One way to get more out of a holiday is to head further afield than you otherwise might. LARASAGE did exactly that in South Africa, and found a fascinating region that’s now more easily accessible.

The Call of the Karoo

The Karoo is a semi-desert interior area of South Africa notable for its extremes of temperature and its low rainfall (the name is thought to mean “big thirst”). It extends across parts of the Western and Eastern provinces of South Africa, and while on first encounter it may seem desolate and unforgiving, delve deeper and you’ll find enormous variety – geological, historical and botanical.

There are many historical towns in the Karoo, but none as widely acclaimed as charming Graaff-Reinet. A visit here is greatly enhanced with a raconteur like David McNaughton from Karoo Connections. He enthusiastically took us around the town – not to mention tourism. A recent restoration has revived the property, and in 2017 it was named one of South Africa’s Top 10 hotels on TripAdvisor. The Drostdy Hotel also allows you to give something back. The hotel runs as part of the Tourism College, which allows women from under-privileged backgrounds to study the hospitality trade; they’re then given a year’s training within the hotel, and, once qualified, a path in the industry is assured.

Out & About

Graaff-Reinet is growing in its number of trendy coffee shops, homeware and antique stores, making it a destination to spend some time pottering in. One must-visit is the Oehas Nursery, where a man’s passion for cacti and succulents has evolved into a garden wonder. Just out of town, the Valley of Desolation is unfortunately not named; viewpoints provide breathtaking panoramas of rock formations (piled dolerite columns) against the backdrop of the plains of the Great Karoo, a landscape produced by erosive and volcanic forces of nature over 200 million years. The area is renowned for its pre-dinosaur fossils.

A short drive away is Nieu-Bethesda, and the infamous Owl House, a museum of concrete sculptures and crushed-glass walls that has an unusual and controversial backstory surrounding the woman who created the artworks and her life in this remote place.

Karoo National Park

The reserve’s three Karoo homesteads welcome guests. Eating is a highlight here; the meals are exemplary – an array of courses, each artfully plated, with the wonderful feeling of eating at a family-friendly home, or dining at your grandparents’ table. (Din’t miss the créme brûlée with spun sugar!) A game fence surrounds two of the manor houses and safari tents through which the Milk River meanders, with guests free to explore the area on foot, or get active on the 1.6km circular running track. Also, a visit to this reserve isn’t complete without driving to the most incredible sundowner spot, aptly named “360”. And you can discover some of the more inaccessible spots in the mountain tops via an unforgettable scenic helicopter flight with Fly Karoo.

The Drostdy Hotel

Today, the old town has new paintwork and some well-maintained museums. A stroll along the quiet streets reveals many examples of magnificent Cape Dutch, Victorian and local Karoo architecture.

The Drostdy was built in 1805 and has operated continuously as a hotel since 1867, playing a significant role in the cultural, civic and agricultural development of the town – not to mention tourism. A recent restoration has revived the property, and in 2017 it was named one of South Africa’s Top 10 hotels on TripAdvisor. The Drostdy also allows visitors to experience Karoo history, with a maze of external courtyards, and the à la carte menu and wine list are superb. Staying at the Drostdy also allows you to give something back. The hotel runs as part of the Tourism College, which allows women from under-privileged backgrounds to study the hospitality trade; they’re then given a year’s training within the hotel, and, once qualified, a path in the industry is assured.

Drostdy Hotel

The Drostdy Hotel is a hotel that has been in continuous operation since 1867. It is located in the historic town of Graaff-Reinet, South Africa. The hotel has undergone recent restoration, which has revived the property. It was named one of South Africa’s Top 10 hotels on TripAdvisor in 2017. The hotel has a maze of external courtyards and a menu of à la carte dishes. It also offers training opportunities through the Tourism College, which allows women from underprivileged backgrounds to study hospitality.

FACT FILE

In Africa, it’s not uncommon to see places become run down, their cultural value overshadowed by development. Graaff-Reinet is now “back on the map” as a viable holiday destination, thanks in part to the recent collaboration of these key players:

- Newmark’s Drostdy Hotel: drostdy.co.za
- Mount Camdeboo: mountcamdeboo.com
- Karoo Connections: karooconnections.co.za
- Fly Karoo: flykaroo.co.za
- Plett Air Safaris: plettairsafaris.co.za

GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines flies direct to Cape Town on certain days. From there, fly to Plettenberg Bay (Cem Air) and on to the small airstrip of Graaff-Reinet. Alternatively, it’s a six-hour scenic drive from Cape Town.

Before and After

I recommend a stay in Cape Town to begin; Newmark has properties at the famed V&A Waterfront (newmarkhotels.com). From Graaff-Reinet, you can catch an onward flight with Plett Air Safaris to Kwanbuh, a “Big Five” game reserve in the Eastern Cape (kwandwe.com).