



The Drostdy, Graaff-Reinet

A short and very easy flight from Cape Town and we land at Port Elizabeth. We head back to Avis to pick up our next Toyota Corolla and to hear the sweet tones of Serena guiding us on our three hour journey into The Karoo and to South Africa's fourth oldest town, Graaff-Reinet. Now if truth be told, I was wondering why I was heading to a town that no-one in the UK really seemed to want to promote. However, Malcolm, from The Independent Traveller, had enthused about Graaff-Reinet, telling me how so many people really were missing a trick. I needed to find this out for myself.

Two hours in and we had travelled through vast panoramas with the sun casting shadows on the undulating mountains, wild rosemary and wild aloe adorned the flatlands and monkeys and ostrich stared out at us from the roadside as we zipped pass. We stopped at the only town you travel through before Graaff-Reinet, Jansenville, the heart of South Africa Mohair production apparently. Whilst waiting at the Lavender Cafe for our toasties and chips to be cooked, I discovered that South Africa produces the finest Mohair in the world and is responsible for controlling 80% of the worlds production. The Mohair Experience opposite offered us a great opportunity to purchase the softest scarf ever for my daughter. Will she realise what a luxury item she now owns at the tender age of 10 years old?

Only an hour to go and we would be entering Graaff-Reinet. I had been reliably informed that there was only one main street and that I could not miss The Drostdy as it had pride of place in the centre of town as the original court house. This is absolutely true, as long as you can pay attention and do not get too distracted by the stunning Dutch Reform church that looms ahead of you or any of the other beautiful historic buildings that you pass. The Drostdy takes up what seems like two blocks as it now encompasses Ferreira House and the slave quarters that belonged to Ferreira House, now Stretch's Court.

I have fallen in love with this charming hotel. The history and the character oozes from it. Stretch's Court is a row of brightly coloured cottages, restored externally in the style of the slave quarters. Internally they are well thought through and luxuriously appointed. A simple night light in the bathroom so that you can see where you are going, fabulous lighting throughout, a powerful hair dryer and, what is rapidly becoming my favourite piece of furniture, the Chinese barrel stools once again! The Drostdy boasts it's own art gallery linked to a local charity and a wonderful wine shop selling a vast array of the finest wines South Africa offers.



More is to come later, however for now we are to be whisked off to the Valley of Desolation by Buks. Buks has lived in Graaff-Reinet for the last 20 years and his passion and enthusiasm for this town is infectious. Buks was a fascinating man with so many stories to tell I could be here all night writing them up! As we travelled the few minutes to the edge of the town Buks informed us that Graaff-Reinet was the only town in South Africa in a national park. Suddenly this was so apparent! Wildlife are free to roam – into town if they wish! We travel past the dam and start climbing, with Buks pointing out wild plants and buck enroute. We get to our first stop off, jump out of the car and start a short climb to the view point. I am actually now slightly running. I can't explain but I have a real excitement building in me for what I know is going to be the most breath-taking view. Words cannot do justice to the drama that unfolds when you reach the viewpoint, sit on the wall and look out over the valley of desolation. Silence, eerie silence, otherworldly rock formations and vastness. I just sit and take it in.

Due to the time of year, we do not stay to watch the sunset here but rather jump back in the car to a second vantage point for our sundowners. Craig at The Queen Victoria had already warned me that I would see one of the most magnificent sunsets that I would ever experience and he was not wrong. The colours changed literally in front of our eyes from burnt orange to pale pink to violet. A tiny moon sat in the middle with Venus shining brightly above.

This was truly a magical place and I could now fully understand why Malcolm felt so passionately about sending his guests here on one of his tours of South Africa.

Returning to Graaff-Reinet Buks took us to the main Dutch Reform church and told us a little known story about the Queen. She came out to Graaff-Reinet as she wanted to breed her racehorses with those belonging to the Rupert family. Before she went out to stay with them on their farm she visited the church and on every window frame was cast an image of the Queen. This remains now.

It had turned chilly now so we say goodbye to our new friend and retire to the bar for a hot chocolate. What a vibrant little place with a great atmosphere. Warmed up we go back to our rooms to get ready for our final dinner. Well first and foremost no-one had told me that Yusain Bolt ran the restaurant! If in doubt check out my photo below of him proudly showing off his restaurant! On a more serious note, again we were greeted by warm and welcoming staff and shown to a table by the roaring fire. Our final meal was not to disappoint. A perfectly cooked steak will always please.



With that our trip had sadly come to an end. My overriding memory of my week in South Africa was of the amazing staff that we encountered at all of the properties that we stayed in. These properties have all gone to great lengths to instil pride and passion in their staff, but most importantly humour and the ability to make you feel relaxed and at home, albeit in luxurious surroundings.

Oh and in case you were wondering – no, we never had a bad meal!