

WINE
TALK

Keeping it Country

Gems glitter along two wine routes now flying the biodiversity flag

It's not a pretty picture. A woman looms in the foreground, her head turned slightly to survey a wind-battered shantytown. She's all smears and dashes of charcoal and around her, black smudges and swirls whip up an unforgiving wind. It's a stark scene, but we are riveted—staring at a William Kentridge original.

We endured Friday rush hour to escape to **WILDEKRANS COUNTRY HOUSE** near Elgin to explore the **GREEN MOUNTAIN ECO ROUTE**, the world's first biodiversity wine route. Far away, travellers whiz by on the busy national highway. But perched on our antique four-poster bed, we're enjoying original art, tranquil surrounds and contemplating a nocturnal forage.

The Green Mountain Eco Route incorporates the area around the Groenland Mountain, including Bot River (Botrivier), Elgin Valley, Grabouw, Houw Hoek and Villiersdorp. We head down to the **SHUNTING SHED** in Bot River for supper. Lit by fairy lights, candles and old signal lanterns, the refurbished railway shunting shed transports us to the world of the South African Railways, 30 years ago. Locals sit at the long bar across from a dining area of mahogany and vinyl sleeper bunks salvaged from decommissioned trains. Vintage postcards chart railway

journeys under our glass tabletop and a waist-coated muso belts out Bob Dylan.

From a list of train-themed pizzas we choose the blue cheese and caramelised red onion 'locomotive' and a hearty plate of bangers and mash. Local wines take pride of place on the wine list, which means quality and value for



Wildekrans Country House is a great base when exploring the Green Mountain Eco Route

money, and we wash down our grub with a bottle of Witklip Shiraz. Coffee is served in railway-issue white teacups, edged in green and emblazoned with a leaping springbok. The old days were never this good.

The next morning, before heading out to explore the area, we get a heads

up on the Green Mountain Eco route from founding member, Alison Green, our host at Wildekrans. "Basically, the route is a collection of attractions including wine farms, adventure tours, hiking and mountain biking trails, luxury accommodation, country restaurants and farm stalls, where

all members are committed to sustainability, conservation and social upliftment," says Alison. "All grape growers and wine producers are Biodiversity Wine Initiative (BWI) members or champions, so visitors get a unique experience at each stop along the route."

Members have also just undertaken a huge alien-clearing project in partnership with **WORKING FOR WATER**, which will see the Groenland Mountain clear of aliens in five years. Visitors can enjoy the fruit of this initiative on the **TAKE A HIKE** walking tour. Ranging from two to four days, the hike showcases the diverse natural splendour of the region, with baggage transported while you

walk, and overnight stays at Wildekrans Country House and Porcupine Hills.

"The hike takes you through various wine farms including **OAK VALLEY**, **PAUL CLUVER**, down to **BEAUMONT** in Bot River and up to **PORCUPINE HILLS**," explains Alison. "Hikers cross over the top of the Groenlandberg and the views from

there are amazing. At one point you see Kleinmond in front of you, False Bay arching around to Cape Point and Walker Bay to your left.”

At Oak Valley and Paul Cluver we discover both farms boast impressive mountain bike trails. Without our bikes at the ready, we make the most of our visit by stocking up on wine and then head lunch-wards to **THANDI'S KITCHEN**.

Thandi Wines is the first farm worldwide to produce a Fair Trade wine. We enjoy a glass of Thandi Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon and a generous serving of *bobotie* at the community-run farm kitchen before heading down the Houw Hoek Pass to visit a local legend, Elrieda Pillman, famous for living in harmony with nature.

You can't help but be impressed. Elrieda runs **GOEDVERTROUW** as a wine farm and guest house and does pretty much everything herself, from growing fresh produce to milking the cows and cooking for parties of up to 50 people for Sunday lunch. “They have to serve themselves, though,” she laughs. How does she do it? “I've always had unbelievable energy. It is tiring, but I have no problem sleeping at night!” she says, shelling almonds while we drink tea and eat homemade coconut-and-apricot-jam *hertzoggies* on the veranda.

When she's not tending the vineyards, making wine and looking after guests, Elrieda is in her celebrated garden, which stretches down from the thatched homestead to the road in a ramble of roses, forget-me-nots, lavender and daisies. We head back to Cape Town, thrilled to have discovered Elrieda's

secret kingdom, hiding in a valley along the Bot River.

A few weeks later, I'm once again transported through a country-living portal as I visit Shaun and Debbie McLaughlin of **TRINITY LODGE** in Darling to chat about preserving what's important, both in nature and lifestyle. Shaun heads up the **DARLING WINE AND ART EXPERIENCE** and is delighted that Darling has recently been recognised as the first district where all grape growers and cellars are BWI accredited.

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“This is a great recognition for our members, who are passionate about biodiversity and conservation,” says Shaun. “For visitors, it means that the Darling wine experience remains a rural one and the escape from the city to a country environment will continue for generations to come.”

For chef Debbie, this ethos extends to the modern country-cooking guests enjoy at Trinity Lodge and **HILDA'S KITCHEN**—the acclaimed country restaurant she runs on the **GROOTE POST** wine estate. Hildagonda Duckitt, the nineteenth century food and housekeeping guru, born on the Groote Post estate, is Debbie's muse. “Hildagonda wrote two cookery and housekeeping books and was South Africa's own version of Mrs Beaton,”

Debbie explains. “Her recipes inspire me and I love the idea that I am somehow continuing her legacy.”

Debbie admits that some of Hildagonda's recipes don't translate well into modern dishes and you won't find Hildagonda's trotters, braised lettuce or mock turtle ragout on the menu. Visitors will find authentic wildlife in the veld though—thanks to Groote Post's reintroduction of endemic game. Kudu, black wildebeest, red hartebeest, bontebok, springbok, quagga, eland and gemsbok thrive in the farm's game camp, which visitors can enjoy as part of a game drive or nature walk.

Leveraging the area's green credentials, Shaun confides that an ambitious hiking and mountain bike trail is in the pipeline.

“Darling falls within the West

Coast biosphere and we're working with experts to devise a trail that will stretch all the way from Milnerton to Veldrift.”

The more culturally inclined can look forward to the first ever **DARLING WINE AND MUSIC EXPERIENCE**, planned for 6 to 8 February 2009. “We're taking the orchestra into the vineyards at harvest time, where a tasting of each grape variety will be paired with classical music accompaniment,” Shaun explains, “It's about using your ears as eyes.” In typical country fashion, there'll be something for the whole family, with a Friday evening concert, a Saturday music race for the kids and a chilled Sunday jazz brunch.

Sounds like just the tonic for the post holiday-season blues. **GT**