

# Go South Africa

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SECLUDED Banhoek Valley from Alluvia Specialist Winery. Photograph courtesy of Zorgvliet

## Grape escape

You don't need to be an expert to get a lot from a wine holiday in South Africa. Deirdre McQuillan visits one estate that combines its vineyards with five-star luxury

**I**HAVE BEEN labouring here for 10 years, and the land is phenomenal," Rudolf Jansen van Vuuren says with a smile, bunch of grapes in hand, as he gestures towards a neat line of Cabernet Sauvignon vines heavy with night-blue fruit.

We are in the vineyards of the 300-year old Zorgvliet Wine Estate, in Banhoek Valley, in Stellenbosch, where the burly viticulturist is outlining his work with the passion of a proud father, showing us what to look for in a bunch of grapes and describing each leaf as a factory. His charges are 130,000 vines from which the estate's wines originate. At more than €250,000 per hectare, we're standing on the most expensive soil in Africa.

"Skins give character and flavour, so you want small berries and large bunches, so that there is less juice and more skin and, therefore, more concentration," he explains, gently discarding wrinkled grapes from a pristine bunch.

Earlier he had taken us up a bumpy track on the back of a truck to the highest vineyard, planted with Sauvignon blanc, called 535 because of its altitude, 535m above sea level. Here the air from the ocean drops into the valley and cools the vineyard, and we learned that the south side of the mountain is actually decomposed Table Mountain sandstone, which gives it a special character.

"This is a unique position. This is prime. You can do so much with the terroir here," he said, explaining that by terroir he meant soil, climate, slopes, altitude – factors that determine the quality of the wine.

As an introduction for non-specialist

### Go there



British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies to Cape Town from Dublin and Cork via London Heathrow. South African Airways, BMI and Virgin Atlantic also fly from London Heathrow.

wine lovers, we vine tourists are "vine ranging", fast learning about canopy management, splicing and suckering – or pruning – plus about pests such as snout beetles, not to speak of the sheer graft that goes into vine cultivation. Pruning at Zorgvliet takes 18 people nearly three months, for example.

Man has made his mark across this beautiful valley for centuries, as the neat lines of undulating vines embroidering its contours amply testify. At Zorgvliet, Jansen van Vuuren works in tandem with an ambitious and adventurous winemaker called Neil Moorhouse, whose energy and enthusiasm

for his wines are infectious. Together they're an impressive team.

In the cellar – the most technologically advanced in the country – the grapes arrive and are fast-tracked up a conveyor belt to be stemmed and picked over on a sorting table before being decanted into huge steel tanks where fermentation will take place. The estate will produce 20,000 cases of wine, or 240,000 bottles, from the 2009 harvest.

There's a lot of competition in the Stellenbosch region. Africa's premier quality wine growing district has some 600 wine estates, 6,000 labels and long established wine routes. What makes Zorgvliet special is that it is like a world unto itself, a family enterprise attracting visitors not only because of its inviting environment, at the foot of the majestic Simonsberg Mountains, but also for its accommodation, restaurants and spa, along with a unique history and heritage.

There are weddings here nearly every week – a 17th-century cellar building (located near a slave bell) is now a chapel; a wedding for 100 people works out at about 100,000 rand (about €8,700). Seventy per cent of its weddings are from the UK and Ireland.

For vine tourists there is something to see on the farm at all times of the year, whether it's the harvesting, pressing, blending, barrel tastings or pruning of the vines. "It never stops here," Jansen van Vuuren says with another smile.

When Mac and Marietje van der Merwe bought the estate, in 2002, they set about restoring one of the oldest wine farms in the country. One of the interesting facts about the place is that

in its long history it never stayed in the same family for more than 48 years. Though the Van der Merwes' fledgling enterprise is barely seven years old, it will no doubt ensure the future of their growing grandchildren.

No expense has been spared in the venture, which has to be, according to Mac, "commercial, sustainable and responsible". A self-made entrepreneur and mechanical engineer from a humble background in Johannesburg, he made his fortune from a number of businesses, including manufacturing, before acquiring and turning around a loss-making gold mine.

Low key in manner and permanently attached to a mobile, he admits he knows nothing about farming; he becomes animated talking about his great passion, the game lodge he bought and restored in the Limpopo Valley, now a five-star private reserve with 5,000 head of game, 350 species of bird and various conservation projects. He has

always had a feeling for animals, he tells me, and attributes his success to perseverance and being the first to see opportunities.

The estate at Zorgvliet is divided into separate brands, each individually managed by a family member charged with the responsibility for their character and commercial viability. Their daughter Melanie, for example, runs Zorgvliet Vineyard Lodge & Spa, their son Stefan Le Pommier Country Lodge and Restaurant; the more secluded Alluvia Specialist Winery and Guesthouse is managed by their other daughter, Sandie, and her husband, Delarey Brugman, a couple dedicated to creating world-class wines.

Marietje's hand is obvious in the landscaping and interior decor throughout. Being a passionate cook, she merges her ideas and home recipes with those of her chef. A handsome, elegant matriarch, she is a former champion athlete who modestly describes herself as "just an ordinary housewife".

Zorgvliet's location between the historic cities of Stellenbosch and Franschhoek makes it an ideal base if you want to explore further. Franschhoek Pass, the coastal drive to Cape Town, for example, is stunning. We heard that many visitors to Western Cape now prefer to base themselves in Stellenbosch, a 45-minute drive from Cape Town International Airport, rather than Cape Town itself.

With its lovely Cape Dutch architecture, cafe culture and lively student population, Stellenbosch has an attractive small-town feel. Already many guest houses are booking out, with South Africa hosting the soccer World Cup next year, along with the Indian

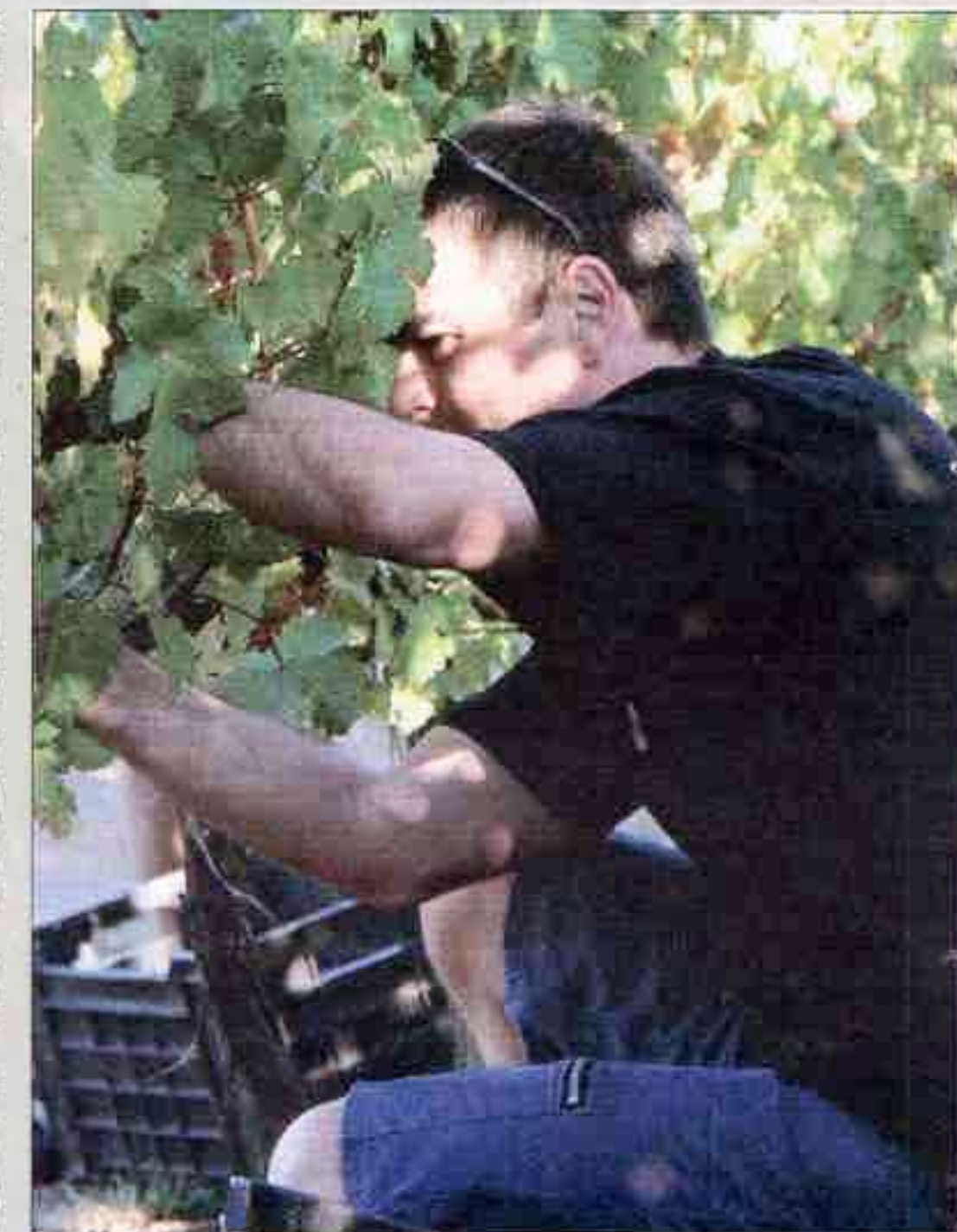
Premier League cricket, Tri Nations rugby and the England cricket tour, a unique conglomeration of major sporting events.

Not the least enjoyable aspect of our short visit was the pleasure of tasting Zorgvliet's excellent wines and food, a consolation for the wet weather for most of the trip. Our arrival coincided with a violent electrical storm, earth and sky exchanging vaporous clouds that slowly dissipated over the darkening valley prior to flashes of lightning and heavy downpours.

Though Banhoek's rainfall is four times the national average, this is a place of extremes. A few weeks earlier, following a very dry spell, it had endured one of its worst fires ever, the conflagration coming perilously close to those valuable vineyards. "It was petrifying to watch that fire burning and the huge flames coming closer," recalls Andrew Harris of Alluvia, shuddering at the memory.

But little green shoots were already visible in the scarred landscape in late April, encouraging signs of growth and regeneration. It's not for nothing that Zorgvliet, whose name has not changed in more than three centuries, means "let your sorrows flee".

Deirdre McQuillan was a guest of Zorgvliet. A three-night Wine Experience package, staying at the five-star Zorgvliet Vineyard Lodge & Spa ([www.zorgvliet.com](http://www.zorgvliet.com)), including breakfast, wine-estate activities, a food-and-wine-pairing gourmet dinner, sunset picnic and spa treatment, costs €820 per couple, excluding flights. Contact St Andrews Travel on 00-44-1204-397367 or 373322, [www.standrewstravel.com](http://www.standrewstravel.com)



Thanks a bunch: harvesting at Zorgvliet, on Africa's most expensive land