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FIRST-HAND FEEDBACK

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SOUTH AFRICA

Megan Valentin, Amy Watson, Rene Balt, Kendall Cozett, Nerusha Jay Narain and Janine de Bruyn recently went on a Cape educational trip, and shared this feedback on their stays.

Megan, Amy and Rene, the three Johannesburg ladies, arrived in a cloudy, rainy Cape Town, though there was the occasional ray of sun and rainbow peeking out. The first day was an easy introduction with an orientation drive through the city, and tasting some local delicacies in Bo-Kaap. Dinner was enjoyed at the lovely Alphen Hotel in the Constantia area. The hotel has an old-world charm to it with its Cape Dutch character, and 18 designer suites spread over various smaller buildings, giving it a more intimate feel. The restaurants are well supported by the local public, and there is always a vibrant energy around their grounds. Perfect for couples, families and small groups. The night was spent at The Vineyard Hotel, another Grande Dame of the southern suburbs (located in Newlands). It is surrounded by the most beautiful gardens with views across to the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden area and glorious mountain views. Here we recommend booking any room or suite that has mountain views. The hotel has recently undergone some renovations and soft refurbishes and is looking fabulous. The evening turndown included a beautiful pot of tea and treats – very special and unique. Breakfast was an amazing spread.

The following day was dedicated to site inspections of the Victoria & Alfred Hotel, Queen Victoria & Dock House, Winchester Mansions, and Icon Villas in the V&A Waterfront and Atlantic Seaboard area. Overnight was spent at the gracious Clarendon Fresnaye, perfectly located in Fresnaye which is a five minute drive to the Waterfront and the beaches of Camps Bay. Gift welcomed us warmly and was extremely attentive. They have lovely gardens, lawns, and two swimming pools. The family rooms are situated away from the main house, which has its own pool, so you can easily have families staying in one section and honeymooners on the other side. Rooms are contemporary with accents of colour giving it a modern appeal.

The next day we continued with hotel site inspections. We visited Clarendon Bantry Bay, The Pod Hotel, Welgelegen Guest House, the Onyx Hotel and Kensington Place. We ended off at Four Rosmead for the night. This guest house is located in Oranjezicht in the City Bowl, and walking distance to many popular restaurants. The rooms are quaint and comfortable, with everything you expect from a guest house. The breakfast selection and quality were noteworthy. Four Rosmead offers a cosy stay for honeymooners and couples looking for an economical option. We would recommend staying in rooms that are not close to reception.

The following day was spent exploring the Cape Winelands. Our first stop was at Hazendal, a Newmark Hotels property, and a lovely resort-style hotel offering golf, mini-golf, padel, a large swimming pool, various eateries, state-of-the-art kids play centre, art gallery, and vintage car museum; plenty to keep families entertained. We continued to Spier for lunch, which currently is undergoing major renovations to the hotel. They are elevating their offering and we look forward to returning to visit their “new” hotel. That night we stayed at Lanzerac, which is an institution in the Stellenbosch area with 330 years to its name. Beautiful Cape Dutch architecture and thoughtfully curated interiors showcase the heritage and elegance of this hotel. Complimentary services are very

comprehensive, including a mini-bar, wine tasting, wine cellar tour, use of spa hydro facilities, and transfers to Stellenbosch. Stunning property suitable for couples, families as well as groups.

The next day took us to Franschhoek where we visited Tokara, Delaire Graff, Cloud Estate, Bartinney and La Fontaine. We also visited Pigcasso, a farm sanctuary NGO, where one can view the pig's art creations in the OINK gallery, and feed Ballo, the resident cow. Good fun! All properties are lovely and have a unique charm. We stayed over at Avondrood. What a gem of a place, a lovely boutique hotel just a block away from the main road, where all the restaurants and quaint shops are situated. The staff were super friendly and Justin, the manager, is very hands on and passionate about the offering. The rooms are spacious with a country-style feeling, spread over the lush gardens. A charming guest house for those looking for an authentic local stay.

A beautiful drive took us from Franschhoek to the Overberg region, along the renowned Hemel-en-Aarde wine route to Hermanus. Along the way we stopped at various estates. In Hermanus we visited Auberge Burgundy and Harbour House Hotel, located at the historical old harbour. We spent the night at Abalone Lodge which is just a five-minute drive from the town centre, located right on the coast. You have beautiful views especially from the upstairs ocean-view suites. We were welcomed warmly by Nicole with drinks, and a thorough orientation of the property. It was very cold so it was great to have heated flooring. Something to bear in mind is that the bathrooms in the ocean-view suites are separated from the bedroom by a glass window. The curtain is rather sheer, so does not provide total privacy. So great for couples, but perhaps not the best option for two friends sharing a room (we'd recommend the garden rooms for this option). It's a warm intimate property with a lot of soul.

The next day saw us exploring the Stanford area, where we visited Mosaic Lagoon Lodge. A lovely cosy retreat tucked into a milkwood forest along the lagoon. From here we continued to Grootbos for the grand finale of our educational. We stayed at Forest Lodge and did site inspections of Garden Lodge and the villas. What a magnificent offering, Grootbos is definitely next level. From its unique location surrounded by pristine fynbos and milkwood forest, to the finely curated, luxury rooms, the gourmet food and mind-blowing wine cellar. The choices of activities are many so would recommend a three night stay. We participated in a fun and educational nature drive, visited the Florilgium with its extraordinary artwork. Marna, our guide, was amazing. Grootbos is just perfect in every way!



BOTSWANA

Tanya Karovsky, Jacqueline Cranko, Paul Rikhotso and George Karanga recently visited Botswana and had the chance to stay at Natural Selection's Duke's Camp, and here is what they experienced.

This was our first stop in the Delta, and flying over the dry semi-desert that changes into the water channels of the Delta was spectacular.

After being collected at the airstrip, we were looked after very well, with a comfortable drive in a new vehicle that had padding, cup holders and charging points. First impressions were very good, and our guide was extremely calm and very welcoming. Arriving at camp we noticed that there was a discreet electrical fence and found out this was due to the hippos that lived around the property. This camp is on ground level and not on raised walkways.

We had a very warm welcome and were taken into the main tent area where we sat in the tea room for our briefing, and were fed lots of lovely home-baked goodies with tea and coffee. It felt like we were transported back in time to the 1940s East African safari era. The tent and all the décor were collected by the owner from East Africa and Morocco and the Far East. It is a very eclectic collection that has been lovingly curated and placed in the camp.

The rooms are tented, placed on top of a wooden deck with views over the water. The tented accommodation allows immersion in nature, inviting in the scents and tranquil sounds of the bush. Hippos are neighbours, and can be heard chomping in the evening when they come out of the water to feed.

We were very impressed with the water saving efforts as there is a bucket in the shower to catch the cold water before it gets warm. This is used to clean the rooms, so there is very little water waste. Everything is run on solar, and we all received our own reusable water bottles.

The highlight of the stay was a trip out on the boat for the day, seeing huge crocs and old bull elephants standing in the water eating the soft papyrus grass. We passed hippos and spotted a large variety of birds; too many to count! We ended off the trip with a very special evening learning all about the Delta, at a drinks station set up at sunset on the riverbank whilst sitting around a fire.

The staff were outstanding, warm and friendly. They really made us feel special and looked after.

