

Fêted in Franschhoek

Detail-driven hospitality and names that reinforce function in the Winelands

the first thing I see as I walk into The Owner's Cottage at Grande Provence in Franschhoek is a photograph of some of my predecessors in the venue's Angel's Suite.

There stands Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex, with his lovely wife Sophie, Countess of Wessex; the actor Jude Law, posing with a couple of the staff and his now ex-wife Sadie Frost in happier times; and former South African State President FW De Klerk, in residence with a small group of friends.

I'm not so much concerned that I don't fit the guest profile as that everyone else seems to have come with someone, and perhaps my single status for this trip – I'm in town to cover a festival – might see me fretting about what I can possibly get up to when returning to the boutique hotel after a hard day's scribbling in notebooks.

I needn't have worried. As it turned out, I have the five-room, 10-sleeper place to myself, which means that, among other things, I enjoy the full benefits of the unnecessary but indulgent niceties that the package includes – regularly replenished bowls and platters laden with high-end dark chocolate, decanters filled with a range of expensive spirits and a beautifully laid fire every night.

That's not to mention the other details of the room – including a television that rises, Star Trek-like, out of what appears to be an old-fashioned leather chest, laid on a table at the foot of the bed. If you weren't made aware of its presence by an attendant, you'd likely get through your stay without noticing it at all (no bad thing).

Being alone also affords me to stick my nose into all the elegantly decorated nooks and crannies of the establishment. Everything is placed just so, from the bouquets of fresh flowers and bowls of lemons to the

first-edition hardcovers and the sculptures, paintings and other artistic paraphernalia sourced from around the world.

Given as Read

That theme continues a short walk away down an estate road in The Gallery at Grande Provence – the system of nomenclature here is admirably unpretentious – where an airy, extensive space plays home to a rotating exhibition of work (across all disciplines) by both established and emerging South African artists. Knowing what you're about with all of the finer points of what's on show is not necessary, as the team is led by Trent Read, scion of the famous gallery-owning family responsible for the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg.

Like The Owner's Cottage, The Gallery offers unadvertised delights in unexpected corners, with its charms extending out into a sculpture garden called, as you'd now expect,

The Sculpture Garden. Depending on where you're standing, the backdrop for an artwork might be the steep slopes of the Oliphants Hoek peak a couple of kilometres away, the lush vines of the adjacent vineyards or the glass frontage of, yes, The Restaurant.

Taste adventures

By this time, I had begun to despair of ever getting off the property to make it to whatever meetings I was supposed to be at and felt I should probably sit down and consider my options. At one end of The Restaurant is a separate room (The Tasting Room: surely you have the gist of this naming system by now?) with more modern,



The Gallery at Grande Provence will feature 'From Giyani To Alexandra – The Journey Continued' by Phillemon Hlungwani from 5 to 28 March 2016. The exhibition consists of monumental charcoal and pastel drawings and a series of etchings. The artist has been working for the last two years on an extraordinary body of work that focuses on the people and landscape of his village in Limpopo and that of Alexandra Township where he moved to as a young adult





Above: An odd hole in the wall is positioned to allow a sunset view if you're relaxing in the jacuzzi

Top right: A contemplative statue in The Sculpture Garden

industrial fittings – tractor-seat bar stools and the like, but arranged more formally than that description might suggest – where visitors can enjoy a sampling of the estate wines, with the particular selection tailored to personal preferences. I should have understood that pausing there would not do my schedule any favours, but I was less concerned with that outcome when I emerged some time later, having enjoyed sips of a number of winemaker Karl Lambour's creations. Any guesses as to what the estate's signature blends are called? Ten points if you stuck to the formula established so far, which would have seen you go for 'The Grande Provence Red' and 'The Grande Provence White'.

It's a strange combination – meticulous attention to detail and no-frills titles on everything – but it makes everything very easy to remember should you want to recommend any part of the experience to someone, which may be at least part of the reasoning behind the strategy. This conversation must have taken place at least once:

"Say, anyone know a good place to go out for a meal tonight?"

"Try The Restaurant."

"Thanks, wise guy."

"No really, that's what it's called."

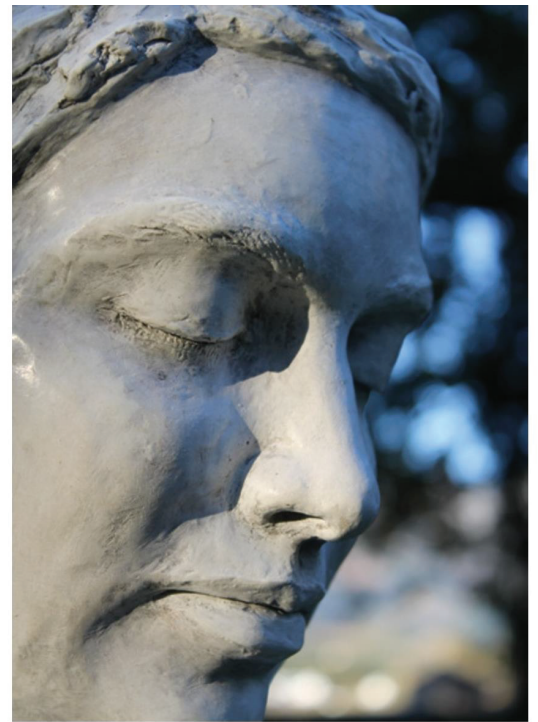
"That's weird."

"Why? It is what it says on the sign."

How to get there



Airlink connects



are wildly creative. Take a dessert listed on a recent menu – they change often, so don't get too attached to what you enjoyed on a previous trip – that was described thus: 'Hot fondant sphere, set Anglaise, aerated espresso, red velvet textures, salted cocoa twig and Amarula pipette'. Run-of-the mill stuff it is not, and with dishes served with flourishes that include smoke trapped under a bell jar that slowly dissipates to reveal your order, this is food as theatre as much as it is a means of enjoying some sustenance.

Sunset spectacle

After some post-dessert dessert back at The Owner's Cottage (the dark chocolate bowls and platters are fully charged again), there is time to wander outside and explore the private garden, which includes not only a swimming pool but also a jacuzzi, hidden under a tasteful canopy at the top of a short flight of stairs above the pool. There are a couple of chairs and a table on a small deck in front of the jacuzzi with, curiously, a large rectangular hole in the surrounding wall at calf height for anyone seated there.

Finally, a chink in the armour; a feature that doesn't make sense. Except that it does. If you're lounging in the jacuzzi, enjoying the warm water at the end of the day, the sun will set off to your right, sliding down behind the mountains and casting a velvet glow over the vineyards. You wouldn't have a clue that that was happening if there is a wall blocking your view, but the flatscreen TV-shaped aperture included by the architect