

The Free State's Castle Retreat

Since the Normans and Visigoths first rampaged across Europe centuries ago, a castle has always been a place of refuge; somewhere to retreat to in times of peril, when the outside world threatens to break down all of your carefully laid defences; an impenetrable fortress where you'll be safe from your worst enemies.



South Africa's Free State province may be thankfully free of marauding barbarians, but deadlines, emails and other office bores had been massing at the gates for some time, laying siege to my sanity. It was time to find a refuge.

We hit the long road to Bethlehem, swung onto the R711 and, with quick stop in Clarens for a cappuccino and to marvel at how strip malls seem to be taking over, we're off through Fouriesburg and out onto the R26. A left, another left and a bit of gravel, and we arrived at the castle gates.

"Welcome to Destiny Castle," says Devlin Fogg, who manages what is surely one of South Africa's most unusual getaways. High on a sandstone plateau, what was once a local businessman's folly, left in ruins for years, has been transformed into a fairytale castle to call your own.

We park our cars in a barn full of drying thatch and climb into a plush 4x4 for the transfer up to the castle. The steep road is not town-car friendly, but if you have an off-road vehicle you're welcome to drive up yourself.

"For some of our guests this is the only time their 4x4 has been off-road!" laughs Devlin.

On the plateau the road evens out, and lush fields of grass lead the way to the front door, with its welcoming – and suitably European – rose garden. Built of hefty sandstone blocks the structure looks like the perfect escape for a few days, and up close you get a sense of just how much thought has gone into the design of Destiny Castle.

On three levels in the main turret you discover the grand dining room, private cinema and top-floor lounge. Here antique pianos wait to have their ivories tinkled and portraits of Jan Smuts and Emily Hobhouse gaze down from the walls, a nod to the Anglo Boer War history in the surrounding hills.

But the highlight of the rough stone turret is the rooftop deck, a crenelated look-out offering spectacular views over the surrounding countryside. On still evenings you may be treated to a starlit braai up here,

but it's a fabulous sundowner spot any day of the week. A few distant lights may twinkle in the valleys, but otherwise it feels like you have this corner of South Africa all to yourself.



If the night's a little chilly for dining al fresco, you sit down for a seven-course dinner at the grand communal table. It's a silver and crystal affair where the European training of chef Urs Nydegger is artfully reflected on the plate. Set into the two-metre-thick walls are wine racks stocked with bottles from some of the best Cape vineyards to enjoy with your meal.

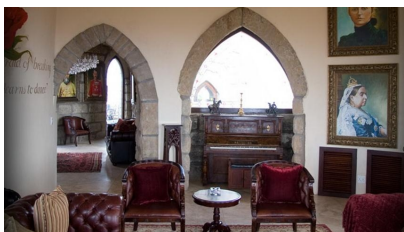
But there are no formal wine-lists, or printed menus here. The chef explains what you'll be eating, and you're welcome to select a bottle from the rack: "People should arrive here and feel as if it's their castle," Devlin tells me over a particularly good glass of Semillon.

A separate courtyard ensures the revelry is kept away from the delightfully over-the-top Gothic bedrooms in a separate wing of the castle.

Solid wooden doors require a hefty shove to make your way into the room – "All the better for keeping the deadlines out," I think to myself – where a four-poster bed dominates the room.

A free-standing tub has pride of place in the open-plan bathroom (a recent trend that not all travellers may be wild about) with views through to the lounge and the landscape beyond. Deep leather armchairs inspire afternoons with a favourite book, or quality time spent chatting and gazing at the horizon, enjoying the silence.

I'm not one to sit still for too long though, so I take myself off for a sunset walk before dinner.



Wandering along the plateau I'm struck by how a castle perched on a rocky outcrop can blend into the landscape so easily. Built of locally quarried sandstone, the castle and its four bedrooms tower above the surrounding farmlands, so high the swallows have to look up at the parapet as they soar along the cliffs. Below, fields of golden grass and lush lucerne meander in the gentle valleys, carefully ploughed into concentric lines like crop circles from chilled-out aliens.

To the north puffs of cumulus skip along like skimming stones on a bright blue pond above the flat plains

of the Free State, while just a few kilometres south – literally across the nearby stream – is the neighbouring Kingdom of Lesotho.

The Basotho are famous for their “equitable redistribution” of horses and cattle from South African farms. But, says Devlin: “We don’t really have any problems with the surrounding villages.” That may have something to do with the fact that the local chief keeps her own horses in the lush pastures here.

The castle doesn’t currently offer horse riding, but there are activities aplenty to keep you busy. The 460–hectare reserve has wonderful walks laid out, along with some excellent single–track mountain–bike trails. The popular villages of Clarens and Ficksburg are not far off, while the Afri–Ski resort is also an easy drive away if you want to spend a day on the slopes in winter. The property is home to beautiful and ancient Bushman rock art.

There is also a small spa on–site with hi–tech gadgets that allow you to DIY your own massages and steam room, but perhaps the true charm of Destiny Castle is its simple isolation, perched on the edge of a cliff away from the stress of daily life.

“We call the castle a reflection resort,” says Devlin, “a place where you can simply come and reconnect with yourself, your loved one and your friends.”

With only four rooms accommodating eight guests, it’s the perfect place for an intimate wedding, to celebrate a birthday milestone or one of those just–for–the–hell–of–it getaways that invariably create memories that last a lifetime.

It’s still early in the year, but I’m sure – like me – you can already see the enemy approaching. Discretion is always the better part of valour; so when it feels like your defences won’t hold up ... retreat! retreat!

Photos: Destiny Castle

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