

The appeal of Riebeek Valley is based on country charm and a clever association with olives.

A well-oiled machine

Words **Ed Suter**
Photographs **Ruvan Boshoff**

Only 90 km away from the centre of Cape Town, Riebeek Kasteel and Riebeek West effortlessly tick all the 'small village' boxes on the checklist. Church spire rising out of the valley? Tick. Quaint cottages with no electric fence in sight? Tick. Wind pumps? Tick. Cosy décor shops with enamelware and wire signs reading 'Lekker'? Tick. Yes, it's all there. But as opposed to say, Franschoek, they still feel like authentic dorps with their uncommonly large number of shops with single-syllable names, such as Crisp and Revive, buzzwords to conjure up an air of small-town simplicity and freshness. For a day spent away from the city, a trip to this valley to sample locally produced wines and olives is definitely worthwhile.

Riebeeck Valley is central to the Swartland. The farms Sonquadrift and Allesverloren were established there in the early 18th century after settlers clashed with the existing inhabitants in 1701. The valley is also famous for being the birthplace of General Jan Smuts, whose home on the farm Ongegund is now a museum on the grounds of the Portland Pretoria Cement (PPC) factory.

The valley has successfully broadened its appeal beyond its own orbit of olive, grape and wheat farmers with the annual hosting of the Med Fest (a chance to sample the cuisine of all the various Mediterranean countries) in March, the Olive Festival in May and the Art and Shiraz festival in October. So successful has Riebeeck Kasteel been at aligning itself with the piquant fruit that the Olive Festival is now firmly established on the Western Cape calendar and almost too popular for its own good. Better to go there on any other weekend when you can stand back and admire the village and its charm, which centres on a grassy square where locals pass back and forth, greeting one another as they go. It's an approach to community of which the residents are proud. As one estate agent says, 'If we see someone we don't know, we go up and meet that person.' Perfect for those seeking an escape from the anonymity of big cities, less so for anyone relocating as part of a witness protection programme.

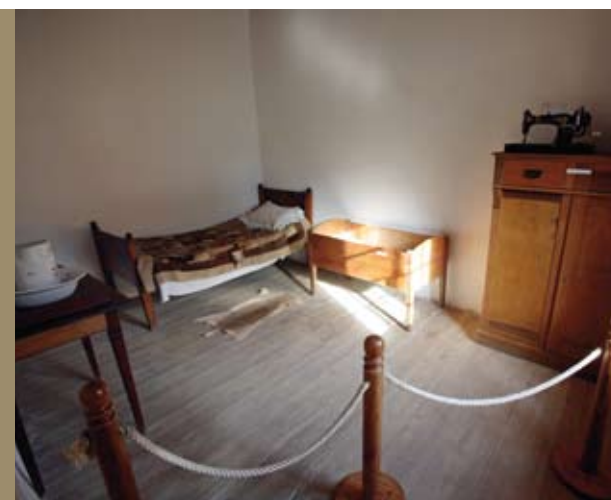
Asked to describe Riebeeck Kasteel, another agent sums it up as 'quiet, quirky, charming, safe, and with lovely restaurants. It's still a village and it's hard to find a village with an interesting vibe to it.' The area's centrality – an hour to Cape Town, 20 minutes to Wellington and about half an hour to Tulbagh – means people are opting to move out of Gauteng and Cape Town to Riebeeck Valley, where a 200m² home can be bought for R1,5-million.

Daniel Christen, who runs the RE/MAX franchise in the valley and who has been living there for the past 14 years, says the growth in the area has been unbelievable. 'When I arrived, there was not even a single coffee shop in the village – now there are 20 restaurants.' He believes the village to be in the same position Franschhoek was in 10 years ago and that it has been following similar trends, including an exponential rise in property prices. 'A piece of land I sold for R32 000 in 1998 would now fetch R425 000,' he says. However, Daniel insists there are still good deals to be had, especially in the less well known of the three villages – Ongegund. 'There are some amazing opportunities for investors who are not blinkered. At present Ongegund offers the best value for money. There are properties that, if they were 7 km closer, would fetch R1-million to R1,5-million more. This has made it possible for younger couples to invest. Added bonuses are the child-friendly streets and play-parks.' Currently, the priciest homes (about 2 500m²) in the valley go for about R5,5-million.

Like Franschhoek, aesthetics in the valley are strictly controlled to ensure it retains its quaint charm. One couple who were drawn to this charm and made the move to the valley a few years ago are hospitality industry publicists Ian and Lise Manley. They bought a home in Riebeeck Kasteel in 2003, intending to use it as a weekend escape. After a nasty break-in at their Kenilworth home, they decided to move to the country town for good. 'Living here keeps us grounded, away from the frenetic life we both lead because of our PR business,' says Ian. 'It's great for our two boys too, as they are brought up to experience the simple life rather than turning into mall rats.' The family spends their weekends experiencing the pleasures of small-town living, including visiting Saturday morning markets in both Riebeeck West and Riebeeck Kasteel, mountain biking in the vineyards, gardening and enjoying delicious meals at the rustic Auntie Pasti restaurant.

When it comes to buying property in the area, Ian and Lise's advice is that location is important, and that you should try to find something close to Riebeeck Kasteel's square. 'Most buyers

OPENING PAGE The Dutch Reformed church in Riebeeck Kasteel. THIS PAGE, RIGHT The rural charm of Riebeeck Valley is a strong drawcard for families looking to escape the relentless pace of the big city. CENTRE AND BOTTOM LEFT The colonial architecture of Kloovenburg Estate's olive boutique speaks of the valley's rich agricultural heritage, while the array of products inside prove just how versatile the olive can be. BOTTOM RIGHT A bedroom in Smuts House Museum – General Jan Smuts was born in Riebeeck Valley. OPPOSITE, TOP The restaurant at the Royal Hotel has a colonial feel to it. It's one of several eateries at the hotel, which also does a splendid high tea. CENTRE LEFT TO RIGHT 'The longest stoep South of the Limpopo' belongs to the grand Royal Hotel; 150 years on, the Royal remains as popular as ever. FAR RIGHT A few of Garden Bleu's European-inspired garden art objects on display; Crisp deli completes Short Street, a relatively new commercial development that perfectly captures the 'dorp' vernacular.



Additional reporting Sandy Welch

- OUR TOP 5 FOR COUNTRY DINING**
- ▶ **Bar Bar Black Sheep** – hearty favourites and interesting tapas. +27 (0)22 448 1031, bbbs.co.za
 - ▶ **Bartholomeus Klip** – as part of a day trip to the farm. A local twist to French cuisine. +27 (0)22 448 1620, bartholomeusklip.com
 - ▶ **The Royal Hotel** – with a stoep to sit on and watch the village go by. +27 (0)22 448 1378, royalinriebeeck.com
 - ▶ **Café Felix** – country cooking and an ever-changing menu. +27 (0)22 448 1170, cafefelix.co.za
 - ▶ **Café Merlot** – great Sunday lunch while gazing out over the Het Vloek Kasteel farm from the terrace. +27 (0)22 448 1488, hetvloekcasteel.co.za

fabled charm has become a wedding destination *du jour*, often creating a serious shortfall in accommodation on weekends.

One of the newest hotel additions to the area is the Kloovenburg Pastorie. A famous landmark that once belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, the hotel has been lovingly restored to offer upmarket, exclusive accommodation as well as a venue for olive and wine tasting every Sunday morning from 10.30 a.m. onwards.

Perhaps those who tie the knot in Riebeeek Valley are drawn back to settle. Riebeeek Kasteel's popularity among those in search of a quieter life is borne out by the presence of five estate agents in the small village. One even offers a house 'located in the quiet part of town'. Although a rowdy part of town isn't immediately apparent, one can only imagine the quiet part of Riebeeek Kasteel is very quiet indeed. 🏠

OUR TOP 5 THINGS TO DO

- ▶ Hire a bicycle from BEN, the Bicycle Empowerment Network. See the sites by bike and support a worthy cause. +27 (0)76 402 4793, benbikes.org.za
- ▶ Taste the wines and try the award-winning olives at Kloovenburg. They have their own hiking trail too. +27 (0)22 448 1635, kloovenburg.com
- ▶ Visit Bartholomeus Klip, a beautifully restored Victorian homestead, for a game drive, lunch and a dip in the dam. +27 (0)22 448 1620, bartholomeusklip.com
- ▶ Just wander around. The shops and restaurants around Short Street are all worth a visit. Don't miss Garden Bleu, an unusual store carrying a variety of outdoor *objets d'art*, from fine French garden furniture to Victorian wirework and Tuscan inspired artworks. It's a good idea to visit the valley during the flower season in August/September. +27 (0)22 448 1545, riebeeekvalley.info
- ▶ Support Goedgedacht, a charitable trust that supports the valley's farm workers by supplying tuition, after-care for workers' children, and other educational opportunities. Olive oil and olive products sold from their farm shop. +27 (0)22 482 4369, goedgedacht.org.za



ABOVE AND LEFT Exterior view of Kloovenburg Pastorie, Riebeeek Kasteel's newest hotel; Kloovenburg Pastorie's lounge and dining area – the hotel offers upmarket accommodation. BOTTOM LEFT Homes in Riebeeek Kasteel offer excellent value for money, and the town is central enough to make moving there an option worth considering.

WITH THANKS ...

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