

SOUTHERN *comfort*

In South Africa's Franschhoek valley, Grande Provence is a paradigm of sophisticated simplicity, executed with impeccable attention to detail

By SANDRA LANE

The sun was setting as we left the sprawl of Cape Town behind. When we reached Franschhoek it was dark – the deep darkness of the countryside – and rain was falling steadily. Turning through the gates of Grande Provence our driver followed a lane between arrow-straight rows of grape vines then, across a tiny wooden bridge beneath towering trees, came to a stop at the Owner's Cottage.

The front door stood open in welcome, warm light spilled out from the entrance hall – and there was no sign of anybody. No over-eager valets yanking open the car doors, no uniformed doormen parroting learnt-by-rote greetings – just a few moments to breathe in the peace. Then came Elzaan and Wellington, warm, relaxed, discreetly solicitous, showing us our room, organising our luggage, pouring us a drink. In the living room the scent of candles and flowers mingled with wood smoke, a gently crackling fire taking the chill off the night air. We settled into deep leather armchairs in front of the hearth as Elzaan and Wellington brought us a simple supper of delicious cheeses and cured meats, artfully arranged on a tray, before wishing us goodnight.

In the morning roses bloomed outside our bedroom window, their scent mingling with that of damp grass warming in the sun. The smell of coffee drew us into the conservatory for breakfast – a farmhouse buffet of

heavenly flavours: fresh, seasonal, mostly home-made. Outside the windows, the light was piercingly clear, the air washed by the night's rain, the colours and contrast between light and shade almost surreally intense. Across the lawn the cottage's private pool beckoned, though too chilly for swimming on this early spring morning.

There comes a point in life, for many of us, where the notion of luxury becomes less about 'things' and more about attitudes; where anything fussy, overdone or pretentious gets very short shrift; where the low-key, private and quietly beautiful are infinitely more valued than the latest-coolest place or supposedly-must-have object. This is the luxury that defines Grande Provence: a highly sophisticated simplicity that glows with comfort, culture and style. And it was the owners' desire to share that notion of luxury that led him to add two guest cottages to the historic estate, as well as a restaurant-wine tasting room-art gallery complex.

Lying at the heart of the celebrated Franschhoek wine country, the 47-acre estate originated as a farm in the 1680s, when a group of French Huguenots, fleeing persecution in their own country, settled in the valley – Franschhoek being Afrikaans for 'French Corner'. The original Manor House, built in 1694, is today the private home of the estate's owners, while a second historic building, the Jonkershuis has been restored as a private dining space for guests. The Cape Dutch architecture of these houses has been recast in contemporary style for the Owner's Cottage and its smaller sibling, La Provençale cottage. Both are paradigms of rustic chic – intimate and elegant in a kick-your-shoes-off and feel-at-home way, with just enough, subtle touches of Africana in the décor to create a sense of place.

Set on the far side of the vineyards from the cottages, amid beautiful formal gardens where large-scale sculptures sit beneath ancient oak trees, the restaurant at Grande Provence has, thanks to its chef, Darren Badenhorst and the estate's own award-winning wines, become a notable dining destination in its own right. A long and lazy lunch – a parade of stunning flavours, masterfully handled ingredients, gorgeous presentation and pitch-perfect service – left us in no doubt why. ★ www.grandeprovence.co.za

