

FREEWHEELING IN THE WINELANDS

Wind in the face, grapes in the glass
– what better way to do a Boland
wine route than on a bicycle

□ There's no traffic to contend with as you ride between the vines.

A PICTURE OF PATIENCE IN A FLOPPY hat, James Kennedy of Longlands farm is waiting to drive his tractor and trailer of red grapes onto the scale at Stellenbosch Hills winery. Once everything has been weighed the grapes will be offloaded, then they'll weigh the tractor and empty trailer again to find out how many grapes he's brought. While waiting for all this to happen, James reads a copy of *Wynland*. He shows me a picture of the chap at Lourensford farm – across the valley – watching his place burn to a cinder in the recent runaway fires in the Cape winelands.

While we're chatting, I learn that James's wife, Paula, grows organic vegetables and runs the Saturday Slow Food market near the train station. And that's not all I learn. Pete, our guide from Bikes 'n Wines, urges me to try a nice fat red grape from James's trailer to see how warm and sweet it is. The grapes are warm apparently because red grapes are planted at an angle so the sea breezes don't cool them while the opposite is true of white grapes. All this information and we're less than an hour into our Bikes 'n Wines trip!

What I was more afraid of learning before the start of the trip, though, was that I wasn't going to handle this gig. I'm no hot-shot cyclist and the idea of pedalling around the winelands at the same time as getting quietly mellow tasting the product had, frankly, worried me silly. It didn't help to find out that we'd be sharing the experience with a team of toughened cyclists from Joburg, in town for the Argus. So when they piled out of their dusty 4x4, all muscled calves and matching branded T-shirts, I very nearly spontaneously broke an ankle so I could cry off. But I needn't have worried because before the day was out, I'd learn a whole lot more.

We gathered at a little wooden hut at the Lynedoch Eco-Village – fittingly as the ethic of Bikes 'n Wines is 'take only memories, leave only bike tracks'. Fresh-faced student guide Pete Otzen allocated us each a silver-grey, sized-to-suit bike, a waterbottle and a helmet (though team Joburg had their own helmets with Argus numbers still attached). We signed indemnity forms, there were some jokes (which went straight over my head) about 'granny gears' and 'cork-stopper *dúiweljies*', and off we set, Pete in the lead, slung about with a 911 backpack of spare inner tubes, snacks and what I later noticed to be an alarmingly comprehensive First Aid kit.

Now I couldn't remember when last it was that I'd sat on a bicycle, and I'd also forgotten just how difficult it was to stay in control when holding >>



TRAVEL

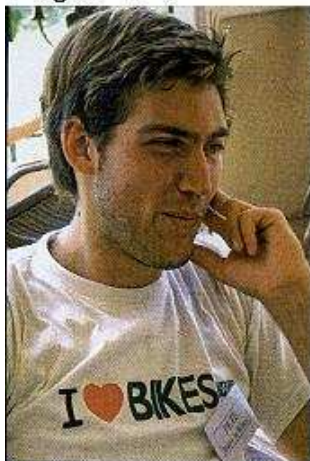
Country Life

TEXT NANCY RICHARDS
PICTURES JOHN-CLIVE

☐ Cheers! Cheese and wine pairing at Spier, Estate. So far, so good.

☐ Enjoying our 'sparkling' finish at Welmoed Wine Estate.

☐ A Bikes 'n Wine trip usually starts with a train ride to Lynedoch Eco-Village, where the bikes are handed out.



- Our guide, Pete Otzen, chilling over lunch at Skilpadsvlei.
- Getting into some serious wine tasting at Stellenbosch Hills.
- A dip in the dam takes the heat off.
- Hanging in there with the harvesters at Skilpadsvlei.



>> only one handlebar, so for the first few kilometres the jaunty angle of my helmet, which pretty much blocked half my vision, had to stay that way.

First stop was Spier Estate, and a fine spray from the lawn sprinklers greeted us as we rode into the magnificently manicured property – did I mention the mercury was teetering around 34°C?

In the cool of the wooded wine-tasting cottage, Team Joburg settled comfortably around a table for a wine and cheese pairing – mozzarella with a crisp Sauvignon Blanc, fontina with the Chenin and maasdaam with the Mourvèdre. Personally I was ready for a very large glass of water, but it seemed churlish not to try any wine so, sipping through the quaffable Discover range, I made a note of the signature Merlot, 'rich plum with berry aroma, mouthwatering caramel, hints of almond, velvety smooth lingering palette'. Yummy.

But we were not lingering. Back at the bikes, Joburg Jaco gave me a few tips on helmet management. "Straighten and tighten the straps, but leave a finger-sized gap under the chin so you can breathe. "Things went a lot better after that.

Next stop was here at Stellenbosch Hills, where we met James and the tractor. It is also where, while tasting in the chic slate-and-glass interior, we come across the deliciously sweet Muscat de Hambourg. This escapes nobody's notice and two boxes are discreetly loaded into the photographer's car.

Now we are in full swing. After Stellenbosch Hills we'll be stopping at Skilpadsvlei for lunch, Pete warns us there's a 'bit of a hill' ahead, but I'm beginning to relax into the surroundings – magic views, healthy smells of manure, crowing roosters, barking dogs – this is definitely the way to go (the Muscat might have helped). But I won't lie, the 'bit of a hill' turns out to be a challenge – until Joburg Chris teaches me about gear changing, after which, with legs spinning a whole lot faster, I sail up to the top.

So named for a colony of turtles found here back in the 1800s, Skilpadsvlei is a delight, with grape pickers harvesting, geese gliding on the lake, wide view from a broekielace balcony across leafy vines. "This do alright for you then?" asks Pete.

It's also a chance to chill over a Skilpad salad packed with litchis and smoked oysters, or pancakes for those who prefer to carbo-load. I now learn the truth about Team Joburg, who turn out to be not such daunting pros after all. For three of them it was their first Argus, and the punishing wind forced one to pull out and catch the train. This little jaunt is therefore the real 'cherry on the top' experience for them.

Pete, who's been with Bikes 'n Wines from the get-go, says their clients are, in fact, mostly foreigners. "Brits, French, Italians, Germans, Dutch, Swiss, Scandinavians... We once had a couple of picky New Yorkers, but that's another story."

Enough of the skinner; time for more wine tasting so it's back on the bike. This time we travel through the vines themselves, leaving sandy tyre tracks, dodging birds and beetles and – following Pete's lead – diving into a handy dam for a cooler.

It's on this stretch that I learn my best lesson when Hein, an Argus veteran, shouts while whistling past me on a downhill slope, "Leave the brakes, doll, just let it gooooooo!" Well after that I kind of do – all the way through to the last stop, Welmoed, where, under the welcome shade of umbrellas and among the ducks, we get to sample Chamat, the house sparkling.

This is probably the moment for someone to do a Lance Armstrong and spray us all with champagne from a shaken bottle, but, after riding 17km we are sticky enough as it is and, anyway, the bubbles are slipping down very nicely on the inside.

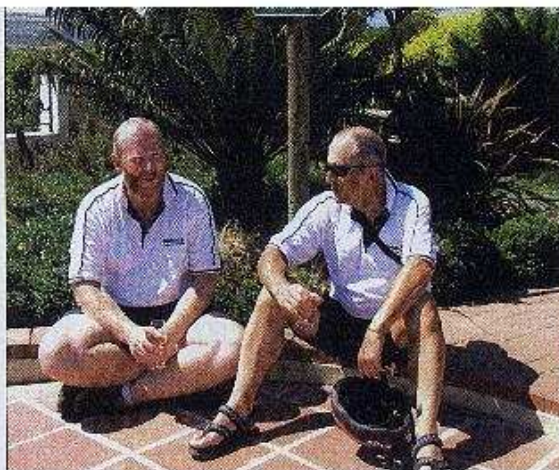
Later, as we hand back our bikes, I'm very grateful a) to have made the finish line unscathed and b) for the invaluable lessons learned from Team Joburg – thanks, guys. And, despite having a bit of a sore spot where you can imagine, I've had a lot of fun. □

Map reference F2
see inside back cover

TRAVEL
Country Life

Bikes 'n Wines

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Footnotes

The founders of Bikes 'n Wines are a trio of graduates from the University of Cape Town: architect and wine lover Jacques van Emden, events manager and adventure cyclist Quintin Smith, and marketer; wine lover and adventure cyclist Lior Chen. They started the business because they wanted to inject some fun and originality into the 'same old' wine route by making it social and sustainable, and to put something back into the community at the same time.

In terms of their partnership with Lynedoch Eco-Village, R10 of every ticket sold goes towards the village's school for farm children (at time of writing they'd just clocked up R10 000), and the long-term plan is to help develop the children's outdoor skills and activities.

Although we didn't do it, an integral part of a Bikes 'n Wines trip is to meet at Lola's coffee shop in Long Street, Cape Town, then catch the train to Lynedoch (trips also go from Stellenbosch). This way the participants got to see more and also do some bonding on the way to the start and back again.

Soon Bikes 'n Wines will be offering overnight wineland tours. Level of fitness required? If I can do it, so can you.

□ Totally no rushing the tasting at Skilpadsvlei.

□ Close of play back at Lynedoch Eco-Village, from left the author, Jaco Smal, Chris Joubert, Estelle Havenga, Hein van der Merwe, Heindrich Smal and Pete Otzen.

□ Estelle Havenga finds the pick of the bunch.