



PICTURE: Shutterstock/Quality Master

Escape to Western Cape

From vibrant streets to the vineyard retreats, discover the brilliance of the Western Cape, says **Lina Molloholli**

I've done this trail more than a thousand times and I'm still in awe of the view every single day – it's the best part of my job,' says our guide Fatima. I'm 90 minutes into a steep mountain hike up the Lion's Head, 669m above sea level, in Cape Town. 'This is the most difficult bit, but it will be worth it,' says Fatima, as we climb ladders and rocks towards the peak. I'd been contemplating whether I should have stayed in bed, but when we reach the top by 7am, all my doubts are gone. The sunrise is a spectrum of golden hues, softly hugging the picturesque city. Fatima serves us freshly made *koeksisters* – syrupy fried doughnuts in the shape of a plait – and much-needed coffee while we take in the view.

I'm in the Western Cape with seven top-performing agents on a reward trip for frontline sellers in Virgin Atlantic's Sky High Club – in partnership with Virgin Limited Edition, South African Tourism and One&Only.

With visitor numbers to South Africa on the up – 250,000 Brits arrived in the nine months to September 2023, a 35% rise on 2022 – and the tourist board planning more agent fam trips for 2024, the Rainbow Nation is set for a strong year with the travel trade.

CITY ESCAPE

Back in the capital, we're greeted by guides Sherene and Shaheed for a local history and art tour. Among the colourful Victorian houses and spice and produce markets, the house facades are blooming with art. This is where we come across artist Jumah and his

seven-year-old daughter Alima, who are painting two zebras underneath the hashtag '#meetsouthafrica'. We quickly learn that zebras symbolise balance, harmony and unity, and the black-and-white stripes are often seen as a reflection of life in this once-divided nation. As she hands me a brush to help her paint, Alima questions: "If zebras can unite white and black, and be happy, why can't we?"

The day continues with a tour of the Victoria & Alfred (V&A) waterfront, although there's no walking involved this time – NAC Helicopters Cape Town luxury

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choppers are waiting to whisk us away on the journey of a lifetime. 'We are 3,000m above sea level,' says our pilot Federico, as we gaze out at spectacular views of valleys and vineyards before reaching the waterfront. Originally a working harbour, the V&A has evolved into a bustling hub of activity, spanning world-class shopping, dining and vibrant street performances.

After cooking up a hearty meal of coconut curry, mango salad and berry pastries at Food Jams, we return to our city base, One&Only Cape Town. With 131 ➤

ASK THE experts



Melanie Gittins,
senior account
manager,
Virgin Atlantic

"We've seen great demand for bookings to Cape Town for winter 2023-24, which exceeds the previous year. We are even showing positive signs of early bookings for winter 2024."



Rachel Lewis,
campaign and
partnership
manager, South
African Tourism

"It's highly recommended to book local guides for Cape Town and Franschhoek tours. They always have the best tips and knowledge to enable you to experience a destination like a local. It will make all the difference to clients to get the authentic sense of a destination – it's one of the things that made our trip so special."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Quad biking at Atlantis Dunes, Cape Town; Rickety Bridge Winery, Franschhoek; Sir Richard Branson's Mont Rochelle estate in Franschhoek

PICTURES: Mont Rochelle; Lina Molloholli



rooms and suites, it offers a haven of lavishness with panoramic views of Table Mountain and the marina. Amenities include an outdoor infinity pool, a spa, plus restaurants such as Nobu for Japanese-Peruvian fusion and Reuben's for a taste of local flavours. It's the perfect setting for a good night's sleep before a jam-packed day of desert quad-biking at Atlantis Dunes.

"The country's food and wine capital, Franschhoek, offers a landscape punctuated with vineyards and is a sensory feast for wine lovers

WINE ESCAPE

The country's food and wine capital, Franschhoek, offers a landscape punctuated with vineyards and is a sensory feast for wine lovers. I feel at home. Our base is Sir Richard Branson's Mont Rochelle estate, with its 26 rooms perched majestically on the slopes of the Franschhoek mountains. The estate's vineyards beckon, and the tasting room – with its contemporary design and expansive views – provides the ideal atmosphere for sampling the exquisite vintages, from the crisp sauvignon blanc to the robust shiraz.

Only a short drive away at Jordan Wines, manicured vineyards on rolling hills set the stage for an exceptional tasting journey. The estate's commitment to sustainable viticulture is evident in every sip. Our knowledgeable guides Devon and Leon guide us through a selection of their acclaimed varieties, each telling a story of the terroir and the dedication of the winemakers. We learn that the colour of wine comes from soaking the skin of the grape in its juice.

On the second day we head to Rickety Bridge, which was granted to Paulina De Villiers, one of the first female landowners in South Africa, in 1797. The historic feel of the estate unfolds against the backdrop of the Dassenberg mountains. The cellar tour delves into the artistry behind each bottle, while the tasting session allows me to explore the nuances of their premium wines, including their distinct Bridge Cabernet Sauvignon.

The journey continues with a Bikes'n'Wines e-bike journey to La Bri Wine Estate, a boutique winery with old-world charm. As we stroll through vines heavy with plump grapes, our guide Eon tells us that you can identify the variety of a vine by its leaves and grape bunches. Merlot, for example, has big leaves with a waffle structure, whereas pinot noir typically has pine cone-shaped bunches. The rustic tasting room is the perfect setting to savour La Bri's signature blends. And as the sun sets behind the mountains, casting a golden glow over the valley, I can't help but feel grateful for the opportunity to savour the magic of Western Cape, one sip at a time. **TW**

BOOK IT

Kenwood Travel offers a seven-night stay at One&Only Cape Town from £3,639 per person, based on two sharing a Marina Table Mountain Double Queen Room. Includes breakfast, up to 23kg luggage and direct return flights with Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow on December 3. kenwoodtravel.co.uk

Elegant Resorts offers a seven-night stay at Mont Rochelle from £2,780 per person, based on two sharing a double Shiraz Room. Includes breakfast, UK airport lounge access, private transfers and direct return flights with Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow on December 3. elegantresorts.co.uk