

The Cape's Secret Corner

Wellington

With any luck, you are reading this on your way to Cape Town; heading due south as the rails trace the rump of the Hottentots Holland Mountains. Tulbagh, site of a devastating earthquake in 1969, is behind you and you are just starting to catch glimpses of Table Mountain in the distance. On either side, deep fields of green wheat and bright yellow canola are puffed full after the soft winter rains; a sea of waving grass.

Text: Richard Holmes

Images: © Doolhof Wine Estate, Wellington Tourism

But on the western side of the line, do not be surprised if you see a herd of buffalo happily chewing the cud in a flower-filled field. Thankfully, they are not the notoriously bad-tempered African buffalo that counts itself among the continent's Big Five. No, these are Indian water buffalo – originally from Australia, and farmed by a lawyer-turned-cheese-maker. Yes, in the hills surrounding the quiet Winelands town of Wellington it seems you will find almost anything!

The lawyer in question is Wayne Rademeyer, who hung up his gowns to focus on his first love: cheese. Today, his small herd of water buffalo produce the only authentic buffalo mozzarella in South Africa. Pungent, stretchy and a world away from rubbery commercial mozzarellas, the unassuming Wayne is quietly making waves in his corner of the valley with his handcrafted cheese.

Not far off, up on the flanks of the Groenberg, the folks at Foxenburg get their milk from a herd of rather less intimidating goats, but their crumbly feta, fresh chevres and soft cream cheeses are equally delicious. On wooden racks, rounds of crottin, Shepherd and Caprino Romano cheeses mature

slowly. Every cheese on the farm is made by hand according to age-old techniques, using pure goat's milk from their herd of free-range animals. The herd forages freely on the vegetation of the Groenberg – the aptly-named 'green mountain' – giving the Foxenburg cheese its unique flavour; a distinctive *terroir*.

Terroir is, of course, a term more usually associated with fine wines and happily the vineyards in and around Wellington have that by the barrel.

Although often standing in the shadow of Stellenbosch and Franschhoek – its more glamorous Winelands neighbours – the vineyards of Wellington are known for having some of the best soils in the country, and there are wineries galore waiting to be explored.

Not far from the cheeses of Foxenburg, you will find the wines of Welbedacht, equally famous for what is in the bottle as for the day-job of the winemaker's son; Schalk Burger Jnr being one of South Africa's best-loved rugby players. The winery produces a range of wines, including the premium 'No. 6' – named for the number on Schalk's Springbok jersey.

That is about as close to celebrity as you will find in





Wellington; a village that offers a decidedly low-key Winelands experience. In the wineries surrounding the village, you can feel that this is still a farming community, and you will find honest country hospitality and genuine warmth at every stop.

Nearby Doolhof is certainly worth a visit. Tucked away in a lush valley between the Groenberg and the Bain's Kloof Pass (worth the drive for the wonderful views), the estate is the kind of place where you could easily while away most of a day.

The picturesque Kromme River flows through the property, and in 2007, a River Walk was laid out to allow visitors to wander at leisure. The meandering path runs for several kilometres across the estate, and a number of carefully laid out picnic sites are available along the way.

If that all sounds like too much hard work, then simply settle in and sample some of Doolhof's delightful wines. The tasting room – in the original 19th century wagon house – spills out onto a terrace, and with light meals on offer it is a wonderful way to spend a spring afternoon. And if you find yourself unable to head back to the city, simply check in at Grand Dédale Country House, offering fine five-star accommodation right on the estate.

Wellington also produces excellent brandies, and it is easy to meander through the stills of the valley. Savingnac de Versailles offers brandy and chocolate tastings, while at De Compagnie, an 1849 alembic copper still drips out fine brandy. Upland Organic Estate boasts organic brandy and grappa, with similar sniffers on offer at Nabyegelegen. Oude Wellington Wine and Brandy Estate is a good spot to end off a morning, with the Oude Wellington Restaurant offering wonderful South African cuisine.

Well-fed and watered, do not leave town without a short stroll along the high street. The Dutch Reformed Church

dominates the skyline, along with a statue of Dr Andrew Murray, a missionary who was instrumental in establishing schools and colleges in the area.

The nearby tourism office can also point you in the direction of the Anglo-Boer War Blockhouse. The most southerly relic of the war that devastated the country at the turn of the 19th century, this was one of a number of fortified Block Houses built by the British to protect the railway line from Afrikaner commandos, and is worth a visit for history buffs.

There is quirky history to be found all over town, from the very first all-steel bridge to be built in South Africa – still in use today at Lady Loch Road – to the dusty rooms of Ouma Granny's House which will whisk you back in time.

Across the valley, there is a distinct feeling that time moves a little slower here. So while the village and vineyards whiz past the windows as the Blue Train moves ever onwards, why not consult your travel itinerary, and start planning your next trip to this quiet corner of the Cape's beautiful Winelands.

For more information on Wellington, visit www.wellington.co.za. ■



Grand Dédale Country House

Grand Dédale Country House nestles snugly in the centre of a picturesque labyrinth of mountain ranges, vineyards and forests. At the heart of the Doolhof Wine Estate, the restored Manor House continues its tradition of Cape Dutch hospitality by welcoming a whole new generation of guests looking to get away from it all. Accommodation is available in three 'Elegant Living' suites (with king size beds and i-Pod docking stations) or three 'Loft Living' rooms which are beautifully appointed under the Manor House's sweet smelling thatch and come complete with romantic Victorian bathtubs. The Old Wine House – a freestanding thatched stone cottage dating from 1707 – is ideal for honeymoon couples. Delicious 'Cap Classique' continental breakfast buffets, light lunches, homemade high tea treats and three-course candlelit silver service dinners ensure that dining at Grand Dédale is an elegant affair. For more information, contact +27 21 873 4089, email info@granddedale.com or visit www.granddedale.com.