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South Africa's Cape Winelands

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Seated at a long table with traveling companions, you savor several varieties of wine—a crisp, fruity Chenin Blanc; an effervescent, sparkling Chardonnay; a spicy, full-bodied Shiraz. Between sips, you munch on crackers and delicious, locally-made Mascarpone cheese. Gazing out the windows of this elegant, high-ceilinged tasting room you see a jagged mountain ridge, and below, undulating farm fields and orderly rows of grapevines. From all appearances, you might be wine tasting in France, Italy or California; instead, you are experiencing South Africa's Cape Winelands.

Rugged, verdant, beautiful – all adjectives describing the Cape Winelands, a region to the northeast of Cape Town and the country's largest wine producing area. Known locally as the Boland (an Afrikaans word meaning "uplands"), the Cape Winelands include six distinct appellations, or wine regions, with differing characteristics of soil or climate. These are Stellenbosch, Franschhoek, Paarl, Constantia, Robertson and Wellington.

South Africa is no Johnny-come-lately to the wine industry. The first vineyards were planted by the Dutch East India Company as early as 1659, intending the grapes to help prevent scurvy among sailors plying the southern trading routes. The area's first wine estate, Constantia, was established in 1685 by Simon van der Stel, then governor of the colony.

However, it wasn't until the 1990's, after Apartheid racial segregation ended and boycotts were lifted, that export markets opened up and the world began to discover South African wines. Today, the country produces highly respected, award-winning wines. Popular red wine varieties include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinotage and Shiraz, as well as fortified wines known as Cape port. White wines of the region are primarily made from Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc varietals.

Experience for yourself the exceptional wines, expansive landscape and picturesque towns that make this region a delight to explore. A full-day tour of the Cape Winelands is included in the itinerary of our [Extraordinary Africa journey](#). Among the tour's highlights are tastings at wine estates and visits to the historic settlements of Stellenbosch, Franschhoek and



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Paarl, where you will have some free time for lunch and exploring on your own.

Founded in 1679 by Simon van der Stel, Stellenbosch lies in a broad valley surrounded by mountains nearly a mile high. This community retains many of its original buildings characteristic of the Dutch Cape architectural style, defined by ornate gables, thatched roofs and whitewashed plaster walls.

One of the oldest towns in the country, Franschhoek is noted for its many well-maintained original Dutch Cape-style buildings, and for having some of the country's best restaurants. Due to its spectacular natural setting, architectural heritage, wineries and fine cuisine, Franschhoek has unofficially been declared South Africa's "food and wine capital."

Paarl, the largest town in the Cape Winelands, features lovely Cape Dutch houses, tree-lined streets and lush gardens. On a hill overlooking Paarl, the stunning, modernistic Afrikaans Language Monument commemorates the 50-year anniversary of Afrikaans being recognized as an official South African language. It was also in Paarl that Nelson Mandela was released from prison in February 1990. Although much of his 27-year incarceration was at Cape Town's Robben Island prison, Mandela spent the final three years at the nearby Victor Verster Correction Centre.

South Africa's Cape Winelands region enjoys a Mediterranean climate, with warm, dry and sunny summer weather (December – January) and mild, rainy conditions in winter (June – August). Even during these seasons, temperatures are mild compared to much of the U.S. Since Tom Harper offers departures year-round, anytime is a good time to visit [Extraordinary Africa](#) and the Cape Winelands.

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