

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Wonderful winter escape

A spectacular new museum celebrating African art adds to Cape Town's many attractions, not least the excellent food, climate and exchange rate, finds **Wendy Gomersall**

Cape Town has always been a favourite winter sun destination for Brits. What's not to like about guaranteed warm weather, a 'friendly' time zone just two hours ahead of the UK, and a massively favourable current exchange rate of more than 18 rand to the pound?

If you're lucky enough to be spending Christmas in Cape Town, swapping snow for sunshine and sand, you won't need any convincing, but if this destination is new to you, it's worth hearing about the latest innovations in tourism.

The opening of a stunning new modern art museum in what were once grain silos is set to lure even more culture vultures to spend time here, whether it's for a few days enroute to another African country or a whole holiday in the one city.

The new Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) on the V&A Waterfront is the first major museum in Africa dedicated to contemporary art. Hailed as South Africa's answer to the Tate Modern, it's vast and hugely impressive, though, I'll be honest, I found the exhibits a bit love them or hate them.

There's a giant dragon worthy of *Game of Thrones* hovering over the atrium, cowhide mannequins, mystical mask photographs, and my personal favourite, a zebra painted amidst multi-coloured balloons. It's all certainly thought-provoking.

Development of the museum, which covers nine of the 57m-high building's 11 floors and encompasses 100 galleries, represents a colossal architectural and engineering project. This has been spearheaded by the V&A Waterfront, whose chief



View over Cape Town, main; the new Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa has 100 galleries, above

executive, David Green, hails from Edinburgh.

"We recognised the importance art plays in society and the need to showcase the talents of Africa in Africa," he says. "It is for these reasons we are so proud to be able to unveil a home that will be not only a powerful platform for the artists but allow locals and international visitors access to great works of art, that will become the legacy of society as a whole."

Entrance to the museum is a very reasonable 180 rand/approximately £10 per person (www.zeitzmocaa.museum).

Occupying the top two floors of the silo is the brand-new, achingly stylish Silo Hotel, set to join Cape Town's line-up of iconic palaces to style. Rooms start at 12,000 rand/approximately £665 for a double room – no, it isn't cheap – but that does include breakfast and admission to the Zeitz MOCAA museum (www.theroyalportfolio.com).

Even if you don't stay there, have dinner in the rooftop Granary café, which serves excellent food. The Sunday roast is already a firm

favourite among Capetonians, with a choice of roast pork, beef or chicken.

If you're visiting for Christmas you'll love the festive atmosphere of Adderley Street, Cape Town's version of Edinburgh's Princes Street which is illuminated by hundreds of festive lights depicting some of the city's history as well as Christmas themes from the first weekend of December.

There are stalls lining the street selling everything from food to gifts so don't be fooled by the warm temperatures, your Christmas will contain all the traditional elements of home.

You might even catch a choir at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden. It's a must see for any visitor, not least because it boasts more than 7,000 plant species, including many that are rare or threatened, but over the festive period families picnic while being serenaded by fabulous voices.

Where might you rest your head? If you're celebrating a wedding or a big anniversary, splash out on an iconic luxury hotel. The elegant Cape Grace down on the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront opposite the Silo, is gorgeous. Rooms rates from 7,945 rand/approximately £440 including breakfast (www.capegrace.com).

The hotel's Signal Restaurant offers fantastic seafood specialties such as the curry risotto with spiced kingklip and grilled prawns, hearty options including succulent ostrich steak or confit of lamb shoulder, and vegetarian options such as creamy mushroom tortellini.

The magnificent Mount Nelson is nicknamed the Pink Palace after its colour and is simply gorgeous. Even if you don't stay there, go for the fantastic Afternoon Tea, it's fabulous – multiple tiers of sandwiches, savouries, cakes, scones and all the trimmings and a South African favourite, melt-in-the-mouth milk tart, or melktert. It's incredible value for money at just 325 rand/approximately £18pp (www.mountnelson.com). Go when you are hungry is my advice, perhaps after



The V&A Waterfront at night

negotiating those 100 art galleries.

You don't have to splash out for five-star though, particularly if you are planning an extended winter stay. A cheaper option could be the delightful little Welgelegen Guest House in the residential Gardens area of Cape Town, a 30-minute drive from the airport and a couple of minutes' walk from Kloof Street and its wide range of restaurants.

By the way, don't miss dinner at Kloof Street House, a quirky restaurant in a magnificent Victorian house in gardens glowing with fairy lights. The bouillabaisse with line fish, salmon, prawns, calamari, mussels, clams, garlic toast and aioli and the salted caramel cheesecake with popcorn ice cream are out of this world. Use the opportunity to sample some of South Africa's amazing wines, too.

What else should you do while in Cape Town? Most visitors take the tour of Robben Island where South African anti-apartheid revolutionary and former president Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were held during the apartheid era. Assorted buildings chart the island's 500-year history, then a former political prisoner lectures you about its days as a prison. The tours ends with a look at Mandela's cell.

A trip up Table Mountain is obligatory, too, by five-minute ride on the Table Mountain Aerial Cableway. The views – weather permitting – are stunning. There are free guided walking tours and an audio tour, a shop of course and a restaurant if you need a snack and drink. There's even wi-fi (www.tablemountain.net).

You have to go out whale watching from Gansbaai – book with Dyer Island Cruises, which claims to offer quite possibly the only place in the world where you can see a mighty whale and a great white shark on the same boat trip. We didn't sadly, but we certainly did see whales – half a dozen or so – and Cape fur seals. Peak season is June to December (www.whalewatchsa.com).

Cape Town's list of other must-do experiences include a trip to the Penguin Colony at Boulders Beach, Simon's Town – African penguins, adorable and very endangered, used to be known as jackass penguins because of the braying sounds they make. They're a tad smelly, truth be told.

And you should head back to the shops on the V&A Waterfront to find some African art to take home – it may not be a zebra with balloons but I'm very fond of my lion's head made from wire and thousands of beads. ■

Aardvark Safaris (01980 849160, www.aardvarksafaris.co.uk) tailor-makes holidays to South Africa; British Airways (0844 493 0767, ba.com) has return flights from Edinburgh to Cape Town via Heathrow from £1,007; from Glasgow from £945. For more on South Africa, visit www.southafrica.net

STAYCATION



Play time in

Stratford

At The Townhouse the stage is set for a dramatic weekend break, writes Moira Gordon

fall the world really is a stage and all us men and women merely players, be grateful if you are permitted the pleasure of performing any scene where Stratford-upon-Avon provides the backdrop.

There is something magical about this quaint medieval market town, that drips with history and character. Blessed with olde worlde Tudor buildings and river walks, the home of the Royal Shakespeare Company allows you to metaphorically check in your woes like a coat at the cloakroom and, like any fine play, it is able to instantly transport visitors to another world.

The birthplace of William Shakespeare, fans of the playwright have cause to visit the idyllic town and every year hundreds of thousands make the pilgrimage, following umbrella or flag wielding tour guides as they snake their way through the narrow streets from one point of interest to another.

From the many theatres which stage his plays to some of his finest soliloquies on a tiny stone rostrum in the picturesque garden of his childhood home, the bard's works are on permanent show and the chapters of his life are vividly illustrated in numerous buildings throughout the town.

There is a warm welcome the minute we pull up outside the beautiful, 400 year-old Grade II

listed building of The Townhouse. The chapel-like windows inspire the graphics on the hotel signage and they also offer a quick glimpse into a delightful interior that is as warm as the general manager Neil Hanson and his staff.

With parking located at a nearby NCP car park we first unload our bags and with them any troubles as, for the next couple of days, our every need is taken care of.

After checking in, we are shown to our room. Winding our way through the inviting bar – which stocks a wide range of speciality gins and a long list of cocktails – the comfortable dining room and up a couple of flights of ornate stairs, the attention to detail is obvious in the decor of the 12-room hotel. Retaining the character of the building, the owners, Brakspear, have managed to give the hotel a contemporary feel. Steering clear of the twee, they have instead used a palette of green, taupes and grey heritage colours to convey the sense of history, while the plush furnishings offer the warmth and richness that allows guests to feel pampered but also completely at home.

Entering our top-floor bedroom it is clear that sense of luxury extends to every one of the bedrooms. Each is unique but they all have quality vintage furniture – not a flat-pack wardrobe or nightstand in sight – giant beds draped in crisp white sheets that easily envelop weary

travellers, the kind of thick-pile carpets you sink your grateful toes into, and a welcoming decanter of port. Even the bathrooms offer a degree of decadence, with shower cubicles big enough to host a party, gorgeous tiling and a roll top bath.

Leaving such an inviting room is not easy but with a town to be explored it would be wasteful, albeit understandable to simply hole ourselves up there. Instead we set off to take in the jaunty-angled houses, navigate the narrow streets which join the main thoroughfares, and check out the individual shops, before finding a beer garden along the banks of the Avon where we watch the barges and boats on the river.

We set off to take in the jaunty-angled houses, navigating the narrow streets

Back at the hotel, the lure of sampling a pre-dinner cocktail was too strong and we allowed the bar staff to surprise us. After a few questions to ascertain which tipples would be best suited to us, we were served up a Planters Punch and a Bramble and both were delicious.

The vibe in the bar was relaxed and friendly and, as is the case, every evening from Monday to Saturday we were treated to some live piano music, courtesy of one of the music students from the King Edward's School, situated opposite the hotel.

The exterior of The Townhouse in Stratford-upon-Avon, above left; one of the hotel's 12 bedrooms, above

Dinner was an equally enchanting experience. The lighting was intimate and romantic but the mood was informal while the service was informed but never intrusive.

As for the food – that was close to perfection. The breakfast choices were superb, with the eggs royale besting the full fry up, although the waffles were a tempting alternative. There is a great value pre-theatre menu, with three courses for £16.50, and on Sundays several roast options are added to the list. But there could be no complaints about the food that we settled on over the course of the two-night stay. From the melt in the mouth twice-baked cheddar soufflé, to the seared scallops, grilled pork cutlet and ribeye steak, there was nothing to fault on the plates other than the fact they left little room for dessert. Thankfully, though, we were unable to resist the passion fruit and lemon posset, and the warm treacle tart and we knew that we could work some of it off the next day as we followed the tourists around town, in and out of the museums retracing the bard's footsteps.

As Shakespeare himself said: 'All's well that ends well.' ■

Double rooms at The Townhouse (01789 262222 or e-mail book@stratfordtownhouse.co.uk) 16 Church Street, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire CV37 6HB start at £140 per night.

48 HOURS IN

Valence

Thursday, 7pm

Check in at Hotel Atrium Valence (20 Rue Jean Louis Barrault, 26000 Valence, tel: (0033) 475 55 53 62, www.atrrium-hotel.fr) where a double room with balcony costs from €71.

8pm

Dine at L'Épicerie (18 Rue St-Jean, tel: 0475 42 74 46, http://lepicerie-pierre-seve.fr), where Pierre Seve's "promenade gourmande" menu includes offal dishes, as well as guinea fowl, and turbot in tarragon.

Friday, 9am

Join a walking tour of Valence's delightfully traffic-and-tourist-free historic centre. Wind up at the iconic Kiosque Peynet bandstand on the Champ de Mars for a great view.

12:30pm

One in ten of the city's inhabitants are Armenian, descendants of people who fled the Ottoman Empire. Try lunch at Sassoun (8 Rue d'Armenie, tel: 0475 56 22 99) where the meze-style menu has 20 Armenian-Lebanese dishes for €22 a head.

3pm

Hop on a train to Romans-sur-Isere, France's footwear capital and indulge in some retail therapy.

8pm

Anne-Sophie Pic's restaurant at Maison Pic, 285 Avenue Victor Hugo, tel: 0475 44 15 32, www.relaischateaux.com/gb/france/restaurant/pic-drome-valence) is reason enough to visit the city. She's the only woman in France to hold three Michelin stars – book ahead.

Saturday, 11am

Rent an e-bike (Carbone Zero, 24



Rue Denis Papin, tel: 0475 56 99 06, carnone-zero.fr) to explore Valence's network of canals, built to irrigate vineyards and market gardens.

12:30pm

Lunch at L'Ane en Ciment (Place St-Jean, tel: 0475 45 53 28), a friendly, informal spot.

2:30pm

Visit the Musée de Valence, where highlights of a splendid collection include fine medieval mosaics.

8pm

Dine at Le Bistrot des Clercs, (48 Grande Rue, tel: 0475 55 55 15, www.bistrotDESCLERCS.COM) to sample dishes like escargots with garlic and parsley, venison and oysters. Expect to pay around €32 each.

Sunday, 9am

Check out for your journey home. ■ Robin Gauldie

Valence is less than an hour from Lyons, around one hour from Grenoble, and two hours from Paris CDG Airport by TGV high speed train (uk.voyages-sncf.com). For more information visit: www.valence-romans-tourisme.com; www.ladrometourisme.com

BARGAIN BREAKS

Easy way to Edam

Discover Amsterdam on two wheels with Freedom Treks. Their four-night Amsterdam – From One Hotel trip features four easy self-guided routes that connect Edam, the medieval castle of Muiden and Dutch fishing villages. Available from April to September 2018, prices start from £396, which includes a four-star hotel in Amsterdam, breakfasts, route information and a breakdown service. Flights and bike hire extra. **Call 01273 224 066 or see www.freedomtreks.co.uk**

two adults and one child sharing a room at the four-star Sunwing Resort Fanabe (self-catering), with flights from Glasgow on 12 January, 2018. **Call 0844 412 5970 or see www.thomascook.com**

Castle chambers

Visit the five-star Fonab Castle, Pitlochry before 14 January (not 24 December-1 January) and take advantage of their Winter Break offer. From £189 per room per night, Sun to Thurs, or £219 Fri and Sat, this includes accommodation in a Loch View or Castle Room, breakfast and use of their Woodland Spa. **Call 01796 470140 or see www.fonabcastlehotel.com**

Terrific Tenerife

Thomas Cook is offering seven nights in Tenerife from £425pp, based on