

WEEKEND *in the valley*

ROBERTSON MIXES ITS RUSTIC CHARM AND BEAUTIFUL MOUNTAIN RANGES WITH MORE THAN 30 WINERIES, FROM BIG NAMES TO BOUTIQUE PRODUCERS. IDEAL, IN OTHER WORDS, FOR WINE TASTING WITH A GOOD VIEW AND YOUR FEET UP
BY **JAMES BAINBRIDGE**





For Capetonians used to the sight of Table Mountain and weekends in the Winelands, visiting Robertson is a little like venturing 'beyond the Wild Wood', in the words of the laid-back Ratty from *The Wind in the Willows*. The valley of wine and roses, as Robertson is known, lies just over the horizon and through the Huguenot Tunnel, outside city folks' usual radius, in a rural land where the pace is relaxed and the rhythms of farming dominate. At 160 km from Cape Town, Robertson is the perfect weekend distance, close enough to be convenient, yet far enough to offer a change of scenery.

ROUTES TO ROBERTSON

If you are coming from the Somerset West area, consider taking the more relaxed route of the N2 through the Overberg, turning off at Grabouw or Stormsvlei. For most people, however, the N1 is the best option – and it couldn't be more scenic. Once you've popped out of the Huguenot Tunnel, that four kilometre-long portal to classic country weekends, the road surges between the Du Toitskloof Mountains before following the south side of the wrinkly Langeberg range.

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It used to be tricky to find a pit stop outside of Worcester (also known as San Diego Spur), but this developing area now offers some great stops. There's the roadside Nuy on the Hill, showcasing the Nuy winemaking valley with its deli-restaurant, panoramic windows and playground, and, 20 km further on, the first of the 38 farms in the Robertson Wine Valley. In this area, Rooiberg takes its name literally with its quirky red installations, including the sailboats on the farm dam and none other than



Africa's largest chair. Producing a dozen ranges, including everything from bubbly to muscadell, the 55-year-old winery's Pinotage, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon have scored in competitions such as the Veritas Awards and National Wine Challenge. Its Bodega de Vinho restaurant serves quality padkos including burgers, wraps, gourmet pies, tapas and delicious platters.

BEER AND BUBBLY

For a break from wine and a look at the Breede River Valley's dusty back roads, turn off Route 60 at Nuy on the Hill or Rooiberg, and head towards the Langeberg to find Saggy Stone. Bringing some craft beer to the party, Saggy Stone serves tasting paddles of its five lagers and ales, all made using sweet mountain spring water filtered through moss and granite. It also offers wood-fired pizzas, burgers and tapas in its stunning hidden valley, where a jungle gym keeps the kids happy while the grown-ups sip a cold draught. Just bear in mind that it's only open from Friday to Monday, 11 am to 4 pm.



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Back on Route 60, Graham Beck is one of the area's best-known brands; its bubbly is as central to South African Christmases as braais and small talk with Ouma. Founded in 1983 by its namesake businessman, and continued by his son Antony, the estate makes its Cap Classiques using Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grown here. Overlooking a long pond, the contemporary tasting room is a stylish venue to sample the Non Vintage, Vintage and Prestige Collections. Options range from a free tasting to the R125 'glass act', featuring specially designed glassware. Graham Beck is, along with Robertson Winery,

Viljoensdrift and Jan Harmsgat, one of the few places offering tastings on Sundays; this traditional farming region's top priorities remain family life, the Dutch Reformed Church and, of course, making fine wines. Many tasting rooms also close around 3 pm on Saturdays.

FARMING TOWN

Robertson is pleasant for a wander through its jacaranda-lined side streets and, around the corner of Voortrekker Avenue (Route 60) and Reitz Street, its cluster of cafes and shops. Bourbon Street is an old favourite for steak and a craft beer, but the best option for a gourmet breakfast or lunch is Strictly Coffee, a deli and one of two coffee roasters in town. On the same stretch of Voortrekker are the Robertson Art Gallery, specialising in modern- and contemporary South African art; Robertson





Kwekery & Tuinsentrum – a nursery – with its succulent selection, cafe and putt-putt; and La Verne Wine Boutique, which offers a good selection of local wines under one roof. Affie Plaas Farm Stall on the west side of town and Platform 62 in Ashton also have well-stocked wine shops.

BONNIEVALE BOUND

The Robertson wine route covers a broad area, running all the way across the fertile Breede River Valley from the Langeberg south to the Riviersonderend Mountains, which separate this tapestry of vineyards, fields and paddocks from the Overberg. From Robertson, you can cross the river to McGregor, follow the north bank to Bonnievale or continue along Route 60 to Ashton, from where Route 62 cuts through the Langeberg to Montagu via Thomas Bain's awe-inspiring Cogmanskloof Pass. The Bonnievale route takes in many of the area's best-known wineries, including Springfield, which produces some of the finest wines available anywhere in the Cape. The fourth-generation family farm, run by the descendants of winemaking French Huguenots, has a hard-won, truth-to-terroir approach to its wines – as names such as The Work of Time (a Bordeaux blend) and Life From Stone (a Sauvignon Blanc) suggest. The riverside terroir here includes lime, much like Bordeaux and Sancerre, as well as quartz and sandy loam soil, with vines planted east-west to pick up the south-easterly breeze and avoid the hottest sun. The deck and lawn fronting the dam are certainly

pleasant spots to enjoy a bottle of Wild Yeast Chardonnay or Whole Berry Cabernet Sauvignon.

ON THE RIVER

Nearby, Viljoensdrift is popular for its one-hour riverboat cruises, which take you past vineyards, yellow-woods and wild-olive trees as you savour the house wines and a picnic from the deli. If you miss the flat-bottomed *Uncle Ben 2*, you can nibble on ciabatta, carpaccio, pesto and pâté on the riverside deck. Rafting Route 62, meanwhile, offers a livelier way to see the Breede, taking in six kilometres of gentle rapids, bird life, vineyards, and perhaps a rare otter, on a five-hour trip that's suitable for beginners.

Continuing along the riverside Route 317, De Wetshof is the area's grandest estate; its tree-lined drive leads to the replica Cape Dutch cellar and tasting room, both based on Louis Thibault buildings. Run by the De Wets, the scions of a French Huguenot winemaking dynasty, the estate is one of Robertson's oldest wineries



ROBERTSON FESTIVALS

BOOK ACCOMMODATION WELL IN ADVANCE FOR THE FOLLOWING EVENTS:

HANDS-ON HARVEST

March

One for families, with grape picking and stomping, vineyard safaris, blending and tasting experiences, as well as picnics, pairings, a Sunday market and more at Viljoensdrift.

handsonharvest.com

WACKY WINE WEEKEND

June

Robertson's famous festival has earned a reputation for student debauchery, but there are plenty of activities for wine lovers, from cellar tours to tutored tastings.

wackywineweekend.com

ROBERTSON SLOW

August

Gourmands can enjoy dinners with winemakers, cooking classes, cellar tours, single-vineyard and vertical tastings, brandy pairings and Cap Classique masterclasses. A Sunday market, game drives, horse rides and boat cruises are also on the cards.

robertsonslow.com

WINE ON THE RIVER

October

A laid-back spring event at Goudmyn Farm, bringing more than 30 wineries to one riverside idyll – alongside country cuisine, live music, a children's area, river cruises, horse rides, wine safaris and accommodation.

wineonriver.com



**SCAN
HERE**

BLEND YOUR OWN WINE AND TAKE IN THE VIEWS WITH US AT EXCELSIOR WINE ESTATE

Roughly between Viljoensdrift and Ashton is Excelsior, where horses and llamas greet visitors to the dam-front tasting room and playground

and a South African Chardonnay pioneer. The range includes a Cabernet Sauvignon and two Cap Classiques, as well as several Chardonnays, two of which were given the nod by *Wine Spectator Insider* in 2018.

BOUTIQUE PRODUCERS

In the same area, Esona has a beautiful tasting room and deli, surveying the vines from their perch above the atmospheric old cellar. Its distinctive small-batch wines, including a Shiraz and a Sauvignon Blanc, are typical of the boutique producers upping the creativity and craftsmanship of Robertson viticulture. Winemaker Lourens van der Westhuizen is behind a handful of them, including Esona,

his own Arendsig, the Mimosa range released by Montagu's boutique hotel and Exdiem in the Klaasvoogds Valley. North of Ashton in Wildepaardekloof, the valley running parallel to Klaasvoogds, Kleinhoekkloof is another boutique farm to look out for, producing a dozen wines among the leopards and snakes at around 400 m above sea level.

RURAL BYWAYS

One of the great joys of visiting the Robertson area is meandering along the side roads between Route 60 and the Breede River, which take you over the railway line and through the platteland. On one such byway, roughly between Viljoensdrift and Ashton, is Excelsior, where horses and llamas greet visitors to the dam-front tasting room and playground. With its three ranges of quaffable and fairly priced wines, and its Graze deli-restaurant serving *roosterbrood* sandwiches, Excelsior encapsulates the Robertson Wine Valley's unpretentious charm.

LUXURY STAY

SEARCHING FOR THE ULTIMATE SPOIL?
CHECK IN AT THE ROBERTSON SMALL HOTEL

Feel a sense of calm steal over you as you stroll through lush gardens, admiring the gracious Victorian Manor House, a National Heritage Site and the heart of Robertson's only 5-star hotel. Fondly known as 'The Small', it's a setting that harkens back to a simpler time when afternoon G&Ts on the terrace coupled with quiet conversation was the order of the day. In stark contrast, the hotel's recently updated interior is a colourful mix of contemporary design – all by local artists – with a distinctly African identity. There is nothing stuffy about the decor style, but rather an unexpected focus on playful elements such as the oversized Pichulik key chains, a cheeky contradiction to the 'small hotel' concept.

Of the 10 rooms available, the Pool Suites are the most remarkable, flowing on to a large rectangular swimming pool, each with a private patio for lazy, post-wine-tour lounging on those scorching summer days. The luxurious bedrooms and bathrooms are light and airy, high ceilings and skylights creating a sense of space. Every last detail – no matter how small – has been considered, from the splendid art pieces (all for sale), to the delicious hazelnut-flavoured Terbodore coffee – best enjoyed while perusing *The Small Guide*, a handbook of specially curated experiences in the surrounding area. Nature is never far away thanks to textile designer Alexis Barrell's hand-printed gowns and quilt inspired by indigenous flora and fauna, as well as the generous amber glass bottles of earth-friendly body products scented with essential oils such as lavender and ruby grapefruit.

Service is, of course, superb. Think baked treats left beside the bed at night and complimentary car washes.

The Small Restaurant, overseen by Chef Chris Erasmus of Franschhoek's Foliage, and the quirky Em Bar (with its impressive craft-liquor selection) ensure that your wining- and dining needs are well catered for. There's even a Wellness Room offering facials, massages and other treatments should you fancy a little extra pampering.

therobertsonsmallhotel.com etc