



A KAROO INSTITUTION

Drostdy Hotel's Enduring Appeal

There are certain places that become part of your travel story. Destinations you return to so often that they begin to feel less like hotels and more like familiar landmarks in your own life. For me, Drostdy Hotel in Graaff-Reinet is one of those places.

I have been visiting Drostdy Hotel in Graaff-Reinet, on and off, for the better part of four decades. During that time, I have watched it evolve as a kid, from a charming historic hotel into what is undoubtedly one of my favourite places to stay when travelling through the Karoo. While the reasons for my visits have changed over the years, from family holidays to more recent work assignments, one thing has remained remarkably consistent. Every time I arrive, Drostdy provides a welcome sense of calm and comfort amid the vast, semi-arid landscape that surrounds it.



Situated in the heart of Graaff-Reinet, South Africa's fourth-oldest town, the hotel is perfectly positioned to complement its rich heritage. The town itself is often described as the gem of the Karoo, and for good reason. Framed by the dramatic Camdeboo mountains and characterised by wide streets lined with Cape Dutch, Victorian, and Karoo-style architecture, Graaff-Reinet possesses a timeless quality that few destinations can match.

Drostdy Hotel sits at the centre of this historical tapestry. Its origins stretch back to the early 19th century, and the property has long been

intertwined with the story of the town itself. Over the years, careful restoration and thoughtful development have allowed the hotel to preserve its historic character while introducing the modern comforts expected by contemporary travellers.

Many heritage properties struggle to find the sweet spot between authenticity and luxury. Some become overly polished and lose their sense of place. Others lean so heavily into nostalgia that comfort becomes secondary. Drostdy manages to avoid both pitfalls. It embraces its history without becoming trapped by it.

HISTORY MEETS MODERN COMFORT

The whitewashed walls, elegant Cape Dutch architecture and manicured courtyards immediately establish a sense of arrival. Yet beneath the historical façade lies a hotel that feels entirely relevant to modern travel. The rooms are spacious and tastefully appointed, offering a blend of period charm and contemporary convenience. Throughout the property, attention to detail is evident without ever feeling ostentatious.

Perhaps that is why the hotel feels so comfortable. There is no need for it to prove anything. Its confidence stems

from generations of hospitality rather than fleeting trends.

One of the greatest pleasures of staying at Drostdy is simply slowing down. The Karoo has a unique way of altering one's sense of time. Distances appear endless, traffic becomes almost non-existent, and the pace of life settles into something far gentler than what most urban dwellers experience daily.

After hours spent driving across South Africa's expansive interior, arriving at the hotel feels almost therapeutic. The cool courtyards, shaded verandas and tranquil atmosphere provide an immediate contrast to the heat and dust that accompany a Karoo journey. It is a place that encourages you to pause, unpack, and stay a little longer than originally planned.

The hotel's swimming pools are particularly inviting during the warmer months, offering a welcome refuge from the Karoo sun. Meanwhile, the various communal spaces encourage quiet reflection, whether over a morning coffee, an afternoon book or a glass of wine as the day's heat begins to subside.



A TASTE OF THE KAROO

Food also plays an important role in the Drostdy experience. The restaurant celebrates regional flavours while

maintaining a level of refinement befitting one of the Eastern Cape's premier hospitality establishments. Karoo lamb naturally takes centre stage, while seasonal ingredients and local influences help create a dining experience that feels connected to the surrounding landscape.

Yet the appeal of Drostdy extends well beyond its physical comforts.

What continues to draw me back is the way it serves as a gateway to one of South Africa's most fascinating regions. Graaff-Reinet offers visitors an exceptional blend of history, culture and natural beauty. The town's numerous museums provide insight into South Africa's colonial past, while its churches, monuments and heritage buildings reward those who enjoy exploring on foot.

Just beyond town lies one of the country's most remarkable natural attractions. The Valley of Desolation, with its towering dolerite columns and sweeping views across the Camdeboo plains, remains





every bit as spectacular today as it was when I first visited many years ago. Watching the late afternoon light paint the landscape in shades of gold and amber is an experience that never loses its magic.

THE PERFECT KAROO BASE

For travellers undertaking long-distance road trips between Gauteng, the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape, Graaff-Reinet is also strategically convenient. Yet reducing the town to merely an overnight stop would be doing it a great disservice. Destinations like this deserve time. They reward curiosity.

Drostdy Hotel encourages guests to engage with the destination rather than simply pass through it. Whether staying for a single night or several days, there is an unmistakable sense that the hotel forms part of the broader Graaff-Reinet experience rather than existing separately from it.

Looking back over forty years of visits, I realise that my appreciation for the hotel has grown alongside the



property itself. I have watched it adapt to changing traveller expectations while retaining the character that first made it special. In an era when many hotels seem increasingly interchangeable, that sense of identity has become one of its greatest strengths.

The Karoo remains one of South Africa's most captivating regions, defined by vast horizons, dramatic landscapes, and an almost meditative sense of space. Within that setting, Drostdy Hotel stands

as a sanctuary of comfort, history and understated elegance.

For me, it is far more than a place to spend the night. It is a familiar refuge on the road, a reminder of how rewarding slow travel can be, and a destination that continues to welcome me back. ①

by **bernie hellberg jr** / photography by **drostdy hotel**