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Life & Leisure

LUXURY



**BROKE
BAROQUE**
FLUID DESIGN
HITS FLUID
TIMES

NO SHOW
LUXURY GOES
UNDERCOVER

**AFRICAN
FARM**
HUKA LODGE
FOUNDER
ON SAFARI

WHEN
THE GOING
GETS TOUGH
**THE TOUGH
GO SHOPPING**

By Kate Jennings





CALL OF THE WILD

 Story by Brook Turner

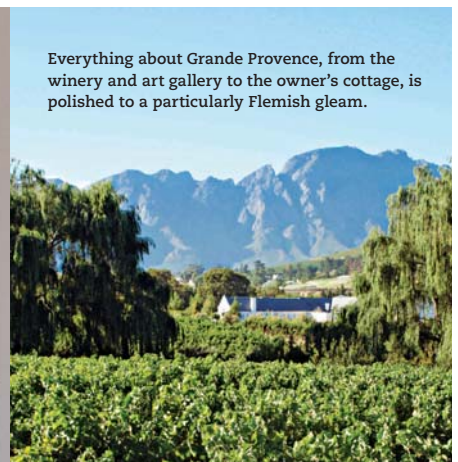
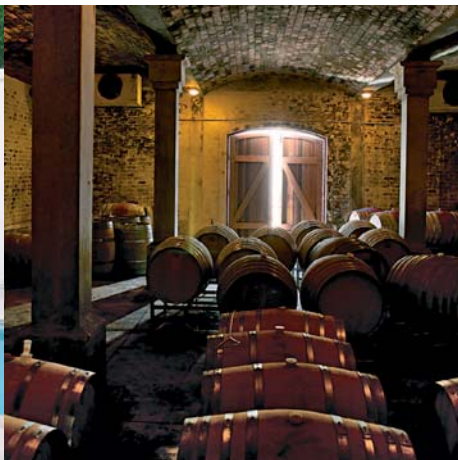
IN HIS FIRST MAJOR INTERVIEW IN 25 YEARS, SUPER LODGE PIONEER ALEX VAN HEEREN TALKS ABOUT HIS GRAND PLANS FOR HUKA'S LATEST FRONTIER: AFRICA

There's a story about the moment Huka Retreats founder Alex van Heeren decided to buy Grande Provence, his wine estate in the Franschhoek Wine Valley, an hour's drive from Cape Town, South Africa. It came as he sat beneath the gables of the property's 17th-century manor house, one of the oldest in the country, drinking a glass of the house wine (Angels Tears) and staring across the vineyards at the knitted brows of the Cape Fold mountains.

As a story, it makes sense. Ultra-luxury lodges tend to be the love children of a sudden encounter between a wealthy – usually fabulously wealthy – individual and a bit of bucolic bliss, as John Sax, founder of New Zealand's Treetops, has noted. Staring down the oak-lined drive outside the manor house where the elephants used to cross, too, you can see how it might have been so.

Except that it wasn't. "We had many glasses of wine and thought we should do it," van Heeren laughs, when asked about the story. "But the real reason I bought it was that my three children went to South Africa. I had a holiday home in the village and I was here longer and longer each year and I'm not the sort who can sit on his hands."

For a man who has dreamed up some of the world's most desirable destinations – from Huka Lodge, on a breathtaking bend of the Waikato River in New Zealand, to Fiji's Dolphin Island – van Heeren is anything but quixotic. Sure, it takes "a healthy dose of naivety", he says, to be



Everything about Grande Provence, from the winery and art gallery to the owner's cottage, is polished to a particularly Flemish gleam.

a successful entrepreneur, "because if you really think it through, you'll see so many reasons why you shouldn't." But that said, he's a realist, rather than a romantic, a Dutchman rather than a Frenchman.

And a businessman first and last: a large part of Grande Provence's attraction was that it made sense as a deal. The property had been in the hands of Count Agusta – scion of the family behind the Italian helicopter manufacturer AgustaWestland – who eventually opted for Monaco instead. Like Huka Retreat (Irishman Alan Pye's legendary fishing lodge, which hosted everyone from the Queen Mother to Charles Lindbergh in its heyday), Grande Provence had a rich history dating back to the Huguenot settlement of Franschoek, (French corner), or Olifantshoek (elephant corner), as it was known when the local pachyderms used the protected valley as a nursery.

These days, Franschoek is home to the flocks of "swallows" who winter there from around the world. Not only have local real estate prices jumped more than 350 per cent in five years, but the area is, so far, resisting the general downturn, according to Sotheby's International Realty, which shares the main street with boutiques, restaurants and galleries. The town's relentlessly high end: the tone set by La Residence, South African hotelier Liz Biden's entirely OTT slice of Versailles-among-the-vines, just up the road.

The hotel is not quite as out of place as it seems. A few hundred more Huguenots, and South Africa might have spoken French, though that little bit of romance, too, comes with a very Dutch twist. The French Huguenots fled to the

Cape, van Heeren says, because Holland wasn't conservative enough for them. Franschoek started life as a poor, hard-scrabble town of impoverished immigrants. The Cape Dutch gables on Grande Provence's manor house, one of the oldest in South Africa, were added more than a century after the plain main building was constructed.

But while its provenance was impeccable, like Huka (where a car park fronted the glorious river when he bought in 1984), Grande Provence was a sleeping beauty. "It was dilapidated," van Heeren recalls. "When I first saw it I thought 'This is a gem', but it was still quite difficult to see." So he brought over long-term collaborator, interior decorator Virginia Fisher of New Zealand's Fisher & Paykel family. "We walked through and she didn't say anything," he says. "Then she said 'Look, the financial side is your side, but it's got the bones'."

That financial side – he bought just before the local property boom really took off – was the real clincher, however. "The brain drain was very much still happening," van Heeren says. "South Africa still had a lot of question marks over it.



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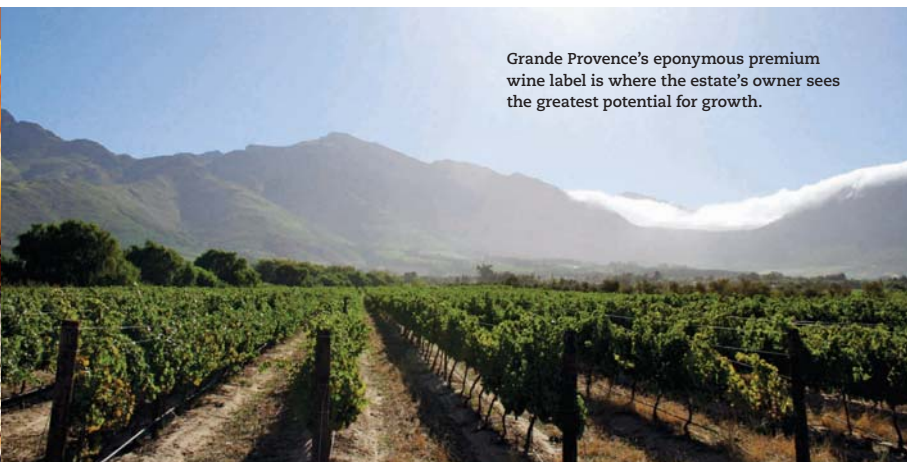
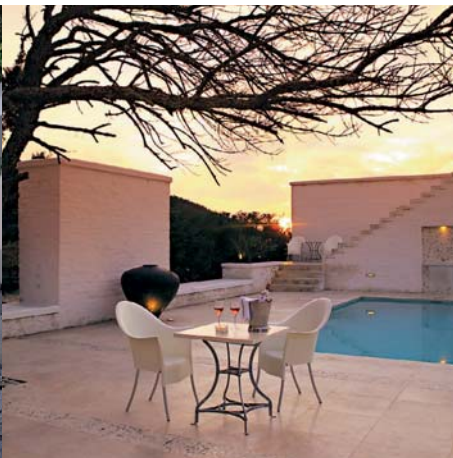
We bought it in the right way at the right time. Most people are led by emotion, and the moment you do that it becomes a bottomless pit."

The upshot – after five years and an outlay he estimates at three times the original price – is a pristine, 30-hectare "wine farm", as such properties are known locally, which is in turn a beachhead for the much larger African campaign van Heeren has in mind as soon as the economy shows the slightest signs of life. It's the next major punt for the man who pioneered the ultra-luxury lodge in New Zealand 25 years ago.

"We're looking at some very serious areas in the Caprivi Strip [on the Okavango Delta, famous for its remoteness, stunning scenery and fabulous game] in Namibia, over which we have first right of refusal," he said recently in his first major interview. "I still also have a concession in the Serengeti in the western corridor. But I first want to have Grande Provence working and functioning and being properly profitable."

The idea is to complement Grande Provence with a remote, high-end tented-camp safari experience. Might he decide on more than one camp? "Let's take it a step at a time," he says. "I'm still Dutch. You have to be very careful. We are in a phase where we just want to know which way the coin is rolling internationally."

Grande Provence is already "washing its face", he says, no mean feat given the scale of the enterprise – there are 15 gardeners alone, plus the winery (it now produces its own eponymous premium label), restaurant and art gallery staff – and the fact that it is based on a single accommodation option. The manor house is Van Heeren's, leaving only the



Grande Provence's eponymous premium wine label is where the estate's owner sees the greatest potential for growth.

neighbouring "owner's cottage", a two-storey, five-bedroom house with its own pool, loggia and staff, that has already hosted Prince Edward and Jude Law. Like its Huka counterpart, it's a cottage only in the sense that New Yorkers use the term to describe their estates in the Hamptons. TV sets pirouette out of ostrich-skin consoles, glossy flightless birds stalk the pristine lawns and in recent months it's been named one of the top 10 villas in the world by *Harper's Bazaar* and a grand award winner by Andrew Harper's *Hideaway Report*.

It's a model some tour operators thought might prove too niche, given the cottage is available to only one guest or party at a time. But it chimed with the boom times, specifically the huge demand for boutique villa-type accommodation that led van Heeren to open a second cottage recently at Huka.

"We came from a very low base," he says of the South African venture. "And because of Huka we had instant credibility. That rubbed off immediately very positively. Even now, this very bad economic time hasn't struck us yet."

The mother ship has not been quite so fortunate, however. Since it opened in 1984, Huka Lodge's business had only improved, particularly after Queen Elizabeth made the first five visits, followed by Rupert Murdoch and Bill Gates.

"If we were down 1 or 2 per cent one year, we'd say that's a heck of a lot," van Heeren says. "But occupancy was down nearly 20 per cent in January and February, and that's high season. The knock-on effect from the [United States economy] was quite horrendous, but it's now creeping up to the figures we had last year."

Like anyone lucky enough to be getting any bookings

at all, van Heeren says Huka's have become much more short term, reflecting the prevailing wary mindset. "I know that a lot of my friends are very scared," he says. "They are conservative business people and people still don't realise internationally – well, perhaps now they do – the knock-on effect. They will say to the family, 'I'm sorry but this year we stay close to home. I need to be close to my businesses.'"

There's been pressure from travel agents to lower rates, he says, but he remains resolute. "To reduce rates, I'd need to lower the quality of what I'm offering," he says. "The moment I do that, Huka is no longer what it was famous for."

In a sense, Grande Provence brings the Huka group full-circle. Van Heeren, who describes himself as bush-mad, lived in South Africa from 1958 until 1981, when he moved to New Zealand, becoming honorary consul for the Netherlands and buying chunks of government-owned institutions like Tranz Rail, as part of a wave of privatisations over the next decade. Huka, with its "do what you like, when and where you like" ethos, was an attempt to recapture



It's a cottage only in the same sense that New Yorkers use the term to describe estates in the Hamptons. TV sets pirouette out of ostrich-skin consoles.

the unbridled freedom of his African experiences. "I'm a businessman," he says. "We travelled the world because we're into shipping and commodity trading, especially steel, and what irritated me was that you saw more and more regulations and rules in terms of five-star hotels. If you're a free thinker, that's what you find irritating."

He says that he foresaw the explosion of ultra-luxury lodges that subsequently took place in New Zealand. "The country was ready and it was a matter of time," he says. "In the beginning, tourism was not that fantastic from overseas. The hotels were government-run – they were reasonable three-star hotels. They had an amazing location but no innovation."

Of course, luxury lodges travelled well beyond New Zealand, proliferating globally during the boom, catering to a new class of wealth. So how will they fare in the downturn? "The perception is that there's an oversupply internationally, so I think there'll be a shake-out," van Heeren says. But the Huka constituency will survive. "There remains a big market for that; it has its own problems at the moment, but it hasn't disappeared. It's a market that was never, I believed when I started Huka, properly catered for."

As he eyes the horizon for a chance to exercise his naivety again, van Heeren is also keeping a weather eye on his family, including a son who is a pilot for the United Nations and a daughter studying law in Cape Town. "I cannot see that the Hukas of this world will be that affected," he says. "It's actually never looked back during its 25 years. I hope that one day one of my children will take it by the bootstraps and go on, because I love the concept." **LUXURY**