt in 1798 by Lord Andrew and Lady Ann Barnard (he was secretary to the Governor of the Cape), in the centre of a mid-17th century vineyard. In 1980, it became the family-owned hotel that it is today — purchased by the late Francois Petousis.



There are sepia photographs, watercolours and extracts from 19th century newspapers lining the walls of the original 18th century Cape mansion that forms its centre. 'The Vineyard is one of the finest estates in the Colony,' according to an excerpt from an 1854 book displayed on one wall.

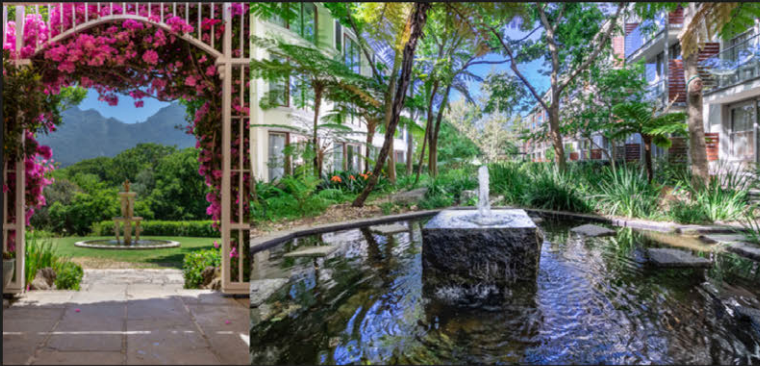
It's a walk-in history book (albeit one with 194 beds, including 25 suites and nine apartments), from 1798 right up to ooh, well, yesterday; and it boasts a patchwork of decorative and architectural styles from the 18th to 21st centuries. Our apartment is an example of the latter, with its new and sleek open-plan galley kitchen and dining area, contemporary furniture and L-shaped sofa, large rugs on wooden floors, exposed brickwork and white on white. Sort of Scandi design hits Cape Town vibe.





The hotel lures an eclectic clientele: from a man in a kilt and sports teams to international and local families, corporate guests, neighbourhood residents and independent travellers, its character often changing according to the day or hour.

It turns out that the Vineyard Hotel is a local landmark and something of an institution: a go-to place for locals. There are monied Capetonians to be found taking tea or drinks on the terrace, by the tinkling cherub fountain. Festive Capetonians celebrating over a birthday breakfast (the buffet is excellent) in the dining room with palm trees and 35ft ficus tree inside the 20th century metal and glass covered court-yard.



There are locals to be found gathering in its bar over a pint or four to watch top sporting events. And upmarket neighbourhood residents training in its gym. Plus locals and overseas visitors in its Angsana Spa: well, all I can say is go for a signature massage and let therapist Taslynn work on your key pressure points to strengthen your 'qi' or energy. You'll walk out unknotted, taller and happier.

And now to its fine dining restaurant. This is one of the holy grails for locals and visitors alike. We wander through the garden to Myoga ('ginger blossom' in Japanese), its multi-award winning 90-seater restaurant. It's decorated with a Buddha, chandelier, hanging copper pans and ceiling fan. Plus Louis XIV-style chairs, an Oriental ceiling, and an open kitchen through green arches with Doric columns.



It's in this restaurant that executive chef Mike Basset oversees a modern menu, including local and global dishes, with lots of sustainable organic produce from the Cape and surrounds. Serious foodies go for the 6-course tasting option ('restricted to one desert,' as the menu proclaims) paired with Cape wines; but we wimp out and try just three courses, with a mere two glasses of vino. But what a three they are! Delicious! And five-star service too — and not just from Adrienne, the waitress who's studying to be a lawyer.

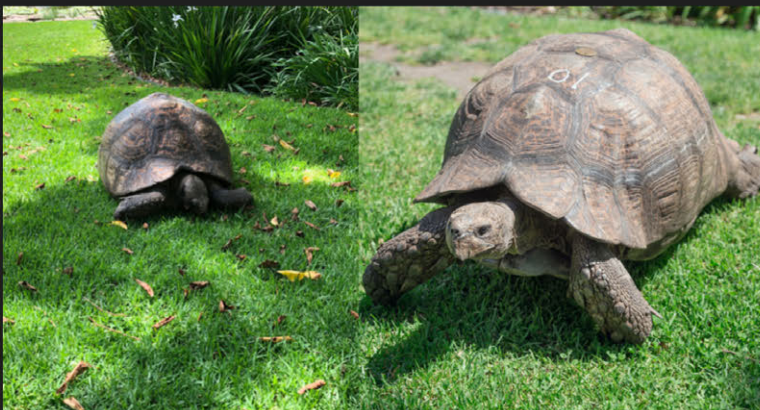
We're offered Baleni salt from Limpopo (who wouldn't want to taste this for its name alone?)

with artisanal cheese butter and more-ish fieekeh (green wheat) and lentil bread. Then there's a tasty tuna tartare — complete with hazelnuts and miso 'jam.' A braai (barbecued) salad that includes alliums (a bulbous plant): a dish that I'm going to copy. Plus hot smoked Snoek (a game fish) and then Abalobi (caught using an App used to track sustainable fishing). We finish with a memorable guava and rose sorbet.



This is a hotel to which I'll return. The luxury it offers is its tranquil setting and peaceful atmosphere away from the buzz of central Cape Town; its friendly, attentive, warm and efficient staff — many of whom have been working here not just for years but for decades; its genuinely home-from-home accommodation and lack of pretension; and also the fact that staying here feels pleasurable like being part of the community. It's only a four-star, but there's so much about it that recommends it more highly than that.

There's something else that marks it out. There are notices around the grounds that read, 'Slow traffic. Tortoises crossing.' There are 11 tortoises, even though one bears the number '13' on its back. (Each has a digit painted on it.) They're the largest species of such reptiles in the continent: tortoises the size of old turtles (the biggest weighing 40kg) and others that are still relatively small, at 30cm.



The eldest tortoises are Gloria (number 13) and Thomas (number 11): apparently they're 'around 50 years old.' Number 10 takes an entire day to walk halfway up the path to the front door of our apartment. I do it in 32 seconds. But let's face it: ambling slowly is really just an excuse for them to chill longer in this lovely hotel. Some of the tortoises have hung out here for 40 years, since the early 1980s. It's easy to see why they'd want to. Anyone would.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The lead-in price for an apartment is R5000 (around £275 per night). Please call 021 657 4500 or visit www.vineyard.co.za for bookings and room rates. For further information about Cape Town, visit www.capetown.travel. For a car rental, go to Avis at www.avis.co.za.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.