

Why Clarens is the perfect weekend escape

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Clarens has it all: a cosy village atmosphere, great farm stays and statuesque mountains – and that’s where you should head, says Melanie Van Zyl.

In the south-eastern corner of the Free State, this famously flat province has a change in disposition and generously shares the sky with columns of the earth as broad as they are tall (kind of like the stereotypical farmers you’d expect of the OFM region too, come to think of it). Huddled up in the valley between these giant heights of ochre-orange sandstone, a little village called Clarens regularly charms city slickers with unique eateries, retail therapy and locally brewed beer.

Named after the Clarens of Switzerland, where Paul Kruger spent his last days in exile, South Africa’s Clarens has become quite the weekend destination. It’s a common outing for Joburgers and, according to village locals, Durbanites are also taking advantage of its close proximity – it’s just over three hours away from both city centres. Known (and verified by the high number of galleries) as an artists’ haven, the real charm of Clarens is that there are no franchises or big outlets. The closest Wimpy, Woolies and 1-Stop are 40 kilometres away in Bethlehem – just the way it should be. Every establishment is owner-run. No restaurant is replicated elsewhere in the country; the stores are small, unique boutique outlets and, except for the Protea Hotel, so are the accommodation options.

Free tasters at Clarens Brewery.

I’m at the Clarens Brewery having a glass of the cherry-flavoured Red Stone Cider (made from cherries grown in the region). Close by, at a blanket shop that’s been in business for more than 50 years, is a colourful array of thick, woollen Basotho blankets. Then, there’s the farm-fresh eggs and butter from Bon Appetit, the little deli further along the only tarred road in town. There are no traffic lights here either. Yes, this small village sure is seductive, but with so much natural beauty in the

immediate vicinity, I always choose to stay closer to the mountains instead of sleeping in the village. Artists Simon Addy and Lynne Hoyle have a home just 10 kilometres from town and they've opened their sweeping country house to visitors. This is a family home with heart and the love here is palpable. It's the place for a boozy lunch with family or friends – the 12-sleeper is more than spacious enough, and the chopping-board table in the kitchen kept warm by restored Aga ovens has 'heard' many stories. Simon suggests a visit to Motouleng Cave (or the Fertility Cave) as something different to do in the area. He's got a shortcut there and as we drive across the hills he chats about our private panorama. 'Someone once came here in winter and described it as vaal. I think it's just as beautiful with the taupe and khaki tones that come with the cold.' I agree. Down a steep path, below an enormous overhang, lives a small community beside a stream. There are cats and chickens, small smoky homesteads and precarious rockeries. It's eerie. This sacred spot has been a place of worship for as long as cultural memory extends. Motouleng means 'the place where the drums keep beating' and the caves, or more accurately the lengthy overhangs are an important area for both traditional religions and independent Christian churches – candles are lit in the deep crevices to symbolise this. This overhanging cave is also regarded as one of the largest in the southern hemisphere and is also a place of shelter for the small village. People are summoned here (sometimes for months and even years) to learn about their ancestors or to become a practising healer, and it gets busy on weekends as many descend the trail to give thanks. I'm surprised happily that such a pocket of culture still exists.

Each time I return to Clarens, I'm amazed by the extraordinary mountain settings and outdoor opportunities. The Rooiberge are the mountains that immediately surround the village. They shorten the days here as they cause shadows to fall across the village square a little earlier, and the sun peeps over them later in the morning – the perfect light for sleeping in and making the most of your time off. Then there are the

majestic Malotis further south-east, their colours spreading across the sky from pastel purples to a deeper hue of blue like litmus paper. The most unusual are the Clarens Formation sandstone cliffs, unique to the area and best experienced on the drive from Harrismith coming into Golden Gate National Park – so called because the west-facing cliffs glow a glorious rust colour at sundown. The skies are sometimes patrolled by one of the most threatened birds in South Africa, the bearded vulture, which feeds on bone marrow. This clever bird has learnt to drop bones from extreme heights to crack them open. The mighty mountains are also responsible for 50 per cent of the country's water supply and are the watershed of both the Vaal and Orange rivers. If you drive in any direction from Clarens – towards Fouriesburg, Lesotho, Golden Gate or Bethlehem – the farmlands and monumental peaks are breathtakingly beautiful. That's why I always make for the mountains.

Plan your trip

Getting there

Google Maps will want to take you via Bethlehem. I prefer the more scenic route (and there are less potholes). From Joburg take the N3 south to Harrismith and take the off-ramp into town. Join the N5 briefly and then turn left onto the R74. Then take the turn right onto the R712 and drive the remaining 70 kilometres to Golden Gate National Park. Once through the park, it's an easy 20 kilometres to the village.