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APRIL 2020

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South Africa's Best-Kept Secret

Capetonians know that winter is when to visit the nearby Winelands

BELOW
The Wine Studio
at Mullineux &
Leeu Family Wines



WHEN I MOVED TO CAPE TOWN from New York in the middle of April a few years ago, I regretted going straight from one winter to another. But I've since come to appreciate the cool, rain-lashed months of Cape Town's low season, which runs from June to August. While the Cape Winelands and their anchor hamlets of Stellenbosch and Franschhoek are radiant at any time of year, summer's heat and crowds made me reluctant to take the hour-long drive in peak season—but the magic of winter in the region is South Africa's best-kept secret.

Bundling up in ponchos and scarves and staying cozy near a crackling fire might not be most Americans' idea of a mid-July activity. But that's just what you'll find many Capetonians doing at retreats like stalwarts Babylonstoren, with its beautiful produce gardens, and Leeu Estates, where guests can enjoy a goblet of Pinot Gris as they chat with legendary winemakers Andrea and Chris Mullineux. The air is crisp and clean, and the smell of the fynbos shrubs is strong; sipping coffee on the terrace at Leeu and watching the morning mist rolling over the vines is an only-in-the-low-season experience.

And then there is the light: The sharp winter sun gives the white Cape Dutch buildings an almost golden hue never seen in the summer. The vineyards themselves are all open, and you'll have greater access to wine blending at Grand Provence; you can reach it via the charming hop-on/hop-off Franschhoek Wine Tram. And don't miss a six-course wine-paired dinner at the regal Cavalli Estate.

Between the tastings and the tours is a full calendar's worth of events. I always loved Bastille Day in July, which celebrates the area's Gallic heritage (the first settlers in Franschhoek were French Huguenots). And though the Winelands can be chilly, they are never actually *cold*. They remain green in winter, sometimes looking better than in summer, when the heat can turn the grasses brown. The wine-makers will be fresh off a busy harvest and eager to talk about their newest releases, which means visitors at this time of year are the first in the world to taste what will be poured next season. How's that for insider access? —SARAH KHAN



ABOVE
The Franschhoek
Wine Tram
stops off at
historic vineyards
in the region

LEFT
A pool house
at the Fynbos
Cottages at
Babylonstoren

BABYLONSTOREN *doubles from \$515; babylonstoren.com*
LEEU ESTATES *doubles from about \$555; leeucollection.com*
GRAND PROVENCE *doubles from \$254; grandprovence.co.za*
CAVALLI ESTATE *canalliestate.com*