



BARREL ESSENTIALS

The wine cellar at Saronsberg, a vineyard estate in the Breede Valley outside Tulbagh. Opposite: Seagulls fighting southwesterly winds along the False Bay coast near Simon's Town, on the Cape Peninsula.





OUR BICYCLES ARE LOST. I receive this news from my local fixer by e-mail on the runway at Cape Town International Airport, having just flown 17,000 kilometers to spend a week touring the nearby Cape Winelands. By bike.

They aren't exactly lost, it turns out. Just stuck in customs. When we shipped them from the United States a month earlier to ensure that we'd have adequate bikes for such a long tour, we were promised that they'd be waiting for us on arrival. But those assurances mean little now. On a Sunday in South Africa, with a 300-kilometer ride scheduled to begin first thing the next morning, the bikes might as well have tumbled off the plane into the Kalahari as been waylaid by local bureaucrats.

The bad news doesn't stop. Weather forecasts, which were fine and clear when I boarded the plane in the States, now look cold and wet and grim for the second half of the week. Meanwhile, two of the seven hotels on our itinerary have yet to confirm. And when we finally clear immigration and head out into the sparkling light of a South African summer afternoon, our guide for the week is nowhere to be found.

This confluence of portents doesn't jibe with my memory of the Cape Winelands. On a visit eight years earlier, while following our whim in a rental car, my wife, Jen, and I had wondered aloud why we weren't touring on bikes. Cape Town is arguably the most physically beautiful city on the planet, with the craggy flatter of Table Mountain tumbling

DRINK IT IN

Above, from left: A family enjoying a couple glasses of wine on the steps of their Cape Dutch row house on historic Church Street in Tulbagh; pruning grapevines at Doolhof. Opposite: Saronsberg Peak looms above the guest cottages at Saronsberg estate.

down to a whitewashed city crouched by the Atlantic. And the bounty of the Western Cape stretches off north and east to wine country, where vineyards cling to the steep slopes beneath limestone cliffs and amiable little towns are stuffed with quaint inns and eateries. The roads are as smooth and sedate as any in bike-crazy Napa, California, and the scenery better than that of French wine-touring mainstays such as Provence or Bordeaux. It's terrain that begs to be pedaled.

And so we've returned to do just that. Rather than book an outfitter, however, I decided to organize my own tour. I was tired of scripted package trips and wanted some adventure. Besides, few cycling operators seemed to offer riding tours in the Winelands, though I did manage to track down a Cape Town-based outfit called Daytrippers, whose owner, Steve Thomas, offered to vet my itinerary and even provide a car and guide for support. It sounded like a perfect plan.

Now, with a missing guide and torrential rain in the offing and no bikes to ride, I'm having second thoughts. But just as I'm about to walk off in search of a car-rental desk, a truck with a Daytrippers logo on its door and a pair of bicycles in its roof rack pulls up to the curb. It's Bennett Thomas, Steve's 22-year-old son, who is just coming off a year of surfing in Jeffreys Bay, near Port Elizabeth, to work at his parents' business. He has maps and gear and, most importantly, loaner bikes from his father. He also has a surfer's insouciance that melts my concerns. "It's all cool," he tells me. "Everything's set." Lesson one about traveling in Africa: patience is the antidote to most problems.

With that, we're off, cruising east toward the thin blue line of rolling hills on the horizon in search of quiet roads and wine.

PEOPLE HAVE BEEN BIKE TOURING since before bicycles existed.



The precursor to the bicycle, the dandy horse, was a two-wheeled contraption that a seated rider propelled forward by shuffling his feet as though walking or running. The awkward machines couldn't have gone fast or far, and yet Frenchmen apparently toured the countryside on them almost 200 years ago. When chain-drive bikes arrived in Europe in the late 19th century, touring took off. As today, bicycles offered a cheaper mode of transport than horses or automobiles, and they gave many more people the freedom to travel.

I, too, love touring for its freedom, though in an age when you can hop from Washington, D.C., to Johannesburg in half a day, it's clearly a different kind of liberty than just going somewhere. The simple act of moving slower allows you to see things you might not otherwise have seen by car, if only because you'd likely have sped through at 100 kilometers per hour.

Case in point: we start our ride on an isolated stretch of tarmac 180 kilometers up the motorway northeast of Cape Town. There's nothing significant here, no starting line or coffee shop. This isn't even the Winelands, but the Karoo, a vast, arid high desert region that is cut off from the coast by a muscly range of sandstone mountains called the Cape Fold Belt. I chose this spot as our starting point mainly because I've always wanted to see the Karoo, but also because it promised access to a beautiful pass from the get-go. Over the next six days, we'll meander back to the coast by way of some of the best-known towns and vineyards in the region, and end the trip with a victory lap of sorts around the Cape Peninsula before the final dive into Cape Town.

At least that's the idea. On a bike, you can't always tell what's up the road.

Bennett, who will be following us at an inconspicuous distance, warns that this first stretch of highway may be busy, so I brace myself for a harrowing start. We pass through a broad expanse of desert-like terrain that recalls the high plains in my home back in Santa Fe, New Mexico. But after 27 kilometers, just two cars have passed us. "We can always source traffic for you," Bennett jokes at our first rest stop.

We turn west, and the pavement fades to a dirt track and begins climbing up Swaarmoed Pass. On the bike,

I'm immediately connected to the place in ways I couldn't be if I were driving. I have enough time to take in the details. An old woman stands in a meadow rolling with tall green grasses as she pins up bright laundry in the sun. In several fields I see door-high stone arches hung with old brass bells that were once—and maybe still, Bennett tells me—rung at mealtimes and to signal the start and end of the work day. Field hands in red and blue jumpsuits harvest kale. And everyone points and waves and laughs and cheers as we ride by.

From the top of the pass, we begin a long descent to the town of Ceres. As we swoop through arcing turns and around blind corners, a floral, citrusy aroma hits me with the force of an old man's cologne. Peaches. Instead of wine, this town is known for stone fruit, including apricots, cherries, plums, and even some apples.

Though there are no wineries in Ceres, we still manage to find our way to the leafy patio at Witherly's and, a few hours later, to the bot-

CAPE ESCAPE

A view toward the Cape of Good Hope, the southernmost point of the Cape Peninsula, above. Left: The author riding through the vineyards at Delaire Graf Estate, in the Stellenbosch wine region. Opposite: A room with a view and a private infinity pool at Delaire Graf Estate.





RISE AND SHINE
Early-morning fog lifting above the Breede Valley. Opposite, clockwise from top left: In the gardens at Delaire Graff Estate; a bedroom at Delaire Graff's lodge; a sommelier discussing the finer points of the estate's cabernet franc rosé; the charcuterie plate at Moreson's Bread & Wine restaurant.





VALET AND VINES

Above, from left: The attentive butler service at the Grande Dédale extends to looking after guests' bikes; well-manicured vines in the surrounding vineyards of Doolhof estate. Opposite: Local teens out for an afternoon jog on Church Street in Tulbagh.

tom of a bottle of chenin-sauvignon blanc. The waitress tells us it's from Tulbagh, in the next valley to the west. That's where we're headed for the night, but there are still 35 kilometers, Mitchell's Pass, and the languor of a bottle of wine on a sunny afternoon between us.

We eventually roust ourselves, and on the way out of town the two-lane highway tips up through a field of perfectly round boulders like oversize children's marbles. This late in the day, with the wine still in my belly, the short climb to Mitchell's Pass—more like Mitchell's Bump—is a gift, and we plow gently down into the Breede Valley. We pass rows of gangly gum trees and plains of wheat shifting in the wind like a golden sea. Serrated ridgelines lurk at every verge of the flat valley.

Soon we veer into Tulbagh. We ride down Church Street, which is lined with neat little Cape Dutch homes that have thatched roofs, rounded gables, and dazzling white paint. A few kilometers more bring us to Saronsberg, our winery and inn for the night.

After a quick shower at one of the vineyard's new cottages, we walk down for a tasting at the winery, which is filled with so many paintings and sculptures that you'd be forgiven for thinking it a gallery. "People don't normally come to Tulbagh. It's not as famous for wine as Stellenbosch or Franschhoek. We only have maybe five wineries," says Jolande van der Westhuizen, the assistant winemaker at Saronsberg.

But, she says, motioning to the mountains and fields around us, the *terroir* is impeccable. "They do good cabernet on the other side of the mountains, but the cooler climate here means we have better pinotage. We want people to come, sit on the patios, and enjoy the views and our wines."

And that's just what we do. With a bottle of the velvety shiraz in hand, we head for the porch of our mod concrete-and-glass bungalow to rest our legs and watch the daylight fade to inky blue over Saronsberg Peak. After just one full day on the bikes, we've ridden clear of the previous day's concerns.

FROM TULBAGH, we will cross the Boland Mountains and enter the heart of Cape wine country. Our route traverses the valley in the shadows of a great crest of peaks, then narrows to a tight two lanes as it traces the Witte River up a steep-sided gorge strewn with rocks and the flowering red fynbos shrubs endemic to this corner of South Africa.

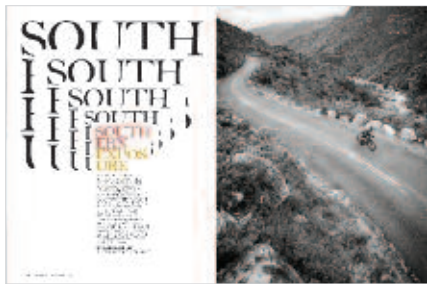
The road, which pierces the range through a precipitous cleft called Bain's Kloof Pass, is a magnificent piece of engineering that was constructed in 1853 by the self-taught civil engineer Andrew Geddes Bain. With a woozy view down over a thread of whitewater and a steady five-percent grade for almost 16 kilometers, the pass is as good as anything I've ridden in the Alps or the Rockies. It almost feels like France, except that the few cars that pass us—including several Land Rovers—do so at a crawl, rather than hurtling wildly through turns as is so often the case in Europe.

Four hours of moderate riding brings us to Wellington, where we find our way to the vineyards of Doolhof. Strung like a verdant tapestry on the hillside, the 380-hectare estate

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is crowned by a gleaming country manor called the Grand Dédale. It's a magnificent place done up in chalk-white marble and gilded antiques, and our stay here underscores part of the Cape Winelands' appeal. If you were to ride up panting and covered in road grime to an opulent place like this in France or Napa, they might not even open the gates. Here, co-owner Angelo Casu greets us like old friends and sends a butler down to look after our bicycles. The wine tastings, both at the Doolhof winery and elsewhere, are similarly easygoing, hosted by young sommeliers who laugh and crack jokes with you and dispense with uncomfortable formality.

Bearing an uncanny resemblance to Christopher Plummer, Doolhof's British owner, Dennis Kerrison, is down from his home in Bordeaux, and he and Casu invite Jen and me to dinner along with the four other guests at Grand Dédale. They set out a feast on a massive table on the veranda and pour bottle after bottle of wine, including a rare magnum of 2006 Cape Boar. "I took a bottle of this to France with me, and we tried it against second- and third-level *grand cru* bordeaux. We all agreed we'd take the Doolhof every time," Kerrison says after a mouthful of the blend. "The wines from this country are extremely underrated."

As the empty bottles stack up, talk turns to politics. It's impossible to speak about South Africa without pausing on Nelson Mandela. The elder statesman will pass away just a few weeks after we leave the country, but even in his current infirm state, people speak about him with unabashed reverence. The roads, the peace, even the wines—there's a pervasive sense that none of it would be possible without Mandela. It's not to say that everything is rosy. I've already met many South Africans who express palpable apprehension about the direction of Mandela's ANC party and the crisis that could be coming once its figurehead is gone. But Casu doesn't see it that way. "There's too much money at stake, too many smart and successful people here to allow things to spiral," he tells me. "This

won't ever be another Zimbabwe."

Conversation briefly lulls, perhaps because such a prospect is unspeakable. In many ways it seems impossible that South Africa could ever end up like its dysfunctional northern neighbor, if for no other reason than nobody is willing to tarnish Mandela's legacy. One of the other guests, a financier from England who brings his wife to Grand Dédale every year, raises his glass: "To Mandela."

Red wine balloons clang together in the warm spring night, and everyone goes back to talking. And though it's well past midnight, Kerrison uncorks a bottle of 2008 Doolhof Renaissance, then a 2007 bordeaux-style blend called Lady In Red. Mindful of tomorrow's 50-kilometer ride, I hold my hand over my glass. But then I think better of it and nod to the waiter for a refill. There's wine to be appreciated, after all.

THE NEXT TWO STOPS on our tour are arguably the most iconic towns in the Cape Winelands, Franschhoek and Stellenbosch. The roads here are wider and busier, and the wineries more profuse, which makes it next to impossible to get very far on the bike. Heading into Franschhoek, there's La Motte and Rickety Bridge, both of which come highly recommended. And of course we can't pass up MÔreson and its acclaimed Bread & Wine restaurant, where Neil and Tina Jewell serve locally sourced, house-cured charcuterie alongside the winery's award-winning chardonnay. By 4 p.m., it seems a safer bet to let Bennett drive us the remaining six clicks to the guesthouse than to ride.

We check in at Avondrood, a Cape Dutch home that's recently been renovated into a bed and breakfast. With just six rooms, a manicured garden out the back, and a cozy common area where guests congregate and read and play games, it's homey and easygoing—not unlike Franschhoek itself. Owner Justin Mitchell says that he's been almost fully booked since opening less than a year ago.

"The weak rand is working in our favor. Travelers can come and have an experience that might otherwise cost double or triple elsewhere in the world," he tells me. But he thinks the popularity is more than just economics. Mitchell says that South Africa's star is still rising, especially in the afterglow of hosting the 2010 World Cup. "Before that, and even still, people would say you shouldn't come to South Africa because it's too dangerous," he says. "But millions of people did come and were blown away. People who take the time to visit usually return again and again."

The next morning, Jen and I stroll down main street Franschhoek. It's the Cape Dutch equivalent of Healdsburg, the friendly vineyard-touring hub in California's Sonoma County. Locals sit on the leafy patios sipping coffee, and small businesses peddle hand-made pastries and local art. When a Japanese couple wanders into the café where we're sitting and asks the barista for advice on the best local wineries, a question she likely gets a dozen times a day, she pulls out a map and spends almost 10 minutes making suggestions. It's the sort of hospitable small town you visit and immediately think, "I could live here."

Indeed, we have a hard time tearing ourselves away. We don't get rolling till after midday, and we don't make it far—less than 10 kilometers—before we're wooed by yet another winery. I almost feel guilty, but it is past noon, after all.

It's unclear why or how bike tours and wine country became so entwined, but it's a massive worldwide industry, from old standby destinations like Napa and Provence to up-and-coming ones such as Mendoza, Argentina. I've always assumed that it was partly because while drinking and driving is perilous, biking from tasting to tasting a bit tipsy is just good fun. There's also a wine tour's magical blend of endorphins and alcohol, the former jacking up the exhilaration factor and the latter adding a healthy dose of decompression. It's a bit like working out at the gym, getting a massage, and drinking a martini all at once.

By the time we reach Delaire Graff it is late afternoon. This elegant wine estate is so meticulously groomed that even the entire



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stretch of grounds running alongside its cobble, kilometer-long entrance road looks like an English garden. Our stand-alone suite has two huge rooms and a veranda and a plunge pool with a view over the valley and down to Stellenbosch. A bottle of cabernet franc rosé is chilling, and Jen wastes no time in uncorking it. Never mind that we're due at the winery shortly for a full tasting. While she's pouring, we receive word that our bikes will clear customs tomorrow—just in time for us to ship them back home. We toast the irony that they will have traveled halfway around the world and back without ever touching African soil.

On the tasting room's patio, a thirty-something sommelier named Randall walks us through Delaire's finest. We don't have the heart to stop him when he commences with the cabernet franc rosé, which we're already well acquainted with, but then comes a chardonnay, a sauvignon blanc-sémillon blend, the Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, and finally the winery's signature Bordeaux-style Botmaskop (Afrikaans for "boatman's head," the name of the mountain on whose slopes the estate sits). Randall brings each glass out slowly, giving us time to savor the views and the quietude as much as the wines.

It's something of a culinary meditation, one of those rare moments in life when you are completely present and able to drink up every nuance: the slight spice when I lever my nose inside the wine glass; the rich taste of berries that sit on the back of my tongue; how the flavors shift and turn with different bites of appetizers; the light breeze rustling through the century-old oaks above; the slight brininess in the air blowing off the distant Atlantic.

Perhaps this is why wine country pairs so well with cycling. Both are about pausing, not rushing through, fully absorbing the experience. As we sip the Botmaskop, I notice that the sunset turns the vineyard below us a breathtaking scarlet almost the color of the wine in our glasses. From here forward, every time I uncork a bottle South African red, I'll remember that quiet, contented afternoon.

CIRCLING THE CAPE Peninsula is one of those rides that cyclists dream of, like following in the wheels of Tour de France riders up the Alpe d'Huez. Yet the morning of our last day on the road, we wake to a southwesterly gale so fierce that I consider leaving the bikes in the rack. It's the precursor to the big storm that was forecast, which mercifully looks like it won't strike till late afternoon. Still, by the time Bennett deposits us at Simon's Town, on

the eastern side of the peninsula, water is lifting off the ocean in diaphanous sheets, and gulls are knocking around the sky like dry leaves in the wind.

"We call these winds the Cape Doctor. They clear the miff air from the city," Bennett tells me. I tell him I'd rather ride in a closed garage with the car running than in this wind. "People have literally been blown from the highway," he concedes. I scowl. But there's no way I'm skipping this ride.

Heading south out of Simon's Town, the wind smashes into me. I stomp on the pedals, yet I'm moving so slowly that it feels like I'm towing a crate of wine. Rather than worry over it, I focus on the passing scenery. Quaint pastel houses balance on the steep headlands. Red and blue fishing boats crowd into the marinas where fishermen heft nets full of kingklip and bluenose. The few trees that have managed to cling to this rugged, granitic bluff are stooped

and stretched sidewise from the constant meteorological beating. I imagine that's how I look, too.

"It's not the easiest to cycle in South Africa," Bennett said over dinner at Delaire the previous evening. For most people it's a long journey to get here, and there's maybe not as much information or support as a visiting rider might be used to back home, he explained. "But the riding... just try and find a place that has better riding."

Once I round the Cape and turn north, the wind shifts to my back. The bike accelerates from seven kilometers an hour to 60 like a missile. I fire past rocky promontories and through fields of fynbos, then hurtle close enough to empty beaches that I can feel the icy spray from the Atlantic. Cape Town is less than an hour away, as are the Constantia wineries on the eastern flank of Table Mountain. But for now, I just want to race with the wind. ☺



THE DETAILS CYCLING THE CAPE

—GETTING THERE

Cape Town is not just the jumping-off point for tours of the Cape Winelands, it's a destination in its own right, so plan your itinerary accordingly. **South African Airways** (flysaa.com) flies there nonstop from Dubai and via Johannesburg from Hong Kong; **Singapore Airlines** (singaporeair.com) also stops in Johannesburg on its daily Cape Town service.

—WHEN TO GO

The Western Cape's climate is pleasant year-round, with daytime temperatures ranging from highs of 17°C in July to 27°C in

February. Rain can be heavy, though not especially persistent, in June through August, while the summer months are glorious and sunny but often windy.

—TOURING

Steve Thomas of **Daytrippers** (27-21/511-4766; daytrippers.co.za) can help plan out whatever bike tour you have in mind and provide every level of support, from nothing more than an itinerary and maps to a fully catered experience including pickup at the airport, a support vehicle, and accommodation. Thomas and his wife Di have ridden and raced all over South Africa, and can recommend everything from the

best passes and trails to ride, to where to sample the region's choicest wines.

—WHERE TO STAY

You'll be spoiled for choice in the Winelands, which has more hotels and inns than vineyards. In the charming and less-frequented Breede Valley, the 16 newly opened self-catering cottages on the grounds of **Saronsberg** (27-23/230-0707; saronsberg.com; doubles from US\$56), make for a great escape, while the winery's modern, industrial sensibility offers an intriguing counterpoint to the quaint town of Tulbagh.

Farther south in the hills outside Wellington, **Grand Dédale** (27-21/873-4089; granddedale.com; doubles from US\$258) occupies a historic Cape Dutch manor house on the grounds of the Doolhof wine estate, with six lavish, antiques-filled rooms. There's also a thatched-roof stone cottage and, right down the hill, the Doolhof winery, where guest can indulge in private tastings and cellar tours.

Ringed by a jag of thorny mountains that tumble down to

vineyards, Franschhoek may well be the prettiest town in the Winelands, and the place to stay is

Avondrood (27-21/876-2881; 39 Huguenot St.; avondrood.com; doubles from US\$155). Set in a restored 1870s Victorian home, this four-star bed and breakfast has just a half-dozen pretty rooms and friendly service to match the town. In nearby Stellenbosch, **Delaire Graff Estate** (R310, Helshoogte; 27-21/885-8160; delaire.co.za; doubles from US\$726) is a fabulously located vineyard with above-the-fog views down over town and a 10-suite lodge with impeccably appointed guest quarters, all with sitting rooms, quiet verandas, and private plunge pools.

And on a vineyard on the eastern flanks of Table Mountain, just around the peak from Cape Town, **Lanzerac Hotel & Spa** (27-21/887-1132; lanzerac.co.za; doubles from US\$253) has 48 rooms that open onto lush gardens, a well-stocked whiskey bar, and one of the hottest tables around, the alfresco Terrace Restaurant. —AG