

Uncovering the Hidden Helderberg

A new boutique hotel in the Cape is not only dishing up a delightful new destination, but is also showcasing just what makes the often overlooked region of the Helderberg so special.

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Silver Forest Boutique Lodge & Spa



mountain, pretty gardens filled with flowers and trees frame a magnificent view of Strand in the distance, making the hotel as pretty outside as it is inside, where the forest theme continues. All of the common areas as well as each of the eight suites boasts striking wallpaper depicting forest scenes of all manner of trees. It instantly adds a sense of calm to every space, particularly in the rooms, which combine this sense of quietude with cosy furnishings (including a log-burning stove for chilly winter's nights), and possibly the most comfortable bed I have ever slept on (we may very possibly be hitting the hotel up for their stockists' details in the near future!).

Night cap surprises every evening make turning in extra special – but not before a drink at the bar and a delicious dinner. The dining room is Fudge's central command station, and this is where he really turns up the charm. He is adept at sharing his time equally with each table of guests, although he clearly has an eye for dog people (or should that read suckers?). And as a reward, all he asks is the odd nibble of something tasty from the menu – while his mum isn't looking, of course. Concerned for his waistline, his mum, Penny, has popped a discreet note in the guest info book asking visitors not to feed him, but that is easier said than done when he turns his adorable face at you and pops the puppy dog eyes on megawatt status. Luckily, his job as guest relations manager keeps him busy and fit, so we didn't feel too guilty about the piece of bacon we slipped him at breakfast.

A TAIL-WAGGING WELCOME

Arguably the best way to be welcomed anywhere is with a wagging tail. And Fudge has wags in spades. The unofficial ambassador for the recently opened Silver Forest Boutique Lodge & Spa in Somerset West, Fudge is a people person, if ever there was one. A long-haired Welsh Jack Russell, Fudge has spent the majority of his life as the family pet of the Rodenhurst family, the proud owners of beautiful Silver Forest. Now in the golden years of his life, it turns out that his true calling is actually in hospitality.

Fudge loves his new home, and so he is keen to show guests around, as he is convinced that they will love it too. And to be honest, it's certainly not a hard sell. Perched on the slopes of the Helderberg

THE HIDDEN HELDERBERG

While Fudge is keen to encourage visitors to Silver Forest, his mum, Penny, wants to extend the welcome a little wider to include the surrounding Helderberg region. The "Hidden Helderberg" she calls it because, though there is a wealth of fantastic attractions, top restaurants





Waterkloof Wine Estate



and wine estates right on Silver Forest's doorstep, Stellenbosch and Franschhoek are still top of mind when people talk about great food and wine regions.

This is something Penny, a successful entrepreneur who is used to the world of brand building, is keen to rectify. As such, she is the biggest proponent and cheerleader of this region, often coming up with great itineraries for her guests and even ferrying a few of them – us included – around to show off her favourite spots. These trips have proved so popular that she is looking at making them a formal part of Silver Forest's offering.

LUNCH WITH A VIEW

A herd of goats welcomed us to Waterkloof Wine Estate, heading off to play their part in helping to make the wine-making process here as natural as possible. Working in tandem with nature forms such a big part of the estate that their restaurant – often referred to as the glass box – boasts floor-to-ceiling walls of glass so that you can marvel at the view, whether you are enjoying a meal at the award-winning restaurant or sampling a bevy of wines from the estates' extensive range.

While the view from Waterkloof is legendary, fewer people know of another spectacular setting perched on top of an adjacent hill – that of Idiom Wines. The road that leads to the estate is long and winding and if we weren't with Penny, I might have



Idiom Wines

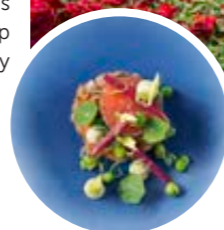
thought that we were lost. But once we finally emerged at the top we were greeted by a beautiful indigenous garden, those aforementioned views, and a wonderful collection of artwork, displayed both in the garden as well as in the tasting room and restaurant, which once again serves up lovely wine-paired cuisine in front of large, light-filled glass walls.

THE HELDERBERG HEAVYWEIGHTS

From the relative youngsters of the area we moved on to the undisputed Grande Dame: Vergelegen Estate. The estate has been making its mark on the country's history and wine heritage since it was founded in 1700. Little wonder then that it has played host to a number of auspicious guests over the years, including Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and Beyoncé.



Vergelegen Estate



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Not surprisingly, the wines here are renowned, as is its fine-dining restaurant, Camphors. But the estate's attractions extend far beyond the viticultural and culinary, and you would be remiss not to dedicate at least half a day to explore the estate's 18 beautiful gardens. When in bloom, the camellia garden, the only International Camellia Garden of Excellence in Africa, is spectacular, and year round the venerable 300-year-old camphor trees are mind-boggling – just imagine what they have seen during their lifetime. For a small glimpse of this, there are a number of historical buildings and museums to explore, including the 201-year-old wine cellar which houses a library of rare books that will have any bibliophile's heart racing.

A hop, skip and a jump from Vergelegen is Lourensford Wine Estate – not surprising when one considers that they used to be part of the same estate. Like Vergelegen, Lourensford deserves a at least a few hours of your day, as there is much to explore, including a coffee roastery, two art galleries – one dedicated to the work of Frans Groenewald and the other to the work of South African Old Masters – a deli, and the Millhouse Kitchen for one of their famous rustic dishes. Guided hikes are on offer through the picturesque estate, and for those with a slower day in mind, there is the option of grabbing a craft beer at the onsite ABRU taproom. Save some space for a wine tasting though. This is wine country after all, and the estate's Wine and Chocolate Pairing is delicious.

AN OLIVE BRANCH

For a change of pace, we ended our Helderberg tour with a visit to Morgenster Wine & Olive Estate. A little more intimate than the previous two estates, you can expect fantastic personalised service while enjoying lovely views of the clouds rolling in over the mountain backdrop. Morgenster makes some fantastic wines which are on offer to taste, but for something out of the ordinary, opt for the olive oil tasting instead. I never thought I would see the day when I would be sipping olive oil like wine, but very soon your palate starts to adapt and you can appreciate the different flavours of the oil much like you would with any wine tasting. The lemon-infused and truffle-infused varieties are really something special, and we are still enjoying ours at home months after our visit.



Lourensford Wine Estate



Morgenster Wine & Olive Estate



SPA YOUR WORRIES AWAY

As evening drew near, it was time to head back to Silver Forest. But the fun was far from over as we headed to the spa to languish in the sauna, sip bubbly in the Jacuzzi and then rub and scrub ourselves with lovely smellies in the Rassoul chamber, which ends each session with a delicate rain shower. Afterwards we were pampered with massages and pedicures so that by the time we were finished, we were so relaxed, the thought of swapping our robes for clothes was decidedly unappealing. Luckily spa robes are deemed acceptable attire for the intimate dining room, so that's just what we wore while enjoying a delicious three-course meal, a bottle of wine, and the room's cosy candlelit ambiance.

As we finished and got up to leave, Fudge appeared on cue to escort us to our

room. Missing our own dogs at home, we invited him in to have a cuddle, but he declined. After all, a guest services manager's job is never done. /

Silver Forest Boutique Hotel and Spa

Silver Forest is a luxurious private boutique lodge and day spa which delivers five-star service in a tranquil setting with the utmost attention to detail. It differentiates itself from the rest due to its spectacular natural location, superior spa offerings and lovely lodgings, as well as the personal attention that is afforded to each guest. For more information, email lodge@silverforest.co.za or visit www.silverforest.co.za.