

South Africa: The wine route back to Cape Town

On Wednesday (November 26) we left the coast at Wilderness and drove to our next stop. Oodtshorn was only a 1 ½ hour drive over the coastal range to the southern end of the Little Karoo, so we were there before noon and so we decided to take the scenic drive to Prince Albert, about 70Km away to the north. We had been before and Prince Albert itself doesn't have a great deal to offer but the drive there over the Swartberg Pass is spectacular. About 25 miles of the drive are on an unpaved road, originally built by a Scot in the mid-1800s. It is an amazing feat of engineering and provides amazing views over the mountains and the Little Karoo valley.

The summit of the pass is at about 5000 feet and some of the surrounding peaks are probably of the order of 7000-8000 feet and the views are fantastic as the road winds its way up and down in hundreds of zig-zag loops. A good deal of the road was built by simply (!) building a wall (up to 20 feet high in places) along a stretch of Cliffside and then filling that with rubble and dirt until a reasonably flat surface was formed. This was the road then – and it is essentially the same today. It would appear that it will remain in its present state since we noticed that the Pass is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site so presumably changes will be hard to come by.

It is probably one of the best – and most thrilling – drives that we have ever taken and, while the ride up the southern slope is exciting, things get really thrilling on the downward slopes to Prince Albert.



Swartberg Pass Scenic Drive



Prince Albert



The easy way home....

Once at our destination we had a light lunch and then returned to Oodtshorn via the longer (100Km) main road, which in itself is an impressive ride through the mountains. The passes are not as high as the Swartberg Pass and because of that, much of the road is cut through the huge cliff walls so giving the sense of driving through a deep gorge. It really was a wonderful way to spend the afternoon.

Thursday morning we drove into town and found a small café for breakfast; once again it was warm enough to sit outside and watch the world go by. Following that we went to the C.P. Nell Museum which we thought was simply a history of the ostrich farming industry here but it turned out to be so much more. There were several rooms dedicated to the ostrich, its farming and the boom period (early 20th century) which gave rise to the many magnificent homes in the town and the current status (still thriving but now more for the meat) – but there were about eight additional rooms on the town and its three hundred year history.

The exhibits were plentiful and well described and – as we have often found in our travels – the size of the town bore little resemblance to the quantity and quality of the items collected for display. We were once again brought up short by the 20th century rooms full of things we recognized; it's always a little difficult to be familiar with items that are now museum pieces.



Outdsthoorn:

Clockwise from top left:

Former Boys' High School, now Museum;



Queen's Hotel;

Stone Church;

One of the Ostrich Baron's homes



For the afternoon the plan was to visit the Cango Caves (about 20 miles north and one of the top attractions in South Africa) and then a nearby Ostrich Farm. We arrived at the ach had magnificent examples of stalactites and stalagmites (estimated age up to 1.5 million years) in enormous caverns – the largest of which was several hundred feet across and had been used as a theatre until the 1990s. The guide was very good at describing what we were seeing and adjusted lighting (from colored to bright to none!) to give us a sense of what the early explorers found as well as a chance to take some great photos. As Molly said, we have no need to visit caves ever again as these surely can't be beat.



Stalactite meets
Stalagmite!



The Cango Caves

Before leaving Outdshoorn, we drove the 15 miles north to the Ostrich Farm that we had been rained out on yesterday. We arrived just in time for the 45 minute tour and were introduced to our guide. She first gave us a little history of ostrich farming in this area and, in particular, about this farm. This is not a commercial farm and is strictly for visiting tourists, so none of the animals are slaughtered for their meat or hides. We did learn, however, why ostrich skin is so expensive – apparently it takes six months to cure a hide before the dyeing and finishing process can begin.

On the tour we saw several dozen ostrich of all ages and met “Bonnie and Clyde” and “Adam and Eve”, both couples having been mates for many years. We saw a good number of their young. We also were allowed to feed a bird (simply holding a piece of food in the palm of the hand) and several tourists got back massages, neck rubs and even a kiss from an ostrich. A brave two also got to take an ostrich ride – a difficult task even for the two “professional” jockeys in the ring.

Overall it was a very pleasant visit (it had not been at the top of my list!) and we learned something more about the birds and their habits. An ostrich egg, for example, is very strong and can stand a weight of up to 100Kg (over 200 pounds); each of us got a chance to stand on a small group of eggs. The male and female take twelve hour shifts sitting on the eggs for 14 days until they hatch. And they only do this once there is a batch of fifteen eggs to hatch – which takes a while since the female lays one egg every two days. Interestingly, all fifteen hatch at one t



Ostrich Farm: Molly getting neck massage and “hatching” eggs

Shortly before noon we started our onward journey from Outdshoorn to Montagu, about 150 miles west along Route 62. This route basically follows the wide valley that is the Little Karoo, with the coastal range to the south and the mountains reaching to the Great Karoo to the north. For much of today’s drive it was desert-like, much like many parts of Nevada in the US West, but the mountains on both sides added a lot of variety. We climbed a couple of passes but only to an elevation of about 2000 feet. The views in all directions were spectacular and we were once again struck by just how varied the landscape can be in such a relatively small area of this country.

The final 50 miles were in much greener and more cultivated land and we saw many fruit trees, fields of crops – and vines! We were now on the Western Cape Wine Route in which we will stay until we reach Cape Town. This route is supposedly the longest stretch of vineyards anywhere in the world and it seems that all of them do tastings and many provide meals. We will get more up close tomorrow!



We arrived in the small town of Montagu in the late afternoon and found our Guest House (run by a couple originally from Manchester, England!)

and were given “instructions on where to eat, where to visit during our stay.

On Saturday morning we spent some time at a local market and on the main shopping street of Montagu.

Montagu is fundamentally two towns – the White area where our guest house is and the Black area just a couple of blocks away on the main road. It is quite surprising how the two are so precisely separated; the homes don't look that different (perhaps a little larger in the White section) but the color on the street is totally different. This picture is perhaps a little over-emphasized on Saturdays (today) as that is the day when the local farmers and rural township dwellers come to town to do their shopping so the streets are filled with Blacks. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that we were the only Whites in that part of town – but there was absolutely no concern on our part and the locals were extremely friendly and helpful.



Montagu—the church and the ibis tree!

We then spent the rest of our day on the Wine Route. We followed a map provided to us by our host on which were marked most of the wineries (at least those with sampling potential) as well as other points of interest and places to eat. We had a delightful four hours plus following a 60 (approximately) mile circular route. Most of it was on paved roads but we went on a 15 mile section of gravel road. All of it had absolutely stunning scenery: a marvelous ever-changing combination of desert scrub, fruit tree plantations and vineyards – all with steeply rising gray mountains as a backdrop. We didn't stop at any of the vineyards for tasting



(many said “by appointment only”) but on our second stop for sustenance, I had a glass of wine with my sandwich. It was a locally produced chenin blanc and cost about \$1.35 for a 250 ml glass. We also saw many bottles for sale at our first



stop with prices ranging from about \$6 per bottle. It was tempting to stock up and have it shipped home; we felt sure the cost of shipping would not bring the price up to US levels. We didn't!

The whole day was taken at a very slow pace and the weather was gorgeous (90F at the hottest, by far as the hottest we have felt since Namibia) and the experience was one that we will long remember – and hopefully repeat.



We arrived back in Montagu just as the scheduled power outage began. We had been warned that it would last until 6:30 – and be “all clear” well before our evening meal. Indeed it was—and we had another excellent meal.

On Sunday, we left for our final destination of Stellenbosch. It was warm again and headed for 90F under a clear blue sky. We drove west on Route 62 and then Route 60, once again through fruit farms and vineyards. We were still well and truly in the wine area and, even though we thought yesterday’s drive was beautiful, the scenery today was even more stunning.



On the drive to Stellenbosch



A little before the very trendy town of Franschhoek, we climbed the Franschhoek Pass and then had a fantastic view across the valley, the town and the surrounding vineyards. Here we stopped for lunch before driving on to our final hotel in Stellenbosch.

Monday was a very pleasant morning as we left the hotel and walked a few blocks to a breakfast café sitting outside, with temperatures in the high 60s and a nice cooling breeze.

Then we set out on a walking tour of Stellenbosch. We picked up a very useful brochure at the tourist information center and then slowly meandered around the historic buildings. Stellenbosch is the oldest inland city in South Africa and was initially founded by the Dutch East India Company as a farming community.

Virtually all of the buildings are painted white, many have thatched roofs and a large number have gable endings typical of the

Cape Dutch era of the late 17th century. Obviously not all of the buildings date from that period – many are mid 1800s and Victorian in style – and, since there have been a number of devastating fires, many buildings have been reconstructed. However, the flavor of the old community remains, centered around a large green area (The Braak) and most of the streets are lined with trees. Many of these are oak trees for which the town is famous, so the whole effect is a painting of white buildings, large green trees, set against a backdrop of 2000 feet high mountains.



Stellenbosch

Tonight are having dinner at the Governor's Hall on the Lanzaarc Wine Estate. This had been recommended by our host in Montagu and, based on our experiences at similar restaurants in this area three weeks back we were eager to try another.

Tuesday (December 2—tomorrow) is our final day in South Africa (for this trip) but we still had a whole day before our midnight flight to Amsterdam.

We plan to drive back to Franschhoek and visit the Huguenot Monument, built in the 1940s to commemorate the arrival of 200,000 Huguenots from France in the 17th and 18th centuries. They fled religious persecution and settled in the Western Cape area and are generally attributed with establishing wine making as the major industry of the area.

So, our three weeks are almost over. From Franschhoek we will return to Cape Town, return the SUV that has served us so well over the past twelve days, have dinner at our nephew's home and then drive to the airport for our midnight flight to Amsterdam—and the home, after an amazing trip.