

THE WESTCLIFF

*Condé Nast Traveler (US) Gold List 2005–2008,
Travel + Leisure Top 100 Hotels in the World*

'Do you hear the lions?' asked Samuel the waiter.

I listened. I didn't. The roaring of the lions has long been a holy grail at The Westcliff hotel. I could hear the elephants, but that's no big deal. Everyone hears the elephants.

When a foreign friend arrives in Johannesburg I always take them to the Polo Lounge at The Westcliff. There is no better view in Jo'burg: perched high, staring across the blue foreground of the land's loveliest infinity pool there is a cliff-drop, an air-chasm to the rich jungle of the Zoological gardens, a Tarzan valley of trees and tangled green. In the distance are the domes and spires of Rosebank and Sandton like half-submerged islands in the green, looking overgrown and overcome by a surging African bush. You see no traffic, no houses, no one. It is a vision of the city as it will be when all the people have left – Jo'burg as a kind of Eden, with lions roaring below – and believe me it takes some special kind of hotel bar to give you a vision like that, before the first cocktail has even arrived.

The Westcliff, one of the Orient-Express Group's southern African flagship properties, is barely 10 years old but it has the grace and quiet opulence of very old money. It offers class in a city that sometimes badly needs it. Sprawling terracotta-coloured up the hillside like a sunbathed Tuscan village, the gradient so steep you take a shuttle bus from reception to the rooms and the view-blessed lounges and restaurants, it is an oasis of calm and quiet.

The rooms are laid out in two-storey clusters around their own courtyards and fountains, each room like a muslin-draped, marbled palazzo. The bathtubs are wide and deep and built for two, or perhaps three if business has gone well. A television rises at the touch of a button from its concealment at the foot of your bed. It is how you thought all hotels would be when you grew up.

Stories circle The Westcliff. My friend Karen swears she saw Leonardo di Caprio playing tennis one night around midnight on the floodlit court, high above the city. She ate every night for a week at La Belle Terrace, the exquisitely understated, elegantly stripped-down fine-dining restaurant above the Polo Lounge, hoping to see him. She never did, but she saw one of the musicians from Queen.

The Westcliff has appeared on the *Condé Nast Traveler* Gold List every year from 2005 to 2008 and on the *Travel + Leisure* Top 100 Hotels in the World list for the past two years. That isn't just for the appointment of the place, the facilities, the luxury – it's for the sense of having escaped into a happier place, a place literally above it all.

I looked out at the stretching greenness. 'No,' I said. 'I don't hear the lions.'

Samuel the waiter smiled. 'Let me fetch you another Martini, sir,' he said. 'Then I think you will hear them.'

☎ 011 481 6000, www.westcliff.co.za

Local heroes

South Africa is not only a must-visit destination for globetrotters, it also boasts several of the world's top hotels





CELLARS-HOHENORT

Condé Nast Traveller (UK) Gold List 2008 (Best for Food), 2008 Diners Club International Wine List of the Year

Row upon row of exotic and imported vodkas vie for my attention from behind the glass fridge doors at The Martini bar. Trump vodka? Roberto Cavalli? Or a selection from the Van Gogh collection perhaps? It's easy to be overcome with indecision when faced with a menu of 155 Martinis (making it the biggest bar of its kind in the southern hemisphere), but fortunately the barman comes to my rescue with an Apple Pie Martini. The stylish, polka-dot lounge at the Cellars-Hohenort in Cape Town's leafy Constantia is an ideal spot for informal meetings or simply unwinding over drinks before dinner. Which is where this luxury establishment really comes into its own...

Wrapped around a 300-year-old oak tree planted by Simon van der Stel, The Greenhouse restaurant is a culinary playground par excellence. Executive chef Peter Templehoff – last year's winner of the coveted *Sunday Times* Food Show Chef of the Year Award – whips up a feast of flavours across a choice of 12 starters, mains and desserts. He uses only the freshest seasonal produce, organic and from the Cellars garden wherever

possible, and very little on the menu is imported. While the signature dish is slow-roasted crispy duck with honey-ginger jus, gourmands would do well to opt for the Tasting Menu, which allows you to sample eight tantalising courses (the lobster tortellini nero in a sorrel sauce is a personal melting point).

Each course is expertly paired with wine by the inimitable Miguel Chan. The certified sommelier takes me down to the cellar and chats knowledgeably about some of the rare wines he's procured (it's the only hotel in the world that stocks the full range of Vin de Constance), and about how Meg Ryan, a guest at the hotel at the time, helped pick the grapes for the Vin de Hohenort 2007 vintage. It's not surprising to see the latest award – 2008 Diners Club International Wine List of the Year – sitting proudly next to the seventh consecutive Diners Club Award of Excellence. For the ultimate romantic dinner, you can book a table for two in the wine cellar.

The New Dawn Suite is one of 53 luxury rooms and suites offered by this five-star Relais & Chateaux hotel. Light, airy and spacious, there's nothing old-world about the decor of this historic homestead. Things are constantly being reinvented at the Cellars-Hohenort, largely thanks to the hands-on ownership

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of Liz McGrath. In fact, when I left the dining room she was quizzing the executive chef on the latest food trends coming from Mozambique and Japan.

Sleep better on a goose-feather pillow? Call reception and they'll deliver your favourite pillow, free of charge, be it duck feather, anti-snore or non-allergenic. The bedside pamper menu also includes hot toddies, luxury bath oils and aromatherapy candles. The glass doors of the suite open out on to manicured lawns, where a peacock struts past in the early morning light. You can amble among the camphor trees and along interesting walkways in the exquisite 3.6 hectare garden, before taking your place on the sun-drenched terrace for breakfast.

For those who'd like to float on their back looking up at the eastern slopes of Table Mountain, there are two solar-heated pools, while bicycles at guests' disposal allow you to explore the picturesque Constantia surrounds at your leisure. There's even a Gary Player-designed chipping green and the hotel can provide a selection of irons. If this all sounds a bit taxing, why not schedule an hour-long Thai massage at the Cellars spa? Luxury indeed.

☎ 021 794 2137,

www.cellars-hohenort.com



SINGITA LEBOMBO

World's number 1 hotel in Travel + Leisure magazine World's Best Awards 2008, Condé Nast Traveller Gold List (UK) (Best for Ambience/Design)

'They say a buffalo always looks at you like you owe it money,' Matthew, the Singita ranger tells me as he points to the appropriately named obstinacy in the distant bushveld.

It's true. Although I am a good distance away, tucked up in a Land Rover and somewhat comforted by Matthew's presence, I can feel the pressure of their baleful glare. If the animal kingdom boasted thugs, buffalo would be it. They don't even need knuckle-dusters or baseball bats.

I'm in the Kruger National Park, staying at the world's most luxurious lodge: Singita Lebombo. Don't take my word for it. *Travel + Leisure* magazine voted Singita Sabi Sand & Kruger National Park as the world's number one hotel in 2008. I've been here a mere three hours and already I feel pampered like royalty.

I want to watch these wild thugs a little longer but Matthew insists that there is a surprise just around the corner so I give in. Minutes later, I'm standing in front of a braai area perched on the top of a cliff. The lodge's staff are cooking game and

prawn kebabs, rolling sushi and manning a bar that the Cape Grace's Bascule Bar would envy. There are snacks everywhere: nuts, biltong, stuffed peppadews...

What's more astonishing is that this spread is merely an entrée to what is waiting back at the lodge: a five-course gourmet dinner, each course paired with wine from the more than impressive Singita cellar.

I go to bed feeling like an overfed princess, but that doesn't stop me from being amazed at how all of the rooms are built into the environment to have as little impact on their surrounds as possible. I elect to sleep indoors but if guests wish to sleep outside, a bed is prepared and they can fall asleep to the sound of hooting owls, singing crickets and splashing hippos in the river below.

Before dawn, we're off on another game drive. Today we see a pride of lion bloated and drowsy after a night of feasting on the carcass of a giraffe. We hope to find the leopard who left drag marks from a kill the night before, but no such luck. It's probably snoozing in a tree with a full belly.

With all this talk of food, I realise with shock and horror that I have not eaten in two hours and, as I'm now used to delicious meals every time I blink, I'm no doubt on the brink of starvation.

But I needn't have worried, because we head down to the river for a leisurely bush breakfast. I tuck in while an elephant eyes me coolly from across the river, munching her own meal of river-bed foliage.

After a busy morning, I head off for an hour-long back and neck massage at the Singita spa. I size up the tiny masseuse dubiously, wondering how those teeny hands are going to tackle the work-related rocks in my back. How wonderful it is to be proved so very wrong with what must be the most blissful massage ever.

That night I'm treated to a delicious bush dinner. Singita's staff have set up camp in the middle of nowhere. Everything looks magical and the bush has been decorated with lanterns and fairy lights. I'm treated to a heavenly seven-course tasting menu, while entertainment is provided by the local Shangaan people who sing and dance exuberantly around the campfire.

The following day, it's hard to leave. From wonderful game viewing made that much more meaningful by the superb guides to complete and utter pampering, Singita is an experience you will never forget. **D**

☎ 021 683 3424, www.singita.com

The Westcliff, Cellars-Hohenort and Singita all accept Diners Club Cards.