

# KAROO OASIS

*The newly refurbished Drostdy Hotel promises to be just the beginning of a bright new future for Graaff-Reinet, as the Gem of the Karoo is poised to graduate from a stop-over spot to a travel destination in its own right*

Text Sally Rutherford. Photographs David Ross



As you approach Graaff-Reinet by road through the endless plains of the Great Karoo, you cross the vast heart of South Africa. The scrubby vlaktes stretching as far as the eye can see are punctuated by the flat-topped koppies that inspired so many of JH Pierneef's archetypal landscape paintings. While most travellers hurry through the ostensibly arid, barren expanse en route from the interior to the coast and back, it is the lucky few who slow down that feel the slow, steady pulse of life in South Africa's subtly beautiful heartland.

It is the 45-metre-tall spire of the Dutch Reformed Church – a dramatic, neo-gothic sandstone masterpiece inspired by Salisbury Cathedral – that lets you know you're about to arrive in the historic town, a Karoo gem packed with more heritage sites (over 220) than anywhere else in South Africa. But fear not: Graaff-Reinet is far from a living museum. And unlike so many

well-preserved historic villages, it's not a tourist trap with twee cottages frozen in time for the pleasure of visitors, despite the ooma enjoying the cool of the evening on her broekie-lace-trimmed stoep, who – but for her jeans and bright purple T-shirt – could have been in situ since her house was built in the mid 19th century. Despite the architecture of the Cape Dutch, Victorian and Karoo houses that line the streets being passionately protected by the residents who live in them (and by planning protocols), these are real homes occupied by real people.

Tucked strategically in a deep, fertile horseshoe bend in the Sundays River and overlooked by Spandau's Kop, South Africa's fourth oldest town is entirely surrounded by the Camdeboo National Park, a glorious 19 450-hectare reserve that captures the essence of the Karoo. The Valley of Desolation contains possibly the most hauntingly beautiful viewpoint in all of South Africa: just 15 steep kilometres out of town you

will find the massive dolerite pillars that tower over the plains beyond. Don't miss Obesa Nursery (obesanursery.com), the world's biggest cactus nursery which is home to about 7 000 species – the awe-inspiring labyrinth is a must-do. For fascinating inside information and insight into the town, and the Karoo, engage the services of supremely knowledgeable local tour guide David McNaughton (karooconnections.com), who also happens to be an estate agent for Seeff. He explains that it was the unruly behaviour of the early trekboers on this wild frontier that encouraged the VOC (Dutch East India Company) to establish the Drostdy of Graaff-Reinet in 1786. And it is this Drostdy that has the town poised on the brink of a new revival.

A striking example of Cape Dutch architecture, the original magistrate's court was built in 1806 as the local seat of government and residence for the landdrost. It was eventually converted to a hotel in 1878 – making it one of SA's oldest. This illustrious history is immediately evident when you enter the Drostdy Hotel's cool, serene interior, where every effort has been made to honour the past while accommodating every luxury the contemporary tourist would expect.

Sensitively refurbished and expanded by a team that included DHK Architects and renowned interior designer Stephen Falcke, today's Drostdy Hotel is a delightful Karoo oasis. The hotel complex is a historic country village in itself, comprising the original Drostdy; Stretch's Court, a cobbled street of refurbished cottages that were originally built to house emancipated slaves and is flanked by the hotel's main swimming pool; Ferreira House, a luxurious home from home with its own sitting rooms and pool; and the newly constructed Kromm's Court, with 10 luxurious suites clustered around yet another sparkling pool. New additions include the contemporary but intimate De Camdeboo Restaurant, where guests can delight in the superb cuisine offered by executive chef Justin Pillay. Service is provided by graduates and students from the South African College of Tourism, established in Graaff-Reinet by Dr Anton Rupert as part of his Peace Parks Foundation, while the Africology Spa uses strictly indigenous ingredients such as aloë, rooibos, marula and African potato in its luxurious treatments. It is details like this that are proof of the Drostdy's commitment to the community, as is the alluring, contemporary art gallery featuring works only by South African artists.

The thing about the Drostdy is that it is nearly impossible to tear yourself away: an overnight stop could simply never do justice to this seductive, luxurious country hotel, never mind Graaff-Reinet itself. And it is this changing appreciation of the Karoo as a worthy destination in its own right – offering every creature comfort, excellent cuisine, fascinating heritage sites, largely unspoilt architecture, bric-à-brac shops, expansive nature reserves and astounding geology – that is ensuring that this oasis in the Karoo is on every savvy traveller's bucket list.

**Drostdy Hotel 021 427 5900, [newmarkhotels.com](http://newmarkhotels.com)**

**The Africology Spa at The Drostdy, housed in a perfectly preserved Victorian building, overlooks newly planted courtyards that form part of the garden designed by landscape architect Jan Blok**



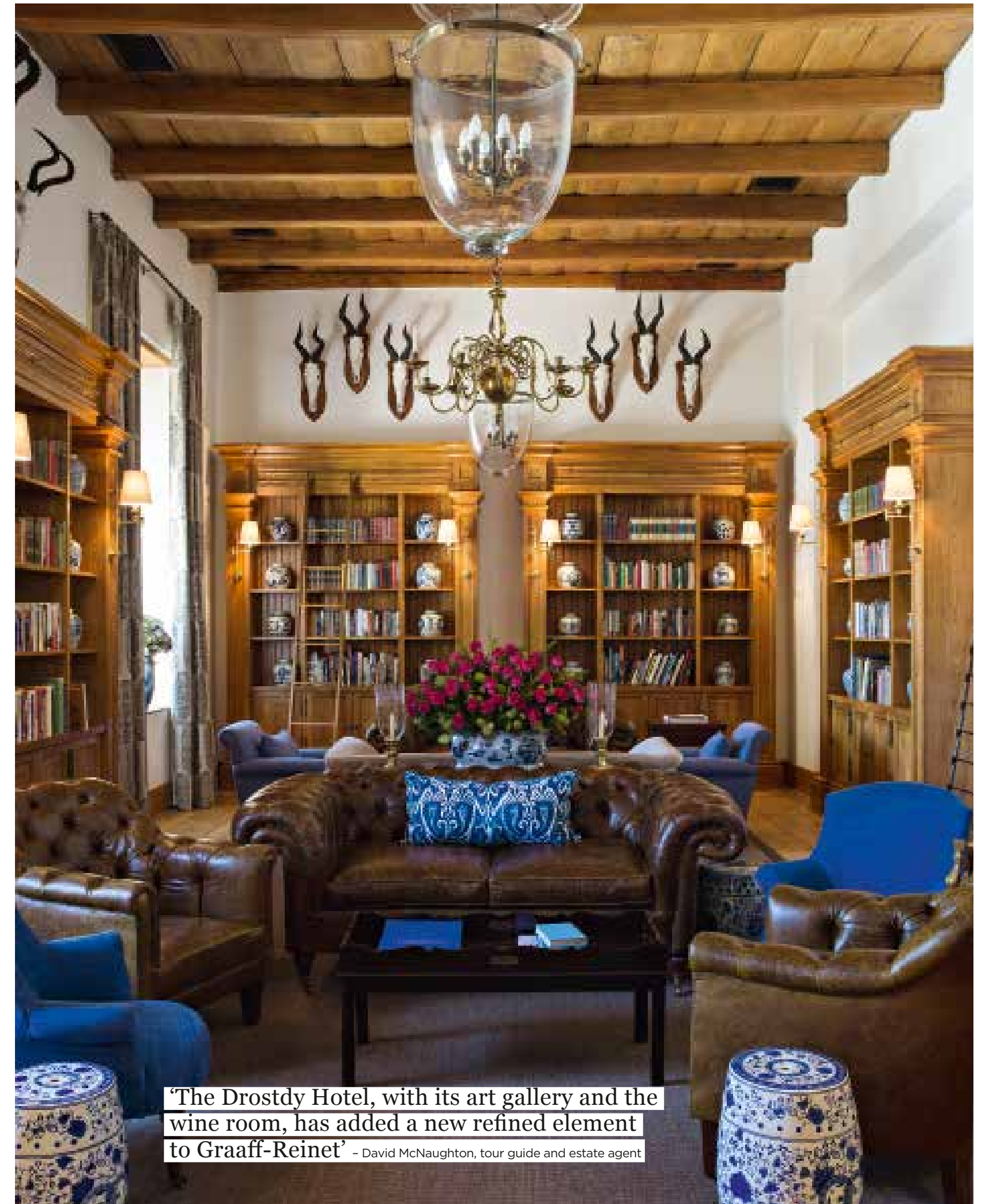
CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Stephen Falcke's luxurious country-style interiors evoke a bygone colonial era; despite being a contemporary addition, the dining room offers timeless comfort and intimacy; the main swimming pool is an essential during the Karoo's baking-hot summer months; taste an impressive range of superb wines in the Drostdy's sleek new wine room with its Tom Dixon pendant lamps







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A burst of cobalt blue adds contemporary freshness in this drawing room; the new Imibala Art Gallery showcases works by South African artists; the cottages in Stretch's Court have been faithfully restored, right down to replicating the original paint colours; the exterior facade of the Drostdy Hotel is untouched by time  
OPPOSITE Old and new are in perfect harmony at the Drostdy Hotel, where heritage buildings have been sensitively restored to their former glory, while the interiors - such as those in the tranquil library - have been given a lavish yet entirely fitting colonial-style revamp, with antique treasures sitting alongside opulently upholstered armchairs and sofas



“The Drostdy Hotel, with its art gallery and the wine room, has added a new refined element to Graaff-Reinet” - David McNaughton, tour guide and estate agent





### IN THE ZONE

'Graaff-Reinet is on the verge of something big,' says Seeff estate agent David McNaughton (who moonlights as one of the region's best-respected tour guides). 'Years ago, when Stephen Falcke had just bought a house here, he told me, "What you need is a critical mass of influential people to invest and then you find others tend to follow."' Truer words couldn't have been spoken. In the last 10 years the Ruperts in particular have invested a lot in the Drostdy Hotel and their own game-breeding farms, and Gaynor Rupert raises all her racehorse yearlings in the district. Other illustrious property owners include GT Ferreira, Princess Irene of The Netherlands and Christian Birkenstock. Increased demand for residential properties is clear: a year ago there were 114 residential properties on the market, today there are just 65. Only five of 12 agricultural properties are still on the market. Growth is enhanced by Graaff-Reinet's good infrastructure, pushed along by tourism and the fact that it's an attractive town. There are three private medical practices, two optometrists and two dentists. Junior and senior schools include both Union and Volksskool. While Montego Pet Nutrition is the town's biggest employer, the massive growth of hunting in the Eastern Cape means that one of the two biggest taxidermy businesses in SA is in Graaff-Reinet.'

**David McNaughton,  
Seeff 049 892 2581**



**Don't miss Obesa Nursery, the world's biggest cactus nursery, which is home to about 7 000 species of plants – the awe-inspiring cactus labyrinth is a must-do**

THIS PAGE A visit to the world's largest cactus nursery is a memorable experience made even more so if you take the time to wind your way around the cactus labyrinth OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Enjoy haunting views from the look-out point at the Valley of Desolation; the impressive Dutch Reformed Church was modelled on Salisbury Cathedral; this ochre wall is one of the last remaining examples of the original plasters; sash windows and shutters are typical of the Cape Dutch vernacular

