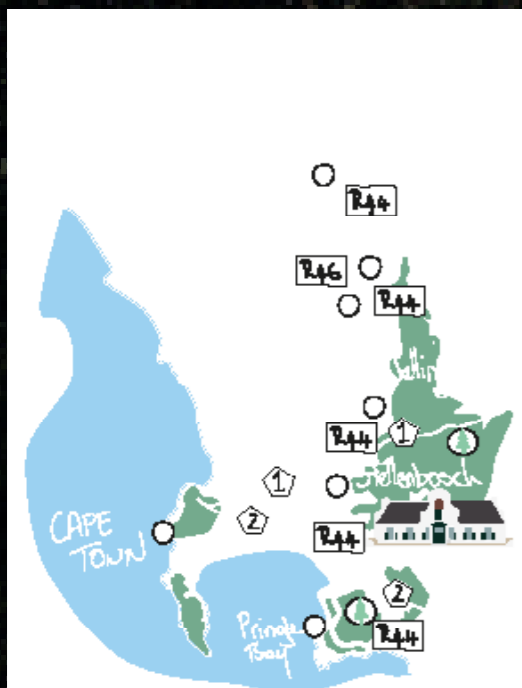


A WALK TO REMEMBER

TREKKING THE STRETCH OF THE R44 THROUGH THE CAPE WINELANDS TRULY BRINGS THE LANDSCAPE INTO FOCUS
By James Bainbridge



If you were driving down the Western Cape's R44 a short while ago and noticed a solitary figure trudging along the roadside, it might have been me. I recently spent a month walking the length of the scenic road – a 250 km journey from the Bot River Lagoon, along the coast to the Helderberg region, on through the Winelands to Stellenbosch and across the Swartland to Piketberg. What a lovely day for a hike, you might have thought as you hurtled past me; or possibly, 'What is that nutcase playing at?'

So why did I hoist my rucksack and hike between the Cape's country towns and farm stalls? What possessed me to walk those long, lonely stretches of the R44 through Gouda and Porterville? The simple answer is, having moved to Cape Town from the UK five years ago, I am still slightly uncomfortable with the car-based nature of South African society. When one roars down the tarmac, pushing the dial towards 120 km/h, the journey itself becomes a mere inconvenience. It passes in the blink of an eye, and you miss the random encounters, sights and experiences that arise when on foot and when using public transport.

Furthermore, in my job as a guidebook writer, I often fly to a country and zoom between its highlights, too busy collecting hotel prices and bus times to stop, drink tea and really absorb the place. This journey, then, was a chance to properly appreciate the Cape and see it from



YOU CAN DO IT TOO!

Whether you are hiking SA's famous multi-day trails or walking 'off piste' as I did, take a few basic precautions:

- Let someone know where you are going and give them your travel schedule.
- Carry a fully charged cellphone and plenty of water.
- Keep clothes and personal effects to a minimum, as they all add weight.
- Stash your cards and cash in a few places in case of an emergency.
- A leg money belt worn under trousers is less conspicuous than a waist belt.
- Safety is achieved in numbers, so try persuade a friend to join you.

ADVENTURE



Riebeeck-Kasteel's snake catcher (and estate agent), Daniel Christen, points out local sights from atop Kasteelberg



a fresh angle by escaping my car and travelling the highways and byways at a leisurely pace.

I chose the R44, out of all the beautiful roads around Cape Town, because the route offers an excellent cross section of the region's scenery. Starting on the dramatic stretch of coast around Kleinmond, it winds between the breaking surf and rocky peaks of the Kogelberg to the towns beneath Helderberg Mountain, then shoots its way through the majestic slopes of Stellenbosch and Paarl to the farmland north of Wellington, overlooked by craggy mountain ranges.

Of course, I took some detours from the hard shoulder to keep life interesting. For example, I walked the Leopard's Kloof Trail, which climbs through a fynbos-filled valley in the Kogelberg Nature Reserve, emerging in the Harold Porter National Botanical Garden in Betty's Bay. I got permission from farmers and winemakers to



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cross their land, which opened some unusual routes through Simonsberg, as well as the little-known Porseleinberg, situated between Wellington and Riebeeck-Kasteel.

Apart from a few blisters, the journey went without a hitch. I even finished a day early. I covered the final 27 km to Piketberg in one day instead of two, based on the news – given by the oracle-like pizza aficionado at a Porterville pizzeria – that rain was coming. The sage farmer-turned-pizza chef was typical of the friendly characters I met en route.



Everyone was welcoming and accommodating – shark spotters, car guards, farmworkers and the snake catcher in Riebeeck-Kasteel. The baboon chasers of Pringle Bay were particularly memorable. They are employed to keep baboons at bay, moving military-like through the bush with paintball guns and walkie-talkies.

From Kayamandi entrepreneurs to Simonsberg winemakers, there was a feeling of positivity about SA – a desire to work with people across the community to improve the country. As for security, I didn't have a single worrying moment. I didn't even have to use the rubber snake I packed to fend off aggressive baboons.

Apart from the people, and the hospitality I enjoyed at guest houses, backpackers and wine estates, the ever-changing scenery was the highlight of my journey. My job has taken me around the world, and the Cape's soaring mountains, golden beaches and rolling fields are, by far, some of the planet's most stunning landscapes.

Walking the R44 on a fresh spring morning, watching an ostrich dash around an emerald green field beneath the Groot Winterhoek mountains, confirmed this opinion. As did crossing dewy vineyards with no one else around and discovering subtle beauty in far corners of the platteland.

Add the Cape's cobalt skies, big smiles and lekker hospitality, and perhaps I wasn't such a nutcase after all. 📷