



Intoxicated by Stellenbosch

South Africa offers an opportunity to observe the grape-to-bottle process at first hand, writes **Ala Coque Meehan**

For many devotees of Bacchus, the enjoyment of wine can lead to a thirst for knowledge and understanding of how the drink is made. Pair that passion with the happy coincidence that grapes invariably grow in sunny climes in attractive surroundings, and you have a recipe for an intoxicating holiday.

Californian winemakers cottoned on to the concept of fostering interest in their product by welcoming visitors decades ago, and a number of other regions – such as New Zealand and Australia – are now also getting in on the act. Most modern vineyards will offer at least a farm shop and an opportunity for wine tasting, and an increasing number also have restaurants and accommo-



The Vineyard Lodge at Zorgvliet: rooms are finished to five-star standard

modation on site. But it is still fairly unusual for a winemaker to allow visitors to view the inner workings of their vineyard, and to share the secrets of their craft. But that is what's on offer at Zorgvliet, a 123-acre wine estate in the Banhoek Valley in South Africa's Western Cape. Owners Mac and Marietje Van der Merwe have cre-

ated a luxurious paradise for wine enthusiasts who want to experience the whole wine making process. Situated a ten-minute drive away from the town of Stellenbosch, and 45 minutes from Cape Town, the estate offers fabulous views, sumptuous food and incredible wines. Stellenbosch is South Africa's best known wine-

producing region, and most of the South African wine consumed in Ireland comes from this area. It is home to 106 cellars, most of which are open to the public. The rooms in the vineyard lodge are exceptionally spacious and are finished to a European five-star standard. All feature panoramic views of the Banhoek Valley from their expansive terraces, and are fitted out with bespoke furniture and Egyptian cotton bedlinen.

the first governor of the Cape of Good Hope, and who recognised its potential for agriculture. Nowadays the main produce in the region is grapes, but strawberries and the national flower of South Africa, the protea, are also grown.

The Zorgvliet Estate is composed of the main farm and winery buildings, the vineyard lodge, a luxurious spa, a chapel and a top class restaurant. All of these facilities are housed in beautifully renovated, low-lying buildings in the Cape Dutch architectural style.

The rolling hills of the Simonsberg mountains and the cooling breezes that come off the Cape combine to provide the perfect conditions for growing grape varieties more typically found in France – cabernet franc, petit verdot, viognier and sauvignon blanc all benefit from the rich soil formed as a result of ancient deposits

Left: the Zorgvliet Estate is a paradise for wine lovers

Under the same Zorgvliet umbrella are two neighbouring smaller operations, Alluvia and La Pommerie. These are individually owned vineyard guesthouses which are run by other members of the Van der Merwe family. They offer slightly less luxurious accommodation than the Vineyard Lodge but have similarly stunning views, are a little less expensive and are more family friendly. Guests can spend their days eating and drinking splendidly, relaxing by the pool and marvelling at the views, but the main business here is wine, and for a wine enthusiast a visit offers the chance to fully indulge in oenomania.

The town is an important historical and cultural centre with a number of museums and art galleries. It was established in 1679 by Simon Van der Stel (the name means Stel's forest), who was



Stellenbosch was founded in 1679



The estate includes a lounge and restaurant

of sandstone from nearby Table Mountain.

You can experience as much or as little of the grape-to-bottle process as you want in Zorgvliet. If terroir is your thing, resident viticulturist Rudolf Janse van Vuuren will guide you through his vineyards and explain his reasons for planting different grapes in different locations.

For those interested in learning the actual process of wine making, Zorgvliet's wine maker Neil Moorhouse will take you through the process in his state of the art winery.

Getting there

Getting there: return flights from Dublin to Cape Town start from around €750 depending on which airline you choose and how many stops are involved in the journey.

Where to stay: the wine experience package at Zorgvliet costs €820 per couple (excluding flights) and includes three nights' accommodation and breakfast at the Vineyard Lodge, a vineyard walk with the viticulturist, optional grape picking, if in season, and a tour of the cellar and winery with the winemaker. Also included is a wine tasting with the wine maker, a food and wine pairing gourmet dinner, a sunset picnic with wine at a mountain spot, and a spa treatment such as a facial or body wrap.

Accommodation in the Alluvia and La Pommerie guest houses starts at around €105 per room per night. For reservations contact St Andrews Travel on 00441204-397376.

For those interested in visiting Zorgvliet on a more regular basis, around €6,700 will buy you a week's fractional ownership in one of the Zorgvliet wine estate's rooms. This comes with a row of vines and your own label.

Currency: South African rand. One euro currently buys around 12 rand.

Useful websites: www.zorgvliet.co.za, www.stellenboschtourism.co.za, www.southafrica.net

As wine making is a seasonal business, different activities will be taking place depending on the time of year that you visit – we got to pick the last grapes of the harvest – but whether it is de-stemming, pressing, blending or bottling, year round there is something of interest happening.

For those who just want to appreciate the wine of the estate and learn a little bit more about it, there are also wine tastings, cellar tours and gourmet pairing dinners where the chef, Roger, works closely with the wine maker to design dishes that perfectly complement the flavours of the wine.

The cuisine served at Zorgvliet is a vibrant mixture of classical French style with typical South African produce. Filet of kudu, a venison-type meat from antelope, is served with sweet potato rosti and a raspberry-infused jus. Kingklip, a white fish similar to hake, is served with a Malay-style curry cream and a butternut squash spring roll. Being so close to Cape Town ensures fabulous seafood as well as local farm produce.

But it isn't all heavy formal fine dining – Roger will happily pack you a light picnic of grilled lamb fillet in pitta pockets with a bottle of chilled Zorgvliet chardonnay if you want to go on a hike around the farm.

The Van der Merwe family and the staff at the Zorgvliet Estate display a genuine warmth and enthusiasm for the experience they offer. Questions are answered with patience, and you leave feeling relaxed and informed, and you can take with you a little bit of the wellbeing you have experienced in the form of the fantastic wines you have seen being made.

In vino veritas, Zorgvliet truly is a wine lovers' paradise.

Book it

Helen Boylan

Combine a five-star Mediterranean cruise with a programme of live opera events. Eight contestants in the Stella Maris International Vocal Competition will compete aboard the MS Europa in October. They will perform on four different nights of this ten-night cruise and will be competing to impress the audiences – who will help decide the winners – as much as the international jury.

Prizes will include a €15,000 cash prize, an engagement with the Vienna State Opera and a test recording with Deutsche Grammophon. Featured opera companies will include the Metropolitan Opera, New York, the Canadian Opera Company, Toronto, the Opéra National de Paris and the Royal Opera House, London.

This opera package cruise departs from Venice on October 25 and finishes in Barcelona on November 4. Prices start at €4,990 per person, which does not include flights. To book, e-mail Irish cruise company John Galligan Travel at e-mail leisure@jgt.ie or phone 01-2076555.

Book six nights for a family of four at one of Oceanico's four-star resorts in the Algarve, Portugal, for travel between now and June 30. Prices start from €204 per person sharing (pps) in May and from €226.50 pps in June, based on four sharing, at the Jardim da Meia Praia resort in Lagos or the Estrela da Luz and Vila Baia (right) resorts in Praia da Luz.



The first 500 bookings made for accommodation in a two-bedroom apartment will be eligible for 'family treats', which include a round of golf, a golf lesson, spa treatment, a three-course meal with wine, tennis lesson, soccer school (limited dates during May) or free entry to a water park. Quote "great family treats" at the time of booking.

Flights are not included in these prices, but Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) and Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) fly to Faro and car hire or return taxi transfers can be arranged through the resort. To book, or for more information call 0870-7467171, visit www.oceanicoresorts.com or e-mail info@oceanicoresorts.com.

The five-star Dunloe Castle Hotel in the gap of Dunloe, Killarney, Co Kerry has deals on activity and 'special interest' breaks.

'Tack up & ride', for example, costs €500 and includes lessons in the basics of pony care and riding, along with two nights' B&B in a family room for two adults and up to three children (valid until October 26).

The 'Father and son fishing break' is priced at €185, includes one night B&B, one dinner for two and two hours fishing tuition on the river Laune. The hotel's leisure facilities include a pool, sauna, indoor tennis, fishing and there are ten championship golf courses nearby.

To book or for information on the hotel's other breaks, including spa and wellness packages, visit www.killarneyhotels.ie, e-mail hotelsales@liebherr.com or phone 064-6644111.

Prices are correct at time of going to print, but may be subject to availability. E-mail the travel pages at travel@sbpost.ie