

# *Finding the* **CURE**

{ Best known for its hot springs and their *legendary healing powers*, Jade Cooke finds that Montagu itself is *something of an antidote* to city living

Words JADE COOKE



I'm standing in a valley a little more than two hours from Cape Town, surrounded by the Langeberg in the distance and, much closer, by a herd of alpaca. The local South Americans daintily nibble oat pellets from my outstretched palm, looking for all the world like a young child's mis-proportioned drawing of a sheep, all graceful long necks and caricature woolly forelocks. Big eyes regard me shyly, curiously, from behind lashes so long and thick they should feature on mascara packaging, and their gentle murmuring is a balm to my city-weary soul.

Alpaca were the last things I expected to find on a weekend trip to Montagu, better known for its restorative hot springs, dried-fruit production and scenic hikes. But then, Janet Bourhill's Alpaca Paddocks has only been in existence for three years, while the town's other attractions were established farther back in its 165-year history.

The scenic Route 62 passes directly through the heart of this Klein Karoo town. And though it's a sharp shoot of only 200 km from Cape Town – barely enough time to have begun feeling a tad

drowsy behind the wheel – blowing straight through Montagu simply isn't an option. It may at first appear less tourist-oriented than its R62 neighbour Robertson, but scratch the surface and there's a wealth of varied experiences to be had.

Janet is one of a number of newly settled Montaguers who've abandoned city life for a gentler style of living here in the Klein Karoo. In her case, that style is a comfortable, converted-stable home; a thriving organic veggie patch; five dogs, two donkeys and one very sassy cat; and the herd that is her pride and joy. You can visit this little slice of pastoral paradise by appointment, at which point Janet will happily acquaint you with the particular charms of both Montagu and the alpaca. Needing a little less water than other livestock and being able to survive on poorer pastures, the alpaca thrive here under Janet's doting care. Shearing and spinning all takes place on site, and the beautiful range of scarves, hats, shrugs and shawls is tempting, even with the temperature currently in the thirties.

It's still early days for Alpaca Paddocks, but Janet's vision for the future includes an empowerment programme for women in the area, teaching them to process the highly valued wool and eventually create their own commercial products from it. A toddler range is also in the works, which suddenly seems like the obvious thing when you consider how hard-wearing and hypoallergenic the stuff is.

From blossoming enterprise to historical roots – I say a reluctant goodbye to my gentle new friends and head into the town proper for an introduction to Montagu's architectural heritage. This begins at Joubert House. Built in 1853, it's generally accepted to be the oldest dwelling in Montagu, complete with Cape Dutch gables and thatch. For the past 32 years it has functioned as a house museum, giving the likes of me a glimpse into 19th-century farm life. The cool interior offers a welcome respite from the day's heat as

### GETTING THERE

Take the N1 from Cape Town, through the Huguenot Tunnel (R32 per car). Turn on to the R60 to Worcester/Robertson. This becomes the R62, which takes you straight down Montagu's high street.



the docent points out artefacts from a bygone era: hand-operated butter churners, delicate china and the museum's prized collection of historically accurate – though frankly creepy – porcelain dolls.

Outside the back door is another Montagu drawcard, an indigenous medicinal plant garden that is the result of 22 years of research into oral traditions of the area, including those of the Khoi and San. Along its meandering paths you will find in excess of 120 medicinal plant species, a smorgasbord of excitement for visiting botanists and pharmacologists.







Completing Montagu's trifecta of historical buildings is the old Mission Church and the KVV complex, where you'll find a showcase of agricultural artefacts. But the morning is wearing on and, if we're not careful, we'll



## WHERE TO STAY

### • Mimosa Lodge

From the pavement, Mimosa looks like a charming two-storey lodge. But, as you exit through the back door, you discover a garden oasis. Winding paths lead to spacious garden and orchard suites, largely screened from each other's view by the clever landscaping, with a delicious, dark pool at the centre of things. Dinner in the award-winning restaurant is a must. The menu, updated daily by Swiss chef Bernhard Hess, features dishes of local fare (from kingklip to springbok loin) that can be paired with wine from the surrounding valley. From R565 pps 16 Church Street. 023 614 2351, [www.mimosa.co.za](http://www.mimosa.co.za)

## News of the restorative powers of the springs travelled far and wide

miss that hallmark of small-town charm, the Saturday morning market. Set on a patch of green beside the church that dominates Montagu's cluster of streets, the market is exactly what you'd expect: tiny, well attended, with stalls manned by locals offering all things wholesome and home-made, from a variety of soap to sausages.

Of course, if your retail bent has a more artistic flavour, you'll want to grab a map from the Tourism Office and wend your way along the Montagu Arts & Crafts Route. Painting, photography, beadwork, shell art, sculpture, woodcraft, quilting, textiles, mosaics, pottery ... you name it, someone has escaped to Montagu to create it. You could quite easily spend a day experiencing the work of this town's varied artists, but the soporific afternoon heat takes its toll, and my arty pursuits are eschewed in favour of a swim and a siesta before dinner.

Then, as the sun dips below the mountains that ring in this historical valley, it's time for another dip, this time in the hot springs most Capetonians associate with the historical town.

Local legend has it that a party of ox wagons was travelling along a river nearby when one of their wheels became stuck. In dislodging it, the owner's hand was injured, and the party was forced to set up temporary camp. Noticing that the river water they drank had an unusually pleasant taste and was slightly warm, they followed it to its source – a hot spring spouting from the solid rock! After bathing the injured hand in the water and finding it miraculously healed, the settlers established a permanent home here, and news of the restorative powers of the springs travelled far and wide. Even today, people travel from great distances and bathe in the sweet water to alleviate everything, from rheumatism to fatigue.

Being in fairly good health at the time of the dip in question, I'm poorly equipped to comment on the veracity of the spring's healing reputation. But I can say this: swirling around in warm, sweet-smelling water, surrounded by the silhouettes of great mountains, and looking up to see the first stars appearing in a velvety Karoo sky ... well, that's got to be the answer to something. etc



## WHERE TO EAT

### • Rambling Rose

Open for breakfast and lunch, this is probably Montagu's most popular eatery. All bread and pastries are freshly baked on site, and (good news for the driver) the coffee is from Origin in Cape Town.

Closed on Tuesdays.

36 Long Street. 083 401 4503

### • Ye Olde Tavern

Situated in a historical building right across the street from Mimosa Lodge, this is the spot to tuck into hearty lamb shank, Cape bobotie and steak. Book a table on a Wednesday for pizza and wine pairing night.

Oh, and there's even a Banting menu.

22 Church Street. 023 614 2398

### • Die Boord/The Orchard

A meal here isn't fancy, but it feels properly quaint and Karoo-esque. Take a seat on the veranda with mountain views, then poke around the little shop selling home knick-knacks after your meal.

58A Long Street. 023 614 3454





## OUT OF TOWN

### I. GO ROCK-CLIMBING

With more than 450 climbing routes ranging from beginner to expert, Montagu has become one of the world's sport-climbing hot spots. There are bolted routes aplenty (some of them multi-pitch) and a number of accredited guides to help newbies up their first rock face.

Montagu Rock Climbing

023 614 3193, [www.montaguclimbing.com](http://www.montaguclimbing.com)



### 2. MONTAGU TRACTOR TRIP

Meander up the mountainside on a tractor ride to the top of Arangieskop. The views from here are really something else, plus your peak pit stop comes with a glass of local Muscadel. A traditional potjiekos lunch at Protea Farm before or after your trip is a must.

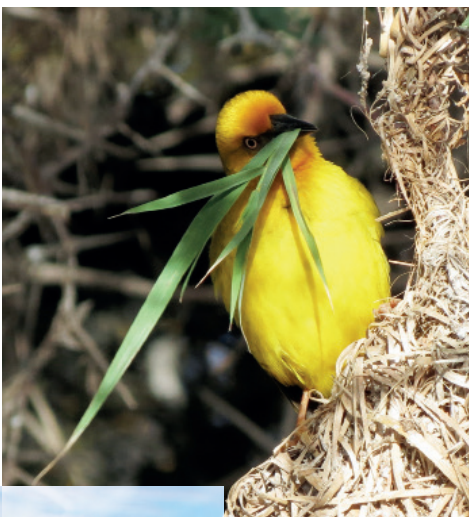
023 614 3012, [www.proteafarm.co.za](http://www.proteafarm.co.za)



### 3. LEIDAM BIRDWATCHING

Twitchers, grab your binoculars. This dam, a crucial part of the town's water system, is home to 18 nesting and 52 visiting bird species, including various herons, kingfishers and ibis.

[www.montaguleiwater.co.za](http://www.montaguleiwater.co.za)



### 4

### VILJOENDRIFT RIVER CRUISE

Sample the excellent selection at this nearby winery, then hop aboard the flat-bottomed riverboat *Uncle Ben II* for an idyllic cruise down the Breede. Picnic baskets and wine are available from the deli to bring aboard. The cruise leaves daily at noon, regardless of the number of passengers.

023 615 1017, [www.viljoensdrift.co.za](http://www.viljoensdrift.co.za)



# LINGER LONGER

More top experiences to *tick off* your list in Montagu

### 5. MONTAGU GUANO CAVE

Don't be put off by the name – most of the guano was removed from this fascinating cave in the 1890s (though it is still an important maternity roost for at least four Southern African bat species). Explore this site where evidence of ancient humans was discovered during the 1960s, then turn your attention to the many activities on offer, including hiking trails, catch-and-release fishing and pony rides.

084 553 4187, [www.montaguguanocave.co.za](http://www.montaguguanocave.co.za)

