



# BACK IN THE *SADDLE*

*Finding stillness on a cycling tour  
around the Cape Winelands*

Sometimes the best way to connect is to disconnect. Today, we are more hooked up than ever before – fused to the world thanks to social media, bolted to every email, and somehow left secured, all due to technology that is supposed to aid us in being the “best of the best”.

As with everything in life, an inevitable balance must triumph. And so the need to detox from all of this connectedness is entering our lives: from daily switch-off times forming part of the ritual, to making time for no-technology family dinners, and even disconnected holidays and weekends dedicated purely to feeling something utterly new and profound: severed.

It was Albert Einstein who said: “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.” Just a little snippet of simple advice that is perfect if you decide to spend the next week cycling around the Winelands and Garden Route, looking to feel grounded. The balance that the genius speaks of is, of course, ideal for two things: staying on the bike and mindfully peddling while admiring the mountains, and perhaps, more importantly, finding the balance of switching off and just doing a single-minded action – a meditation on two wheels.

Before the days of Lance Armstrong and New York’s Citibike hire scheme, there was the dandy

horse, or *laufmaschine*, as the inventing Germans called it, in 1818. But it was really the French who turned bicycling into an art, and by 1860 the capital of France was besieged by a culture of using two wheels to parade around the boulevards for coffee and hedonist delights. A century or two later, the bike as we know it is now safer than ever before, and often seen as the best way to get around a city, or even a beautiful landscape such as the Cape.

Fitting into the trend of slower (and a more mindful life of wellness), biking allows you to put away your iPhone, as you don’t need to capture every moment with your camera or upload it to some sharing-with-the-world website – staying on your saddle is more important. Biking allows for a little free-fall, where train-car-plane windows do not bridle the views and the destination can easily be secondary.

Biking requires very little skill. There is just a heartbeat when you put your foot on the pedals that your childhood memories ignite.

Geared up, caffeinated with over-excitement that the natural wonder of Table Mountain is now behind me, I pedal along towards Stellenbosch. With about 60km per day over the next six or seven days, the path is clear.

Inspired by Cheryl Strayed (with her book *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, now





a Reese Witherspoon hit), who hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, I wanted to take my bike and explore beyond Cape Town and the tourist arenas. The bike, of course, allows just the access I was after: small back roads away from cars, and up close and personal with nature. Where Cheryl, the brave damsel that she is, confronted the mountains by her lonesome, I decided to take along a friend – one who somehow has all the wisdom necessary. Cheryl used the road to mourn the death of her mother and gather herself again. I used the road to find a moment of stillness, a switching off from the hurried pace – perhaps mourning the end of the illusive perjurer called “fast-paced”, to which I had become a slave.

At some point, jet-set and fast-pace were revered; that’s when we lost our way. We decided it was better to do things more efficiently, in spite of the fact that we had lost the grand “art” of doing things. Forget the beauty of doing something; we were too busy trying to just get things done. We chased the dragon, only to find that we had no idea what the dragon even tasted like or, for that matter, whether we even enjoyed this silly morsel.

But now, I have managed to put away my electronics and just sit on this saddle, as I feel the Stellenbosch Mountains come closer. The sound of the spokes tender as I methodically move my legs in

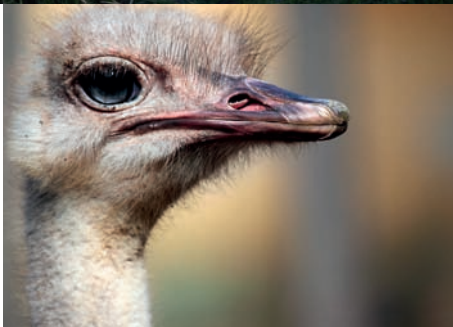


a never-ending dance, the bike is the thread to the turf underneath my feet.

The mountains are what still me first. With the sun pouring down on me, the now-familiar rhythm of my leg action becomes a meditation. The little dust road I am on feels small and insignificant as I tilt my head up towards these great ranges in front of me. With no appointment reminders from my smartphone or driving instructions from an annoyingly accented GPS, the very act of what I am doing becomes the pleasure.

An ostrich lifts its neck and stares me down – ushering me to a simpler life as he winks me





goodbye. The bikes groan as the hill becomes somewhat steeper. A quintessential South African windpump waves and unfetters its supply.

With no real agenda, I feel the sudden need to lay the bike down in that red African soil, to throw off my t-shirt and to seek a source for cooling down. With an open gate and a few innocent sheep finding me amusing, I climb a small ladder, only to discover the windpump's treasure – a better-than-Los Angeles pool of unembellished water from below the ground. My bike sleeps as I jump into the bracing water. I swim not for exercise; I swim for the wellness of something far deeper and fundamental – a celebration of water, a jamboree of the moment.

Back on the bike, with my t-shirt now a scarf, the clay road leads onto a farm offering fare and slumber. In perfect synchrony, the estate cultivates all things slow: butter hand-churned, herb-infused teas and bathing rituals. The people seem at ease, actually within their own skin. Before retiring, I wash my bike with a brush, slowly eroding the day's dust and sweat. As I take care in the simplest action, I find the zeal in the day's most mindful endeavour.

The next morning, plans are executed: biking through the pass to Franschhoek, with the Hottentots Holland Mountains gazing down from either side. The famed Franschhoek comes with its own version





of perfection post-biking: La Residence proffers the perfect respite and a hideaway on their Elandskloof Farm. As the day comes to an end, my bike is leaning on a tree and I am lying in a vineyard with only the clouds floating quietly above me. As the stars come up, night falls and time escapes me yet again.

The next two days (I think) are spent on small farm roads along the coast. Besides the mountains now in the distance, the smell of the warmer ocean and the company of tiny purple-and-white flowers are how the moments move by. We pass through the French-inspired little town of Stanford, with a pop in at the antique store TAT, and then find coffee from Peru in Struisbaai. For the afternoon, my bike and I sit on the nearby vacant beach, meditating, with only the sea spray bearing testimony.

Looking up the coast, miles of sand gape and invite me to pedal along the water's edge. The bike sends out a thin spray behind me, creating modern art patterns in the sand, and the crabs peek out to see who's disturbing their swim.

When we reach Vermaaklikheid late in the day, the tiny, whitewashed Cape Dutch houses encourage us to stop. The road down to the town is the colour of beach sand, and the vegetation is rank and friendly. A light touch of the brakes brings a wonted satisfaction as we stop to take in the sea views. In the

distance lies the Indian Ocean, and beyond that the promise of Antarctica, but for now, it's just the bike, my friend and me.

Biking around the Cape gave me exactly what I craved: stillness. I take out a flask of brewed coffee, slowly unscrew the cap and pour the draft into a stainless steel cup. The bike is between my legs, and sweat is pouring down my dust-caked face in tributaries. It's just another beach view, just another coffee and just another day – but this time around, I am in the stillness of the moment, experiencing every second anew. ■

---

#### **WHEN YOU GO:**

Bike and Saddle Eco-Active Trips & Holidays will take care of everything. With various trips in the Western Cape, including accommodation at fantastic hotels and B&Bs, and healthy fare to boot: [www.bikeandsaddle.com](http://www.bikeandsaddle.com)

#### **WHERE TO STAY, AND PARK THE BIKE:**

The country house Jan Harmsgat close to Montagu and Swellendam is the ideal place to rest your head after feasting on their locally grown fare. [www.janharmsgat.com](http://www.janharmsgat.com)

Halfaampies Kraal, near Klipdale, is as they say "the perfect place to do nothing at all" and offers a reprieve after some serious biking action. [kraal.biz](http://kraal.biz)