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CONTENTS

December 2024/January 2025

FEATURES

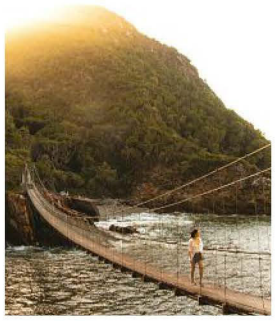
30 COLUMN: ZIGI EKRON
"Before I could ask what was going on, I heard Krisjan retching. The milkshake and roosterkoek made a dramatic reappearance – the kind of unexpected comeback last seen in *Dallas* when Bobby Ewing, after an entire season of being dead, stepped out of the shower at Southfork."

32 DE HOOP NATURE RESERVE
"I'm lying in the fynbos on the southern edge of De Hoop Vlei. I've been surrounded by a herd of eland for so long it feels like I'm becoming one of them…"

42 GARDEN ROUTE
Your guide to the ultimate birding holiday on the Garden Route and in the Little Karoo. There's plenty for non-birders, too!

54 WILLIAM BURCHELL: PART 4
"As Burchell sat here, maybe he pondered the nature of time. Maybe he wondered whether the landscape and the freedom he felt would still be around in 100 or 200 years. He took a stone, turned to the side and scratched his initials into the rock behind him."

94 ELANDS BAY
"It's a melancholy scene, but not without joy. Ou Klippe with his wrinkled face that has seen many a sunset over Verlorenvlei plays his battered guitar. Lea watches, smiling proudly. This is her place in the world, her roots."



COVER PICTURE
EVAN NAUDÉ
Storms River Mouth,
Garden Route National Park

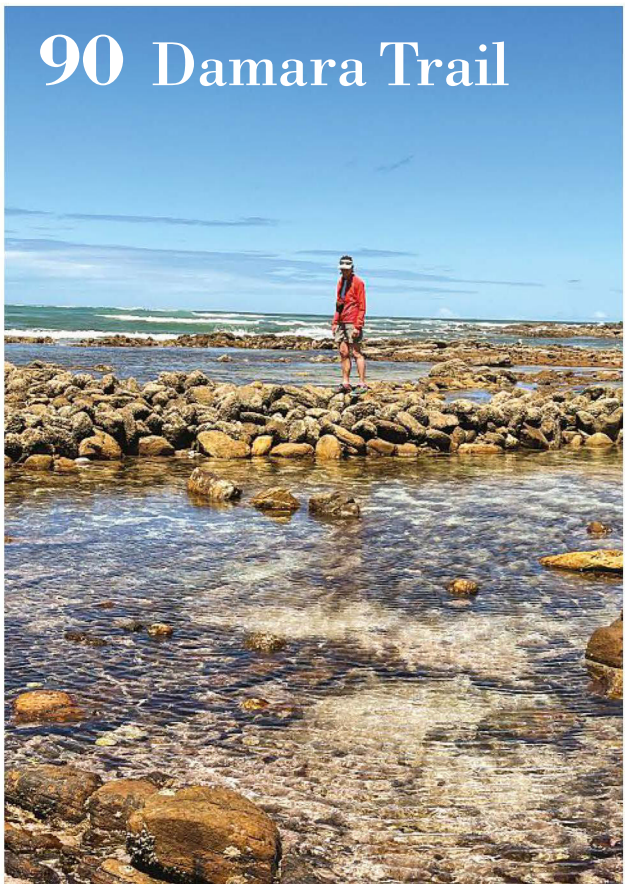


WILLEM VAN DER BERG

54 Willem van der Berg traces Burchell's journey



SHELLEY CHRISTIANS



MATTHEW HOLT

REGULARS

8 ED'S LETTER

12 LETTERS

18 UPFRONT
Night Watch – 19
Leopard Lounge – 20
Books – 26

62 TAKE YOUR PIC
See which reader photos Toast Coetzer chose this time: the Brad Pitt of Polentswa; an emerald-spotted wood-dove; a black-and-white beetle…

68 PORTFOLIO
Our pick of winners from the annual Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition.

76 FOOD
Prepare festive food in a flash with these five-ingredient recipes.

82 GEAR
The editorial team shares their gift ideas for Christmas.

88 WHEELS
Lots of Chinese brands are setting up shop in South Africa and (almost) all of them offer quality vehicles at affordable prices.

90 TAKE A HIKE
Get windswept on the beach, explore the littoral zone and hide out in a cave on the Damara Trail between De Mond and Arniston.

92 DO THIS
Aliwal Shoal is one of the top diving destinations in South Africa, especially if you want to see sharks. Here's what you need to know.

114 WITH MY OWN EYES
What's the best way to eat a leopard tortoise? Ask this honey badger!

116 KIDS' PAGE
Do you enjoy looking for seashells on the beach? Here's a guide to what you might find.

118 BIRDS
The mysterious white-winged flufftail might be the rarest bird in South Africa. It's so hard to find that researchers have only just learnt to identify its call.

120 TRAVEL JOURNAL: AFRICA BY BIKE – PART 2
Join Jean Cooper and De Witt Oosthuizen on the muddy, treacherous tracks of the Republic of the Congo, Cameroon and Nigeria. Roadblocks and dodgy chicken are on the menu…

128 CROSSWORD

129 LETTER FROM PALAPYE
"It can be good when people leave a place, because when they do, nature moves back in."

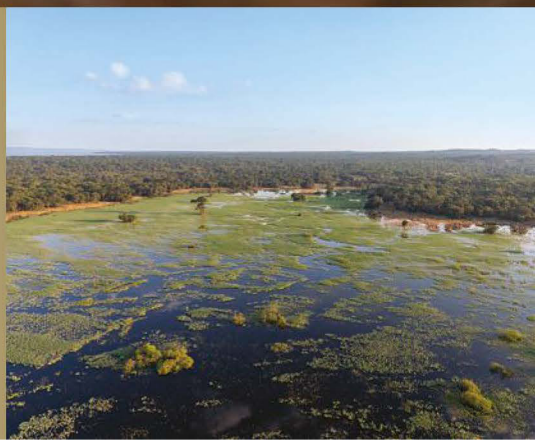
130 AFRICA AT ITS BEST

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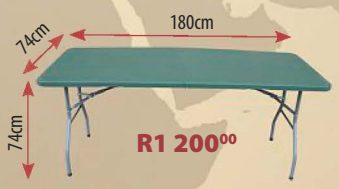


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RONEL STEYN

A spark to light the fire

This issue is for the birds. Or rather, for the birders. Our feathered friends weave a golden thread through many of our stories, from Verlorenvlei on the West Coast, through De Hoop in the Overberg, all along the Garden Route and into the Little Karoo.

Life is never the same after that first bird chirps in your ear. Birders talk about "BB" (before birds) and "AB" (after birds), and some will tell you the story of their "spark bird". In many cases, this will be a Big Tick species like a narina trogon, Pel's fishing-owl or crowned eagle – something you definitely don't see every day.

In my case, it wasn't a bird, but a book by the Lowveld author Will Hickey. *Two for a farthing* was a set work in primary school – it's a story about a humble sparrow family that defend their tree against an aggressive gang of birds known as the Beatniks.

As an 11-year-old, this wonderful little book had a big impact on my life. I noticed the sparrows in our backyard for the first time and learnt to identify the other garden birds, too. Never again would I aim at a bird with my air rifle or slingshot. (Although I do still occasionally lob a small stone towards the cackling guineafowl in the wild olive tree behind our house that wakes me at sunrise every morning…)

I live just outside Stellenbosch and it's the time of year when Cape weavers, yellow and southern red bishops and pin-tailed whydahs – all cocky males in their breeding plumage – bustle around the feeders in the garden. Even the sparrows (still my favourites) manage to squeeze in for a feed. In the scrubby bushes at ground level, Cape robin-chats and Karoo prinias forage for bugs and worms, while malachite and southern double-collared sunbirds flit from one pincushion to the next. When the garden suddenly goes quiet, I know it's because a yellow-billed kite or steppe buzzard is cruising overhead. It's like an episode of *Survivor* out here, played in real time in front of my eyes!

A while back, I hung two Babylonstoren birdhouses (see p 82) in the highest branches of the lemon tree. Nobody has moved in yet, but a breeding pair of greater striped swallows are hard at work building a clay nest under the roof on the stoep. Day after day, my wife Ronel and I monitor their progress. If we don't see them for a few hours, we feel uneasy, like when your kids are out late on a Friday night and they haven't messaged yet. Ronel and I are hoping that we'll become grandparents soon… of swallow grandchildren, mind you!

DON'T MISS OUR NEXT ISSUE!
The February/March magazine will be on sale at your retailer from 24 January 2025.

Pierre

PIERRE STEYN
PSteyn@media24.com



BEHIND THE SCENES

Aliwal Shoal is one of South Africa's best diving destinations. On page 92, freelance photographer and conservationist **Callum Evans** explains why any keen scuba diver or free diver should plan a trip.

How did you get into underwater photography? I started photographing wildlife in high school to help with bird identification and to record the animals I'd seen. This evolved into more artistic work. In 2019, a friend convinced me to sign up for a scuba-diving course. I took up free diving a couple of months thereafter. Since then, I've been diving every chance I get. I started off shooting video with an old GoPro and bought my first underwater stills camera in 2020 – an Olympus TG-6.

What was the highlight of the Aliwal Shoal dive trip? I saw my first ever ragged-tooth sharks in the wild. There were so many fish, including two giant potato bass and hundreds of blacktail, snapper, fusiliers and trevally. It was amazing how curious they were, coming in from all sides us to check us out.

Any funny behind-the-scenes incidents? There was one moment when I hopped into the water to answer the call of nature. I looked down and at least four oceanic blacktip sharks were circling beneath! I leapt straight out and decided I could hold it for a bit longer.

Which underwater animal would you still like to see? The manta ray, because it's such a graceful and intelligent creature. Also, a tiger shark – it's highly adaptable and migrates thousands of kilometres in the world's tropical oceans.

Where to next? I'm heading back to Aliwal Shoal in January to try and see a tiger shark, but I'd also like to go back to the Kruger Park as soon as possible. It's been far too long since I've been in the bush.

What's always in your travel bag? My camera, so I never miss a chance to photograph what I see, a pair of binoculars for spotting birds, a headlamp, plenty of water and snacks, and a warm jacket in case the weather turns.

See more of Callum's work on Instagram: @callumevans_photography



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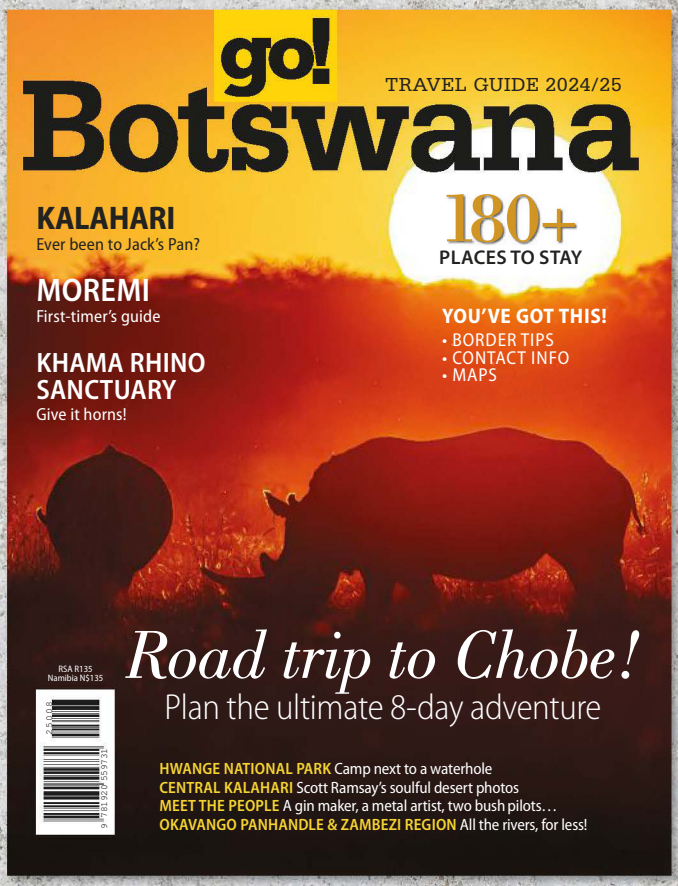
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COMPILED BY **MARTINETTE LOUW**



WINNING LETTER

This trail rocks!

Over the last few years, I've grown addicted to the natural scenery of the Cape region and I hit a hiking trail almost every week to make the most of it. Every now and again I also do a longer trail recommended by fellow hikers.

Earlier this year, someone shared a link to an article about a trail I had never heard of – the Rock Pigeon Trail in Oorlogskloof Nature Reserve near Nieuwoudtville. It's a five-day hike of about 52 km with overnight huts. After a few minutes' reading I just knew I had to do it.

My friend Pieter Cordier and I got a group of 12 together to start the hike on 30 August – we wanted to go in flower season and during new moon to take photos of the night sky.

What an experience! The variety of vegetation and all the wildflowers took our breath away. The rock formations can compete with the best of the Cederberg and there are amazing views of the Knersvlakte. There was clean water to drink from streams and waterfalls all along the route. I took this photo of the Driefontein Waterfall on the second day of the hike.

It's a tough trail and you should be fit and experienced, but it's so worth the effort. We're going again next year!

RUDOLPH SCHARNECK, Rawsonville

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Night cap?

About 15 minutes before I took this photo, this lion was feasting on a wildebeest. We saw this scene in the north of Madikwe Game Reserve – we were staying at Thakadu River Camp and this game drive was part of the package.

After the lion's feast, he walked down the road and we followed him in the game-viewing vehicle to Thole waterhole. Two lionesses joined him and they all lay down to drink.

I took this photo in the golden hour – the light was perfect. The guide also parked the vehicle right across from the lions so I was in a good position and had lots of time. Of all the shots I took, I like this one best because you can see the tongue of the lion and the two lionesses are right beside him.

CHRIS VAN DEN BERG, Toronto, Canada



As pretty as always

I visited the waterfalls on the Doring River, about 7 km north of Nieuwoudtville on the road to Loeriesfontein. There are two waterfalls, but the top one is my favourite – I like the colours of the stones. I've never seen the water level so high and I've been there many times.

PETER IMMELMAN, Bellville



Eye to the sky

The annual Zimbabwe Air Rally celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2024. Fifty-three aircraft competed in the two-day navigation challenge – I navigated for my brother Peter in his Glasair Sportsman and also covered the event with my camera.

The rally started in Kariba and the first day of flying took us around the edge of Lake Kariba, then south over large tracts of land to end at Hwange Airport right on the edge of Hwange National Park. The second day was mostly around and over the park, routing up towards the Zambezi River and Victoria Falls, with a final leg almost over Kazungula to finish at Victoria Falls Airport.

To capture this shot, I hitched a ride in a Robinson R44 helicopter. We took a door off to give me a clear shot of all the parked aircraft at Hwange Airport. Needless to say, I was well strapped in!

The rally is usually held in early June when visibility is best. At 6.44 am it was quite chilly as we circled the parked planes. The photo gives a feeling of expectancy with the aircraft facing the rising sun.

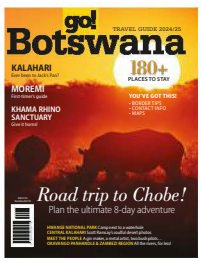
CHRIS SHEPPARD, Harare, Zimbabwe



Not quite up a tree

In August 2024, we spent 10 days in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana. The roads were a challenge, especially with an off-road trailer, but the scenery was amazing. I took this photo at Piper Pan – a group of seven lions walked across the pan to the waterhole and the youngest in the group tried to climb this tree.

HENRIETTE BIESENBACH, Hermanus



Want your own photo of a lion on Piper Pan? Our new Botswana guide (R135) is on shelf and full of ideas for your next trip north. You can also order a copy online: media24shop.com



A tender moment

I was standing on the balcony of my flat when I noticed a red-eyed dove sitting on a nest in the tree next door. A few days later I went out to see how the dove was doing and to my delight, I saw there was a hatchling in the nest. I managed to capture this beautiful moment between the dove and its chick.

I witnessed this awesome wildlife sighting "on my doorstep" and I realised that I should keep my eyes open as you can experience the beauty of nature where you least expect it.

WERNER STRAUSS, Gonubie



Turaco? Tick!

I attended an event for SANParks Honorary Rangers in the Garden Route National Park in September 2024 and we all stayed in the Ebb-and-Flow rest camp in the Wilderness section. I've always dreamt of taking a photo of a Knysna turaco and one day I went for a walk around the rest camp to specifically look for this beautiful bird. To my surprise, I found several in a tree.

It wasn't easy getting a photo, but I persisted. Some people say the Knysna turaco uses its red underwings – only visible in flight – to evade predators. The predator focuses on the bright colour and follows it, but when the turaco flaps its wings, the red "disappears" and the turaco has a chance to escape.

LOUIS HAARHOFF, Vanderbijlpark



Padkos?

I'd like to share this photo of a brown hyena sniffing a puff adder in Addo Elephant National Park. I took it during a visit in October 2024, while we were driving the Mpunzi Loop near Hapoor Dam. The puff adder was dead – it looked like it had been run over – and the hyena carefully sniffed around its head and tail. When more vehicles arrived, the hyena set off into the bushes, but I suspect it returned later when it was quieter.

CHRISTO BOSHOFF, Gqeberha



Nose in the air

During our visit to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in July 2024, we ran into acquaintances at the entrance who told us that the park was very quiet. We started our holiday with low expectations.

On the first morning, we drove from the entrance gate to Polentswa, where we were camping that night. A breeze stirred the tall grass near the Polentswa waterhole, and a movement caught my eye…

We pulled over and saw a lion with its nose in the air. It was a very unusual sight and we almost didn't see it because the lion was as yellow as the surrounding grass. It was the first of many lions we saw during our time in the park.

KARIEN LE ROUX, Struisbaai

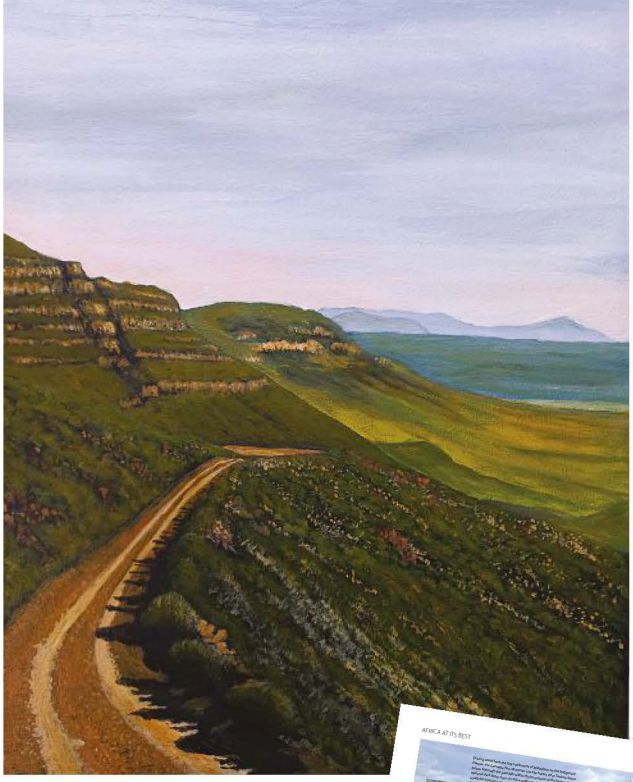


Don't sleep on this view…

On a recent spring morning, I took my bicycle and rode out on the road between Riversdale and Ladismith (R323). I was a way up Garcia's Pass when my watch said I had completed 11 km. I turned around and headed down to the low-water bridge in the Novo area for a breather.

There I was met by this scene of Sleeping Beauty, a section of the Langeberg range, in the distance. As someone who grew up in Riversdale, Sleeping Beauty has been a part of my daily life forever and I'm still amazed by it – I have a natural wonder in my own backyard!

HERMAN CROUS, Riversdale





Thanks for the inspiration!

As an amateur painter, I love the landscapes of our country. Toast Coetzer's photo of the Gannaga Pass in the Tankwa Karoo National Park in *go!* #196 struck me with the vibrant colours and wonderful sense of isolation that our country has to offer.

I was thrilled to get his permission to paint it, and equally pleased with the result.

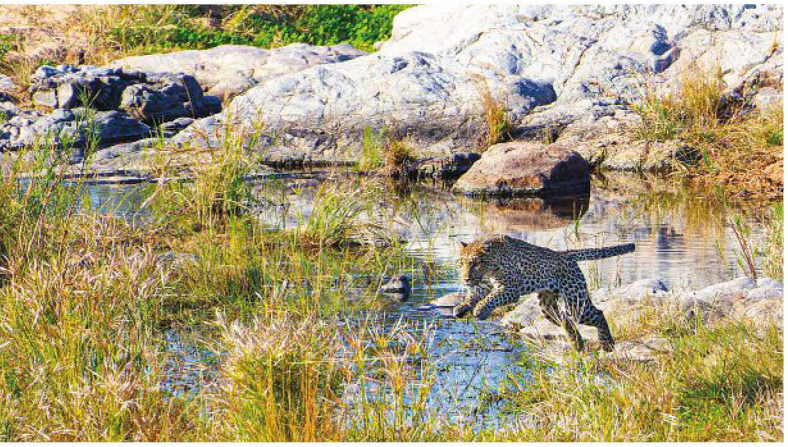
CHRIS TURNER, Muizenberg



Rip curl!

I often stay at Yellow Sands Caravan Park at the mouth of the Kwelera River near East London – it's a peaceful spot and the management of the park is top notch. I took this photo early one morning in July 2024, just before seven. Luck was on my side – the wave curled around the sun perfectly.

LAMPIES LAMPRECHT, Bloemfontein



Caught in action

On our last day in the Kruger Park, we came across a traffic jam on the H3 between the Afsaal picnic site and Malelane. A traffic jam in the park usually means one thing: lion or leopard.

True enough, this leopard was walking through thick bush, moving towards the Mhlambane River, which we'd just crossed. We quickly turned around and went to park on the bridge. The leopard appeared after about five minutes.

While drinking, it suddenly pricked its ears and stared intently at something in the grass. I set my camera to burst mode – clearly something was about to happen – and caught the leopard mid-leap!

ALWYN PETRUS VILJOEN, Pretoria

Q&A

Every month our experts answer your questions about birds, bugs and beasts. Send your photos and queries to editor@gomag.co.za



Friend or foe?

ROELIEN CORNFORTH from Krugersdorp writes: There are hundreds of these insects on the gardenias in my garden, but they don't seem to eat the leaves and flowers. They lay their eggs on the stems, hatch and live there for years. Can you identify the insect and tell me whether they can harm the plants?

Entomologist DUNCAN MACFADYEN says: This is a twig wilter bug. It's about 25 mm in length and is boldly marked with tan-and-black forewings and orange underwings. The antennae have white-and-black bands.

It's common in bushveld areas and urban gardens, where it appears to favour the Transvaal gardenia and other plants in this group. A community on a tree may include a number of generations; adults with larvae of various sizes are common.

They don't permanently damage the plant, even when present in large numbers. They have sucking and piercing mouth parts, which they use to puncture the branches of the gardenia. They then inject enzymes that wilt the tip of the branch and they feed on the digested matter. They don't feed on the leaves, stems and flowers and only wilt the branches, which won't kill the plant.

When they feel threatened, they spray a foul-smelling secretion from the glands near the bases of their legs. You can often smell a tree harbouring these insects from afar. The spray can travel up to 15 cm and the smell can make humans feel ill and can burn the skin or eyes on contact. This fluid seems to be poisonous to other insects and is used as a defence mechanism to deter predators.



What's going on?

JUDY CRONJE from Muldersdrift writes: We saw several gemsbok with deformed horns in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in September 2023. This one stood out to me – are the deformed horns caused by inbreeding or injuries?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN says: The deformed horn of the gemsbok in the reader's photo could have been caused by genetics or a defect during embryonic development, but it's more likely the gemsbok's horn buds were injured when it was still very young. Gemsbok aren't born with horns, they have soft lumps on their heads where their horns will develop as the antelope matures.

The horn bud might have been injured by a branch when the young gemsbok ran through the bush, during play with other young gemsbok, or by the impact of an adult antelope's horns, and it affected the growth of the horn.

The deformed horn shouldn't impact on the animal's quality of life or its life expectancy. However, there have been recorded cases of the deformed horn growing towards the head and entering an ear, eye or the skull.

Keep in mind that the bulls use their horns during fights to establish dominance for breeding privileges. The bulls and cows also use their horns to fend off predators and protect their calves. Deformed horns could influence their ability to do both.

If the horn breaks off, it won't regrow, except if the animal is very young and the break is high up on the shaft. Even then, the regrowth will probably be abnormal.

#2025resolutions

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IN BRIEF

COMPILED BY **VANIA JOOSTE**



GALLO/GETTYIMAGES.COM

African penguin in peril

Critically endangered. That's the new conservation status of the African penguin, as declared by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in October 2024. What does "critically endangered" mean? It means that this iconic bird is only one step away from extinction.

With fewer than 10 000 breeding pairs remaining in the wild, the African penguin is the first of the world's 18 penguin species to be classified as such. Climate change and commercial fishing are the major threats to the survival of this species.

SANCCOB and BirdLife South Africa have initiated landmark litigation to force the South African government to implement stricter laws to protect the African penguin, with special focus on fishing restrictions around their breeding colonies.

You can help by signing a petition: only.one/act/save-african-penguins





A new frog in the Cederberg

In an exciting discovery, scientists recently identified a new species of frog: the Cederberg dainty frog *(Cacosternum cederbergense)*. The first specimen was found by herpetologist Marius Burger in 1997 and was confused for a distantly related species, the Karoo dainty frog.

New research done over the last three years has now confirmed that the Cederberg dainty frog is the first frog species to be completely restricted to the Cederberg area.

The new species is different from its close relatives in several ways: It lacks the dark streak from the eye to the iris that other species have; it also has larger glands near its jaw, and it has heart-shaped bumps on its hands. The sound it makes is also lower in pitch compared to other frogs.

What's more, this frog has adapted to survive in the challenging environment of the northern Cederberg, where it lives among rocky outcrops and breeds in small pools of water that form after winter rain.

In total, 17 specimens have been found. The frogs are tiny – around 1 x 2 cm in size.

– Tyrone Ping

NIGHT WATCH



STELLARIUM.ORG

Look for the Star of Bethlehem

The Star of Bethlehem is synonymous with Christmas. It's the star described in the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible, where it attracted stargazers from the east to Bethlehem and led them to the stable where Jesus was born.

Something about the star was special, which prompted them to make the journey to Judea. Many articles and books have been written about what the Star of Bethlehem could have been. Was it a comet? A supernova? An occultation? Or maybe a conjunction, when planets or other celestial objects appear close together in the sky? Every possible explanation has been researched and debunked. There's only one remaining explanation… a miracle!

There are many spectacular events in the night sky this December and January that can remind us of the Star of Bethlehem.

Venus and the crescent moon will form a striking conjunction near the western horizon in the early evening on 4 and 5 December. There will be a repeat on the evening of 3 January 2025, when Venus will be very close to the crescent moon again. By the next night, the two will have moved apart, which will make you realise how quickly the moon moves against the starry background.

After Venus, Jupiter is the brightest planet. Jupiter will reach opposition early in December – it will be right opposite the sun as observed from earth and visible throughout the night. By sunset on 14 December, the nearly full moon will be close to Jupiter. They'll be in the same position on 10 January 2025, this time joined by a bright star called Aldebaran, one of the eyes of Taurus the bull. This gathering will also be visible all night.

– Willie Koorts

BIRD BRAIN

CHALLENGE #2



Do you know your birds? Can you identify this species?

Clue: This rare summer visitor was photographed in the suburbs of Pretoria. Cities are one of the best places to see this species because their prey – mostly pigeons – is so abundant.

Use your bird guide or app and see if you can figure it out. Turn to page 119 for the answer.

Listen to classical music by candlelight

In the mood for a magical evening? How about a classical music concert where the musicians are surrounded by hundreds of candles? Candlelight Concerts are held in 100 cities worldwide and Cape Town is one of them.

Professional musicians play music from Bach to The Beatles in venues specifically chosen to improve the listening experience.

Capetonians can look forward to "Vivaldi's Four Seasons" on 6 December, and "A tribute to Hans Zimmer" at the SA Sendinggestig Museum on 24 January, among others. Tickets from R650 per person.

Visit candlelightexperience.com to book, and to find out more about other concerts during the festive season.



GALLO/GETTYIMAGES.COM


MEGAN MURGATROYD

LEOPARD LOUNGE

Battle of the top predators

Working in leopard research and conservation sounds like an exciting career. Surely you get to see leopards all the time? If you're in the Bushveld, yes, but in the Western Cape even the researchers hardly ever see leopards – almost all of our data comes from camera traps and signs in the veld like tracks and scat.

In fact, it's birders who seem to see leopards in the Western Cape more often than others. More specifically, ornithologists and enthusiasts who enjoy studying Verreaux's eagles.

The reason for this is that Verreaux's eagles will dive-bomb or mob a leopard if they spot one in their territory. They swoop to the ground and repeatedly dive towards the leopard, sometimes with extended talons. And thus the birders are made aware of the presence of the leopard – a fact that would otherwise have gone unnoticed!

There are two possible explanations for this interesting behaviour. Leopards and Verreaux's eagles are both apex predators, and in some areas they compete for the same prey: dassies. So, the eagles will do what they can to chase away the competition, in the same way they'd have chased off another eagle in their territory.

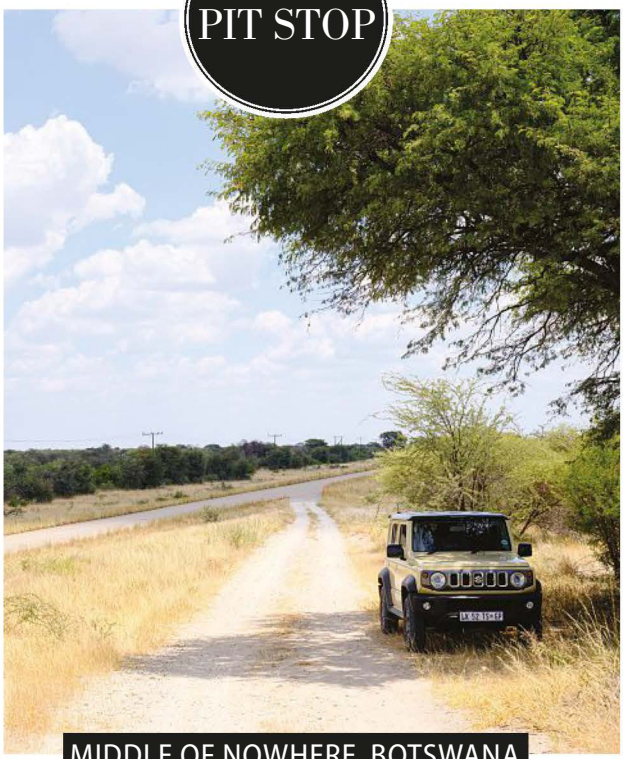
The second possibility is self-defence. Verreaux's eagles sometimes catch dassies that weigh as much as or more than the bird itself. They can't lift the prey to fly away and must start eating on the ground, where they're vulnerable to their prey being stolen by a hungry leopard. The leopard might even attack the eagle itself. For this reason, when an eagle spots a leopard from its vantage point high in the air, it will use the opportunity to get rid of the cat while it can.

According to reports of those who've witnessed this behaviour several times, it seems as if the leopard doesn't take much notice of the eagle's bombing. It certainly doesn't beat a hasty retreat. But the incessant diving does appear to irritate the leopard after a while and it usually moves away.

Moral of the story? If you really want to see a leopard, watch a Verreaux's eagle!

– Jeannie Hayward

PIT STOP



MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, BOTSWANA

A pit stop in northern Botswana requires a certain level of caution. There are no fences around the national parks and other reserves, which means that lions, elephants and other dangerous animals roam wherever they want. It's best not to sit next to a herd of elephants while peeling an orange. Things won't end well for your orange – or you.

While driving, you have to keep your eyes open. Look out for potholes on the A3 between Maun and Gweta, yes, but also scan the thickets and grassland next to the road. Elephants are easy to see from a distance, and you will see them because a pipeline in this region has sprung several leaks and the water attracts thirsty ellies that don't often look both ways before crossing the road…

I'm in no rush today. After a few days in Maun, I only have to reach my overnight stop near Nata before dark. I've hit my groove behind the wheel and I don't want the road to end. Ever felt that way? To just drive forever, slowly, with a smile on your face?

I pass the veterinary control gate and the turn-off to Motopi, then the landscape gets even wilder. On my right (south) is Makgadikgadi Pans National Park; to my left (north) is Nxai Pan National Park.

Then I see the hill I've been waiting for: a vegetated dune you could easily overlook if you're in a hurry. I tap the indicator paddle in my Suzuki Jimny and turn left. There's a shade tree here where you can get out.

Before I left Maun this morning, I stopped at a coffee shop called Hilary's and bought a toasted chicken mayo sandwich. Now it's time to eat it – here, in paradise.

Where? Next to the A3 between Maun and Gweta, about 21 km east of the Motopi turn-off and 35 km west of the turn-off to Nxai Pan National Park.

– Toast Coetzer

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WHAT ARE YOU BUILDING FOR?

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ENTERTAIN IN STYLE



Meerendal Wine Estate outside Durbanville has a new addition to their luxurious facilities: the elegant **forest marquee**. Receive clients or host an intimate wedding reception set in the beautiful Cape Winelands.

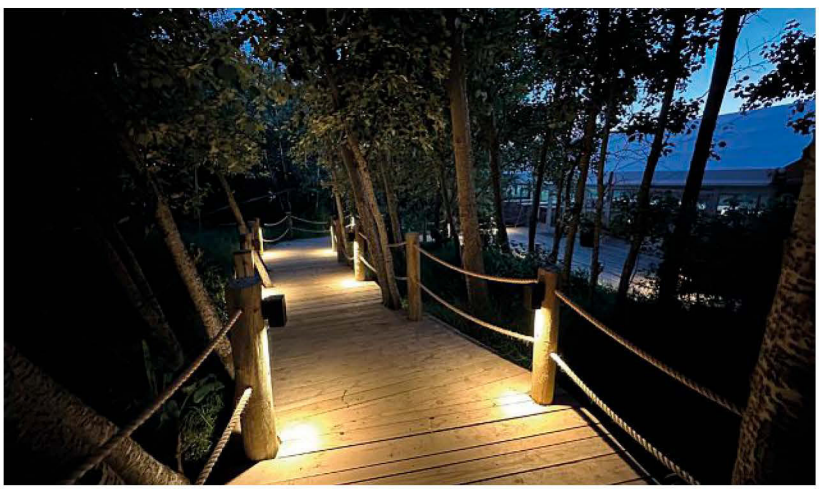
Meerendal is known for its scenic vineyards, award-winning wines, and historic buildings. The estate is a lush green oasis where you can confidently entertain friends and colleagues. In recent years, the estate has also become a large and well-known concert venue, hosting events such as the *go!* Festival of Hiking and the Afrikaans music festival Liefde By Die Dam.

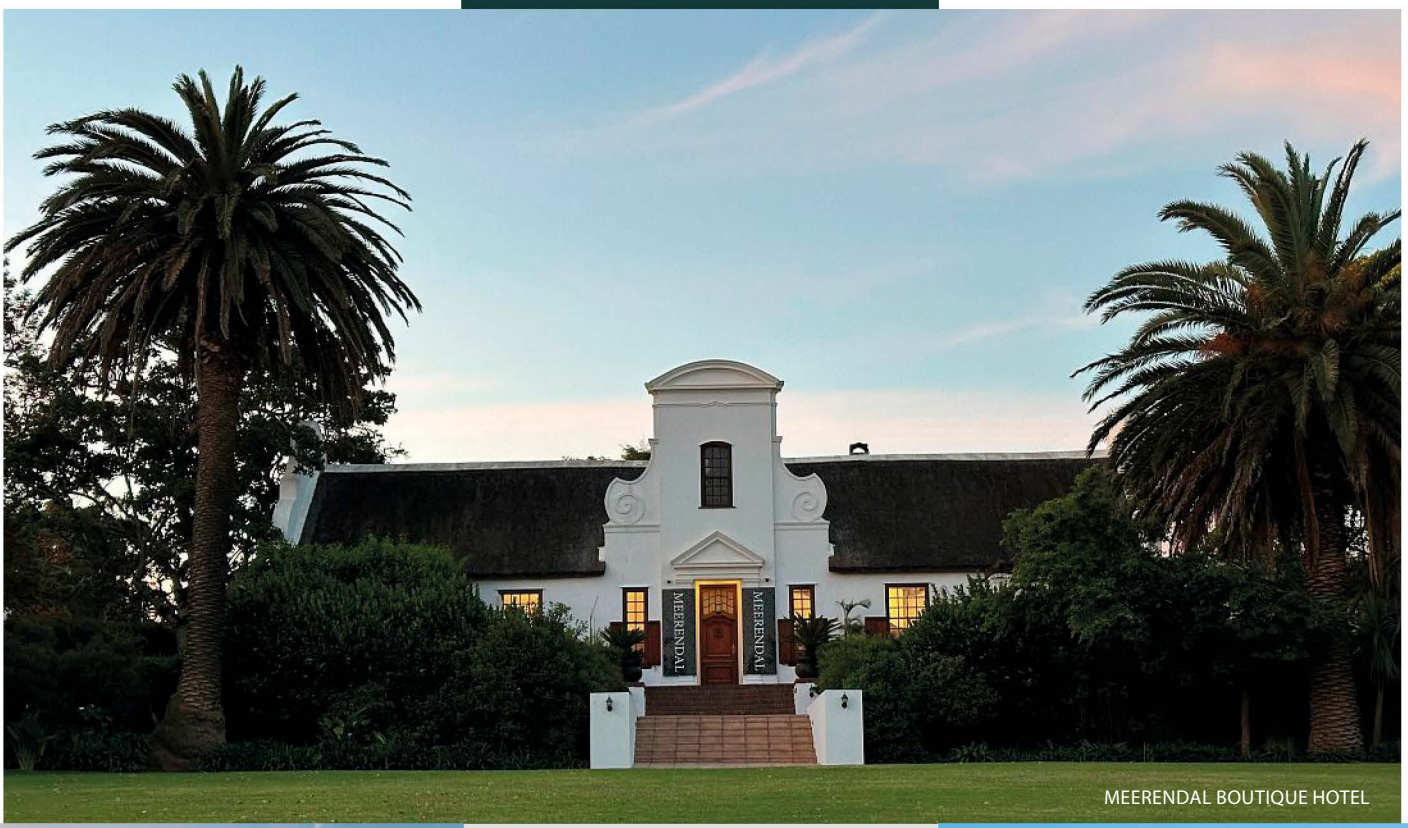
However, if you want to host something smaller, you can now book the stylish forest marquee overlooking the dam.

THE RECEPTION HALL OFFERS:

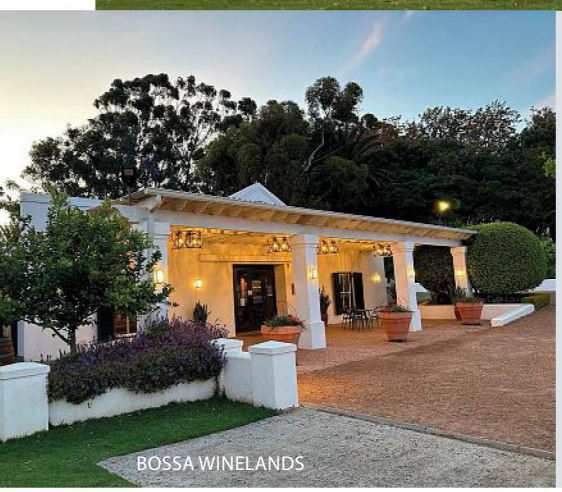
- A sturdy structure with glass on all sides, providing protection against wind and rain while offering a spectacular view of the dam and vineyards.
- Seating for 100 guests for lunch or dinner, with the option of a buffet meal provided by La Romantica restaurant.
- Exhibition space in an expo setup where more people can be accommodated.
- A beautiful boardwalk through trees leading to the venue. The boardwalk is also wheelchair accessible.
- A wooden deck at the back of the venue, with neat ablution facilities.
- Optional accommodation in the 21-bedroom boutique hotel in the Meerendal Manor House, of which 6 rooms are in the Manor House.







MEERENDAL BOUTIQUE HOTEL

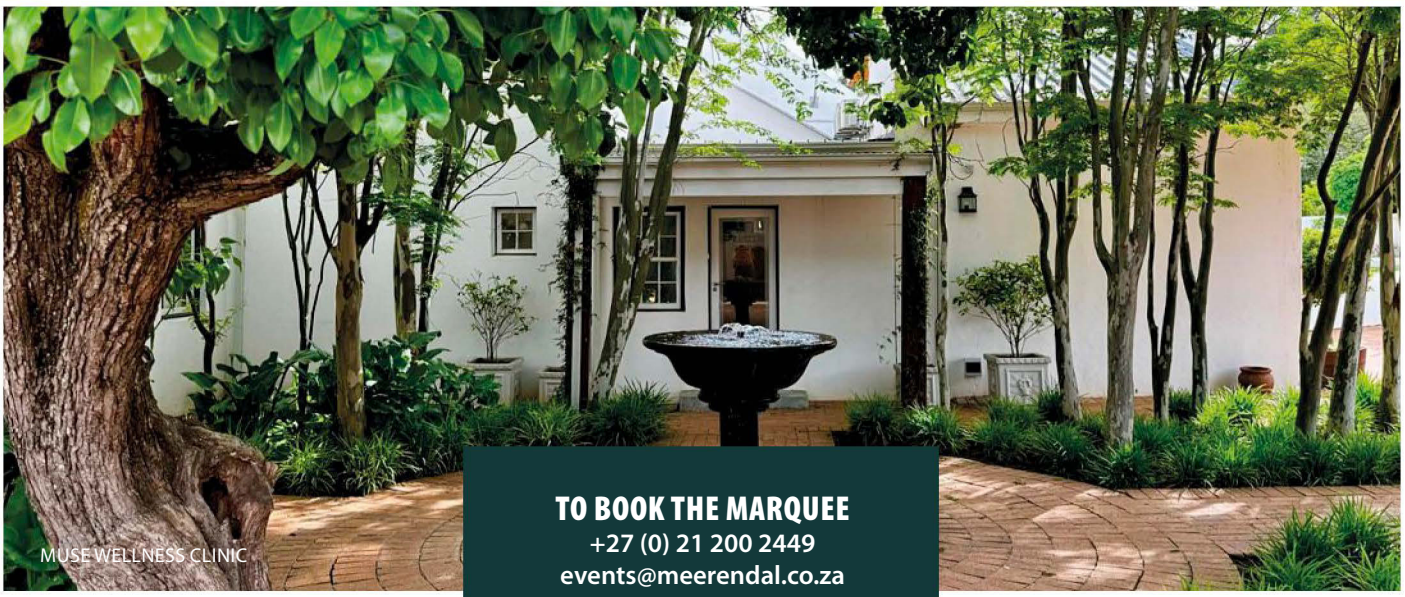

BOSSA WINELANDS

MEERENDAL ALSO OFFERS

- Ample parking.
- Two restaurants, La Romantica and Bossa Winelands.
- A tasting room, where you can sample Meerendal's award-winning wines.
- Cocoafair chocolatier, where you can taste handmade chocolates.
- A network of cycling and hiking/ running trails across the estate.
- Expansive lawns and a children's playground.
- Muse Wellness Clinic.

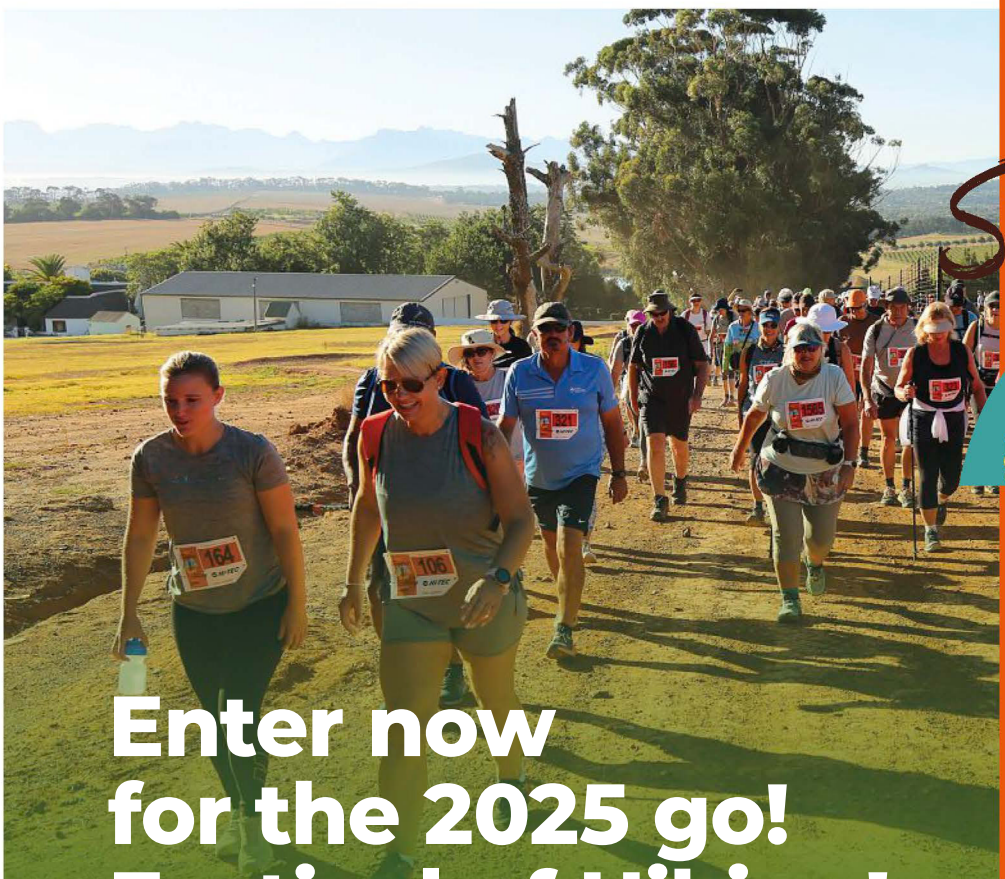


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Join us for a weekend of walking fun. Distances vary from short and easy to longer and more challenging. Entries for our second go! Festival of Hiking are now open.

WHAT IS IT?

This unique event is tailor-made for hikers – whether you're just looking to stretch your legs or wanting to test your fitness for the Otter or the Fish River Canyon. Bring your friends and family for a weekend of hiking fun in the scenic hills, with other outdoor enthusiasts. The inaugural go! Festival of Hiking in 2024 was a huge success, attended by nearly a thousand walkers.

WHAT'S NEW THIS YEAR?

This year's festival terrain will be set up on the lawn at Meerendal's two restaurants. The hikes will all start and finish there. You can look forward to coffee and food stalls so you and your friends can relax on the lawn after the hikes. Beer will be sold from the registration tent.

Visit the expo for the best hiking gear, and don't miss our sponsor Salomon's stall.

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An easy
5 km
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SATURDAY
Choose between an early morning
5 km, **13 km** or **25 km**

SUNDAY
An easy
10 km
at 7 am, before the closing and prize-giving ceremony

Sign up for one or two hikes, or attend all three days! Limited accommodation is available at Meerendal. Register at **wegstapfees.topevents.co.za**

14–16 Feb 2025

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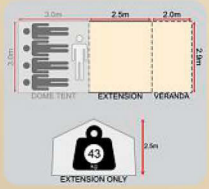
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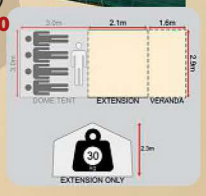
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MEET THE AUTHOR

Photographer, writer and field guide **Scott Ramsay** chats to us about his new coffee table book, *Spirit of Africa*, and why Nature should be spelled with a capital "N".



In the foreword you ask: "How can one capture the spirit of a boundless, three-dimensional landscape with a tiny two-dimensional camera sensor?" So, how *do* you go about trying to distil your experiences into something as beautiful and poignant as *Spirit of Africa*? This book is my humble attempt to do justice to African wilderness, and my intuitive response to it. My work as a photographer for NGOs and safari companies has taken me to some amazing wilderness areas in Africa. Still, getting the shot is often a matter of luck. It's about being in the right place at the right time; like a surfer, you have to get up early every morning, regardless of the weather, to catch that rare, perfect wave.

Also in the foreword, you write: "Most African wilderness is under constant attack, either directly or indirectly, from human influence." What is your goal with showcasing the last untouched patches of wilderness left on the continent? We always assume that humans are the most important species, and that earth was given to us to use. With *Spirit of Africa*, I hope to offer a different view: Nature has an intrinsic right to exist, independent of our human needs and wants. I hope to show that Nature is a sacred community of which humans are just a small part. (I purposely capitalise the "N" in Nature, just as people spell God with a capital "G".)

I would be happy if someone picks up *Spirit of Africa* and feels a sense of reverence and empathy for Nature. Maybe they'll start to see wild animals as fellow earthlings, with as much of a right to be here as us. I know that's a high bar to set for a book, but that was my intention.

Sebastião Salgado, Ansel Adams… Those are some legendary documentary photographers you mention as influences. When it comes to wildlife, how do you avoid the photography clichés? After all, everyone on a safari vehicle has a camera and long lens… Salgado and Adams were dedicated to their craft. They also really cared about their subjects: Salgado about social injustice and traditional communities, and Adams about American wilderness. They both worked extremely hard and spent long periods of time in the field, away from home. They gave part of their soul to their subjects.

To avoid clichés, there are a few things: Spend as much time with your subject as possible. Get out of the vehicle and walk around – go on a wilderness trail. Get down as low as you can, or stand on top of a koppie. (Or use a drone if you're allowed to, but always respect the animals and other people.) Zoom in as far as you can, or pull back and place the animal in the context of the landscape or ocean. Shoot in all kinds of light – harsh light, low light, soft light. See what happens. Don't worry if the light is rubbish. Harsh light can be great for black-and-white images. If you can impart a sense of atmosphere, or a feeling, then you've got a great photo.

You write about how being in wild places is crucial if humans want to save the planet and themselves. What can be done to enable this for more people, not just those who have the money to travel? The reality is that life on earth will continue, with or without us. Nature will rebalance, whether we like it or not. Like all other species that have ever existed, we're only here for a while, then we'll go extinct. How long we want to be here is up to us.

It's a great pity that so many wild places are now "tourist" destinations, and that you have to pay to visit them. After Covid, Nature became the new luxury because everyone realised how much we need it for our wellbeing. That's a good thing, of course, but it also means that some people can't afford to visit. It's also why places like Table Mountain, and even smaller urban parks like The Wilds in Joburg, are so important: We need to protect and create spaces where all people can experience a relatively pristine landscape, for free.

I was blown away by the images from Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park in the Republic of the Congo. What was it like to travel there? I was fortunate to do photography work for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in Nouabalé-Ndoki. It was awesome, but the rainforest is a difficult place to exist as a human. Even the local Ba'aka people don't go too deep for fear of getting lost.

There's good reason why *Homo sapiens* is a woodland and savannah species. In the rainforest, there are loads of parasites and insects that want to eat you. It's very humid and it can rain for days, so you're never dry. It's actually pretty miserable.

On the other hand, the big animals there often haven't seen humans before. The chimps and gorillas don't know what you are. They either freak out or come closer to inspect you. It's incredible to be in a place that is totally pristine and so remote. But it can be intimidating, too. At times I felt very small and vulnerable. But that's yet another reason why we need these wilderness areas now, more than ever.

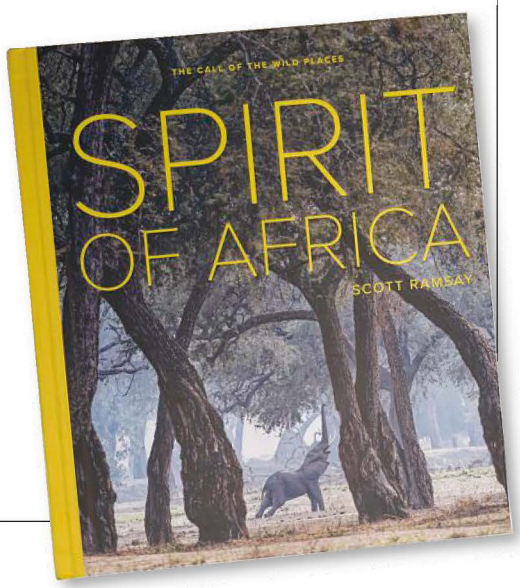


In a world of TikTok and 10-second attention spans, how do you see "slower" media fitting in – your coffee table book, for example, and indeed this magazine? I'm deeply sceptical of digital media, even if I use it – and benefit from it – as a photographer and writer. Social media, especially, is destroying the quality of our human communication and our relationships. That's one thing you see when you spend time with traditional cultures. Long, in-person conversations are normal. Things are discussed over and over again; a conversation can take days or weeks.

I'd be delighted if someone sat with my book and began to meditate a little on the beauty and wonder of wild Africa, and breathe a little deeper as a result.

– Jon Minster

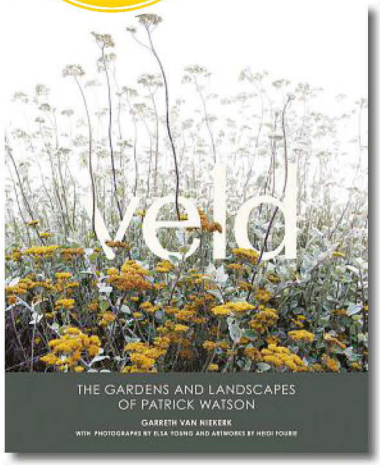
Spirit of Africa is published by Quivertree and costs R1 200 in good bookstores.



GIFT GUIDE

Our editorial team shares the books they'll be wrapping to put under the Christmas tree this year.

COMPILED BY **MARTINETTE LOUW**



Veld: The Gardens and Landscapes of Patrick Watson

by Garreth van Niekerk, Struik Nature
R650 in bookstores

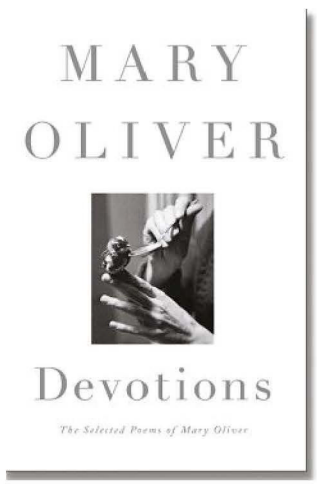
If you've run out of gift ideas for your green-fingered friend – how many orchids are too many? – this beautiful book about local landscape architect Patrick Watson is a safe bet. Inspiration is always a welcome gift.

Watson is known for his creative designs of green spaces big and small. He works with landscapes rather than against them, using mostly indigenous plants.

Veld covers 23 of his designs all over the country, including the Spier Estate near Stellenbosch, residential gardens in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and Sun City in the Pilanesberg.

Watson's designs are as varied as the landscapes they're located in; the book even features an island garden in the Seychelles. You'll find something that speaks to your tastes and local vegetation type – the book covers grassland, fynbos, renosterveld, highveld, forest, arid and tropical gardens. Watson also employs a range of styles, including architectural, minimalist, structural and romantic.

The text breaks down the thinking behind each design and the photographs by Elsa Young will give you a feel for how Watson uses colours, textures and shapes. There are also plant lists for some of the gardens if you'd like to recreate the magic.



Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver

by Mary Oliver, Penguin Books
R360 in bookstores

You're somewhere remote, taking in a majestic view – a cliff by the ocean; a deserted plain in the Tankwa Karoo; a quiet forest you have all to yourself. It's so beautiful it makes your heart hurt and you just know the universe is trying to tell you something…

That's the feeling Mary Oliver captures in her poems.

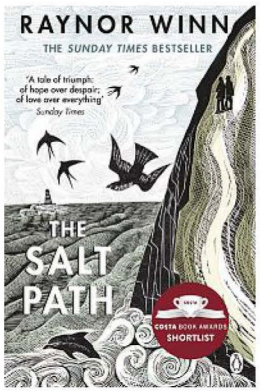
Oliver is an award-winning American poet and she uses nature to convey the wonder of life. Fireflies, foxes, frogs, lilies and willow trees become the teachers of lessons: That death is a part of life; that you have a right to exist on earth; that life should be lived.

In "When I am among the trees", for example, the trees give advice:

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

Oliver wouldn't necessarily say you have to head to the Serengeti to be awed by nature – she references the small, everyday moments that happen in your garden, like a baby bird hatching or a flower opening. This collection of poems will enrich a loved one's next nature outing.

– Esma Marnewick



The Salt Path

by Raynor Winn, Penguin Books
R250 in bookstores

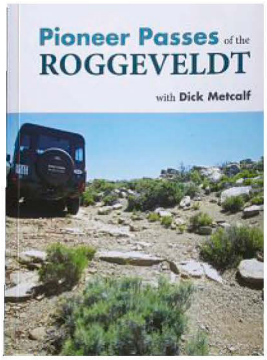
This book tells three stories in one. Firstly, it's a travelogue about the scenic South West Coast Path in England, a thousand-kilometre hiking route from Somerset to Dorset. Winn's descriptions of high cliffs and forested valleys, moonlit pools full of silver fish, pebble beaches, rocky headland upon rocky headland that disappear into the icy Celtic Sea, and the small harbour villages in-between, will have you googling "Salt Path UK" and making plans to go on a mad adventure of your own.

Secondly, it's a story of hope. Winn and her husband Moth lost their farm after a bad investment. They're without a home and they set off on this hike to figure out what to do next.

Thirdly, the book gives a refreshing look at what it means to be homeless and how it can happen to anyone. The couple lives on a small government grant, survive on tea and noodles, and camp wild.

You'll laugh along as the two sneak into holiday resorts for a quick shower and share a single beer in a bar like students. And you'll worry about them as they walk through a storm for hours, facing a precarious future. But together, you'll learn that sometimes all you need to do is put one foot in front of the other.

– Esma Marnewick



Pioneer Passes of the Roggeveldt

by Dick Metcalf, self-published
R250; order from
dickmetcalfza@gmail.com

To most readers of this magazine, Ouberg Pass and Gannaga Pass will be familiar names since they often feature in articles about the Tankwa Karoo and the Roggeveld Plateau (where Sutherland is the main town).

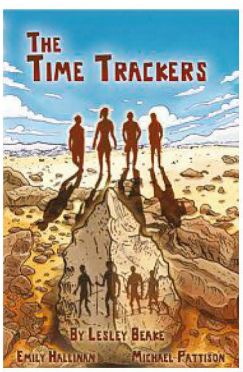
In Dick Metcalf's slim (112 pages) but sturdy volume, you'll discover so much more: virtually forgotten passes like Rooikloof Pass, Biesra Pass, Leeupad, Brandewynsbank, Aapenberg Pass, Skuinsvoetpad, Pruimboshoek Pass and Vloksberg Pass.

Metcalf follows in the footsteps of historical figures like Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon, who traversed the Rooifontein Pass in 1786. Using such documented journeys, he combines satellite image sleuthing and foot-on-the-ground research (after obtaining permission from landowners) to see what remains of the passes, and the old pioneer farmsteads.

These passes were not only used by farmers to move their livestock between summer and winter pastures, but in the 19th century they formed part of the so-called Forgotten Highway towards distant Kuruman and beyond.

Anyone who has ever picked out a faint trace of an old pass on a mountain slope and felt moved by it will enjoy Metcalf's book.

– Toast Coetzer



The Time Trackers

by Lesley Beake (with Emily Hallinan and Michael Pattison), self-published
R200; order from
lesley@lesleybeake.co.za

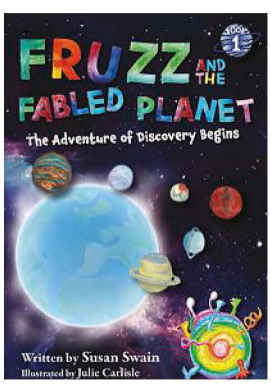
Although this book will make a great gift for a teenager with a budding interest in archaeology, it will also be appreciated by adults. I guarantee you that you'll learn something new along the way!

The first two thirds of the book is a novella in which we meet Tana, who lives on a farm in the Tankwa Karoo. Her life changes the day a team of archaeologists arrives to look at rocks. Slowly, Tana is drawn into their world and becomes fascinated by archaeology as a profession and about who the early inhabitants of this landscape were.

The final third of the book is non-fiction and delves deeper into what archaeology is, as well as other topics like biodiversity, fossils, how stone tools are dated, and the geology behind continental drift. It sounds higher grade, but don't worry, it's all explained in simple terms!

The fictional story overlaps with a real find made recently in the Tankwa by Dr Emily Hallinan and colleagues, who discovered advanced stone tools called Nubian points. Usually associated with parts of Sudan and Egypt, this toolmaking technique has never been observed in this part of Africa.

– Toast Coetzer



Fruzz and the Fabled Planet: The Adventure of Discovery Begins

by Susan Swain, self-published
R180 at takealot.com

Fruzz is a microscopic space explorer who has been searching the universe for centuries, looking for the most beautiful planet. And now that it has been found, we can experience the wonder of earth through this charming space bug's eyes.

Written in a style that reminds me of Shel Silverstein's humoristic poems for children, Fruzz talks to us in rhyming, rhythmic sentences.

Fruzz and the Fabled Planet is the first instalment in a series of children's books that build on the principle that many of the solutions for human challenges can be found in nature.

Author Susan Swain, who lives in Knysna, is a conservationist and writes in the epilogue that she draws inspiration for her stories from the natural world. The main character in this book is based on the water bear, a micro animal about half a millimetre in size that can survive in extreme conditions for decades.

Julie Carlisle, who also hails from the Southern Cape, did the playful illustrations. Children aged 6 to 12 will be entertained by this educational book, which also has word games and space for notes and drawings.

– Pierre Steyn

COST CUTTER

Look out for National Luna's new range of cost-cutting camping fridges that are lightweight, mobile, and easy on the pocket.

Capable of reaching chest-freezer temperatures (-20ºC), these budget buys offer a far more effective solution than rotary moulded, similarly priced ice boxes.

So, if you're tired of constantly worrying about finding ice, the hassle of topping up with ice, or the frustration of your food floating in melted ice, consider National Luna's new range of affordable camping fridges.

National Luna's Travel Box range was launched in late 2023 with the release of the TB20, a low-cost, portable fridge for everyday campers, outdoor enthusiasts, and compact vehicle owners looking for a space-saving fridge/freezer.

Thanks to popular demand, the TB20 concept has expanded to three additional low-cost fridge / freezer options.





The fridges can be powered by AC or DC power supply: 220V in your home or 12V in your car. The two power options open various fridge/freezer applications, including household use, poolside entertaining, camping, fishing, boating, braaing, picnicking, and more.

Thanks to its compact size, the TB20 is ideal as a 2-fridge system, where your primary fridge stores your food and frozen goods, and the TB20 carries most of your drinks. This setup lets you pack the smaller TB20 close at hand for drinks, while significantly reducing how often you open and close your main fridge for food.





All Travel Box fridges come with a free protection jacket worth up to R1 400.

The four Travel Box models are offered in addition to National Luna's wide range of international acclaimed stainless-steel fridges.



Both the 45 and 60-litre models feature a removable divider that quickly transforms the fridge from a dual control, to a single compartment.

The new Travel Box range is available at leading outdoor stores nationwide, starting at just R3 999 while stocks last. Find your nearest dealer here:

** Prices are subject to change without notice*



When things go wrong

You go on holiday to escape your worries, but sometimes a holiday brings its own ordeals. **Zigi Ekron** recalls the weekend of the milkshake…

ILLUSTRATION **NICOLENE LOUW**

Friday afternoon, time to hit the road. Our destination was Wilderness on the Garden Route. My wife and I were in the front seats of the Rav4, with my mother-in-law and our six-year-old godson Krisjan in the back. The boot was filled to the brim with our luggage and there were two bikes on a carrier – one for me and one for Krisjan.

We left Cape Town later than planned but still missed the worst of the weekend traffic on the N1. We made good progress to the Huguenot Toll Plaza and the tunnel. We cruised through Du Toitskloof and stopped at the big filling station just before Worcester, where we bought flat whites and espressos at Vida. Krisjan ordered a chocolate milkshake, thank you very much.

Our stop delayed us just long enough to enter Worcester in peak traffic. This was also when my wife announced that she wasn't feeling well. She was still recovering from an operation and the medication and coffee weren't agreeing with each other.

"I'm going to throw up," she groaned. The traffic light was red and we were caught in a sea of vehicles – buses with school kids going home for the weekend and bakkies with tired workers on the back.

I looked for a way out but there was none. Desperate hand gestures from the passenger seat told me to roll down the window. *Now*. Fortunately, the curb was low enough for the Rav: I roared over it to a side street and flung the door open just in time.

We drove on, past the farm stalls of Robertson, and turned right on the other side of Ashton, onto the R60 towards Swellendam and the N2. Krisjan didn't see much of the scenery – the mountains, yellow canola fields and blue cranes – because his eyes were trained on his iPad where he was building his own world in Minecraft.

We stopped at the BP in Buffeljags. You can't drive through here without stopping for one of their famous roosterkoek. My wife was feeling much better and we each got one – cheese and apricot jam all-round.

The sun was sitting low above the horizon and I squinted when the light hit the rearview mirror. I hummed along to Sting's "Fields of Gold". Not my usual choice of road music, but it suited the landscape.

Luck was on our side as we approached Mossel Bay. We breezed through all the stop-and-gos that have become an institution on that part of the N2. But by the time we reached the bends of the Kaaimans River Pass, it was dark.

I don't mind driving in the dark – I sometimes even enjoy it – but not that day. It had been a long, difficult week and I wanted to get to our destination. I wanted to kick off my shoes, light a fire and crack open a beer. "Don't worry, you're almost there," I told myself.

"Oh, *nooooo*!" my mother-in-law suddenly wailed from the back seat. She passed her knitting to us and before I could ask what was going on, I heard Krisjan retching. The milkshake and roosterkoek made a dramatic reappearance – the kind of unexpected comeback last seen in *Dallas* when Bobby Ewing, after an entire season of being dead, stepped out of the shower at Southfork.

Pulling over wouldn't have helped. The only solution was to drive the last 15 km. If only he could have kept it in for 15 km!

By now we had used everything at hand, even the spare roll of toilet paper we keep in the cubbyhole, and my mother-in-law's newspaper. Still, it wasn't enough.

My mother-in-law tried to wipe down what she could, but this wasn't a problem a packet of tissues from her handbag could solve. I was thankful that our seats were covered in leather and not fabric – and that I was in the front seat...

The receptionist at the holiday resort was very understanding and rushed through the formalities. She even helped us unpack the car. Krisjan doesn't cry easily, but I could see tears were close when he repeatedly muttered, "I'm sorry." His apology wasn't directed at anyone specific, but he was intensely aware of his part in the chaos.

("*O ja*, he gets motion sickness, especially when he plays on his iPad. Didn't we tell you?" Krisjan's dad explained later.)

By now we had used everything at hand, even the spare roll of toilet paper we keep in the cubbyhole, and my mother-in-law's newspaper. Still, it wasn't enough. The car needed a deep clean, immediately.

Once we'd unloaded, I turned back to Wilderness to go to the only supermarket to buy cleaning supplies and an air freshener, and maybe something stronger than beer. No such luck: It was after 8 pm and alcohol was no longer being sold.

I decided to take the partial win and walked back to the Rav. In the dull glow of a streetlight, I saw something glint near the left rear wheel. My heart sank. There, in the middle of the tyre's tread and almost level with the rubber, was the head of a roofing nail! I must have driven over it fairly recently, probably somewhere between the resort and the supermarket, because the tyre hadn't started to deflate yet.

I was utterly exhausted and didn't feel like changing the wheel. I decided to drive back to the resort, carefully and slowly, and look at the tyre the next day. But inside the grounds, there was a confusing maze of streets among milkwood trees. The signs were hard to read in the dark and before I knew what was happening, I was in a narrow dead end.

I had to reverse – there was no other way. I wished the Rav was a newer model with a rearview camera. Not that it would have helped much, because the bicycles were still on the back and would have obscured the view.

Then I heard an expensive sound – the sound of multiple calls to your insurer, money leaving your bank account, and the last bit of rest exiting your body. It wasn't a deafening crack, more like a dull thud followed by the tinkle of broken glass. The handlebar of one of the bikes had snagged a low branch and pushed the other side of the handlebar through my rear window.

I wish I could say I was calm and collected and no swear words were uttered. I wish I could say that my mood didn't shatter into a thousand pieces along with the safety glass. But alas. What I *can* say is that an unhealthy relationship developed between my credit card and the tyre shop, the auto glass shop and the car wash in George that weekend.

I recently sold the Rav, with the air freshener I bought that weekend still dangling from the rearview mirror.



Bigger game like zebra, eland and bontebok are plentiful in De Hoop Nature Reserve, but to share a sunset with a shy grey rhebok is something special.



Alive with wonder

De Hoop Nature Reserve in the Southern Cape can seem understated, but there's life and beauty in abundance if you take the time to look. Here's your guide to one of South Africa's most biodiverse destinations.

WORDS & PICTURES **SOPHIA VAN TAAK**

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Look for the herd of eland in the late afternoon at the southern end of the vlei. Or, if you're lucky, you might spot eland on the dunes! Guide Nazeer January will take you on a fun and educational walk exploring the tidal pools. De Hoop's own lawnmowers. The dunes at Koppie Alleen offer a good view of the sea. (And the whales!)

What was here before?

De Hoop has an agricultural heritage, as evidenced by the old farmhouses, grain silos and stone walls of the reception office and guest units at the Opstal. Wheat, merino, dairy cows and ostriches were farmed here – it was also a breeding farm for racehorses once.

In 1739, a *vryburger* called Frederick de Jager received 14 500 hectares from the Dutch East India Company. Later, his son Lourens took over the farm. (The back of the H-shaped Opstal is his original farmhouse.)

In 1820, Pieter Cloete bought De Hoop and added more rooms to the house. Thirty years later, a section of the farm on one side of the vlei was sold to Tieleman Myburgh. After Myburgh, a farmer called John Henry Anderson took over. In 1907, Anderson built himself a sandstone house, now known as Melkkamer Manor House. Almost half a century later, in 1947, the land on the other side of the vlei became the property of Harry Wood.

The government acquired all the land in 1985 to establish a conservation area. Currently, De Hoop is about 360 km² in size.

It's dusk, but dinner can wait. I'm lying in the fynbos on the southern edge of De Hoop Vlei. I've been surrounded by a herd of eland for so long it feels like I'm becoming one of them. At first they were wary of me, but when I lay down, they continued grazing. Now, only their silhouettes are visible.

This reserve has surprised me many times over the last few days. When I arrived, the weather was so dreary you couldn't see across the vlei. Even the wading birds looked upset by the rain. Under low clouds, every red-knobbed coot had a dark reflection. And it was quiet, as if all sound had dissolved in the water. I didn't see the flamingos at first, then I noticed their sickle-shaped necks in the haze. White with a hint of pink.

The weather cleared later in the day, but the wind still blew across the beach, sandblasting my legs when I went for a walk. For kilometres it was just me and the roar of ocean and wind in my ears.

Last night, I was woken by a herd of mountain zebras that galloped past my unit. It was over so quickly it felt like a dream. But there were hoofprints in the grass this morning. As I investigated the tracks, I saw the dew-studded web of a nursery-web spider. When her eggs hatch, she'll hide her babies underneath it.

The ostriches and bontebok also have young at the moment: prickly-feathered chicks that look like hedgehogs, and toffee-brown calves.

Wait, I can't lie here forever. I sit up. The eland have moved on. But what's that? It looks like cotton candy on stilts. My binoculars are in my car. I squint... It's a Denham's bustard!

Yes, De Hoop is definitely a place for keen eyes. Give the reserve your full attention and you'll never be bored.

Sea spray and sun

As the jackal buzzard flies, De Hoop stretches along the coast for about 50 km, from De Hoop Vlei in the west to the Cape Infanta Lighthouse in the east. From the high sand dunes at the sea, it also extends inland for about 10 km to Potberg.

There are a few dirt roads you can drive on your own – they fan out from the old farmstead, called the Opstal. The rest you can explore on a nature drive or on foot (see page 38).

Besides the terrestrial conservation area, there's also a marine protected area (MPA) that extends 5 km out to sea. The MPA is about 288 km² in size and it's where 40% of the world's southern right whales come to calve between June and November.

Koppie Alleen is on the beach, about 13 km from the Opstal. During whale season, this is where you'll get the best view of the action. Bring your binos, and don't worry – the path up the back of the dunes isn't too steep. After the birth of her calf, mom will look after it for months, producing about 500 litres of milk per day without eating anything herself. By the time the calf is ready for the long journey back to Antarctica, the cow will have lost up to 60% of her body weight! (If you want to lose weight, motherhood is clearly a better bet than wall pilates...)

You might also see pods of bottlenose dolphins riding the waves, or hammerhead sharks migrating past. If you're lucky, a few Bryde's whales will also make an appearance.

Fishing is not allowed in the MPA, nor the removal of animals for bait, so the intertidal zone is pristine. Exploring with a guide feels like a treasure hunt.

Early in the morning, a group of us join De Hoop Collection guide Nazeer January to wade into the rock pools near Koppie Alleen at low tide. The children in the group are a little freaked out by all the unfamiliar, slimy things they find in the pools, but when Naz points out the beautiful colours and muscular foot of a periwinkle, their curiosity wins out. We pick up starfish and kelp, feed anemones and look at crabs... Whatever we find, Naz has something interesting to tell us about it. A few African oystercatchers watch us from afar – we're rummaging through their pantry! Don't worry oystercatchers, we're just browsing: After we've examined a creature, we gently put it back where we found it.

The excitement peaks when Naz finds an octopus. And another. And another! A little German boy and I wade into the water to wait for one of the octopuses to reappear from beneath an overhang. He babbles away to me in German, too young to know that I don't have a clue what he's saying, but when the octopus stretches out a tentacle and wraps it around his finger, we laugh in the same language.

If you love the ocean and want some alone time, you can walk about 5 km east or west




DE HOOP





Opposite page, clockwise from top left: It's safe to swim at Hippo Pools (1,5 km from the parking at Koppie Alleen). A grey heron is (almost) perfectly camouflaged against its background. Vincenzo Neethling and Roald Grobler wear many hats during a boat trip: skipper, bird guide, waiter. . . This male ostrich sports a pair of red socks, which means he's ready for the mating dance.

Watch birds on foot

Although the birdlife around the vlei is the main drawcard, you'll also see several species elsewhere in the reserve; 260 different species have been recorded in De Hoop.

The breeding colony of Cape vultures is the southernmost in the country. You can see them in the Potberg section: A De Hoop Collection guide will drive you there – it's about 20 km along a road outside the reserve. Once you've parked, it's about an hour's steep climb to reach the viewing deck opposite the cliff where the vultures breed. Remember your binoculars or you'll just see dots in the distance. Look over your shoulder once you're on the deck – the vultures like to swoop down on you from behind.

You can also go for a guided morning walk along the vlei and in the veld. While you identify the species around you, you'll learn more about the history, vegetation and animal life in the reserve. A highlight on my walk was two water thick-knees that froze like pillars of salt when they saw us.

When you're at the Opstal, be sure to check out the weaver nests in the fig tree in the courtyard.

of Koppie Alleen. There's a long beach to the west, but don't swim there because the currents can be dangerous. To the east, there are bays and places to snorkel where you can imagine the sea is yours for the day. Hippo Pools – about 1,5 km to the east – offer a safe place to swim behind a natural rock wall.

This will float your boat

The Sout River used to flow into the Indian Ocean, but sand dunes, driven back by the wind, eventually blocked its way. In winter, the natural lake behind this dune field fills up with floodwater and groundwater.

De Hoop Vlei is home to a variety of crustaceans and fish species like Mozambique tilapia and Cape kurper. These tasty morsels, combined with sheltered nesting sites along the shores of the 19 km-long vlei, draw close to 100 different resident and migratory birds.

The vlei was declared a Ramsar site in 1975. It's the oldest of the 30 protected wetlands in South Africa, a title it shares with Barberspan near Vryburg in the North West.

As we set out on a De Hoop Collection guided boat trip, I'm grateful to each and every Ramsar committee member who made that decision. The vlei is crawling with life – it's an instant mood-booster. We've barely left the jetty when a white-throated swallow perches on the side of the boat. The two guides, Vincenzo Neethling and Roald Grobler, miss nothing with their binoculars. There's a Cape teal, because it has a pink bill, and that's a Cape shoveler – note the black bill. A breeding pair of great crested grebes glide by with their chick. (The feathers of their double crest used to be a popular decoration for hat bands.) We see a malachite kingfisher in the canopy of a milkwood tree and an African darter basking in the sun, drying its feathers.

"No, that's a white-breasted cormorant," a know-it-all chips in.

Roald is patient with the guest: "Look at the feathers on the neck – the African darter's are rufous in colour; it's also more slender than the cormorant."

The bill of a pied kingfisher glints in the sunlight. A purple heron flies up with a clap of wings. There are so many red-knobbed coots – apparently, they make up to 35% of the vlei's bird population – and they float around in big groups. Each time we get close, they scatter in a splash, as if someone shouted "Run!" and they all forgot they could fly.

While a glossy ibis tries to gulp down a terrapin, a white-throated swallow lands on the railing of the boat again. Is it the same one as earlier? Apparently they migrate to just north of the equator.

"Can you guess which bird built that enormous nest?" Roald asks, pointing to a stack of branches as tall as a pizza oven.

"A hamerkop!"

This time the know-it-all is right.

In this way, you'll explore the vlei from shore to shore, scanning the treetops for the fish-eagles you've heard calling. The sun is nice and warm and the soft lap of the waves against the boat's hull will almost lull you to sleep.

Vincenzo cruises to a quiet corner, turns off the engine and lays out a spread of snacks and drinks. A grey heron is perfectly camouflaged against the rocks on the shore – I only notice it when it turns its head. What an elegant design. Everything about the heron – and this moment – is perfect.













ESMA MARNEWICK

On Day 3 of the Whale Trail, you'll come across view after incredible view. This one is just the right place to stop for coffee and observe the cormorants.





ON OUR ANCESTORS' MENU

When the afternoon gets too hot or windy, hide out at the Origins of Early Southern Sapiens Behaviour exhibition at the Opstal. In the cool, dark room you'll learn how our ancestors lived along this coastline as far back as 120 000 years ago.

The exhibition includes objects unearthed by archaeologists during excavations in the Klipdrift cave and shelter in the reserve. There are also artefacts from the Blombos and Klasies River caves further east. By studying the pieces of bone and animal remains, archaeologists found that people here ate 14 kinds of shellfish and even angulate tortoises. Dune moles and scrub hares were regularly on the menu, and there are signs that they also ate bigger animals like grysbok, grey rhebok, quagga and oribi.

You can watch excerpts from documentaries that show how the excavations were done; see slideshows of "needles" made from bone, spearheads and necklaces made from seashells. Our ancestors weren't just handy, they also had an eye for pretty things, as you can see by the almost 100 ostrich eggshell shards decorated with abstract patterns.

FOR HIKERS AND MOUNTAIN BIKERS

Visitors can hike **two easy circular routes** (3 km and 13 km) from the Opstal. You don't need a guide. Both are on level terrain and follow the shore of the vlei for a while before swerving into the fynbos. There are also two longer hikes up Potberg: **Klipspringer** (6 km) and **Potberg** (10 km).

The **four mountain-biking trails** (hire a bike or bring your own) take you through more rugged terrain – sometimes rocky, sometimes sandy. The trails vary in length from 12 km to 30 km. Hikers are also allowed on these trails.

De Hoop's five-day **Whale Trail** (55 km) is very popular. The hike starts at Potberg and you hike through fynbos for the first two days, then along the coast to Koppie Alleen over the last three days. Accommodation on the trail is in self-catering houses with big kitchens and rooms with bunk beds – some houses are right on the beach!

Cost: To book the Whale Trail, you need to be a group of at least six hikers; maximum 12. From January to June, it costs R2 800 per person; except during the school holidays in the Western Cape when it's R3 980 per person. You also pay the higher fee in peak season, from July to December. If you want to do the slackpacking option, a porter can transport your luggage between the houses for R560 per person.

Contact: reservation.alert@capenature.co.za
087 087 8250; capenature.co.za

The new **De Hoop Vlei to Whales Trail** is a luxury walking experience. You hike about 38 km over four days with a field guide and spend your nights in De Mond Villa and the Melkkamer Manor House. Each morning you'll be driven to the start point for the day. Once you're on the trail, there's no rush – you can take photos of birds and ask the guide about the plants, insects and animals you see.

The hikers are very well looked after. Not only do you get a food parcel every day, there are also some nice surprises: Come round a bend and you might be greeted by a table with sparkling wine and snacks! In the afternoons, you can look forward to freshly baked pastries and coffee, not to mention the hearty meals.

The trail is tough enough to make you earn all your treats. On the first two days you walk along the vlei for 6 km and 15 km respectively; on the third day you walk next to the sea for 9 km (and visit a viewpoint to see vultures); on the last day it's an 8 km walk to the Tierhoek viewpoint next to the vlei.

Cost: R14 200 per person (minimum of four hikers).

Contact: 021 422 4522; dehoopcollection.com



DE HOOP VLEI TO WHALES TRAIL



HIRE A MOUNTAIN BIKE



GUIDES LOUIS TIERAS AND EDUAN OKTOBER



PHILIP LOTTERING, MARY MINTOOR AND MARCIA TYOBEKA



BIRDING BOAT TRIP



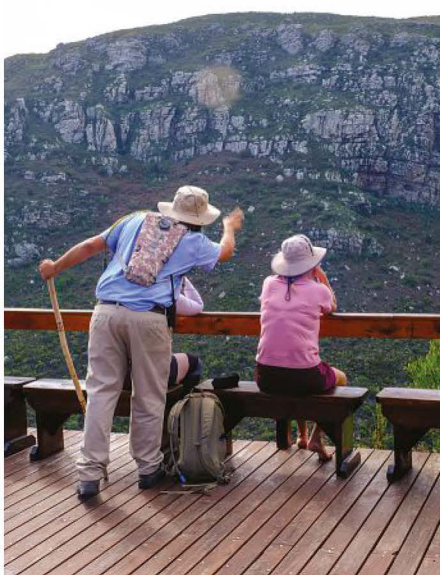
THE VAALKRANS HUT ON THE LAST NIGHT OF THE WHALE TRAIL

ACTIVITY PRICE LIST

Most guided activities take two to three hours. The boat trip, vulture experience and game drive include drinks and snacks.

Birding outing: R210 per person.
Marine walk: R235 per person.
Boat trip: R495 per person.
MTB trail: R435 per person (hire a mountain bike for the day for R350 per adult; R200 per child under 12).
Vulture experience: R650 per person.
Game drive: R495 per adult; R248 per child under 12.
Origins exhibition: Free for overnight guests; R200 per person for day visitors.

VULTURE EXPERIENCE




OPSTAL MANOR


DE MOND VILLA

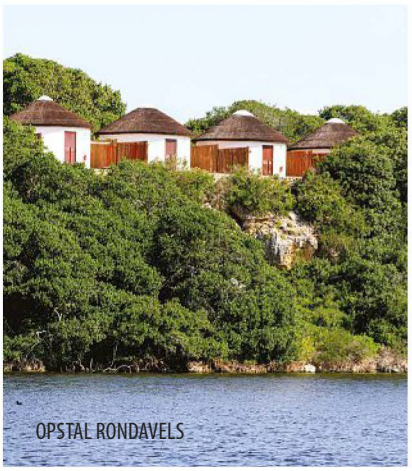
KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Where? De Hoop is 235 km from Cape Town. It's a dirt road for the final 50 km, whether you approach from Bredasdorp in the east or from Swellendam in the north.
What else? The De Hoop Collection's Opstal has a swimming pool, boules court and tennis court. The Fig Tree restaurant has Wi-fi, a fireplace, cosy couches and an impressive wine list with local and international wines.
Cost: All visitors pay a one-off conservation fee of R40 per person; free with a Wild card. Day visitors pay R50 per adult and R30 per child.
Contact: dehoopcollection.com

Sophia visited De Hoop as a guest of the De Hoop Collection.

MORE GREAT DESTINATIONS!

The De Hoop Collection manages the accommodation in the reserve. It's part of the Cape Country Routes consortium, which offers holiday packages in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape. Visit capecountryroutes.com for route ideas and accommodation options along the West Coast, in the Winelands and Overberg, along the Garden Route and in the Karoo.


OPSTAL RONDAVELS


MELKKAMER MANOR HOUSE

STAY HERE

De Hoop Collection has about 50 limewashed guest units that pay tribute to the region's traditional fisherman's cottages. Most units are set around the old farmstead and close to the restaurant. The Melkkamer farmstead consists of three houses and is located on the opposite side of the vlei – it's about a 40-minute drive from the Opstal. If the road is washed away, staff will take guests over by boat. Accommodation ranges from rondavels to manor houses. The Opstal farmstead is about 13 km from the beach and about 20 km from the Potberg section of the reserve.

OPSTAL FARMSTEAD

Self-catering: A rondavel (two single beds, communal ablution facilities and washing-up facilities – bring your own crockery and cutlery) costs R1 850 per night. The Village Cottages, Vlei Cottages, Opstal Houses and Equipped Cottages each sleep four to six guests. Each unit has a kitchen and a living area with a fireplace and an outdoor braai. Rates from R3 250 to R5 700 per night. If you want to eat at the restaurant, it's essential to book beforehand. Breakfast costs R230 per person; three-course dinner R450 per person.
With dinner and breakfast: Stay in one of the Suites (double bed, en suite bathroom, coffee station and a fridge) for R2 700 to R4 400 per person. Accommodation in the Opstal Manor Suite (sleeps six in three rooms) costs R3 900 per adult; R2 150 per child. The house has an original fireplace, built-in cupboards and yellowwood doors and overlooks a courtyard with wild fig trees.

LUXURY OPTIONS

The original sandstone farmhouse is called Melkkamer Manor House. It has four bedrooms (two double beds and four single beds) and no power – you hang out in front of the fireplace by candlelight and walk to your room with a lantern. (Don't worry, the en suite bathrooms have geysers.)

Bigger groups can book two other houses near the Manor House: The Melkkamer Foremans Cottage (sleeps six in three bedrooms; one bathroom and an outdoor shower) has an open-plan kitchen and living area, a dining table and an outdoor braai. No power, but there are gas appliances. R5 000 per night. The Melkkamer Vlei Cottage (sleeps eight in four rooms; two bathrooms) has a similar set-up. The rate is normally R6 300 per night, but this cottage is currently not available.

The more modern De Mond Villa at the bottom end of the vlei has five spacious en suite double rooms, a kitchen, braai, dining room, living area with a fireplace, and a swimming pool and stoep overlooking the vlei. Oh, and Wi-Fi! Accommodation in the Melkkamer Manor House and De Mond Villa costs from R3 900 per person (minimum five guests and two nights). Staff prepare all meals and you get cake and tea in the afternoon. Nature drive, boat trip, guided mountain-bike trail and birding outing included.

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20733_Golf

A twitcher's guide to the Garden Route

You want to plan a family holiday, but there's one problem: You have a serious birder in your ranks while the rest of you couldn't care less about scanning bushes with binoculars. What do you do? Well, you go to a place that has a bit of everything to make everyone happy: beaches, forests, mountains – and birding spots galore…

WORDS & PICTURES **EVAN NAUDÉ**



ROBBERG NATURE RESERVE

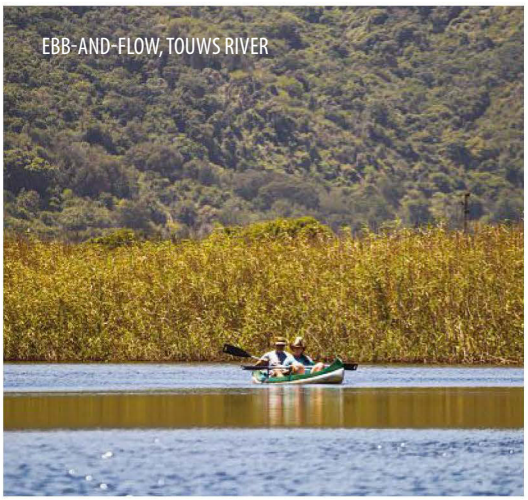




GARDEN ROUTE BOTANICAL GARDEN



DOLPHIN POINT VIEWPOINT



EBB-AND-FLOW, TOUWS RIVER

The Garden Route National Park consist of three sections: Wilderness, Knysna and Tsitsikamma. Day visitors pay R49 – R78 per person; free with a Wild card. 012 428 9111 (bookings); sanparks.org

Going on holiday with a birder requires great diplomatic skill. They don't care as much about sundowners, beach tennis and ice cream and would rather spend hours in a hide or next to a wetland. Thank goodness for the Garden Route, which has upward of 450 recorded bird species – more than half of the 856 found in South Africa – as well as plenty of other activities to keep the non-birders entertained.

This seven-day travel plan is skewed towards avian interests and includes several of the region's highlights, like the Garden Route National Park, Nature's Valley and Storms River Mouth, as well as Little Karoo attractions like Prince Alfred's Pass and Meiringspoort. You can stay longer and add more places (and bird hides) to your itinerary, but most of the planning has been done for you.

Pack your swimming trunks and bird guide, slap one of those "Birder on Board" stickers to your car and off you go!

DAY 1

George & Wilderness

Get up early so you can be at the **Garden Route Botanical Garden** at 8 am when the gates open. Walk the **Mushroom Meander**. Birders can sit next to the dam to see African darter, reed cormorant and brown-hooded kingfishers, and you can all have breakfast at the **Il Giardino coffee shop**.

Return to Courtenay Street and turn off to **Van Rensburgs Foods** to buy braai meat and boerewors for tonight – and biltong for padkos. Next up is the **Outeniqua Transport Museum** where you can see a collection of classic cars, restored ox-wagons and trains.

Now drive to Wilderness along the N2. On the Kaaimans River Pass, the Indian Ocean will unfold before you. Pull over at **Dolphin Point** for a photo.

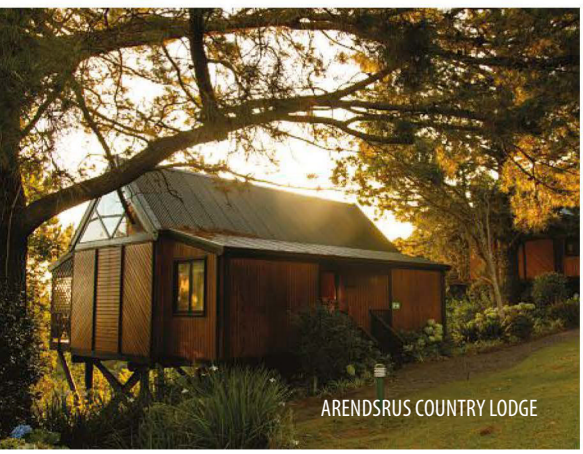
In Wilderness, get a table with a sea view at **Salina's Beach Restaurant** next to the mouth of the Touws River and tuck into fish and chips (R130) or seafood curry (R260).

Spend the afternoon in the Wilderness section of the **Garden Route National Park**. Hire a canoe (R107 per hour) at the **Ebb-and-Flow** rest camp and paddle upstream, or walk the **Half-Collared Kingfisher Trail** (7 km) through an indigenous forest to a waterfall. Have a swim in the river pool.

You'll see birds on both of the outings above, but birders who want to sit in perfect silence can drive to the **Malachite Hide** next to Bo-Langvlei, or to the **Rondevlei Hide**.

Once the sun has set, you can all gather at your chalet next to the Touws River and wait for the frog choir to sing.







DO THIS

Powervan George
This renovated Transnet rail inspection trolley departs daily from the Outeniqua Transport Museum. Climb aboard and travel along the railway line up Montagu Pass to a viewpoint and picnic site.
Departure times: Weekdays at 9 am and noon; Saturdays and public holidays at 8.30 am, 9 am, noon and 12.30 pm. All departure times are half an hour later in winter (1 June to 30 August). Closed on Sundays. The outing takes 2,5 hours.
Cost: R220 per person (bring your own picnic basket).
Contact: 082 490 5627
powervan.co.za

Wilderness River Safaris
Go for a cruise on the Touws River. In summer, the boat departs from the day visitor area in the Ebb-and-Flow rest camp every two hours and travels along the river to the lagoon. (Tours are less frequent in winter.) Birders can book beforehand to go look for birds like half-collared kingfisher, African swamphen and purple heron early in the morning.
Cost: R250 per adult; R150 per child.
Contact: 082 440 9807
wildriversafaris.co.za

Guided birding tour
Want to tick some rare Garden Route species? Spend a morning with bird guide Ben Fouché.
Cost: Tours take about 4 – 5 hours; rates from R1 700 for the first two people, plus R500 per extra person.
Contact: 082 555 8122
outdoorheartbeat.com

SPECIALS FOR YOUR LIST

Garden Route Botanical Garden
- Forest buzzard
- Knysna warbler
- Chorister robin-chat
- Olive thrush
- Orange-breasted sunbird

Wilderness
- Little bittern
- Knysna turaco
- Malachite kingfisher
- Goliath heron
- Giant kingfisher

Il Giardino 081 896 5966
Van Rensburgs Foods
044 874 2045
Outeniqua Transport Museum
044 801 8289 (R20 per adult; R16 for kids under 12)
Salina's Beach Restaurant
044 877 0001; salinas.co.za
Garden Route Botanical Garden
044 874 1558 (R25 per adult; R10 per child)

STAY HERE

ArendsRus Country Lodge
This lodge at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains about 20 km outside George is surrounded by green hills. Camping stands, each with a private bathroom, from R200 per person. Self-catering chalets from R2 000 per night for four people. Lodge rooms from R600 per person. Luxury tents for two people from R800 per person.
Contact: 044 050 0256
arendsrus.co.za

Ebb-and-Flow rest camp
This rest camp in the Wilderness section of the Garden Route National Park is on the banks of the Touws River. Camping from R275 per night for two people; plus R114 per extra adult and R57 per child (max six people per stand). Rondavels from R540 per night for two people (communal bathrooms); from R640 per night with a private bathroom. Huts sharing a communal kitchen from R1 032 per night for two people. Self-catering cottages from R2 150 per night for four people.
Contact: 044 877 1197 (reception)
sanparks.org



KNYSNA HEADS LOOKOUT POINT

SPECIALS FOR YOUR LIST

Knysna
- Pied avocet
- Scaly-throated honeyguide
- Ruff
- Little stint
- Red-billed teal

Nature's Valley
- Narina trogon
- Forest canary
- Lemon dove
- Cape cormorant
- White-fronted plover



NATURE'S VALLEY

STAY HERE

The **Nature's Valley rest camp** on the banks of the Groot River has campsites, huts with communal bathrooms and kitchens, and self-catering chalets that sleep two adults and two children on a sleeper couch.

Birders should keep their eyes peeled – the rest camp is one of only a few places where the shy African finfoot is sometimes seen.

Camping from R286 per night for two people. Huts from R671 per night for two people. Chalets from R1 616 per night for two people; R165 per extra child.
Contact: 044 531 6700 (reception)

DO THIS

Wild Oats Community Farmers' Market
A Saturday institution in Sedgefield. Everything sold here is locally made or grown – biscuits, rusks, braai meat, biltong, beauty products, plants, fynbos flowers…
Opening times: Saturdays from 7.30 am to noon (summer); 8 am to noon (winter).
Where? Next to the Engen filling station just west of town.
Contact: 082 376 5020; wildoatsmarket.co.za

The Motorcycle Room 079 497 4723
themotorcycleroom.co.za (R100 per adult, R50 per pensioner or schoolchild)
île de païn 044 302 5705; iledepain.co.za
Thyme & Again 044 535 9432
thyme-and-again.co.za
Blue Rocks Café 044 020 0485

DAY 2

Knysna & Nature's Valley

En route to Knysna, turn off the N2 onto Swartvlei Beach Road and stop next to the Sedgefield Lagoon. Look for red-billed teal, Cape shoveler, pied avocet and little stint.

Now that the birder is happy, go look at the 150 motorcycles at **The Motorcycle Room** on Thesen Island. Afterwards, grab a cappuccino at **île de païn** around the corner.

Travel along George Rex Drive to the **Knysna Heads**, but first stop at the **Woodbourne salt pan** next to the Knysna Lagoon. If you didn't stop at the Sedgefield Lagoon, you can see many of the same species here.

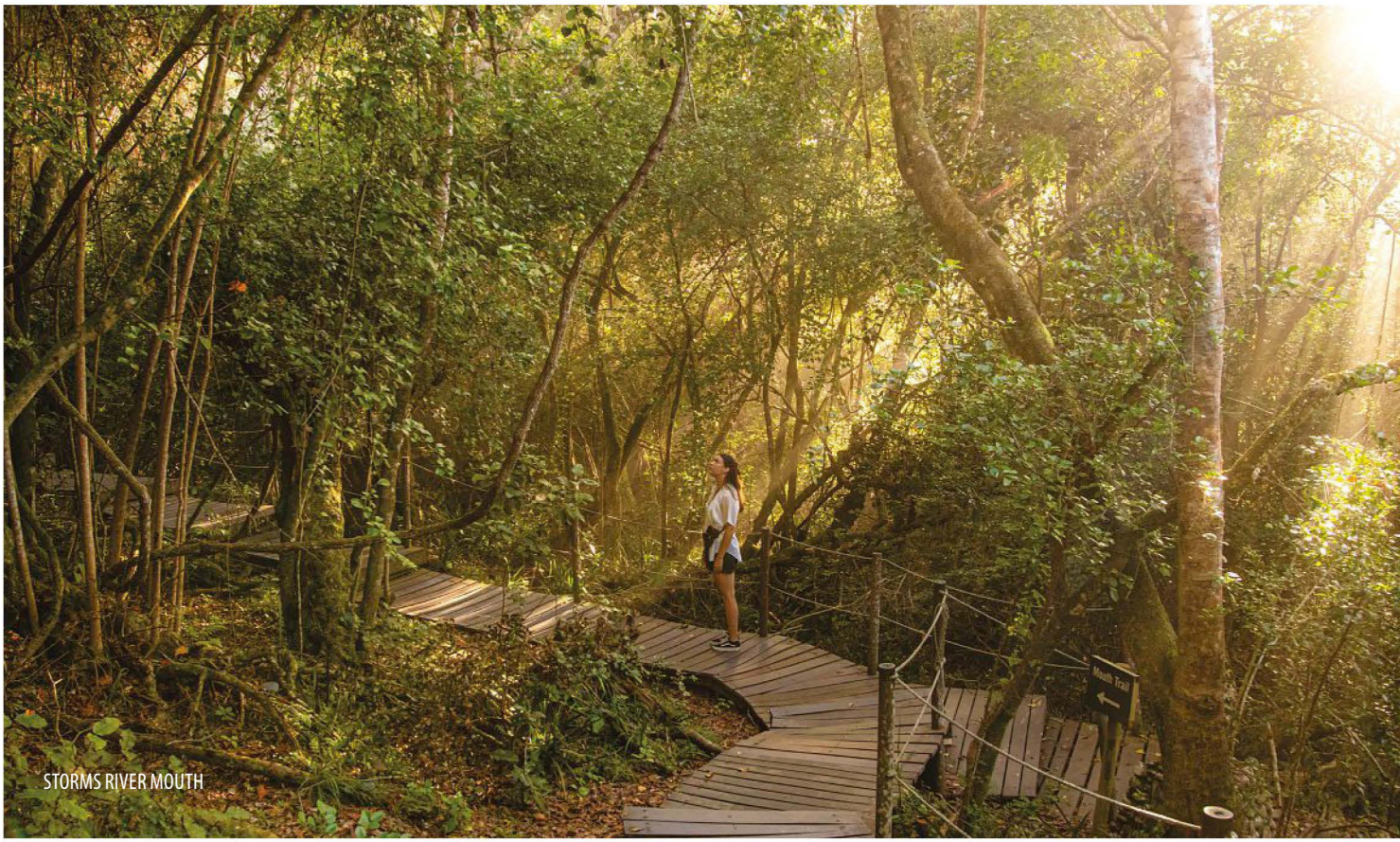
There's a viewpoint at the top of Coney Glen Road where you can see the ocean, the lagoon and the narrow channel between the Heads.

Say goodbye to the sea and return to the N2. Drive east past Plett (don't worry, you'll come back) and stop at **Thyme & Again farm stall** for lunch. There are toasted sandwiches (from R40), burgers (from R95) and pies (R66) on the menu.

The holiday village of Nature's Valley is surrounded by forest. While the others head to the beach, the birders can wander the streets and scan the canopy for forest specials like African dusky flycatcher and yellow-throated woodland warbler. In summer you can see African emerald cuckoo and red-chested cuckoo.

Hike the **Salt River Trail** (2,5 km) along the coast to the mouth of the Salt River, where you'll find a hidden beach. Look for African oystercatcher and Cape gannets behind the waves.

Later, go to the Nature's Valley Trading Store to stock up on firewood, braai meat and ice. Or head to **Blue Rocks Café**, the only restaurant in town, and listen as the birdsong falls silent in the surrounding forest.


STORMS RIVER MOUTH

DAY 3

Tsitsikamma & Storms River

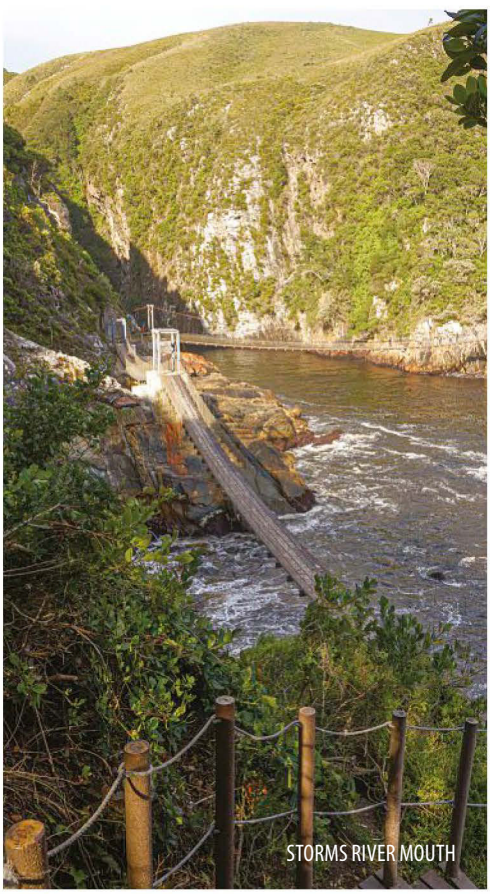
Set aside the whole day to explore the Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park. First, a stop at **Marilyn's 60's Diner** in Storms River Village. This restaurant has neon lights, a jukebox and memorabilia from the days of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis and James Dean. If it's lunchtime, order a burger (from R76) with a milkshake (R60) and a banana split (R50) for dessert. You can also taste a range of beers at the **Tsitsikamma Micro Brewery** next door.

Go see the **Tsitsikamma Big Tree** next to the N2 outside Storms River. Take photos of the 800-year-old, 40 m-tall Outeniqua yellowwood and look for Knysna turaco, African olive pigeon and Knysna woodpecker.

Then drive to **Storms River Mouth rest camp**. Park your vehicle and do the 2 km trail to the river mouth where the iconic 77 m suspension bridge spans the chasm.

Walk across and look for the path from the beach up the hill. Follow it for 600 m to a deck with a majestic view.

Marilyn's 60's Diner ✆ 042 281 1711
Tsitsikamma Micro Brewery
✆ 042 281 1711


STORMS RIVER MOUTH

SPECIALS FOR YOUR LIST

- Victorin's warbler
- Forest buzzard
- Chorister robin-chat
- Knysna woodpecker

STAY HERE

Storms River Mouth rest camp
Wedged between the waves and the forest. Camping from R444 per night for two people; R114 per extra adult and R57 per child (max six people per stand). There's a range of accommodation options, from huts with communal facilities (from R766 per night for two people) to self-catering units that sleep up to eight people (from R1 443 per night for two).

There are three hiking trails: The Loerie (1 km) and Blue Duiker (3,7 km) cut through the forest and the Waterfall Trail (6 km; about three hours) runs along the first 3 km of the Otter Trail to where a waterfall tumbles into the ocean.
Contact: ✆ 042 281 1607 (reception)

SPECIALS FOR YOUR LIST

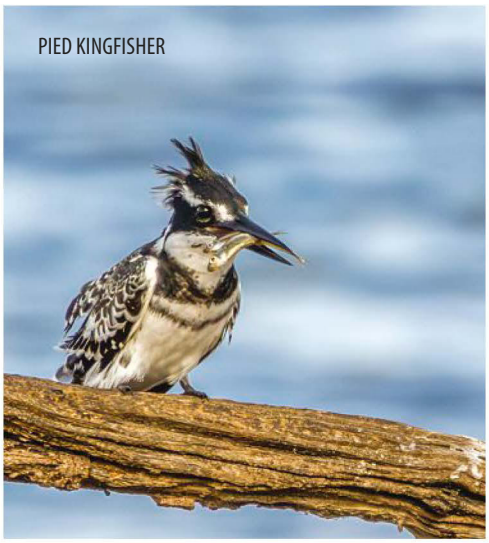
- Karoo prinia
- Southern tchagra
- Cape rock-thrush
- Red-necked spurfowl
- Cape gannet

Nice Neighbour Café
044 011 0354
Mungo Mill 044 533 1395
mungo.co.za

STAY HERE

Robberg Nature Reserve
The Fountain Shack has four bunk beds in an open-plan room with solar-powered lights, a basic kitchen and an outdoor bathroom. The Shack is technically on the Point Circuit (9,2 km), which loops around the entire peninsula, but you can get there by going down the dune on the Witsand Circuit and following the trail to the left. Either way, it's a fairly strenuous hike in. You have to bring your own supplies, charcoal and bedding, and take out all your rubbish. The hut sleeps eight people and costs R1 160 per night for four people; plus R180 per extra person.
Rates: Conservation fee R65 per adult; R45 per child; free with a Wild card.
Contact: 087 087 3937 (Robberg); 087 087 8250 (bookings); capenature.co.za

Bitou Biocamp
This small luxury bush camp is on the bank of the Bitou River, just east of Wittedrif, with almost no impact on the environment. It's in a quiet wilderness among milkwood trees, a world away from Plett's busy shops and beaches. Guests share a bathroom with (hot) bucket showers. Hike, paddle, ride your mountain bike and see how many kingfishers you can tick off your list.
Rate: R950 per person with breakfast and dinner (minimum six people; maximum 10 people; minimum two-night stay).
Contact: 082 724 0442
bhejane.com


PIED KINGFISHER
BEN FOUCHÉ


SWIFT TERNS
BEN FOUCHÉ

DAY 4

Plettenberg Bay

This morning you'll head west back to Plettenberg Bay. Just before you get there, turn right into Old Nick Village and get a table at the **Nice Neighbour Café** for brunch. Browse the shops (curios, ceramic studio, chocolatier, nursery) and make sure to visit the **Mungo Mill**. Stroll around the raised walkway in the beautiful factory and watch as 16 looms weave fabric for towels, bedding and blankets.

Carry on to Plett and turn left into Beacon Way. Stop at the Market Square shopping centre and fill your picnic basket. Then head to **Robberg Nature Reserve**, which encompasses the whole peninsula that protects Plett from the brunt of the Indian Ocean. Robberg is spectacular, with fynbos, beach and sandstone cliff habitats that are home to plenty of birds.

There are a few hiking trails in the reserve, but we recommend the Witsand Circuit (5,5 km), which gives you a taste of everything Robberg has to offer. You walk along the cliffs on the northern side of the peninsula before descending through a dune field to The Island – an outcrop connected to the peninsula by a wide beach. Picnic time! From there, the trail returns to the parking area.

Plett has plenty of places to stay – almost every house is an Airbnb – but the most unique place is the Fountain Shack in Robberg Nature Reserve. It's close to The Island and you have to hike in with all your supplies. But once the reserve gates close, you have the whole place to yourself. You might see a white-chinned petrel or even a (slightly lost) shy albatross from your front door!


ROBBERG



PRINCE ALFRED'S PASS

DAY 5

Prince Alfred's Pass & Meiringspoort

You'll have a long day in the car, so have a good breakfast before you head to **Prince Alfred's Pass**. This pass, built between 1860 and 1866, is one of Thomas Bain's masterpieces. You can still see some of his stone walls on the steep sections.

As you climb, you'll leave the forest behind and enter mountain fynbos. Pull over along the way and look for white-starred robin, orange-breasted sunbird and Cape grassbird. Pale chanting goshawks and black-winged kites might soar overhead.

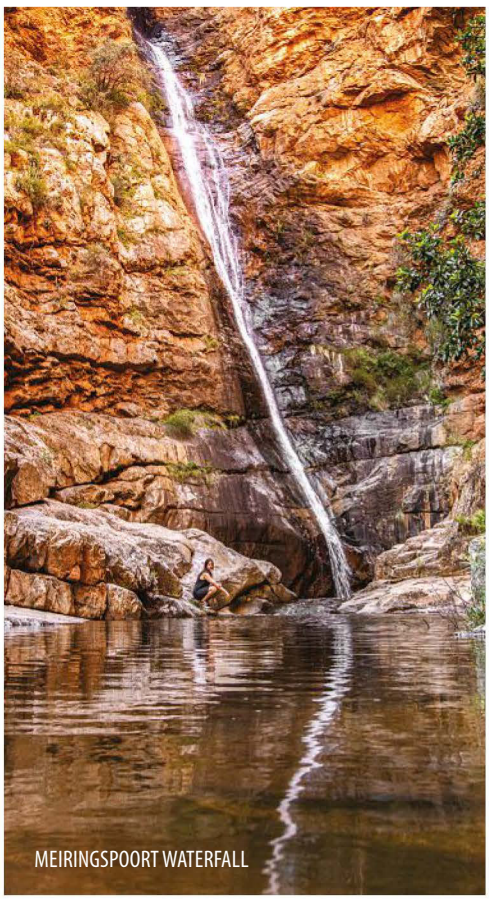
Have tea and roosterkoek at **Die Plaaskind Padstal** in De Vlugt, about halfway up the pass. Several historical buildings surround the farm stall – they were part of the settlement where Bain lived while constructing the pass. Some are self-catering units you can rent, including Bain's cottage behind the farm stall.

At the top of the pass, drive past Avontuur (home of Dalene Matthee's Fiela Komoetie) and on to Uniondale. Go see the **old watermill** next to the showground in Van Riebeeck Street. The mill dates from 1852 and is the biggest of its kind in the southern hemisphere. It's also a national monument.

In De Rust, pop into the **Route 62 Wine Shop** (look for the pink elephant next to the main road), which stocks a variety of local wines, dried fruit, jams and olives. Then head north on the N12 and experience the prettiest stretch of highway in South Africa: **Meiringspoort**.

Drive slowly, take photos of the high cliffs and count the number of times you cross the Groot River (26!). Look for malachite and giant kingfishers next to the water. When you're about halfway, turn into the parking area and go see the 60 m-high waterfall where a mermaid called Eporia is said to live. Birders can look for malachite sunbird, sombre greenbul and cardinal woodpecker.

Drive back slowly and watch as alpine swifts and African black swifts swoop in the dusk.



MEIRINGSPOORT WATERFALL



DIE PLAASKIND PADSTAL

SPECIALS FOR YOUR LIST

Prince Alfred's Pass
- Grey cuckooshrike
- Narina trogon
- Victorin's warbler
- Karoo scrub-robin
- Forest buzzard

Meiringspoort
- Verreaux's eagle
- Fairy flycatcher
- Cape siskin
- African black duck
- Ground woodpecker

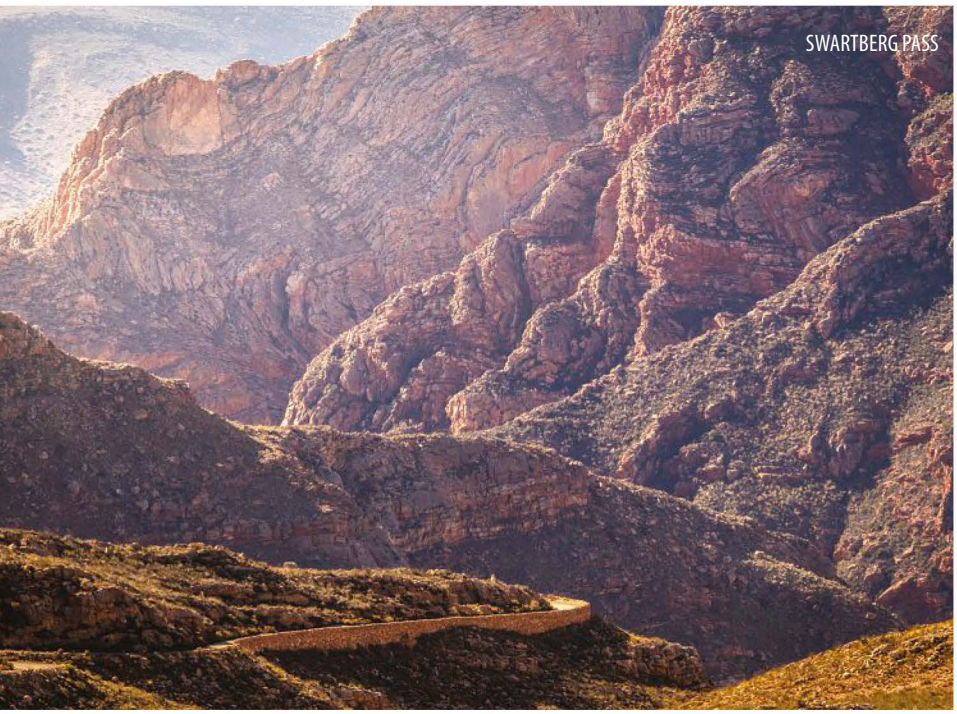
Die Plaaskind Padstal 044 050 0266; princealfredpass.co.za
Route 62 Wine Shop 082 786 8491

STAY HERE

Meijer's Rust
This guest farm is 3 km outside De Rust in a quiet valley. As you drive into the farmyard, it's like the Swartberg wraps its arms around you. Sip coffee on the stoep, swim in the river and go for afternoon strolls among the mountain aloes.

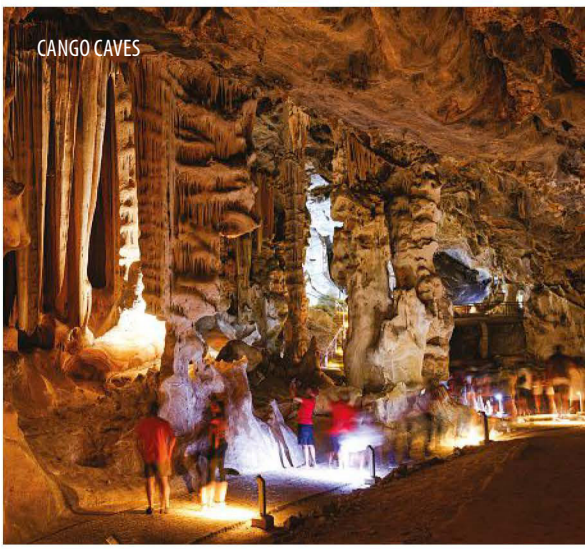
There are four twin-sleeper self-catering chalets, each with a kitchen (no stove) and braai. The Milk Barn sleeps four people (one bedroom and two single beds in the living area). At the top of the mountain, 2 km from the farmstead, is a remote and romantic stone house that dates from the 1800s. There are also three camping stands for up to 10 people each.
Rates: Camping R300 per night for two people. Self-catering from R950 per night for two people.
Contact: 044 241 2420
meijersrust.co.za

Varkenskraal
The farm is 4 km from De Rust in Meiringspoort. The Werkershuisie and Voerstal are luxury self-catering units (each sleeps four) with views of the vineyards.
Rates: From R595 per person.
Contact: 044 241 2352
varkenskraal.co.za


SWARTBERG PASS


KAROO KORHAAN

GALLO/GETTYIMAGES.COM


CANGO CAVES

STAY HERE

Rooiberg Lodge
This lodge, in the Assegaay Bosch Nature Reserve (140 km²), has various accommodation options, even for those who just want a quick overnight spot. There are also hiking, MTB and 4x4 trails and you can book a nature drive or an olive tour.
Rates: Camping R300 per night for two people. Rooms (two to eight people) with communal facilities from R540 per night for two people. Luxury rooms (two or four people) from R1 620 per night for two people, with breakfast. Self-catering chalets (two or four people) from R2 045 per night for two people. Self-catering villa from R3 635 per night for two people.
Contact: 087 802 3578
rooiberglodge.co.za

SPECIALS FOR YOUR LIST
- Karoo korhaan
- Karoo long-billed lark
- Fynbos buttonquail
- Cape penduline tit
- Namaqua warbler

DAY 6

Swartberg Pass & Rooiberg Pass

Start the day with a Full House breakfast (R125) at **Pluim Eatery** in De Rust, then drive through Oudtshoorn towards the Swartberg. Time to experience one of the country's most dramatic dirt road passes traversable in a sedan.

The summit of the Swartberg Pass (also built by Bain) is at 1 583 m above sea level. Stop and take a photo. The Little Karoo is on one side and the Great Karoo stretches to the horizon on the other. Take a short walk – you might see a Cape rockjumper or sentinel rock-thrush. Scan the thermals for martial eagle, Verreaux's eagle and peregrine falcon.

Turn around, drive down the pass and pull over at **Kobus se Gat** for lunch. They're known for their roosterkoek. The curried mince is a favourite, but jam and cheese and boerewors and relish are also winners. Now you're ready for the next mountain pass!

Follow the R62 to Calitzdorp, turn south across the Gamka River and head up the 797 m-high **Rooiberg Pass**, which will eventually deliver you to Van Wyksdorp.

On the pass, your family won't mind all the stops to check whether that little brown job is a dusky sunbird or a protea canary. The views of the Swartberg to the north and the Gamkaberg to the east will keep their cellphone cameras clicking.

Pluim Eatery 083 305 9974
Kobus se Gat 064 929 4408
swartbergexperience.co.za

DO THIS

Ride down the pass
You can hire a mountain bike at Kobus se Gat and be driven up the Swartberg Pass so you can ride 14 km back to the restaurant, where honeybush tea and roosterkoek will be waiting.
Cost: R1 100 per person for about 2,5 hours.

Explore the Cango Caves
Family members who don't want to spend hours looking for LBJs can see these famous caves. Choose the Heritage tour for a comfortable stroll to all of the biggest chambers, or sign up for the Adventure option, which will have you squeezing through the infamous Devil's Chimney and Devil's Postbox.
Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 4 pm.
Cost: Heritage tour (1 hour): R150 per adult; R100 per child. Adventure tour (1,5 hours): R220 per adult; R150 per child.
Contact: 044 272 7410; cango-caves.co.za


ROLAND RUDD HIDE

ESMA MARNEWICK

DAY 7

Still Bay

Drive from Van Wyksdorp to Riversdale and grab a pie at **Ou Meul** – sustenance for the drive to Still Bay.

Buy a bottle of gin for sundowners at the **Inverroche Distillery** before you enter town. Pop in at the tourism office in Langenhoven Street in Still Bay West. It has two unique attractions: a small **museum** where you can see important archaeological finds from nearby Blombos Cave, and a pool full of longfin eels, which have lived here for more than 200 years! The Palinggat Homestead (now the tourism office) was built by Andries de Jager in 1814. Over the years, his family tamed the eels. They're fed daily at 11 am (except Sundays) and it's the only time you can see them properly – see below.

Birders can look for southern double-collared sunbird, malachite sunbird, African hoopoe and pied kingfisher in the garden.

Have lunch at **Coffee & Cream** on the corner of Church Street and Keurboom Avenue – try the bobotie pancake (R75) or bacon halloumi stack (R125). Afterwards, go relax next to the Goukou Lagoon.

Later that afternoon, follow Wege Street to the **Roland Rudd bird hide** next to the last oxidation pond of the Still Bay sewage works. It sounds a bit gross but this is a birding hotspot. Look for black-crowned night heron, black-winged stilt and Levaillant's cisticola while your family goes for a walk on Skulpiesbaai beach. They can also go explore the rock pools between the **ancient fish traps**, used by the Khoisan and later by colonists. The traps are a national monument.

Set aside enough time to explore the coastal forest and milkwood groves in Skulpiesbaai Nature Reserve – it's a good place to see southern tchagra and bokmakierie.

Once you're back at your accommodation, with your swimming gear hung up to dry and your binos back in their bag, open that bottle of gin and raise a glass to the Garden Route!


STILL BAY WEST


STROOIS

DO THIS

Get a map of the hiking trails in and around Still Bay from the tourism office. There are short trails on the banks of the Goukou River, in Skulpiesbaai and Geelkrans nature reserves, and in the Pauline Böhnen Nature Reserve. You can also walk to Jongensfontein along the coast (11 km). All the trails offer good birding opportunities to see waders, seabirds and fynbos specials.

The eels are fed daily at 11am – be there at 10.45 am. It costs R25 per adult and R15 per child. The entrance fee for the museum is R10 per adult and R5 per child.

SPECIALS FOR YOUR LIST

- Flamingo
- Black-crowned night heron
- Purple heron
- Black-necked grebe
- Osprey

GouKou Restaurant & Deli
028 880 0040
Ou Meul 028 713 4065
oumeul.co.za
Inverroche 028 754 2442
inverroche.com
Coffee & Cream 076 666 5237

STAY HERE

Stroois

This thatched self-catering unit is in the Bosbokduin Private Nature Reserve between Still Bay and Jongensfontein. Ocean views from the stoep and braai! The reserve is within walking distance of Skulpiesbaai and the Roland Rudd bird hide. Stroois sleeps four people – two adults and two children. The unit is part of a bigger beach house. A reed fence ensures privacy, but it can get busy during the holiday season.
Contact: lekkeslaap.co.za
(There's a variety of self-catering houses available in Bosbokduin.)



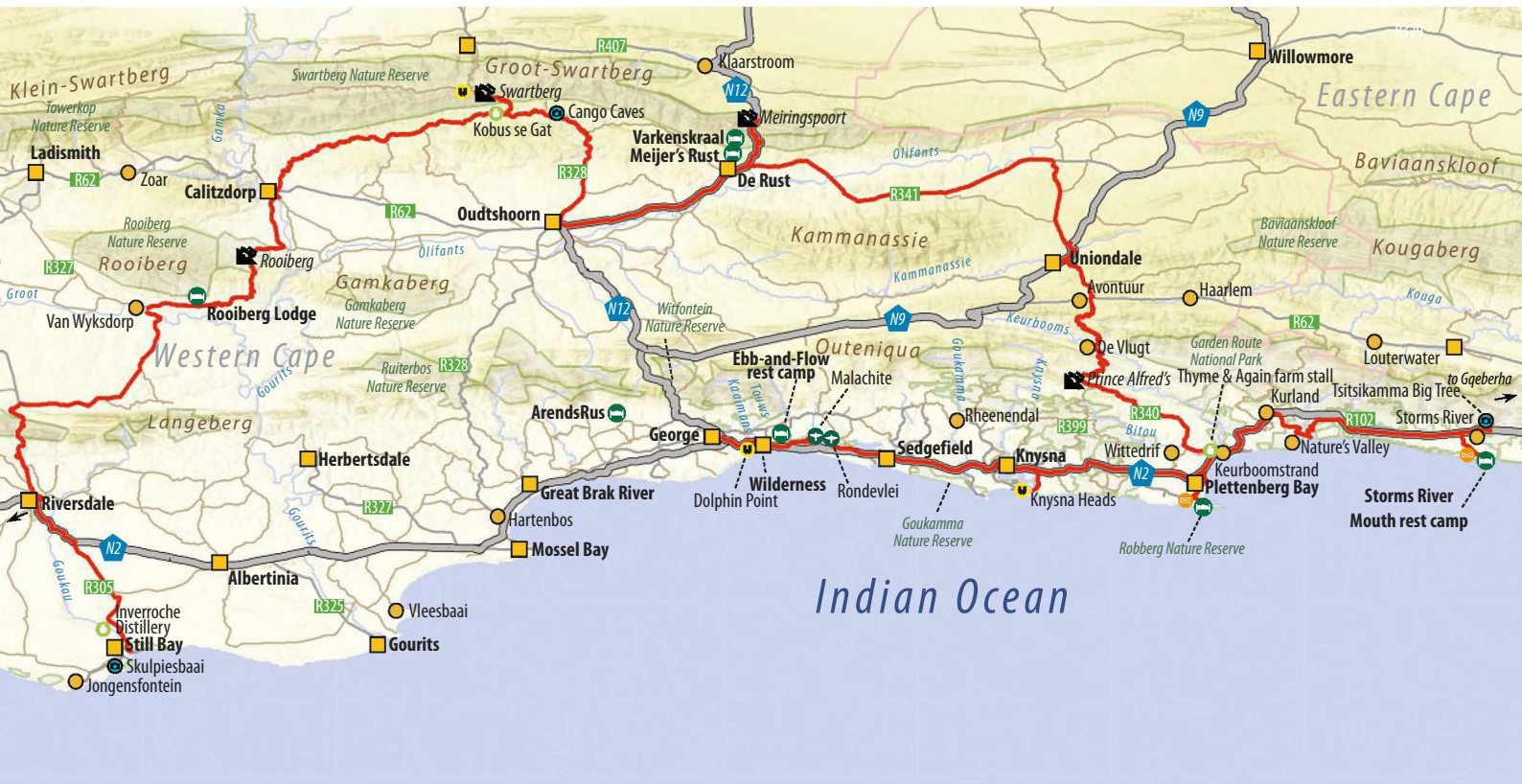
GARDEN ROUTE BOTANICAL GARDEN BIRD HIDE

TOURISM OFFICES

George & Wilderness
044 801 9295; visitgeorge.co.za
Knysna & Sedgefield
044 382 5510; visitknysna.co.za
Plettenberg Bay & Nature's Valley
044 533 4065; plett-tourism.co.za
Oudtshoorn & De Rust
044 279 2532; oudtshoorn.com
Still Bay
028 754 2602; stilbaaitourism.co.za

Evan did this tour as a guest of BirdLife South Africa. Visit gobirding.birdlife.org.za for a list of 29 birding spots and birding lists for the Garden Route and Little Karoo.

Source for statistics in the article: birdlife.org.za





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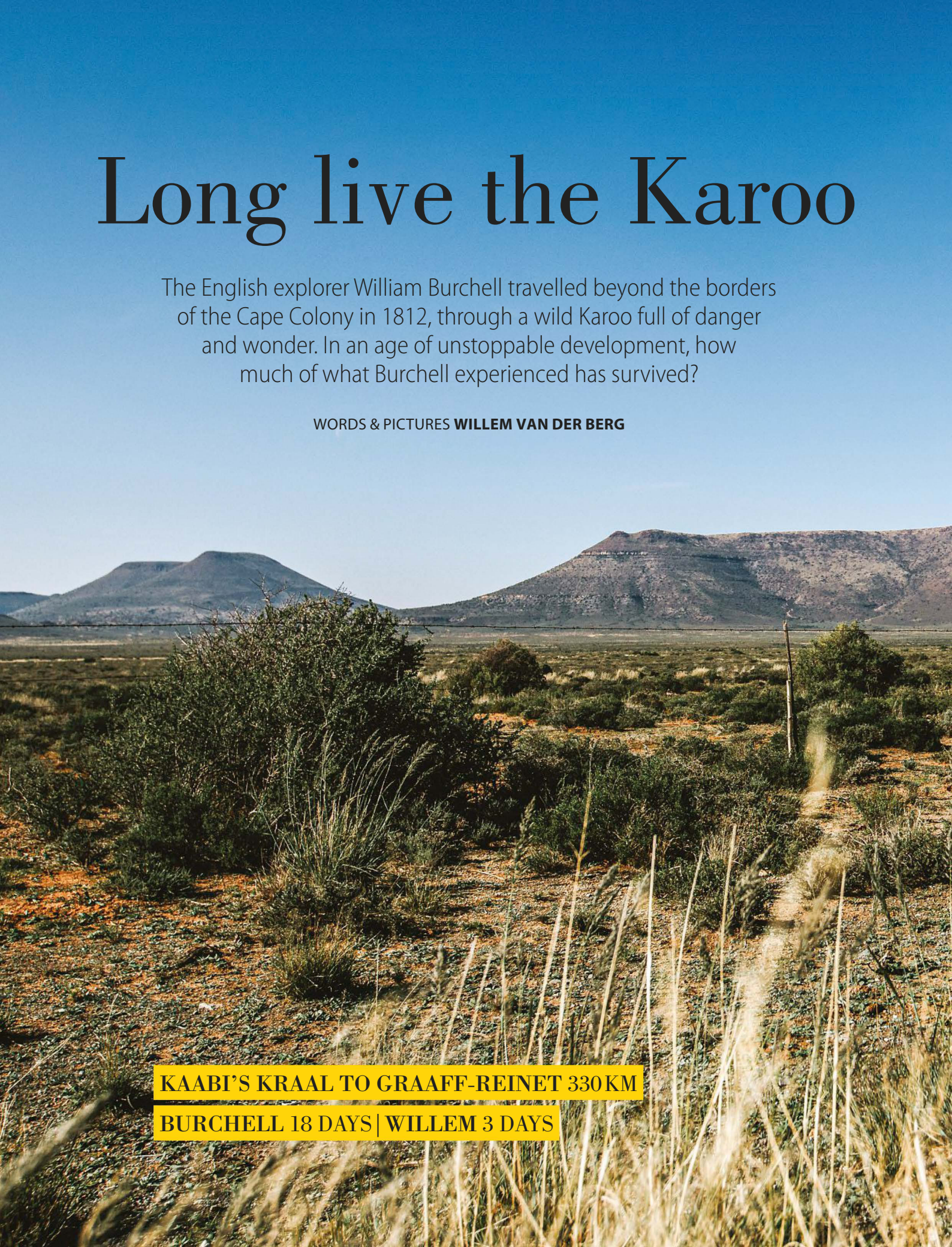
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Long live the Karoo

The English explorer William Burchell travelled beyond the borders of the Cape Colony in 1812, through a wild Karoo full of danger and wonder. In an age of unstoppable development, how much of what Burchell experienced has survived?

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**



KAABI'S KRAAL TO GRAAFF-REINET 330 KM

BURCHELL 18 DAYS | WILLEM 3 DAYS



"At night I sat down with the family to a hot supper of mutton; to which were added, a salad of cucumbers, and a large bowl of milk: this last being usually the concluding dish at a boor's supper," wrote Burchell about his stay with the Vermeulens at the foot of Klein Tafelberg.

The remains of Kaabi's kraal, the Bushman settlement where William Burchell camped from 5 to 9 March in 1812, are next to the N12 between Britstown and Strydenburg. Burchell watched the Bushmen dancing in the firelight and he learnt that they had no interest in his European possessions or stories. They didn't fear death, nor did they fear God. Their eyesight was as keen as a telescope and their hospitality warmed his heart. "They often supplied a source of mirth and good humour, and always contributed to our mutual confidence," Burchell wrote.

The construction of the N12 probably erased many of the footprints left by Captain Kaabi and the 120 people under his command. The almost invisible remains of their lives lie scattered at my feet in the grass.

How many of these Bushman kraals have been destroyed by "progress"? How many of their whetstones have ended up in the foundations of cellphone towers, windmills and the corner posts of border fences?

Is there anything left of Kaabi and his people?

Onwards to Graaff-Reinet

I've been following Burchell's detailed descriptions and the map in his book *Travels in the interior of Southern Africa* (*Volume 2*). From Kaabi's kraal, Burchell and his small company trekked further up the course of the Brak River. On this section of the journey – between Klaarwater (modern-day Griekwastad) and Graaff-Reinet (where I'm also headed) – they rode on horses and oxen to travel faster. It was a wild and unfamiliar world for the Europeans, beyond the borders of the Cape Colony.

I'm also trying to follow the Brak River, but it's almost impossible. The closest you can get to Burchell's route is along the Renostervlei dirt road that runs from the N12 to De Aar.

Burchell wrote: "In every quarter, innumerable herds of wild animals, quietly grazing like tame cattle. Quakkas, springbucks, kannas [eland] and hartebeests on all sides, was a sight we had never before seen during our whole journey."

Lions were also abundant – the travellers often saw their tracks, and at night they heard roaring in the darkness.

One morning, four Bushmen trackers came to greet the party and invited Burchell and his group to their kraal, which was situated on a plain to the west of an interesting-looking mountain. Of the mountain, Burchell wrote: "Very remarkable by the perfect regularity of its form, and by having at each end a small, but equally high, mountain standing in advance, and apparently separated from it down to the base."

Burchell marked it as "Bushman Table Mountain" on his map; these days it's called Renosterberg.

At the kraal, they met the Bushman leader who wore a crow's skull in his hair. Burchell and his people couldn't understand his name, so they called him Kraaikop.

The Karoo Kooi guest farm, about 15 km west of De Aar, can't be far from where Kraaikop's kraal once stood. That's where I book in for the night. A big, friendly man welcomes me. His name is De Waal Venter. "You look like someone doing something interesting," he says.

I tell him about Burchell's travels, and about Kraaikop and his people. De Waal immediately wants to know more. That night we compare our maps in his study. It's difficult to pinpoint the exact location of the kraal, but we know that it has to be very close to the northern corner of De Waal's farm.

"There's rock art in the area," he says. "I'll take you there tomorrow so you can see if you recognise anything from Burchell's descriptions."

The next morning, De Waal is bursting with Burchell stories. "I spent all night reading about him," he says.

De Waal is particularly interested in the plant and animal specimens that Burchell took back to England, where they're now preserved in museums. "I'd love to see those old Karoo *bossies*..." he muses.

De Waal likes *bossies*. As we drive through the veld, he pulls over to show me different species, like the anchor Karoo bush with its bright yellow flowerheads ("They're poisonous when they sprout so the sheep won't eat them, which gives them a chance to grow.") and spekbos, which the kudus like to devour, much to De Waal's annoyance.

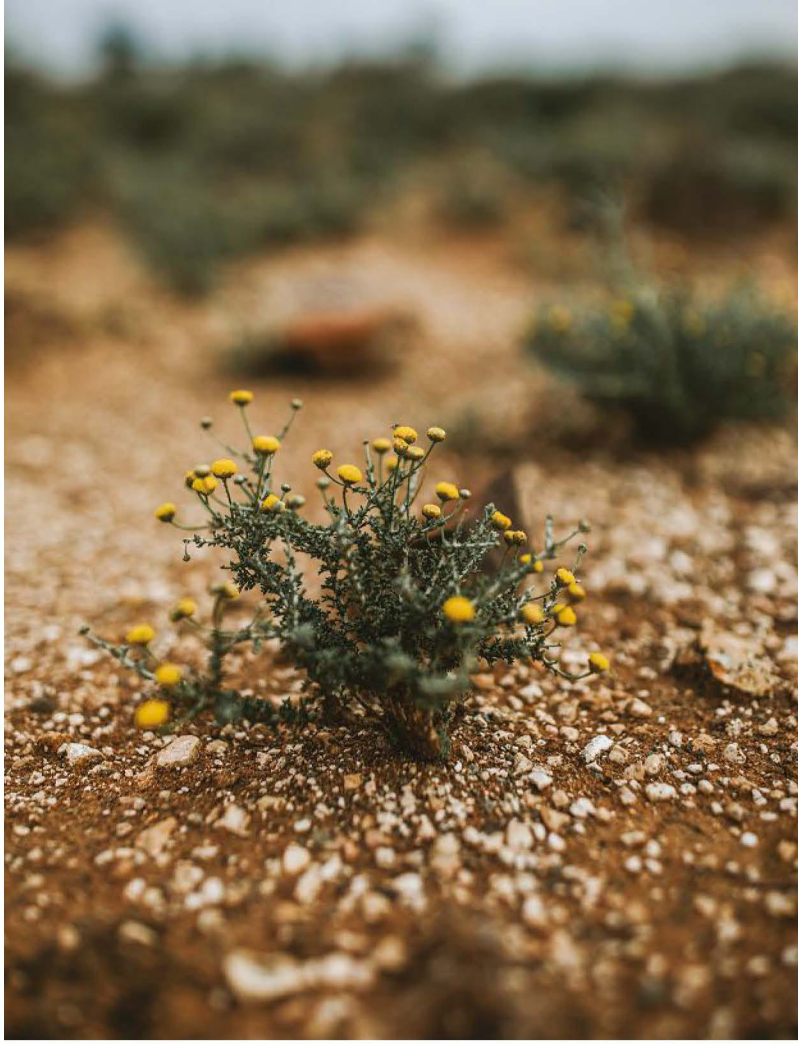
Irrigation also annoys him. "It doesn't belong in the Karoo," he says. "If we leave the water sources alone, there will be enough for the animals to drink for millions of years."

He does, however, allow his water troughs to overflow: "Something for the poor tortoises to drink..."

We reach a clearing in the veld and De Waal shows me an ash bush – a pioneer species that grows on degraded land and provides shelter for other grasses and shrubs. "How on earth does that little seed know it

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: After late summer rainfall, the Brak River between the N12 and De Aar resembled Burchell's "friendly river". De Waal Venter gets more excited by the sight of young anchor Karoo bush in his veld than about rugby. He used to be a prop for the Griquas, but defends the Karoo these days. Burchell made no references to Bushman rock art in his books, but he must have passed close by these ones near Kraaikop's kraal.


ISUZU









This same view greeted Burchell in the afternoon on 13 April 1812. He looked towards the "Bushman Table Mountain" on the right, and the small peak on the horizon where Kraaikop's kraal was.

Opposite page, from the top: This drawing from *Travels in the interior of Southern Africa (Volume 2)* shows the party descending Ouberg Pass on their way to Graaff-Reinet. The "W" is all that's left of Burchell's initials scratched into a rock at Half-way Spring. But the spring, west of De Aar, still flows with delicious, clear water. Half-way Spring is on Ian Strauss's farm called Brandfontein. The bubbling water sometimes makes it seem as if the spring is boiling.

should sprout here?" he asks.

Only the ash bushes know. And like the Bushmen, there's nobody left who speaks their language.

There's a rock outcrop against the border fence of De Waal's farm – this is where we find the rock art. The fence cuts right through their silent stories. On the neighbour's side, there's something that looks like a horse. Maybe the one Burchell rode?

Leave your name in the veld

In the two volumes of Burchell's book, he mentions one instance where he carved his initials into a rock. It must have been just south of De Waal's land, on his neighbour Ian Strauss's farm, Brandfontein.

I phone Ian and he tells me that people have visited the farm to search for the initials before, but they didn't find anything. Still, he says, I'm welcome to have a look around.

First he shows me the natural spring behind his house. Burchell named it Half-way Spring because it was roughly midway between Klaarwater and Graaff-Reinet. Burchell described the water as "remarkably pure, and free from all calcareous or ochraceous deposition".

"That's true," Ian says. "We still drink it without filtering it."

From Half-way Spring, Burchell climbed the eastern side of the kloof to gain some elevation so he could take the co-ordinates of the flat-topped mountain and the place where they'd spent the previous night.

He had an issue with his compass, though: "The compass was much affected by the ferruginous quality of the stone," he writes.

While he fiddled with the compass, he was obviously inspired to leave something of himself there. He writes: "Here on a large crag I scratched, with a piece of rock, the initials of my name."

Ian and I search the bigger rocks for Burchell's initials. We find the initials of other people, an etching of a gemsbok and three faded figures with bows and arrows. Also, a date: 16/9/1949.

It was late afternoon when Burchell stood here. He faced north, north-west, looking towards where Captain Kraaikop's mountain stood proud of the Karoo flats.

Bobbejaankop, near the miraculous ash bush, looks like an anthill on the horizon. Burchell saw this outcrop, too, as well as an approaching thunderstorm. He felt small in the vast landscape. Grateful, he sat down for a

moment. Down by the spring, the people in his group were talking, laughing and making a fire: Philip, Speelman and Hendrik from Klaarwater; Kobus and Hans from a settlement called Die Kloof; Riizo from Kaabi's kraal and now also Magerman from Kraaikop's kraal. Somewhere along the river, a lion started to roar.

As he sat here, maybe he pondered the nature of time. Maybe he wondered whether the landscape and the freedom he felt would still be around in 100 or 200 years. He took a stone, turned to the side and scratched his initials into the rock behind him.

I find a weathered "W", barely visible. Was it William's? Hard to say, but this is definitely the place.

"I also once carved my name into a rock," Ian tells me. It was in 1993, on a farm near Victoria West, and the Karoo was in the grips of a drought. Ian's father could no longer balance the books and they lost the farm.

"It's really tough to lose your land," Ian muses.

I can see in his eyes it's about more than that. When he left his name on that rock, he also left some of his dreams behind.

The other Tafelberg

After a night at Half-way Spring, Burchell and his party moved further south-east. They probably passed Karoo Kooi and Brandfontein. They followed the "friendly river" (the Brak) through Rhenosterpoort and overnighted at a place Burchell called Southern Station on his map: "...the most southern of all our sleeping places along the banks of this river".

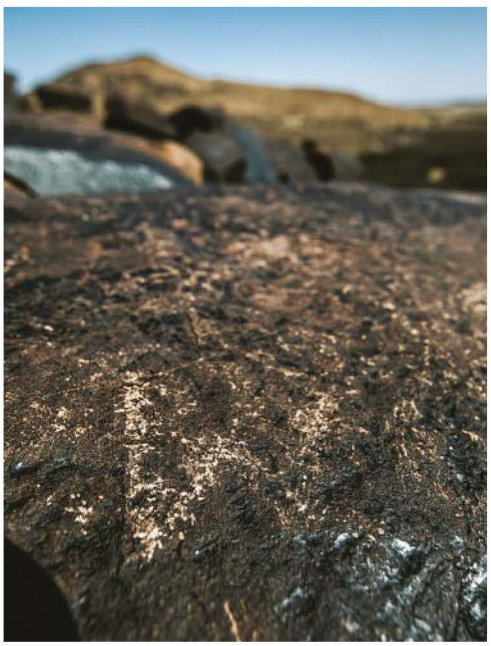
If you drive the R388 dirt road from De Aar to Richmond, you'll cross the Brak. Southern Station must have been around here. From this point onward, the R388 and Burchell's route are similar: Both head straight towards Groot Tafelberg in the distance.

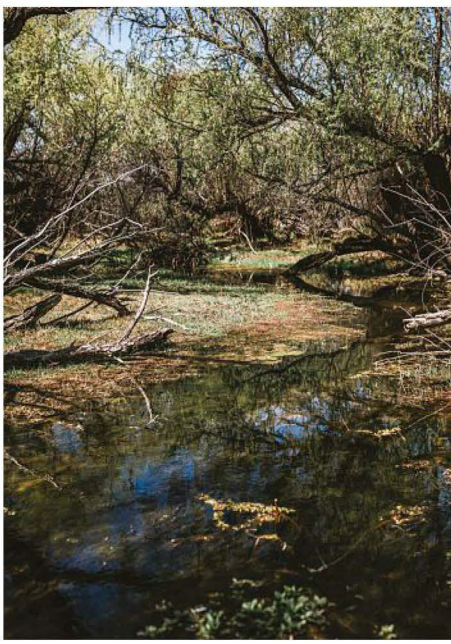
The border of the Cape Colony curved from the northern side of Groot Tafelberg towards another mountain called Toverberg, where Colesberg is now. From there it arched down again, over the Winterberg and the Tarkaberg, to the ocean just east of the Fish River.

Burchell stopped at the first colonial farm of his journey, at the base of Groot Tafelberg. The farmer there, Jacob van Wyk, had no desire to speak to the Englishman and his party; they were not invited in nor were they invited to stay over.

"I ended the conversation by inquiring the bearing and distance of Graaffreynet; resolving to depart from a place, the inhabitants of which, were so much inferior in benevolence,











Dawid de Wet and Johan Bouwer follow Burchell's tracks on the old Ouberg Pass.

WHERE WE STAYED

Karoo Kooi has two self-catering cottages (each sleeps four) as well as spacious guest rooms in a house. The farm is 15 km west of De Aar, next to the N10 to Britstown. Braai packs and meals can be ordered beforehand.
Rates: Cottage R300 per person; guest room R600 per person.
Contact: 083 300 7554
"Karoo Kooi" on Facebook

Karoo 360 is Dawid and Karlien de Wet's tourism business in Graaff-Reinet. They offer a variety of hikes and other activities in the area. Contact them if you want to climb Compassberg or swim under the Gats River waterfall.
Contact: 083 538 2865
karoo360.co.za

to the savages, – men in whose kraals we had been received with artless joy and genuine good-will."

The next night, Burchell received a warm welcome by the Vermeulen family on a farm called Krieger's Fontein. These days, the R398 between Richmond and Middelburg runs past this farm. It's also where a smaller dirt road (GPS: S31.48775 E24.36536) turns south to Graaff-Reinet. I follow it and see everything Burchell saw. Well, almost everything. The Seekoei River is not in flood when I drive through it, and the sky is mostly blue. Burchell travelled in constant rain and it was so cold that people couldn't move or speak. Magerman, the Bushman, almost died of exposure.

Farm like in the old days

At the bottom of Sneeuberg, just outside Graaff-Reinet, Burchell came down with a fever. He lay in a dilapidated stone hut for two days before the local landdrost and the town dominee came to pick him up. They took him to town in a horse carriage.

The track Burchell followed down the slopes must have been roughly the same as the old Ouberg Pass. You can see the old pass if you stand on the tarred Ouberg Pass on the R63 between Graaff-Reinet and Murraysburg and look towards the opposite side of the kloof. The old route is now on private land, but Dawid de Wet arranged for us to go check it out. Dawid and his wife Karlien have many irons in the fire in Graaff-Reinet, but tourism is close to their hearts. They know the region and its people well.

Farm manager Johan Bouwer is also curious about Burchell and waits for Dawid and me on one of the bends in the narrow pass. He talks about the veld with enthusiasm.

"I would love to see the vegetation that Burchell saw. When I started managing the farm a few years ago, the veld was barren and damaged. Since then we've improved the condition by 400%. How? By farming like people did when the veld was healthy."

On this farm, shepherds watch the sheep. They walk with the flock during the day and the sheep are kept in a kraal during the night. Jackals call on the dusky plains around us.

"You hear that?" Johan says. "That's how it should sound. When you don't hear jackals any more, something is wrong. But farmers do everything they can to not have a single jackal on their farm.

"We see the damaging effects of climate change every day. It feels like we're nearing the end times, but we can still change course. We just have to listen to nature again."

I want to find the hut where Burchell thought he would spend his last days. He wrote: "I entered the carriage and we drove from a spot which, for some moments during my illness, I thought it possible I might never quit [leave] again."

Johan takes us to the foot of the mountain where two stone huts have collapsed. One was built from sandstone, the other from dolerite.

The latter is likely where Burchell lay feverish on 23 and 24 March 1812 while the residents of Graaff-Reinet panicked about rumours of a white man leading 300 people from Klaarwater to attack the colony...

Breathe

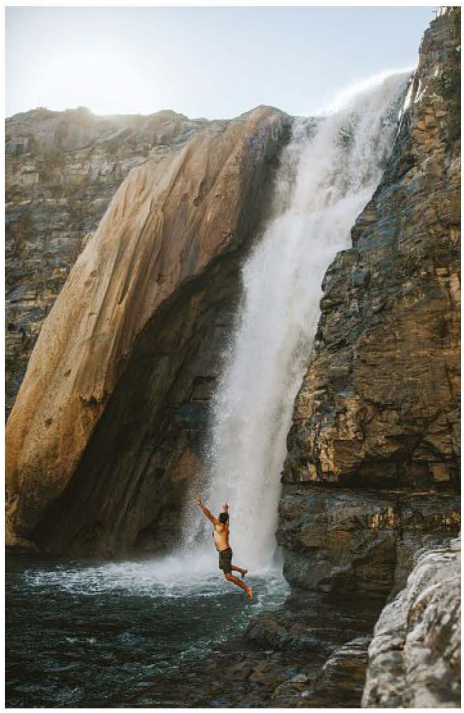
Burchell describes Graaff-Reinet as a fast-growing settlement. Seven years earlier there had been about 20 houses and now there were 74. The church – "a large, handsome building" – stood at the end of the main road. The drostdy was nearby. Fruit and vegetables were easy to find and of a high quality.

The district had 1,3 million sheep, more than 70 000 head of cattle and 9 000 horses. Leopards and baboons roamed the mountains around town.

Burchell stayed in the home of dominee

Clockwise, from the top: Burchell and his party nearly froze on the open Sneeuberg plateau. The beautiful Dutch Reformed church in Graaff-Reinet's main road is not the same "large and handsome building" Burchell wrote about. It is, however, in the same spot as the 1812 church. The view of Compassberg, on a back road between Richmond and Graaff-Reinet. Anver Waterboer might be from Jeffreys Bay but his Griqua heart is at home in the veld. A waterfall in the Karoo is a miraculous thing.











JJ Kicherer for a month. Kicherer made an effort to show him the area. They visited a few farmers north-west of town and stopped to see a waterfall.

"By falling over a perpendicular precipice of great depth, into a woody glen below, this stream forms a very singular unbroken cascade."

Dawid and I find the place on a farm next to the R63 between Graaff-Reinet and Murraysburg. (Dawid again arranged to gain access.) The earth cracks open and a small stream drops straight down the cliffs into a forested ravine.

But Dawid reckons the dominee and Burchell might have missed the best waterfall in the region. We drive deeper into the Sneeuberg, to where the Gats River carves between Nieu-Bethesda and Graaff-Reinet.

We have to walk the last few kilometres to the waterfall. We follow paths trodden by klipspringer, aardvark, baboon and African wildcat. We crawl through kriedoring bushes that would have scratched the backs of kudus earlier in the day. To a tumbling waterfall. In the Karoo.

Dawid and I climb down and we swim in the pool below. Like Burchell, I feel very small in a very big world.

That night, Anver Waterboer joins us around the fire. Waterboer... wait a minute... Yes, says Anver, the Griqua king is his grandfather: the very King Johannes Waterboer I met in Griekwastad in Part 2 of this story. (*Issue #195 – Ed.*) Anver hails from Jeffreys Bay, but he's been in Graaff-Reinet for a while now where he helps Dawid with his tourism business.

"I miss the ocean, but here I have a job and a girlfriend," the Griqua prince says with a smile.

A lot has changed since Burchell stopped at Half-way Spring. The lions of the Brak River have been silenced. The ridges around De Aar groan under the weight of wind turbines. Some of the descendants of Klaarwater prefer the waves of J-Bay to the dry plains of Griekwastad.

But that's okay. Because here under a velvet sky studded with stars, the Karoo is still a place where you can breathe. And a place full of people who are trying to keep it that way.

In the next issue, Willem retraces the last stretch of Burchell's journey to where his footprints disappear in the Kalahari sand near Kuruman.

TAKE YOUR PIC

Show off your photos! Send your best wildlife and travel shots to **Toast Coetzer** and you might see them on these pages. E-mail your entries to takeyourpic@gomag.co.za



WINNING PHOTO

BASILIKI GERICKE
Canon EOS R7
Canon 100 – 500 mm lens

BASILIKI WRITES: Not all lions are created equal; and some sightings are definitely more special than others.

In September 2024, we spent a few weeks in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Early one morning, while driving from Nossob towards the Polentswa waterhole, we found this lion sauntering down the road near the Langklaas waterhole. It's one of the biggest, healthiest and most beautiful lions I've seen in a long time. It walked onto the shoulder of the road, which was higher than the road surface. We could take great photos because we were at eye-level with the beast.

The lion stood there as if to bask in the moment. It posed for a few photos, walked further and then lay down to watch as more and more vehicles arrived to appreciate its majesty.

TOAST SAYS: Basiliki has a point: This is one handsome lion! The lion might not know it but he's Brad Pitt in *A River Runs Through It*. The Brad Pitt of Polentswa…

As a wildlife photographer, you'll learn to tell individual animals apart. Even in a seemingly homogenous herd of impala, you'll see that one antelope looks different from the next. A lion's face has more potential for character than an impala's – the older they get, the more scars and wrinkles there are; some have a longer mane or whiskers; or a torn ear, for example.

Because Basiliki was at eye-level with the lion, it stands proud of the landscape. The uncommonly short grass is also perfect because it looks like tufts of mane stuck into the ground.

I like the tail that appears in just the right place; and I like the space to the left of the lion, where its shadow is visible. It's also important that the entire animal is in focus, and not just the head and eyes. (Basiliki used an aperture of f6.3 and a shutter speed of 1/5 000 second.)

Well done, Basiliki, you win the camera bag!



CHRISTIAAN DANIELS
Canon EOS R7
Canon EF 600 mm lens

CHRISTIAAN WRITES: Early one morning, in the Kruger Park with my family, we left Berg-en-Dal and drove the S114 to cross the Biyamiti weir. It's a special river crossing because the water is basically at eye-level when you're in your vehicle, which makes it a great place to take photos of birds.

We stopped on the bridge and watched a pied kingfisher on the hunt. Suddenly this green-backed heron landed about 5 m away. Luck was on my side because my lens has a minimum focal distance of 4,5 m! I took this photo using a shutter speed of 1/1 000 second, aperture f8 and ISO 500.

Green-backed herons are usually shy, but this one sat still as if to show off its catch. It gulped the fish down and looked very chuffed with itself. It was so full it didn't even fly off when we left.

TOAST SAYS: The colours of the heron's plumage are beautifully highlighted in Christiaan's photo, even though the angle of the light is wrong. Usually, you'd want the sunlight to strike your subject from the front, but Christiaan's camera did a good job here and the exposure on the side of the bird that's in shadow is 100%.

There's a rule in photography that says you can never be too close to your subject, but as Christiaan points out, the minimum focal distance of your lens should also be taken into consideration. I've been much too close to a lion once… My zoom lens couldn't focus on the animal and my wide-angle lens was packed away in the boot. I had to resort to using my cellphone!

The side profile of the heron's head is what makes this photo special: We can see the bird's eye and the kurper in its bill. Sorry kurper, your time is up…



SIBELLA MURRAY

IG: @sibellaphotography
Olympus Tough TG-5

SIBELLA WRITES: We recently did the Nossob Eco Trail – a 4x4 trail that starts in Nossob and ends at Twee Rivieren in the Kgalagadi. I photographed this beetle at our first campsite, called Swartbas. Even though the park has majestic giants like gemsbok and lions, the tiny treasures always capture my attention.

I used my camera's so-called Microscope mode, which is part of its Variable Macro System. I enjoy free diving in False Bay and originally bought my Olympus Tough because it takes incredible underwater shots. Only later did I start experimenting with the camera's other functions, including its ability to capture stunning macro photos, landscapes and even star trails.

TOAST SAYS: It's amazing how much detail you can see on this beetle! By lying down on the ground and bringing the camera right up to it, Sibella has opened up a whole new world.

There's a lot to look at: the texture of the compound eyes, the antennae, the bumps on the shell… By changing the photo to black-and-white, she's emphasized the texture even more. Had there been red Kalahari sand in the background, it would have been distracting. When your subject is shiny black like this beetle, it often works well in black-and-white.

And always remember: the closer, the better!

HERMAN ROHDE

IG: @rsa_wildlife_photography
Nikon D70s
Nikon 300 mm lens

HERMAN WRITES: My parents and I love to camp. We recently stayed in Tsendze in the Kruger – it's definitely our favourite place in the park.

My mother Tanya likes watching the emerald-spotted wood-doves – we saw this one very close to our camp. I took a quick photo for my mom, but it turned out to be a good one: I like how the green spot on the dove's wing complements the green leaves of the tree.

My settings: shutter speed 1/800 second, aperture f4 and ISO 200.

TOAST SAYS: Simplicity has its own beauty – and not everyone notices. Most of us look for photos of flashy birds – rollers or turacos – or something big and iconic like a fish-eagle or a saddle-billed stork.

But I think Herman's emerald-spotted wood-dove is just as impressive. Everything hinges on that green wing covert, glittery as an emerald. It's not the easiest dove to photograph – they tend to fly off or perch in trees where you can't get a clear shot.

The green spot has to catch the sun at a certain angle to shimmer like it does here, otherwise it's dull and inconspicuous. This small green spot becomes the focal point of the photo against the sea of green thorn trees in the background.

We often suggest that composition should follow the rule of thirds, but in this case the central position of the dove works well. It's like he's dressed in a tailored suit and a bow tie with green sequins!







GRAEME MITCHLEY
IG: @gmitchley_wildlifephotography
Canon SX60

GRAEME WRITES: We were out on an afternoon game drive in Kwandwe Private Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape when we saw a crash of white rhinos in the distance, walking slowly down a hill. Rhinos are my favourite animal and I asked our guide, Ryan Hillier, if it would be possible to get closer. He told us there was a waterhole about a kilometre in the direction they were moving, and suggested that we wait there.

Imagine my excitement when eight rhinos came down for a drink! I was in my element. I go to the Kruger often, but sadly the rhinos there have been decimated and the ones that remain have had their horns removed.

A big thank you to Ryan for having the gut instinct to head to the waterhole.

TOAST SAYS: This photo is all about the one rhino turning away from the others. Breaking the pattern creates two points of interest: the row of drinking rhinos and the rhino standing on its own, which has a bit of personality.

The reflection of the animals on the water doubles the joy, and I also like the white thorns in the foliage of the trees in the background. The foliage tells its own story because it's characteristic of the type of dense vegetation you find in many Eastern Cape game reserves.

Thanks for sharing, Graeme. I hope you bought your guide a shot of Amarula at the bar that night!



SANETTE SMIT

SANETTE WRITES: I took this photo on a cloudy, windy day at Bokkomlaan in Velddrif on the West Coast. Bokkomlaan is on the Berg River and there are normally lots of birds around, but this was a quiet day. We'd just decided to leave when I saw this white-backed mousebird in a shrub nearby.

They often fly off, but this one was willing to strike a pose while it feasted on the plants.

TOAST SAYS: I think this is the first time someone has photographed a mousebird at Bokkomlaan, instead of a flamingo, kingfisher or white-breasted cormorant! You won't often see a mousebird on the pages of this magazine either, and that's why I really enjoy Sanette's photo.

Many of our bird species are seen as ordinary or dull and not worth getting your camera out for: sparrows, pigeons, not to mention our myriad LBJs… But look at the attitude of this mousebird! It has a hairstyle like RG Snyman and it's munching on its salad like it's the best thing in the world.

I like the diagonal lines in the frame. Sanette made the right choice and took the photo vertically instead of horizontally. The branch stretches from top left to bottom right – a strong visual element that's boosted by the bird's crest, body and tail.

There you go, mousebird. You've got your 15 minutes of fame!

SEND US YOUR BEST TRAVEL AND NATURE PHOTOS!

WHY? We publish a selection of reader pictures in every issue. Don't be shy, haul out those shots you've been hoarding on your computer and send them to us! We like just about anything: wildlife, landscapes, portraits, holiday snaps or bugs in your garden.

HOW? Send your photos to **takeyourpic@gomag.co.za** Submit only your three best shots each month. Don't send files bigger than 4 MB – if we need a bigger version, we'll ask for it. Give the name, surname, home town and contact number of the photographer. Also include info about where and how the shot was taken, and what equipment was used. If you manipulated your photo in any way, tell us what you did. No AI illustrations, please.

THE FINE PRINT We reserve the right to use your photos elsewhere in the magazine, on our digital platforms and marketing material.

Want to sign up for our online photography course? Visit **takebetterphotos.gomag.co.za**

We're on Instagram! Follow us and our sister magazine *Weg* for travel and wildlife pics: Search for **@gomagsa** and **@menseselense**

TAKE THE WINNING PHOTO

You can win this durable camera bag worth R790!



This canvas bag has sturdy sides and a soft inner to protect your valuable gear. The compartments are adjustable to fit your camera and lenses.

Contact Yumna Tofey if you'd like to buy this bag.
yumna.tofey@media24.com

Capture the Karoo

go! PHOTO TOUR

Improve your landscape and travel photography on this six-day tour with photojournalist Toast Coetzer and Douwe Vlok from Heuningland Tours.







A lonely windmill stands in just the right place. A koppie catches the orange glow of sunset. A flock of sheep next to an old stone kraal… Yes, the Karoo is a photographer's dream!

On this intimate tour, photojournalist Toast Coetzer will be on hand to help you learn all about composition, light, and the inner workings of your camera. (All cameras are welcome, from mirrorless to smartphones.) The itinerary is designed to include stops at a handful of great sites every day. The pace is easy – and there will be time to do birding, too. Non-photographers are also welcome.

The trip is a celebration of the Karoo and covers an area Toast and guide Douwe Vlok of Heuningland Tours know very well. They both grew up in the Karoo and will take you to some of their favourite places – including a few surprises!

For example, have you ever seen the incredible rock engravings at Nelspoort? And have you heard of storyteller Antoinette Pienaar? You'll get to see the rock art and spend a night at Antoinette's farm, Theefontein.

From there, we'll drive a back road (via a vintage car collection in the middle of nowhere!) to beautiful Murraysburg, and then continue to Doornberg Guest Farm, at the foot of Compassberg near Nieu-Bethesda.

Doornberg will be our base for two days, as we visit the Owl House and other Nieu-Bethesda attractions like the Stone Folk of Ongeluksloot, a collection of statues set along a short walking trail. You'll get to explore the village's dusty streets on foot, which will offer plenty of photo opportunities – from portraits to abstract shots.

Day four is spent at the historic Ganora Guest Farm, also in the Nieu-Bethesda district. Here we'll visit their fossil museum and photograph farm activities. In the evening, after a sumptuous dinner, Toast will be available for feedback sessions where everyone can share the day's images.

From Ganora, we drive on more back roads to Graaff-Reinet. We'll travel along the base of Nardousberg to Waterval Farmstay. The afternoon's activity will include a portrait session.

This will be our final night together and after a *kuier* around the braai fire, we say our goodbyes the following morning and head back home.

BOOK YOUR SPOT TODAY! E-mail Liezl at info@heuningland.com
For more info, visit **heuningland.com**

NEED TO KNOW

Dates: 19 – 24 March 2025
Cost: R14 800 per person sharing (Single: plus 30%)
Duration: Six days, five nights
Start: Travalia farm stall, N1 (near Three Sisters)
End: Waterval Farmstay, Graaff-Reinet
Total distance: 450 km (estimate)
Maximum number of guests: 14

WHAT WE SUPPLY

- Formal accommodation
- Three meals per day
- Professional guide
- Photography host
- 4x4 assistance (if required)

WHAT YOU NEED TO BRING

- Your own vehicle (4x4 or SUV with good ground clearance)
- Travel insurance
- Drinks, snacks, etc.
- Camera, tripod and other photo gear
- A camping chair each

Don't blink

COMPILED BY **LYNNE FRASER**

Wildlife Photographer of the Year (WPY) is the most prestigious competition of its kind – an annual celebration of creativity that honours the men and women who spend countless hours in the field to freeze split-second moments that tell the stories of our fragile planet.

The 60th edition recently concluded in London: 100 winning images were announced and the exhibition opened at the Natural History Museum on 11 October.

Head to nhm.ac.uk/wpy to see all the winners, and consider entering the 61st edition: There's no fee for photographers who live in Africa, Southeast Asia and Central and South America. Be quick – entries close on 5 December 2024.



Among the Trees

Thomas Peschak (Germany/South Africa)

The Amazon river dolphin, also called a boto or pink river dolphin, is one of two freshwater dolphin species living in the Amazon and Orinoco basins. But this is the only species that has evolved to explore its seasonally flooded forest habitat.

South Africa's very own Thomas Peschak spent a year in the Amazon for *National Geographic*. While in Brazil and Colombia, he documented the relationship between these endangered creatures and the people with whom they share their watery home.

Peschak spent time in areas where local communities are creating opportunities for tourists to encounter the dolphins. This brings another set of problems: When they're fed by humans, the dolphins become unhealthy and younger individuals don't learn to hunt for themselves.

This image was part of a series that won the Photojournalist Story Award.

HOW: Nikon Z9; 14 – 30 mm lens; shutter speed 1/320 second; aperture f6.3; ISO 1 250



A Tranquil Moment

Hikkaduwa Liyanage Prasantha Vinod (Sri Lanka)

Resting in a quiet place after a morning spent photographing birds and leopards in Wilpattu National Park, Sri Lanka, Vinod soon realised he wasn't alone. A troop of toque macaques was moving through the trees above. Vinod spotted this young monkey sleeping between feeds and used a telephoto lens to frame the peaceful moment. Toque macaques easily adapt to human food. The encroachment of plantations into their habitat has seen an increase in incidents of shooting, snaring and poisoning by farmers trying to preserve their crops.

Vinod's shot was the winner in the "Behaviour: Mammals" category.

HOW: Nikon D500; 600 mm lens; shutter speed 1/1 250 second; aperture f4; ISO 3 200





On Watch

John E Marriott (Canada)

Marriott framed this resting lynx with its fully grown cubs sheltering from the cold wind behind it.

He'd been tracking this family group for almost a week, through the Arctic forests of Canada's Yukon territory, wearing snowshoes and carrying lightweight camera gear. When fresh tracks led him to the group, he kept his distance to make sure he didn't disturb them.

Lynx numbers usually reflect the natural population fluctuations of their main prey species, the snowshoe hare. With climate change reducing snow coverage, giving other predators more opportunities to hunt the hares, hare populations may decline, in turn affecting the lynx population.

Marriott's shot was the winner in the "Animal Portraits" category.

HOW: Canon EOS 5D Mark IV; 100 – 400 mm lens; shutter speed 1/800 second; aperture f9; ISO 1 250





The Swarm of Life

Shane Gross (Canada)

Hundreds of western toad tadpoles swim past Shane Gross as he peeks under the surface layer of lily pads in Cedar Lake on Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

Gross snorkelled in the lake for several hours, through carpets of lily pads. He kept to the surface, which prevented any disturbance of the fine layers of silt and algae covering the lake bottom, which would have reduced visibility.

Western toad tadpoles swim up from the safer depths, dodging predators and trying to reach the shallows where they can feed. The tadpoles start becoming toads between four and 12 weeks after hatching. An estimated 99% will not survive to adulthood.

Gross's spectacular photo won a special category called "Wetlands: The Bigger Picture" and was judged the overall winner of WPY 2024.

HOW: Nikon D500; Tokina 10 – 17 mm lens; shutter speed 1/200 second; aperture f13; ISO 640; in an Aquatica housing with two Sea & Sea strobes





Potato cake with cheddar and sage

Take five!

The year is almost over and it's time to relax. These short recipes each only have five ingredients and will save you time and energy.

RECIPES & STYLING **JOHANÉ NEILSON**
PICTURES **SHELLEY CHRISTIANS & ER LOMBARD**



Chicken roulades



Watermelon salad



Chimichurri sauce

Potato cake with cheddar and sage

Serves **4 – 6 as a side dish**
Preparation time **20 minutes**
Baking time **1 hour**

You need

- **¼ cup butter**
- **1 onion, halved and thinly sliced**
- **1 kg medium-sized potatoes, washed**
- **12 sage leaves, half of them chopped**
- **½ cup finely grated mature cheddar**

Here's how

1 Melt most of the butter in a pan. Add a splash of olive oil – it prevents the butter from burning. Fry the onion until soft and glossy.
2 Use a sharp knife (or a mandolin) and slice the potatoes thinly with the peel on.
3 Combine the potatoes with the buttery onions and chopped sage leaves. Season generously with salt and pepper.
4 Preheat the oven to 200° C. Grease a 22 cm ovenproof pan with oil and arrange a layer of potato slices on the bottom. Sprinkle over a third of the cheese and repeat the layers of potato-and-onion and cheese until you've used all the ingredients. Use a second pan or a weight to press down on the potatoes to make the cake more compact.
5 Fry the bottom of the cake on the stove until brown while you wait for the oven to heat. Bake the cake in the oven, with the second pan or weight still on top, for about 1 hour. Insert a testing pin to see if the potatoes are soft and then let it cool down slightly.
6 Melt the remaining butter in a pan and fry the whole sage leaves until crispy. Garnish the cake with the leaves and serve in slices.

Chicken roulades

Serves **6**
Preparation time **15 minutes**
Baking time **25 minutes**

You need

- **6 chicken breast fillets**
- **6 fresh pork sausages with herbs (we used the Woolworths ones)**
- **50 g shelled pistachios, roughly chopped**
- **12 strips of bacon**
- **30 ml store-bought glaze (see tip)**

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 200° C. Butterfly the fillets without cutting right through and fold them open. Use a meat tenderizer to flatten each fillet evenly.
2 Remove the casing from each pork sausage and spread the meat over the fillets – use one sausage per fillet. Scatter over the pistachios. Roll up the fillets and wrap two strips of bacon around each filled chicken fillet.
3 Place the rolls in a greased oven dish and bake for about 20 minutes. Baste with the glaze and bake for another 5 minutes until they are glossy and cooked through. Set the roulades aside for 10 minutes to rest and serve whole or cut into slices. The chicken is delicious warm or at room temperature.

TIP *There are many good glazes available in shops during the festive season. Use your favourite or baste the cooked chicken with a spoonful of syrupy BBQ sauce, sweet chilli sauce or even honey. It lends some sweetness to the dish.*

Another option is to add a teaspoon of wholegrain mustard and a tablespoon of honey to the pan juices and then drizzle this mixture over the chicken.

Watermelon salad

Serves **6**
Preparation time **20 minutes**

You need
- **200 g soft goat's cheese (2 rolls)**
- **100 g roasted cashew nuts, chopped**
- **½ watermelon, in cubes or balls**
- **100 g black olives, stoned and halved**
- **½ cup mint leaves or basil**

Here's how
1 Cut each roll of goat's cheese into eight pieces. Shape each piece into a ball and roll it in the nuts until covered. Use peri-peri-flavoured nuts if you like a bit of a bite with the sweet watermelon – it's the perfect two-in-one ingredient.
2 Arrange the cheese balls, watermelon, olives and mint in a bowl or on a platter and serve.

Chimichurri sauce

Makes **1 cup**
Preparation time **5 minutes**

You need
- **2 cups soft herbs, like parsley or a combination of parsley, mint and basil**
- **2 cloves of garlic, chopped**
- **1 teaspoon dried chilli flakes, or to taste**
- **3 tablespoons red wine vinegar**
- **½ cup olive oil**

Here's how
1 Put all the ingredients in a jug and use a stick blender to blitz until fine but not smooth – you want a little texture. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Cover and keep in the fridge.
2 Use the chimichurri as a basting sauce when you cook prawns, chicken, steak, vegetables or mushrooms. Serve some of the remaining sauce on the side – the combination of the cooked and raw sauce enriches the flavours.



Coco Pops wreath

Coco Pops wreath

Makes **36 slices**
Preparation time **15 minutes**
Cooking time **7 minutes**

You need
- **300 g white chocolate**
- **100 ml butter**
- **300 g mini marshmallows**
- **6 cups Coco Pops**
- **½ cup Smarties, M&Ms or Astros**

Here's how
1 Finely chop 100 g of white chocolate and set it aside.
2 Melt the butter in a big pot until it foams. Add almost all the marshmallows and stir over a medium heat until they start to melt. (Set aside a handful of marshmallows for decoration.)
3 Add the Coco Pops and chopped chocolate and stir quickly. As soon as the mixture comes together, scoop it into a greased ring pan and spread it out evenly without making the mixture too compact. (A looser texture is easier to cut.) Let it cool down.
4 Melt the remaining white chocolate. Unmould the wreath and pour the chocolate over. Decorate with the rest of the marshmallows and the Smarties. Store in an airtight container and serve in thin slices.

TIP *To make squares, spread the mixture out in a flat dish. Once set, decorate it and cut it into blocks. For a vanilla-flavoured treat, replace the Coco Pops with Rice Krispies.*

Pork belly tortillas

Serves **6 as an appetiser**
Preparation time **25 minutes, plus time to dry overnight**
Cooking time **45 minutes**

You need
- **600 g deboned pork belly, with the skin on**
- **½ teaspoon Taco spices (we used Woolworths Mild Seasoning)**
- **6 medium-sized tortillas, toasted – see tips**
- **2 cups rainbow slaw (shredded cabbage, carrot, beetroot, spinach and herbs)**
- **200 g store-bought guacamole (creamy mayonnaise also works well)**

Here's how
1 Use a sharp knife to score the pork



Pork belly tortillas



skin and fat. Rub salt into all the cuts. Turn the pork belly over and season the meaty side with the Taco spices (don't get it on the skin). Refrigerate the pork belly overnight to dry out – rest it skin up in a non-reactive dish (glass, ceramic or enamel). This step is optional, but one of the easiest ways to ensure crispy crackling.

2 Put the meat on a sheet of foil. Fold the foil around the meat like a bowl. Air-fry the meat in the foil for 30 minutes at 180°C. Remove the foil and the rendered fat, return the meat to the basket and fry for 15 minutes at 200°C or until the crackling is crispy and golden brown. Let the meat rest for 10 minutes.

3 Cut the meat into pieces and add them to the hot tortillas with the slaw and guacamole.

TIPS

• For crisp tortilla cones: Cut each tortilla in two and fold the halves into cones. Secure with a toothpick to keep the shape, brush with a little oil and place them on a baking sheet. Preheat the oven to 200°C and bake the cones for a few minutes until light brown and crisp. Remove the toothpicks and fill the cones with the other ingredients.

• Choose a flat, thin piece of pork belly, with a bigger piece of skin. This way you'll have more crackling and the meat will cook more evenly.

• No air fryer? No problem. Bake the spiced pork belly in a preheated oven at 180°C, but increase the initial cooking time with 10 minutes, to 40 minutes. Then increase the oven temperature to 200°C for crispy crackling. Check after the recommended 15 minutes and decide if it needs a couple of extra minutes.







BRANDPUBLIC

SCAN FOR RECIPE

www.sapork.co.za

Golden roast Leg of Pork

This traditional golden-oldie comes up truly golden when done just right! No frills and no fuss, this recipe succeeds time and again if you stick to the basics!

PREP TIME **10 MINUTES** COOKING TIME **2 HOURS**

Fresh pork facts to surprise you!

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Lean pork meat is nutritious and a good choice of animal protein in varied diet.

In collaboration with **Stellenbosch University's** Division of Human Nutrition

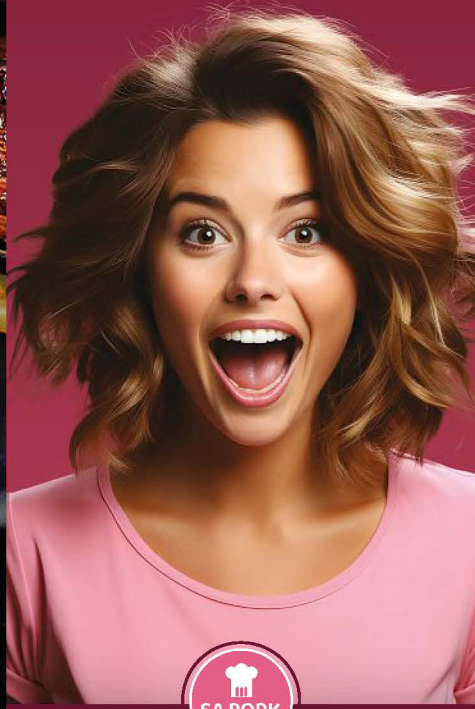
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Average portion size 90 g

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www.sapork.co.za



SA PORK

Simply Porkalicious!

Great gifts for outdoorsy types



We polled the team – these are the gifts we'd buy for family and friends, and some we wouldn't mind receiving!



SOPHIA VAN TAAK

First Ascent Down Bootie Slipper

After a long day on a hiking trail, the first thing you want to do when you reach camp is take off your boots. But then you have to put them back on again when you want to walk around… An extra pair of shoes is a luxury when you have to carry everything you'll need, but this pair of slippers weighs only 360 g and they'll give your feet a much-needed break.

The slippers have a rubber sole and fleece lining, an ankle cuff and a down filling. They're as soft and warm as a sleeping bag – and you can bunch them up to stuff into your backpack.

R1 000 firstascent.co.za



Babylonstoren Birdhouse

Entice birds to your garden with these nests made from grass and recycled fabric attached to a sturdy wire frame. They offer shelter against wind and weather but still allow for ventilation. Hang one from a tree in your backyard – before you know it, a breeding pair will have moved in!

From R320 babylonstoren.com



Dri & Co. Swimming Poncho

With one of these in your car boot, you'll never have an excuse not to jump into a river or swim in the sea on a whim. It's basically a dry set of clothes, a towel and a changing room in one.

Yes, really! You can pull on the poncho over your swimming costume or dry yourself with it. It's roomy enough to change into your clothes while wearing it, so nobody will catch a glimpse of something they shouldn't.

From R510 dri-and-co.com







JOHANÉ NEILSON

Woolworths DIY Foodie Kits

This is a gift that keeps on giving because the packaging is just as desirable as the food inside! I can't wait to spoil myself with the Pap Fries, and to add the enamel tray to my collection.

Pap Fries with Enamel Tray R200
woolworths.co.za

The limited release biscuit tins are another deliciously reusable item that will be refilled for holiday getaways for years to come.

Mini shortbread nostalgic tin 300 g R140
woolworths.co.za

Thandana Big Boy Box Cooler

Arrive in style at picnics, beach parties and braais with this cooler-than-cool 45-litre cool box. It's locally made and available in various designs (this one is "Cheetah"). The outer is PVC-laminated water-resistant fabric and there's a hard plastic waterproof inner, plus a foam-padded lining to keep items cold. The food-grade bamboo board separator doubles as a convenient cutting or serving board. It also includes a front leather pocket, genuine leather handles and a chunky zip that's non-corrosive. If you order online, you can have a name engraved and get your cooler gift-wrapped. Nice.

R4 239 thandana.co.za

Simply Placemats

These locally designed and printed placemats, available in several styles, are made from durable, recyclable 100 gsm paper. The 30 cm beauties add a splash of colour to your holiday table, wherever that may be, without creating any more laundry! They're available in packs of 24.

R279 yuppiechef.com





MARTINETTE LOUW

Sealand Messenger Crossbody Bag

If you like to keep your hands free while you're exploring a new city or browsing the local farmers market, sling this two-litre crossbody bag over your shoulder and off you go with your phone, wallet and keys. It has front and back zip pockets and an adjustable strap. The bag is available in a range of colours – my fave is saffron, which will brighten up your day.

R1 495 sealandgear.com



SOEK Wanderer Sunglasses

Protect your eyes – and the earth – while looking stylish this summer. These unisex sunglasses from Australian brand SOEK have UV400 polarised lenses and an oak wood frame. The brand is all about being eco-friendly: Only sustainable materials are used to produce their sunnies, you get a biodegradable cork sleeve to keep your pair safe, and they donate a percentage of sales to One Tree Planted, an NGO that supports global reforestation.

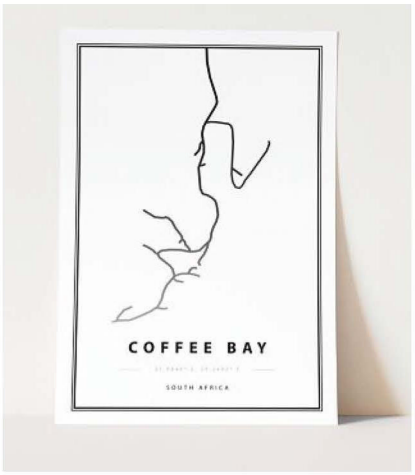
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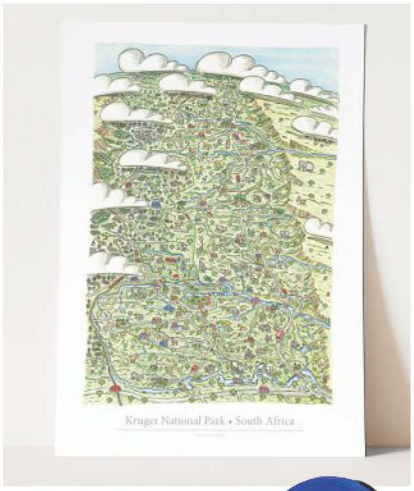


HAMI Hammock

Nothing says "holiday" like a hammock! This double hammock (3 m x 1,8 m) is made from recycled 75D nylon with a 210 thread count and it's super easy to set up – HAMI claims you can do it in less than a minute. Weight isn't an issue either: It can hold up to 225 kg and packs down to only 900 g. Let the relaxing begin!

R1 350 hami.co.za





RICHARD SMITH







MARIJCKE DODDS

Nifty Posters

Satisfy your wanderlust when you're not travelling by buying an art print map of your favourite destination. Nifty Posters sells a range of maps, from minimalist line drawings of iconic towns like Coffee Bay to full-colour ones of parks like the Kruger. Other prints include world maps, capital cities, continents and regions – in black and white, colour and vintage style. There are plenty of other wall art themes to browse, like botanicals, for example, featuring aloes, agapanthus and pincushions.

From R190 niftyposters.co.za

Foldable Waterproof Cushion Chair

Summer is all about picnics, outdoor concerts and festivals. But after a while, slouching on a blanket or sitting on a hard stadium seat can start to feel uncomfortable. This reclining "floor" chair has a padded seat and an adjustable backrest offering good support, so you can sit comfy wherever you are. It's made from durable waterproof material and folds flat so you can keep it in your car boot and take out when needed. Also available in black and red.

R800 soullifestyle.co.za

African Apparel

African Apparel has the perfect outfit for your little bush lover. The kudu T-shirt will ensure your child is dressed for any adventure. Available in three colours and various sizes (3 – 4 to 11 – 12). For tiny tots, they have super cute babygrows with bushveld motifs, available in sizes 0 – 3 to 18 – 24 months. Envious? The adults' range of hoodies and T-shirts features many of the same cool designs.

T-shirt from R190; babygrow from R170
africanapparel.co.za







ESMA MARNEWICK

Island Style Splitty Kombi T-shirt

I stumbled across this classic brand from my youth while searching for locally made bikini shorts. At my high school, everybody had an Island Style T-shirt, whether or not you were a surfer! These 100% cotton T-shirts, made in Durban, are the perfect gift for someone born in the 80s.

R350 islandstyle.co.za

Veldskoen Plakkie

These *plakkies* are made in South Africa and have the coolest name ever. There's a range of colours available, but I like this pink-and-navy pair ("Pink is for Buoys"). It's part of a collaboration with the National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI): For every 10 pairs sold, the NSRI will install one of their pink rescue buoys next to a dam or on a beach.

R300 veldskoen.com

Mungo Bijou Towel

Mungo weaves a range of gorgeous towels, throws and blankets at their mill in Plettenberg Bay. The Bijou is their adventure model. It's lightweight, absorbent and quick-drying. There are more affordable outdoor towels on the market, but they're not as pretty as the Bijou. It's made from locally grown organic cotton, which means you can throw it on the compost heap one day when you can no longer use it.

R660 mungo.co.za



JON MINSTER

MOD Camp Stove Table

MOD is a company that makes clever products for Suzuki Jimnys, founded by keen cyclists and hikers Stan Engelbrecht and Donnet Dumas. After all, travelling in a tiny Jimny is similar to travelling on foot or by bike! This mini table works with almost all medium screw-in gas cannisters – the normal ones you'd take hiking or overlanding. The table itself is made of anodised aluminium and weighs only 450 g. Attach the one end to the gas cannister, flip out the folding legs and voilà: You've got a handy surface for slicing, dicing and coffee-making.

R900 mod.equipment



Grinning Gravel T-shirt

Brought to you by the awesome people at Cape Town-based Everyday Cycle Supply Co, this shirt is for anyone who gets a smile on their face when the tar ends and the road turns to dirt – whether you're riding your bike or behind the wheel of your 4x4. It's available in five sizes and screen-printed on 100% cotton.

R365 everydaycyclesupplyco.com



Sealand Recycled Run Cap

It might be designed for trail runners, but this lightweight cap is great for any outdoor activity. In keeping with local brand Sealand's eco-friendly ethos, it's made from recycled poly spandex with mesh panels for breathability. And the funky orange colourway will make sure you stand out wherever you choose to wear it.

R695 sealandgear.com









PIERRE STEYN

Thule Subterra Carry On Spinner

For some people, buying luggage falls into the same category as paying for car tyres or socks – it's a grudge purchase and they'll opt for the cheapest option every time. Big mistake on all fronts! Buy the best luggage you can afford and avoid the stress of zip malfunctions and wheels falling off when you're running to catch that connecting flight.

If you look after them, Thule's range of bags will last you a lifetime. Think of the Subterra as the Ferrari of carry-on bags. Oversized rear wheels glide smoothly over curbs and airport bumps. The front spinners are smaller so that there's more packing space inside. It's got an armoured exoskeleton and a polycarbonate back panel to protect your valuables, and it fits perfectly into the overhead bin of even the stingiest budget airline.

R10 000 thulestore.co.za

Tankwa Multi-purpose Mat

We love recommending a great local product, especially if it's as well-crafted and comfortable as this camping mat. Each one is handmade by Josh Cox and his team. The multi-purpose mat featured here is made from a puncture-proof dual-foam core with a tough, tear-resistant outer shell. Not only is it one of the most comfortable camping mats we've tested (it even has a pillow pouch that you can stuff with clothing), but it's a breeze to roll up. If you're taking a lunch break on your hike, use the smart fold to lean it against a tree or a rock and sit on it like a chair. Rolled up, it weighs about 2 kg. If you want a lighter, slimmer sleeping mat, consider Tankwa's brand-new hiking pad (R1 800) that only weighs 900 g.

R2 000 livetankwa.com

Twine & Co Organics Tallow Balm

This small company based in George produces a wide variety of handcrafted skincare products made from beef tallow, originally developed by owner Danielle Twine when she discovered that beef tallow worked wonders to combat various skin conditions that her children suffered from. Rather than constantly resorting to medically prescribed cortisone products, beef tallow (one of the most ancient moisturizers known to humankind) proved to be a more natural and sustainable alternative. Products range from face balms to deodorants, soaps and even candles.

R265 for the face balm twineorganicsco.com

Meerkat Spider Chair

A good camping chair needs to deliver on four important fronts. It must never embarrass its owner by collapsing in front of his friends around the campfire; it shouldn't require any technical skill to deploy or fold away; it should be so comfortable that you can fall asleep under a jackal-berry tree; and it needs to stand up to the rigours of a decade or more of camping holidays.

This Meerkat chair from Bushtec ticks all of the above boxes. It's made from solid steel tubing with durable polyester seating and it comfortably seats up to 150 kg.

R1 200 builders.co.za



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JETOUR X70

Once upon a time in China



GWM TANK 300

In 2024, the trickle of Chinese brands setting up shop in South Africa turned into a flood. These are the models that caught our eye.

BY PIERRE STEYN

Can you tell your BYD from your LDV? Your GAC from your JAC? It's a bit of an alphabet noodle broth out there when it comes to keeping track of all the Chinese brands entering the country. Hardly a month went by in 2024 without the launch of a new one.

In the last five years, South Africans have become accustomed to seeing lots of Havals, Cherys and GWMs on our roads, but since then the likes of Omoda, Jaecoo, Jetour, Dayun, Foton and BAIC have joined the fray. Geely is set to make a comeback in 2025, as is MG (now Chinese-owned), pushing the number of Chinese automotive brands available locally to more than 30.

The Chinese offering is very much focused on small and medium-sized SUVs. The majority of these cars offer excellent value for money, with features that cost a lot more in a European, Japanese or American car. Chinese tech compares well and often exceeds the tech in more

traditional brands, and the latest crop of cars have great build quality and extended warranties that provide additional peace of mind. It's no wonder that Chinese cars increasingly feature among the top-ten selling brands, with some emerging as segment leaders in some months. (The popular Chery Tiggo 4 is an example.)

Even though we drove a multitude of Chinese cars in 2024, there were some we liked more than others, especially the **GWM Tank 300**. It wasn't just one of our favourite Chinese cars of the year, but one of our favourite cars *overall*. It's a proper 4x4 built on a ladder-frame chassis with a punchy 2.0-litre turbo-charged engine. A plush interior with all the latest modern conveniences means the Tank 300 (from R725 950) will go toe-to-toe with premium SUVs costing R1 million or more.

Even though there seems to be a slew of Chinese brands, many of them are sister brands that share components, engines and transmissions – the same way Volkswagen (the parent company) does with Audi, Seat and Skoda. Chery, which has been in South Africa for almost a decade, is the biggest Chinese player here and also the brand with the most sub-brands.

For example, take the **Chery Tiggo 7 Pro Max** (from R500 000). When you drive that car, followed in quick succession by the **Jaecoo J7** (from R550 000) and the **Omoda C5 GT** (R590 000), the whole experience becomes a bit of a blur. All three cars share the same 145 kW/290 Nm 1.6-litre four-cylinder turbo-charged petrol engine and seven-speed dual-clutch automatic transmission. All three cars are easy to drive and easy to live with, crammed with features that share similar infotainment systems. And they also share a vast array of auditory electronic pinging and binging that sometimes verges on overwhelming. Once you've figured out how to switch off all the warnings (it takes a while), your choice of car depends entirely on personal taste. If you like a bit of bling, the Omoda C5 GT will do the trick.

One of the latest brands to debut here is Jetour. It, too, is owned by Chery, but it's launching locally as an independent brand. We drove the **Jetour X70**: a seven-seater that's not only the biggest of all the Chinese cars we tested in 2024, but also the cheapest. Starting at R455 000, the bang-for-buck proposition on this car is unrivalled, even if the 1.5-litre four-cylinder turbo-charged petrol engine could do with a bit more oomph. The more powerful 1.6-litre engine in the other Chery brands mentioned earlier would be a better fit.

Still, it's difficult to argue with Jetour's value proposition: You get great styling; 19-inch alloy wheels; rear parking sensors; a reverse-view camera; a digital touch screen and digital instrument cluster; an electric tailgate and electric adjustment for the driver's seat; automatic LED headlamps and a raft of safety features. Oh, and you get a 5-year/150 000 km warranty; a 5-year/60 000 km service plan; and a 10-year/1 million km engine-specific warranty.

If 2024 was a flood, expect a torrent of Chinese vehicles in 2025. There's a strong possibility that the holy grail of our local industry – the double-cab bakkie segment – is next to be disrupted.

QUICKPIC


JAECOO J7


CHERY TIGGO 7 PRO MAX


OMODA C5 GT



TAKE A HIKE

DAMARA TRAIL, SOUTHERN CAPE

WORDS **FIONA MCINTOSH**
PICTURES **FIONA MCINTOSH & MATTHEW HOLT**

"The doctor can't write a prescription for this," the fisherman said, flashing a smile.

It was just the pick-up we needed. We were tired, having laboured for 4 km along a cambered, soft-sand beach. We put down our heavy overnight packs and looked back along the path. The sun was shining, golden sand stretched as far as we could see, the ocean was that seductive turquoise that you see on billboards advertising tropical holidays, and this fisherman was the first person we'd seen since starting the trail earlier.

We were hiking the Damara Trail, a new two-day route managed by CapeNature, which runs from De Mond Nature Reserve to Arniston in the Southern Cape. From the trailhead the previous afternoon, we'd followed a boardwalk along the Heuningnes River, scanning the area for Damara terns. The estuary of the Heuningnes, a Ramsar site, is an important breeding ground for these little birds after which the trail is named.

The trail then undulated through the reserve, taking us past stands of pink satyr orchids and colourful vygies. We stopped to admire the view of the Indian Ocean from a high point before descending to the overnight platform.

Dumping our bags, we crossed the daisy-covered dunes for a swim, then headed back to take stock. Our tents and all the necessary cooking and eating utensils were stowed under the deck. Once we had the fire going, it was back to the beach for sundowners followed by dinner under a big, bright moon.

Knowing that the first day's hike was only 5 km, we'd gone big on provisions: Our shoulders ached but we enjoyed the full braai experience, and maybe a little too much wine…

We woke to a dawn chorus and a vivid sunrise. A humpback whale cruised past. There was little else to see in the first hour of beach walking. We walked in silence, lost in thought, stopping only for a skinny dip. After 4 km – when we met the fisherman – the landscape changed and the soft sand was replaced by jagged outcrops of limestone. From the cliff tops we looked down on wave-cut platforms pitted with deep, circular potholes.

The ocean here is one of rapidly changing moods, as evidenced by the number of shipwrecks off the rocky coastline, including the *Arniston*, a British ship wrecked in 1815 and the inspiration for the name of the holiday town where the trail ends. Even on this windless day, waves crashed into the gullies and we had to time our traverses of the ledges to avoid a drenching.

As we worked our way around the boulders and pebble beaches, African black oystercatchers screeched, gulls swooped and we spotted a pair of rock kestrels and their chicks high against a cliff face.

The trail turned north just before Struispunt, but we detoured to visit historical fish traps and the Baken – a historical beacon that once sported a copper ball, which reflected the sunlight and warned ships of the dangerous Saxon Reef off the point.











Clockwise from far left: The hikers enjoy the sweeping views along the cliff top towards Arniston. There are actually two, interlinked, Waenhuiskrans caves. This is the entrance to the smaller one. The historical Baken, with fish traps to its left. Dining alfresco at the rustic overnight camp, which is set in the dunes. Day 2 starts with a 4 km stretch along a sandy beach, then the coastline becomes more rugged with limestone promontories and cliffs.

Waenhuiskrans Cave, an impressive landmark along this stretch of coastline, can only be visited on the low tide. Lucky for us, this was mid-morning.

After we'd explored the cave, it was a short walk along the cliff top to Arniston, where we were again distracted by whale sightings – this time a southern right and its calf.

We'd opted to spend an extra night in Arniston. It was a good call, allowing us plenty of time to explore the cave and the village, rather than rush back for the shuttle.

All in all, the Damara Trail is an invigorating, pretty hike with botanical, historical and cultural attractions adding to the wilderness factor. It's a great opportunity to spend time with friends and easily manageable as a weekend escape from Cape Town.

Having the reserve all to ourselves at night was a real privilege. After all, there aren't many places with an exclusive campsite in a safe, protected area right next to the ocean…

How does it work? This is a point-to-point route hiked over two days, from De Mond Nature Reserve to Arniston. The total distance is 16,5 km. Secure parking is available at De Mond. (The reserve is 26 km from Bredasdorp and 210 km from Cape Town.)

A shuttle service back to the cars leaves Arniston at 12.30 pm on the second day (or the third day if you extend your stay by booking an additional night in Arniston). CapeNature will send you a list of Arniston accommodation options when you book the trail. There are plenty of cottages to rent, but the Arniston Spa Hotel (arnistonhotel.com) on the seafront is always a good option. There are various room types on offer, most of which have private balconies with ocean views. Double room from R1 710 per night, with breakfast.

Difficulty? Day 1 is only 5,5 km – it's an easy stroll to the overnight point. Don't be deceived by the 11 km distance on Day 2. If the tide and wind are against you, it's a long haul with an overnight pack. Allow at least five hours and try to arrive at Waenhuiskrans Cave at low tide.

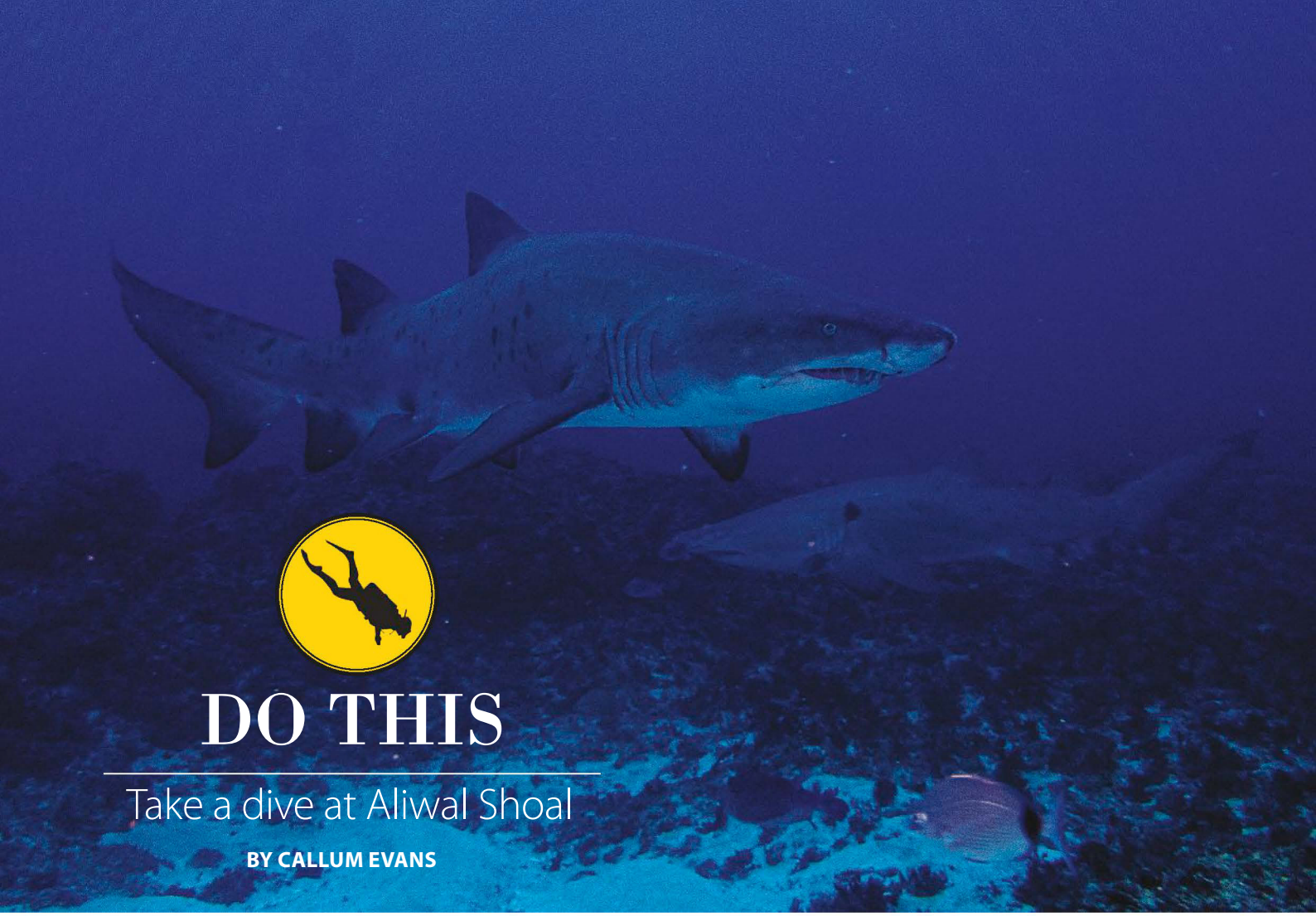
When? Hikers can start the trail any day except Sundays and public holidays.

Cost? The overnight trail costs R580 per person, which includes the shuttle. Minimum group is six, maximum eight. Children older than 8 are allowed on the hike. Conservation fee: R50 per adult per day; R30 per child. Free if you have a Wild Card.

Trail accommodation? Tents are supplied – you pitch them under a roof on a raised wooden deck. Be prepared for a "rustic" night, particularly if rain is forecast – the seating and braai area is uncovered. Braai equipment – and other cutlery and crockery – is provided. Bring a camping stove, mattress, sleeping bag, pillow and towel. There's a compost toilet and rain water from a JoJo tank.

Contact: 087 087 8250; capenature.co.za

What else? Should low tide not fall in the morning, it's only a short walk back to Waenhuiskrans Cave from Arniston. You can also carry on along the beach for about 4 km to the Arniston monument, which commemorates the sinking of the *Arniston* ship.



DO THIS

Take a dive at Aliwal Shoal

BY CALLUM EVANS

You're suspended in the ocean above an underwater mountain range, but instead of trees, coral grows from the rocks, sheltering brightly coloured fish. You don't know where to look! Shoals of stumpnose and bannerfish swim around, and the ghostly shapes of ragged-tooth sharks move dreamlike over the reef. Two green turtles emerge from a cave right beneath you, while the songs of humpback whales reverberate through the water.

Welcome to Aliwal Shoal, a rocky reef about 5 km long, just offshore from the town of Umkomaas (eMkhomazi) in KZN. This Marine Protected Area is one of the most famous dive sites in the world, especially if you're into sharks…

During winter, hundreds of ragged-tooth sharks (nicknamed raggies) gather here to mate. In summer, other shark species visit the reef, including scalloped hammerheads and bull sharks. Tiger sharks are regularly seen, and even whale sharks.

Alongside the sharks, Aliwal Shoal is also home to three species of turtle, various ray species, including manta ray, moray eels and hundreds of fish. Its subtropical location means that species from the colder waters of the Cape mingle with tropical species like anemonefish, Moorish idols and parrotfish.

An Aliwal Shoal diving holiday goes like this: Every morning at sunrise, you drive down to the beach where the uMkhomazi River flows into the Indian Ocean. You climb aboard a big rubber duck and the skipper skillfully navigates the safest path through the waves. It's a thrilling launch that gets the adrenaline pumping.

It takes about 25 minutes to get to the reef, broken up by sightings of migrating humpback whales and pods of bottlenose dolphins. Once you're at the chosen dive site, the instructors help you into your gear, then it's "3 - 2 - 1!" and you roll backwards into another world.

In July 2024, I spent four days at Blue Ocean Dive Resort, a dive centre in Umkomaas. Each dive yielded great visibility (15 – 20 metres) and I was blown away by the diversity of fish species: triggerfish, surgeonfish, butterflyfish, angelfish, parrotfish, rock cod… Shy anemonefish hid within their stinging sanctuaries.

It was winter and there were raggies in abundance. On every dive we saw dozens swimming slowly over the reef and hiding in the caves.

For a guaranteed adrenaline rush, consider a baited dive. You hover in open water surrounded by large sharks. On both of our baited dives, more than 20 oceanic blacktips investigated the bait drum (and mostly ignored us). On this kind of dive, it's important to have good buoyancy control and not splash around too much as this can agitate the sharks. It might not be for everybody, but there's something primordial about sharing a glance with a shark, even if only for a moment before it cruises past you.

Two curious potato bass also paid us a visit on a baited dive, as did a swooping eagle ray. A huge wall of barracuda materialised out of the blue: a shimmering mass of hundreds of these iconic fish.

After each dive, we returned to the resort for a hot shower. All your gear is washed and hung up to dry. There's a debrief so you can enter what you saw in your logbook and identify the various fish, then it's time for lunch at Blue Ocean's restaurant.

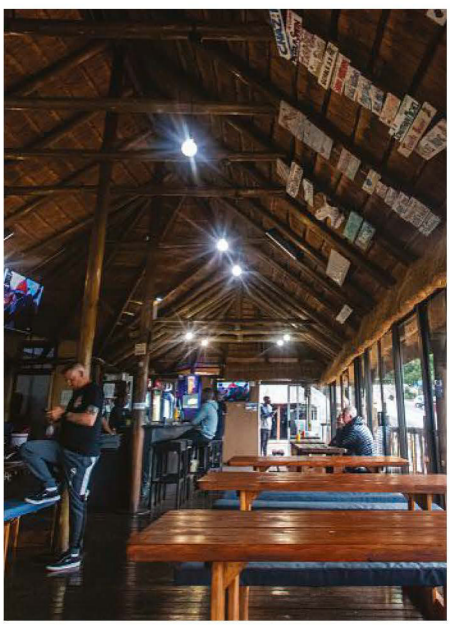
Salut, Aliwal Shoal! Let's do it all again tomorrow.













Opposite page: In winter the chances of seeing ragged-tooth sharks at Aliwal Shoal are excellent.

Clockwise from the top: A humpback whale's tail sticks out as it disappears below the waves. A pair of two-bar anemonefish in the sanctuary of their anemone home. This boat takes divers to the reef. A friendly giant potato bass. The Blue Ocean Restaurant and Bar is the perfect place to unwind after a day spent in the water. This oceanic blacktip swam right past Callum on a baited shark dive.

How does it work? You need to be a qualified scuba diver to dive at Aliwal Shoal. You can do your entry level PADI Open Water course at one of the dive centres in town – it costs about R6 000 per person and takes a few days. If you're qualified, you can explore the various dive sites on offer, which range from shallow (less than 18 metres deep) to deeper (up to 30 metres). There are also several wrecks for advanced divers to explore, and the option of free diving and snorkelling.

Any qualified diver can do a baited shark dive. Some operators also offer baited dives for snorkellers.

Gear: Bring your own dive gear or hire from a centre in town (from R500 per day).

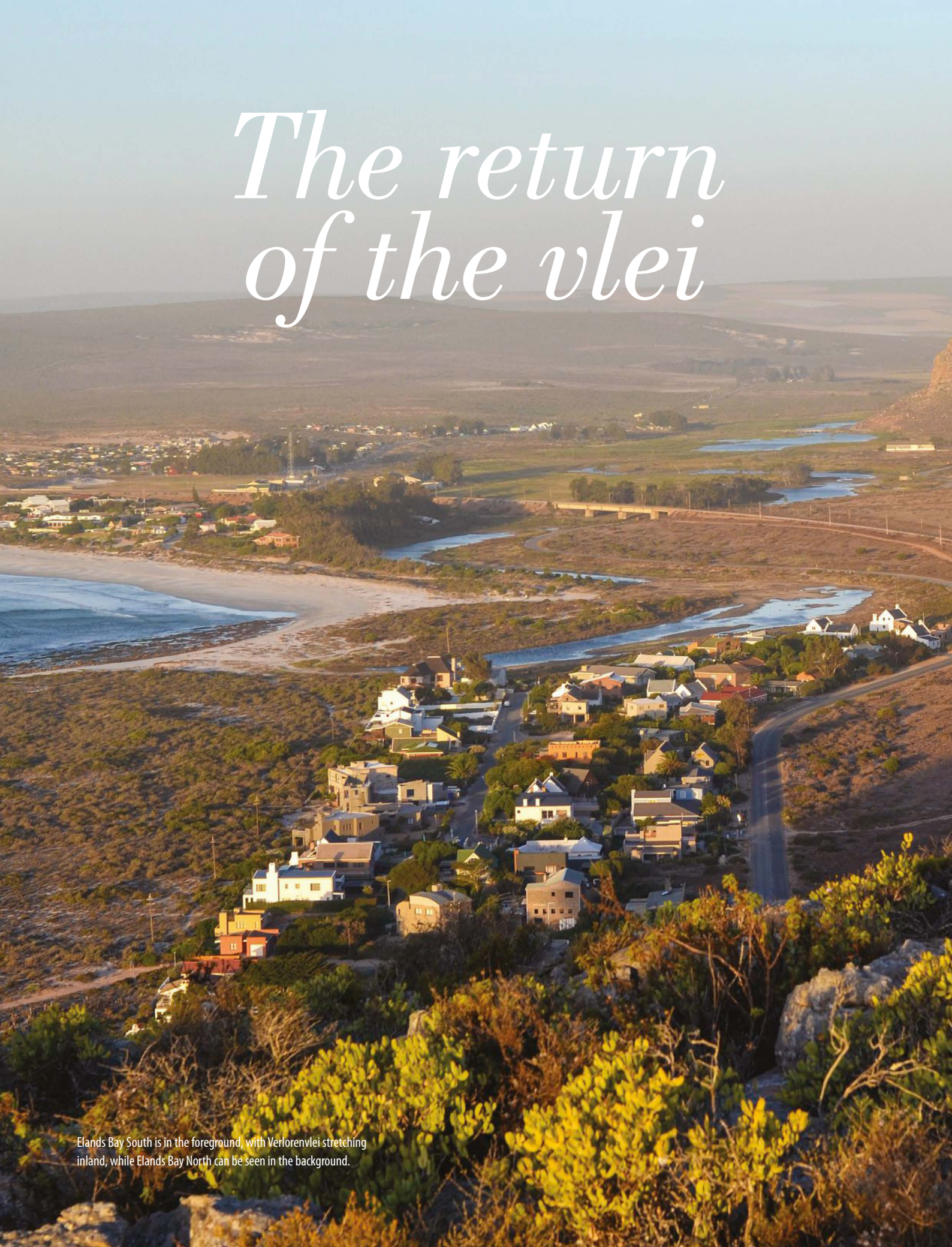
Best time to dive? There's no off season. Different seasons attract different species to the reef. Winter (June to November): ragged-tooth shark mating season, humpback whale migration. Summer (November to May): tiger sharks, bull sharks, manta rays.

Where to stay? We stayed at **Blue Ocean Dive Resort** (blueoceandive.co.za). There are a few different dive centres in Umkomaas and all offer similar trips and packages that include meals and accommodation. Check out **Aliwal Dive Centre** (aliwalshoal.co.za), **Agulhas House** (agulhashouse.com) and **Scuba Addicts** (scubaaddicts.com).

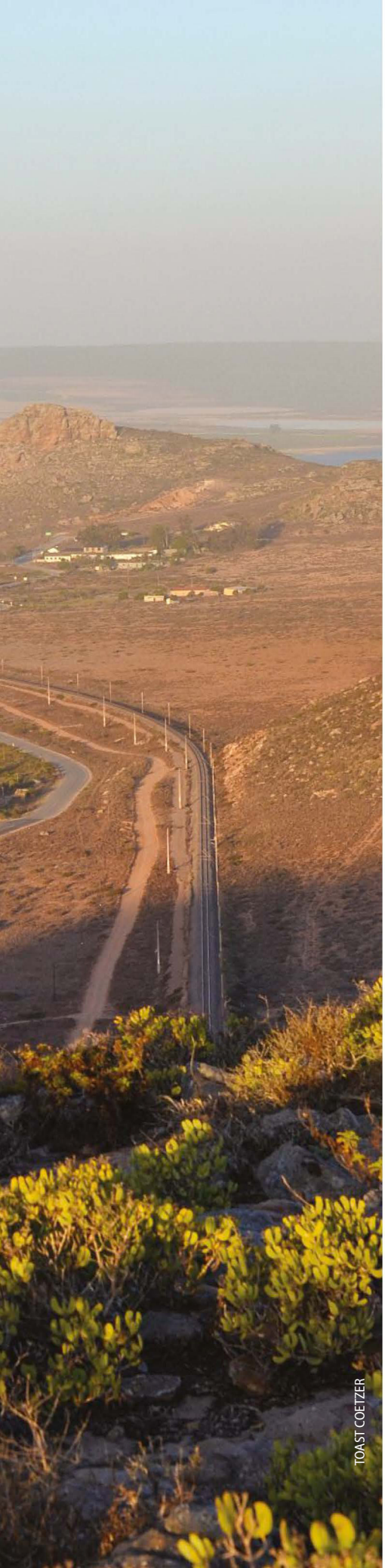
Rates: Blue Ocean: R950 per person per night B&B; R950 per reef dive; R1 615 per baited shark dive. We opted for a four-night package for about R10 000 per person sharing, which included eight dives, breakfast and lodging.

How to get there: Umkomaas is an hour's drive south of King Shaka International Airport via the N2 (85 km). It's 50 km south of Durban.

The return of the vlei



Elands Bay South is in the foreground, with Verlorenvlei stretching inland, while Elands Bay North can be seen in the background.


TOAST COETZER

For many years, Verlorenvlei near Elands Bay on the West Coast lay parched and dry. Finally, during the winter of 2023 – and again in 2024 – it rained enough to fill up and push through to the sea, rejuvenating the entire area. Meet some of the people who have called Elands Bay their home through tough times and times of joy.

WORDS **TOAST COETZER**
GUIDE SECTION **JAC KRITZINGER**

The bay stretches out like a friendly smile, widening as it curls to the north, eventually disappearing in a haze of sea spray and soft sunset light. I'm on top of Bobbejaansberg, overlooking Elands Bay, with Chantal Isaac, owner of the Wit Mossel Pot restaurant in town, and Gerrit Jonker, the local police captain.

From here you can clearly see the different parts of the town. Closest to us is the old slipway and fish factory (mostly inactive), then the beach houses of Elands Bay South. The silver ribbon of water just beyond is Verlorenvlei, where two bridges are visible: one for the Sishen-Saldanha railway line and the other for road traffic. The Wit Mossel Pot is in Elands Bay North, along with the Elands Bay Hotel and a couple of small shops.

Surfers from around the world make the pilgrimage to Elands for its peeling left-hand point break. The sea is flat this afternoon, but I've stood on the beach before and watched stoked surfers ride wave after wave.

This unusual curve in the coastline has attracted people since the earliest of times. Most of the West Coast is flat and featureless, but here there's a sheltering ridge that runs straight into the sea, and a source of fresh water. There's an overhang at Baboon Point, the westernmost point of Bobbejaansberg, where you can see rock art. Indeed, our ancestors frequented this spot since at least the Middle Stone Age. (See "Things to do" on page 99.)

For archaeologists, the most important site is Diepkloof, about 15 km inland from where I'm standing. Diepkloof attained World Heritage status in 2024 because it preserves so much of our prehistory (more than 100 000 years of it!) in incredible detail. The presence of shell middens and even penguin bones shows how the sea was used as a larder, but it's the decorated ostrich shells dug up here that really got the experts excited. They're some of the earliest proof of humans decorating objects they used in everyday life. (You can arrange a visit through the Elands Bay Museum – see page 99.)

Verlorenvlei played a key role in the area's early habitation. For centuries, people and nature co-existed according to the cyclical rhythm of tides and seasonal rain that flooded the vlei. Of course, there would have been droughts and tough times, too.

Elands Bay has just emerged from a very tough time. The vlei was dry from 2017 (some say even earlier) until the winter of 2023. Fish died and the local birdlife all but disappeared. No flamingos, no pelicans, no coots, no fish-eagles. It was a disaster on a scale even born-and-bred *Elandsbaaiers* had never seen before.

Ben Kotzé, born here in 1944, grew up in an old *langhuis* – the traditional building style of the vlei.

"My grandfather was born in 1873 – he remembered a time in 1888 when the vlei was dry. He told us how people could cross the dry expanse in wagons," Ben tells me the next morning when we meet for a drink at the Wit Mossel Pot, the social hub of Elands.

"During this recent drought it happened again – you could drive

through the vlei in a vehicle. I don't recall it ever happening during my own childhood. If I understand it correctly, it's not so much that the rainfall has decreased, it's that irrigation upstream has intensified."

Verlorenvlei's catchment is mostly inland from Elands Bay, towards Piketberg, Eendekuil and the Piekenierskloof Pass. It's potato and wheat country, but grapes and citrus are also grown. The key feeder rivers are the Kruismans, Krom-Antonies, Bergvallei and the Hol River. Verlorenvlei has Ramsar status, which means that it's a key wetland for migrating waders and other birds. Hence, farmers are not allowed to pump water directly from the vlei. But like wetlands worldwide, the vlei must compete with booming human populations demanding more water and food. There's even a potential mining threat to Verlorenvlei, with a tungsten mine on the cards for Moutonshoek in the northern part of the Piketberg.

To see the vlei bone dry was alarming to farmers and town residents alike. After all, Verlorenvlei is the pride of both Elands Bay and Redelinghuys, a village upstream. The vlei draws visitors to the area; birders treasure it; and it's part of the fabric of local life. Many people grew up fishing its waters, either for leisure or for a living.

"Every morning we'd put our feet in the vlei – it was five or six steps from our stoep," Ben says. "Your life was intertwined with the vlei; we even got our drinking water from there at times."

This was long before municipalities provided running water. Households like the Kotzés had to make do with what they had. When the vlei water was fresh, they used it. During winter they harvested rainwater, and they built things called *fonteinkiste* during times when the vlei level was low. Here's how a *fonteinkis* worked: They'd dig a hole through the dry mud until fresh water seeped in, then they'd panel the sides of the hole with planks and put a lid on top that could be locked. This was to ensure that only your family had access to the water.

Lea Witbooi works as a cook on the farm Wadrif, next to the R365 that connects Elands Bay and Lambert's Bay. I pick her up one afternoon after her shift and we chat in the car as I drive us back towards Elands Bay. Lea wants to go show me another Verlorenvlei – the farm where she grew up. Verlorenvlei (the farm) was also the site of the first modern settlement in the area, around 300 years ago. Her grandfather Andries Smit still lives there.

"The people on the farm know him as 'Ou Klippe'," she says. "My real father died when I was little, and my mother had to move to Citrusdal for work, so my oupa Andries and ouma Sophia – they called her Fytjie – raised me and some of my cousins on the farm. We stayed in a type of shed with no power or running water. One of our daily chores was to walk down to the vlei to collect water in containers. There were so many fish in those days – you could spear them in the shallows if you were skilful enough.

"I finished standard 8 and then left school – it was difficult and expensive to get to the high school, which was in a neighbouring town. I had to start working in the potato fields at the age of 18. My ouma taught me how to cook and how to work with my hands. I never had to go study somewhere to learn about cooking. She told me that if you love what you do, you'll be successful in life.

"I loved those early years on the farm. The owner of the farm was Oom Theunis 'Klokkies' Smit, who has passed away now. There were some people from Cape Town who had holiday houses there. The road to the houses ran right past my grandfather's place. During the holidays, we'd open and close the gate for tips or sweets."

The tar road reaches a steep descent as we approach Vensterklip Guest Farm and the vlei looms large. At the bottom of the hill, I turn right towards Elands then swing left again to cross the vlei to the southern side.

"There was a footpath here that we walked along each day to get to school," Lea tells me. "Sometimes the water was high and we had to wade through. Then we arrived at school sopping wet!

"Over weekends, my ouma would send us to town to buy groceries. Once, my cousin Susan and I were walking right here with the shopping bags when a cow came running towards us. But then I realised, hang on, it's not a cow, it's a bull! We had to scramble up a big rock – that one there – to avoid being trampled!"

We turn off the tar road and reach the small house where Andries Smit lives. After greeting me, he disappears into the house to fetch his guitar – he wants to play me a few songs.

The sun sets over Verlorenvlei. It's a melancholy scene, but not without joy. Ou Klippe with his wrinkled face that has seen many a sunset over the vlei, plays his battered guitar. Lea watches, smiling proudly. This is her place in the world, her roots.

Monique Vlok and her father Frans farm potatoes on the Goergap Road, which is where the Kruismans, Krom-Antonies and Hol rivers come together to form the Verlorenvlei River. This is upstream from Redelinghuys, about 50 km from Elands Bay.

"The annual rainfall started decreasing from 2015," Monique says when I meet her at the Wit Mossel Pot. (Where else?) "We're meant to get about 240 mm per year on the farm, but in some years since 2015 we got half of that if we were lucky. The rainfall varies hugely between here at Elands and the catchment area of the vlei. Moutonshoek, for example, gets much more rain. A while ago I measured 7 mm and they received 89 mm, even though it's relatively close by."

Monique loves the wildflowers of the region and spends many hours on her knees photographing plants.

"Some of them are so tiny, you have to crawl in under the shrubbery to see them. And the vegetation varies with the landscape. On the ocean side of the mountains, you'll see ferns and bulbous plants; on the other side there are aloes on the warmer slopes."

Monique is concerned about the welfare of the vlei. She explains how she and her father try to be as waterwise as













Clockwise from top left: Andries Smit and his granddaughter Lea Witbooi on the farm where they grew up. Chantal Isaac owns the popular Wit Mossel Pot restaurant. Ben Kotzé on the stoep of his house in Elands Bay. After years of drought, Verlorenvlei is full again. Monique Vlok farms with potatoes. Felicity Strange and her partner Nick Taylor take a walk with their cats.

possible. They only plant potatoes during winter, when the area receives the most rain, thus requiring less irrigation and also less electricity. (Some farmers plant year-round, using much more water.)

"I don't want the guy who farms here after me to be the one stuck without water. I have a problem with people who only think about the here and now," she says.

Monique serves on a conservation committee that works with the Department of Agriculture and with conservation officers and groundwater experts to identify and tackle the challenges faced by Verlorenvlei. There are actually two such committees in the greater region – one for the Sandveld and the other for the West Coast and the Cederberg.

Another active civic group is called Friends of Verlorenvlei...

Felicity Strange, a retired interior designer and her partner, the retired singer-songwriter Nick Taylor, moved to Elands Bay in the early 2000s after they fell in love with Verlorenvlei. To reach their house, I drive past Lea's grandfather's house again. Part of the farm Verlorenvlei is still active, but in 2014 a few plots were set aside for a development called the Verlorenvlei Heritage Settlement. A handful of people, like Nick and Felicity, bought land and built homes in the old *langhuis* style.

At first, life next to the vlei was idyllic. Nick loves sailing and paddling and spent many days exploring the watery landscape. But as the drought tightened its grip, they realised they couldn't just be passive bystanders. Felicity founded Friends of Verlorenvlei in 2019 with the aim to raise awareness about the vlei's fight for survival.

TOAST COETZER

"The best part of my day is after breakfast, when I go for a walk," she says, striding next to the shore. Her two cats, Smidgen and Smudge, play hide-and-seek in the low bushes near the water. "They love coming along – and they're a laugh a minute."

She tells me how she pays close attention to spoor in the dirt. "You don't see them during the day, but at night all sorts of creatures pass through here. I've seen tracks of steenbok, duiker, small-spotted genet, aardvark, porcupine, honey badger, tortoise and some kind of small wildcat – I'm not exactly sure which one."

"We have two beehives and the honey badgers like to raid them," Nick adds. "They're so clever – they know exactly when the honey is ready to be harvested. They turn the hive over and pull out all the frames they can get – they'd eat all the honey if they could."

Seeing the vlei return to life was an emotional time for Nick and Felicity. Felicity remembers the day the water came: "We can see quite far upstream from our house. We knew the water had come in because we have a WhatsApp group and people upstream were saying the water was on its way. Someone posted a picture of the water thundering down the Krom-Antonies River. Someone at Redelinghuys took aerial photos when the water reached there. A couple of days later, I went for my morning walk and saw a shimmer in the distance...

"It took a long time to fill up because the vlei is shallow and its bed is like a sponge. It had completely dried out during the drought, so it had to soak up a huge amount of water before that water became visible on the surface. Every morning, I put a new stick at the water's edge to mark how the level had risen.

"It was just magical," Nick adds. "The dry veld around our home slowly turned green; I saw plants budding that I'd never seen before."

"This place has a spirit of its own," Felicity says, tears welling in her eyes. "It's a very powerful spirit and it speaks to your heart. Our language is limited when it comes to understanding our relationship with nature."

That's why it hit the locals hard during the drought when someone reported they'd seen the breeding pair of African fish-eagles break down their nest and fly away from the vlei.

"I heard them calling again this morning," Nick says with a smile. "The old people we met when we first moved here taught us that if you hear a fish-eagle calling in flight, there will be rain within 48 hours."

Long may the call of a fish-eagle be heard over Verlorenvlei, and long may the rain come as it should.



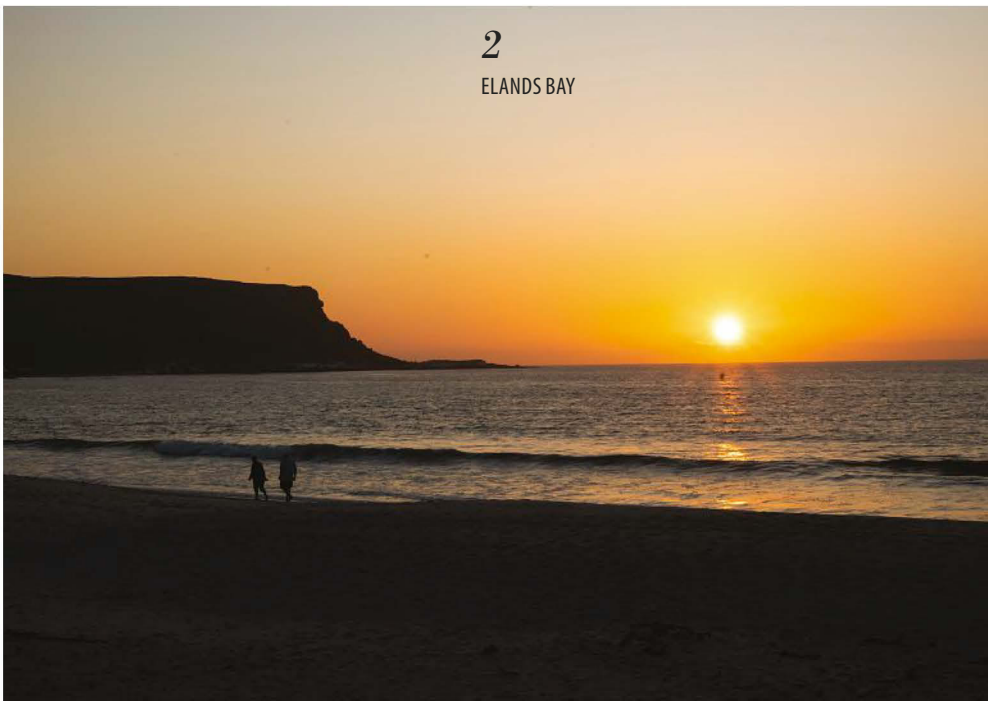
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ROCK OVERHANG, BABOON POINT



LEARN MORE

Facebook: Follow "Friends of Verlorenvlei" for conservation news; follow "Ons mooi Elandsbaai" for happenings in the town.

YouTube: Search "Nick Taylor Verlorenvlei" and you'll find a series of short documentaries made by Nick about the vlei.



2
ELANDS BAY

JAC KRITZINGER





3
DIE ROOI STOOR FARM STALL


4
ELANDS BAY MUSEUM

4 Things to do

1 Brush up on history

High on Baboon Point, there's a radar station and the ruins of other buildings used by South African women during World War II to monitor enemy aircraft and ships. (*See issue #193 – Ed.*) Near these old buildings there's also an overhang where you can see rock art on the walls – people lived in the cave from as long as 80 000 years ago; it's but a small part of the area's rich San heritage. If you look closely, you can see eland, patterns and small handprints. And the view of the ocean is spectacular.

Elsewhere on the mountain, an SAA Lockheed Lodestar plane collided with the cliffs on a misty day in March 1941. Ten passengers died in the tragedy.

Where? As you come into town on the R366, turn left onto the road to Elands Bay South. Keep right at the Velddrif T-junction and continue until the road becomes dirt, past the old crayfish factory and harbour, until you see the radar station on the slope. Park next to the road and follow the path up.

Opening times: It's always open; there's no access control.

Cost: Free.

Contact: Elands Bay Museum/tourism office 060 925 7476

2 Stroll on the beach

If you're not a surfer or brave enough to swim in the cold water, take a walk on the beach. Main Beach is most popular. You can relax for hours, pick up seashells or walk north-west to the dunes in the direction of Lambert's Bay while the trains on the Sishen-Saldanha railway line clack past.

The beach in Elands Bay South curves past the houses to the rocks at the old crayfish factory.

You can also do the Shoreline of the San slackpacking trail – a five-day coastal route of 50 km from Elands Bay to Strandfontein, which includes meals and accommodation. *(See issue #183 – Ed.)*

Contact: Silent Steps silentsteps.co.za

3 Stop at a farm stall

Die Rooi Stoor Farm Stall at Vensterklip outside Elands Bay is right next to Verlorenvlei. You'll find homemade plum jam, clothes, toys, biscuits and bokkems. Sit down in the restaurant and order a quiche or jaffle. Their coffee is delicious and they have a range of rooibos tea products – look for the peach-flavoured rooibos and cancer bush tea.

Birders, grab your binoculars and camera and follow the path to the vlei. If you're lucky you might see pelicans, swift terns, flamingos and fish-eagles. Enquire about accommodation – they have campsites and self-catering houses available.

Where? About 5 km before you reach Elands Bay on the R366.

Opening times: Monday to Friday from 8 am to 5 pm; weekends until 3 pm.

Contact: 022 972 1339; vensterklip.co.za

4 Visit the museum

The small Elands Bay Museum is right on the beach. Inside, you can learn about the region's history, its archaeological heritage (including Diepkloof) and its ecology. The exhibits are neat and full of information. Check out the photos that tell the story of the town, and an exhibit with arrowheads and stone tools found in the area. On the back stoep you'll find photos of current residents sharing their life story. The museum is also the tourism office.

Book beforehand if you want to visit Diepkloof. Tours take place on Wednesdays and Sundays at 9.30 am – R120 per person.

Where? Corner of Strand and Duine streets, next to the Blue Bottle liquor store.

Opening times: Tuesday to Friday from 9 am to 4 pm. Saturday from 10 am to 3 pm. Sundays and public holidays until 2 pm. Closed on Mondays.

Cost: Free; donations are welcome.

Contact: 060 925 7476 (Tania)
072 447 4936





TOAST COETZER



JAC KRITZINGER

EAT HERE

Wit Mossel Pot

This restaurant has a great atmosphere. It's also a surf and bric-a-brac shop – you can buy hats, art, sunglasses, vellies and local clothing ranges like Kaalvoet and Soekie C. The menu has breakfast, burgers, steak, fresh seafood and vegetarian options. The portions are big and the prices are affordable. Sip a beer or a glass of wine with the sound of the waves in your ears.

Where? Corner of Duine Street, opposite the museum.

Opening times: Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm (and sometimes on Sundays if the surf is good). They stay open for dinner if you book beforehand.

Contact: 082 496 8931

Elands Bay Hotel

The local hotel is a favourite among residents and visitors. The restaurant serves breakfast, pasta, salad, seafood, burgers, sandwiches, steak and milkshakes. The dining room is big with a view of the sea; or sit at a table outside on the lawn in the salty air. It's a down-to-earth place with good food and service. Campsite and rooms available.

Where? 1 Hunter Street

Opening times: Monday to Sunday from 9 am to 9 pm.

Contact: 022 972 1640; elandsbayhotel.co.za

JAC KRITZINGER

STAY HERE

Oceanic

This neatly renovated self-catering place was one of the first fisherman's cottages in town. It's on the main beach a few hundred metres from the Wit Mossel Pot and the hotel. The unit has three bedrooms and can sleep six people. There's a big stoep with a sea view, an indigenous garden, DStv and Wi-Fi. You can braai inside or outside (behind the house; no sea view) and at night the waves will lull you to sleep. No pets.

Where? 14 Strand Street

Rates: Low season from R1 500 per night for two people; R1 800 during school holidays; R2 300 for three to six people. Minimum two-night stay. December and January R3 000 per night, regardless of how many people – minimum five-night stay.

Contact: 082 605 1001

visit-oceanic.co.za

Straw House

A self-catering house for eight people built with straw bales. It has an interesting layout: The kitchen and living area are to one side, and you walk through a sliding door and across a courtyard to reach the three bedrooms. One bedroom has its own bathroom and there's a second separate bathroom around the corner. You're not right on the beach but there's a big yard with a wood-fired tub. Pets are welcome. There's also an outdoor braai and Wi-Fi.

Where? 1 Boom Street

Rates: From R1 500 per night; minimum two-night stay.

Contact: 072 541 2936

strawrevolution.co.za

The White House

This spacious self-catering house is right on the main beach and sleeps eight people. It's stylishly furnished with everything you need. The sea view from the back stoep is great. There's also a wood-fired tub, indoor and outdoor braais, and Wi-Fi. Pets are welcome.

Where? 9 Keerom Street

Rates: From R3 500 per night during the week; R4 200 on weekends; minimum two-night stay.

Contact: 072 541 2936

airbnb.co.za

Elands Bay Guesthouse

If you're a big group of friends or family, this self-catering house in Elands Bay South is the place for you. The property is divided into three sections: There's a double-storey main house and two annexes – one on the ground floor and one on the first floor. Each section has its own bathroom(s) and kitchen, so it feels private. The guesthouse can sleep 24 people in total and your dog is welcome in the garden – it's within walking distance of the sea. There's a swimming pool, a games room (table tennis and snooker) and a braai on the deck of the main house. DStv and Wi-Fi included.

Where? 184 Kreef Street

Rate: R7 850 per night.

Contact: 072 541 2936

elandsbayguesthouse.co.za

Point Garden Cottage

A cosy garden cottage near Elands Bay Guesthouse. The cottage is private, with its own entrance. It sleeps two people and is well equipped. There's DStv, Wi-Fi and a Weber on the stoep. You don't have a sea view, but you're close to the beach and the rate is reasonable. No pets.

Where? 24 Kreef Street

Rate: R1 150 per night.

Contact: 072 541 2936

elandsbaystays.co.za

Planet Xancara

If you're in the mood for glamping, Planet Xancara won't disappoint. It's in the mountains next to the R366, near the Diepkloof Heritage Site. The pristine scenery is the main drawcard, but the place also has a spiritual approach and often hosts yoga and meditation courses. There are several luxury tented units among the rock formations – each sleeps two. There's also a communal *kuier* area where you can relax and enjoy three meals per day (no alcohol available, but you can bring your own). The swimming pool overlooks Diepkloof. Someone from Planet Xancara can take you on a guided hike to the foot of the mountain. Wi-Fi is available.

Where? About 20 km outside Elands Bay – turn off the R366.


PLANET XANCARA


OCEANIC


THE WHITE HOUSE


UITHOEK FARM

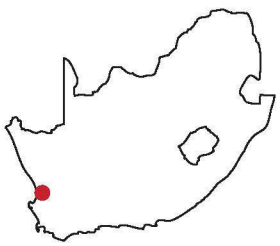
The sand road there is a challenge – if you don't have a 4x4 someone will come pick you up. When you make a booking, you'll receive detailed directions.
Rates: From R1 850 per person during low season (August to October, April and May) to R2 750 per person in peak season (November to March). Includes three meals a day.
Contact: 072 292 6264
planetxancara.com

Uithoek Farm
This guest farm outside town next to Verlorenvlei is *pure plaas*. It has three self-catering houses that sleep 17 people in total. All the houses have louver shutters and only the kitchens have power, with paraffin lamps illuminating the living areas, bedrooms and bathrooms.

The Langhuis is a long, thatched building with four bedrooms – it's the biggest of the houses. Some of the rooms have interleading doors. One room has its own bathroom while the other three share an outdoor bathroom. Tin Cottage is a cosy unit that sleeps two people; Kent's Cottage sleeps four. The units are far apart from each other to ensure privacy, but bear in mind that Tin Cottage is the only house with Wi-Fi and guests from other units are allowed to use it, so they might wander closer.

There's a cement dam and a wood-fired hot tub, plus kayaks to use on the vlei, which is a short walk away through the reeds. Pets are welcome.
Where? About 12 km outside Elands Bay along the R366. Look for the painted tree trunk at the gate.
Rates: Langhuis R4 650 per night; Kent's cottage R2 000 per night; Tin Cottage R1 200 per night. Minimum two-night stay.
Contact: 082 295 3694
airbnb.co.za (Search for Uithoek Farm Elands Bay)

Wild West Coast
Campers will love this spot just outside Redelinghuys. The campsite is high in the mountains on Rehan van Lill's farm. Along with the rugged scenery, you have a panoramic view over Dwarskersbos all the way to St Helena Bay. The stands have no power but there is Wi-Fi available, plus an equipped kitchen with solar power, and ablution facilities. There's a swimming pool, a cave and a 15 km 4x4 trail. You won't make it up the mountain in your sedan, but Rehan will transport you if needed. Look for eland and sable antelope and ask him about the "echo corner" where your voice echoes against the cliffs.
Where? The entrance is at the top of Voortrekker Street in Redelinghuys.
Rates: Over weekends this place is better suited to a big group of friends. It can accommodate a maximum of 40 people in basic self-catering rooms and campsites. Camping costs R150 per person (minimum 15 people for the exclusive use). Basic self-catering room R350 per person (minimum six; maximum 14 people). R250 per vehicle for the 4x4 route.
Contact: 083 567 0265
wildwestcoast.co.za



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- Cellphone reception is sporadic. If you want to stay connected to the outside world, look for a place to stay with reliable Internet.
- The filling station in Elands Bay was under construction during our visit. The only other place to fill up in the area is at Sandveld Oase in Redelinghuys, about 30 km away. They only have one pump and opening times vary. Contact them beforehand to make sure they can help. 022 296 2192

TOUR

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2025 DATES & RATES

- **2 – 9 February**
- **17 – 24 February**
- **26 February – 5 March**

R17 950 per adult; half-price for children under 10

Duration: Eight days, seven nights (tented accommodation)

THE ADVENTURE

DAY 1: TWEE RIVIEREN

Our adventure through the Kgalagadi starts at Twee Rivieren rest camp. Go on an optional afternoon game drive or simply relax and cool down in the swimming pool. In the evening there will be time to get to know each other around the campfire, over dinner prepared by our bush chef.

DAYS 2 – 4: NOSSOB

Today we head for Nossob, where we will stay for three nights. Along the way, we visit the Auchterlonie Museum where you can learn more about the park's history.

You can go on game drives from the rest camp at your leisure, or visit the camp waterhole, which is lit up until 10 pm. The Bhejane team will take care of all your meals, freeing you up to experience everything the Kalahari has to offer: the camel thorn trees, blazing sunsets, birdlife and animal sightings. The swimming pool will be very welcome on a hot day!

DAYS 5 – 7: MABUASEHUBE

After breakfast, we cross into the Botswana section of the park, following the Bosobogolo Trail. Our destination is Mabuasehube, where we'll set up camp. Except for the vehicle tracks, you won't see much evidence of manmade things. And, without light pollution, the night skies are incredible.

The area is renowned for its low-lying pans, where eland, springbok, gemsbok and the iconic Kalahari lions come to quench their thirst. We'll also keep an eye out for leopard, cheetah, honey badger and brown hyenas, all of which are regular visitors to Mabua's campsites.

Please note this is a true African adventure. There are ablution facilities at Nossob and Twee Rivieren only. The other camps have bucket showers and pit toilets.

Note that Mabuasehube is a true wilderness destination and it's important to carry enough fuel and water – comprehensive details of what to pack and where to stock up will be circulated before the tour.

DAY 8: HOME

After one last breakfast, we must sadly pack up and head for home. We'll all travel together on sandy cutlines to Tshabong, where we'll bid our companions farewell. From there, it's about 20 km on a tarred road to the border post and a further 215 km to Kuruman.

WHAT'S INCLUDED?

- Camping fees
- Park entrance fees
- All advertised activities
- Tents, cutlery and crockery
- Three meals a day, plus tea and coffee in camp
- Specialist tour leader and crew as required
- Two-way radio communication

WHAT YOU NEED TO BRING

- Your own vehicle (fuel, border fees and road taxes are for your account)
- Your own mattress and sleeping bag
- Camping chairs
- Drinks and snacks
- Medical emergency and evacuation insurance cover

Contact bookings@bhejane.com or call 082 724 0442 for a complete itinerary

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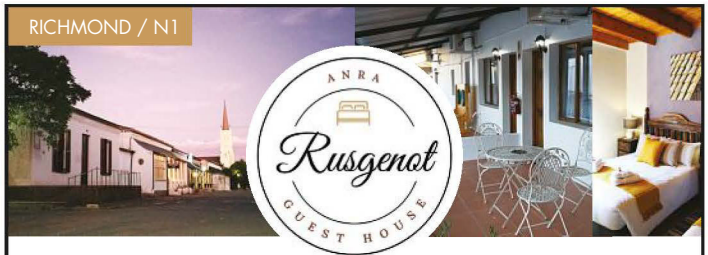
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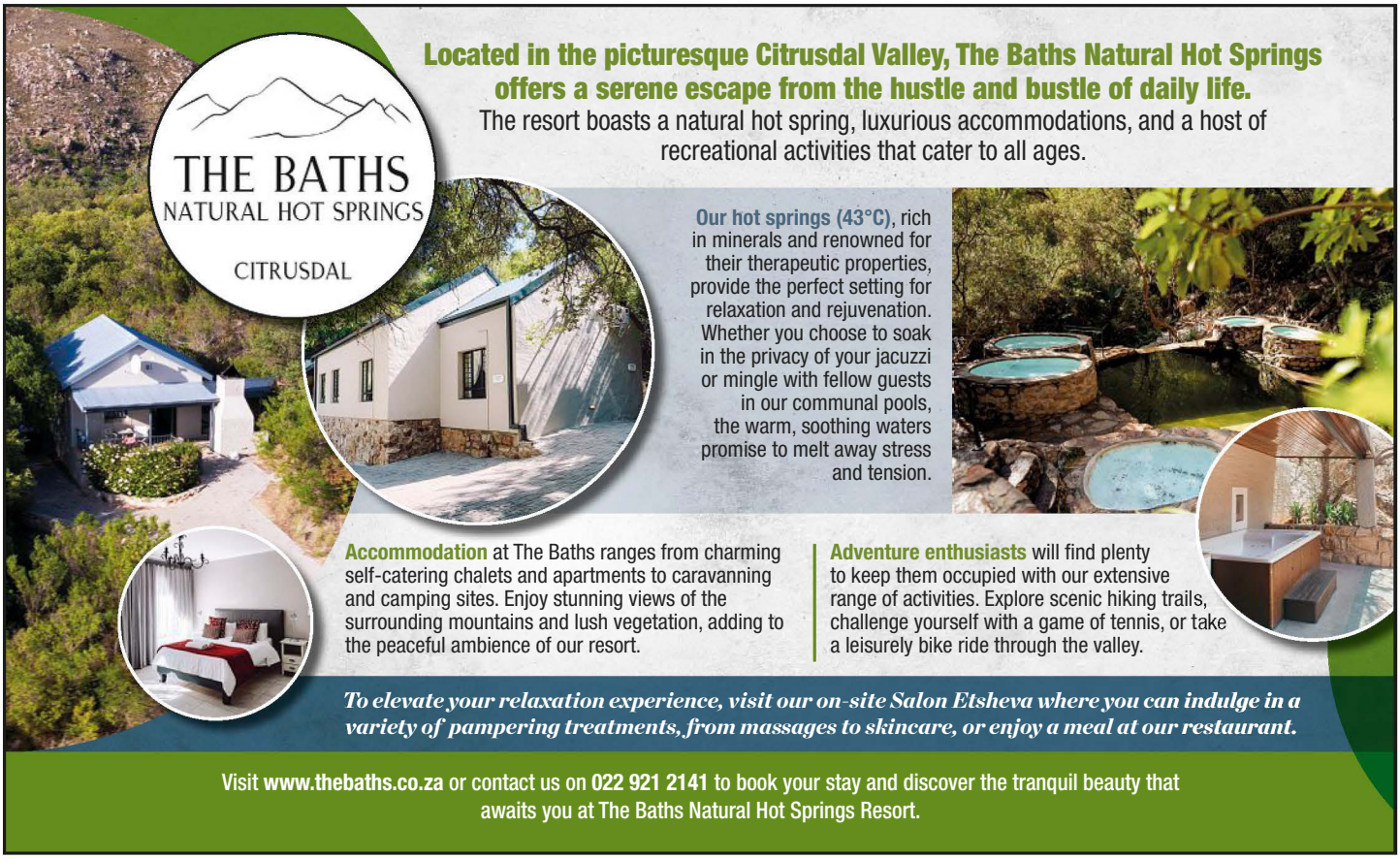


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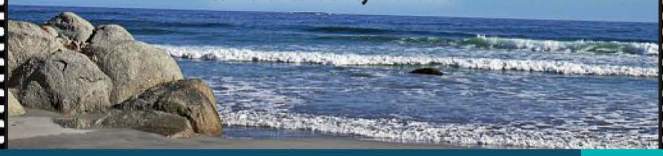


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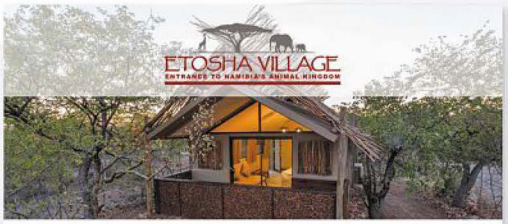
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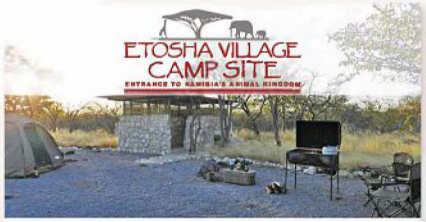
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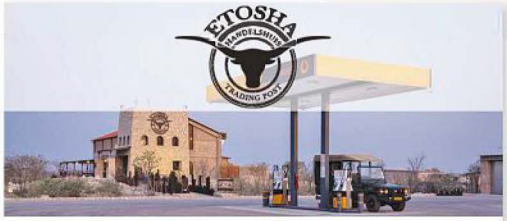
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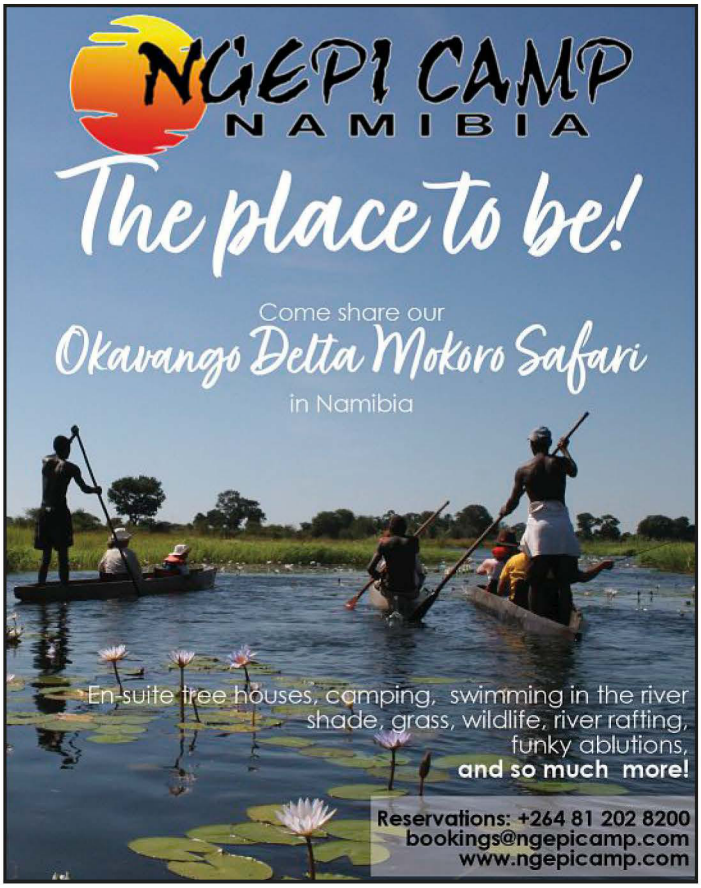
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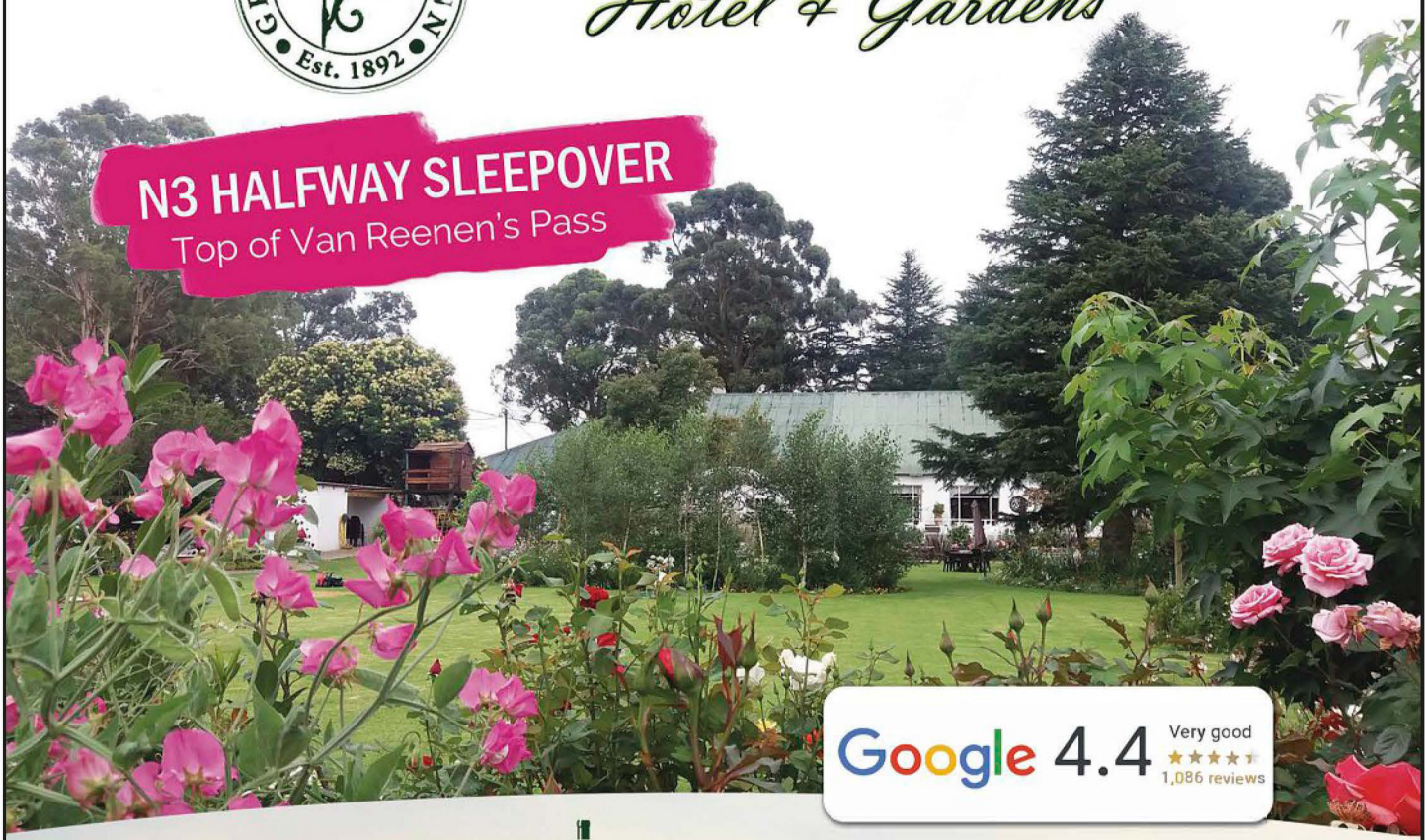

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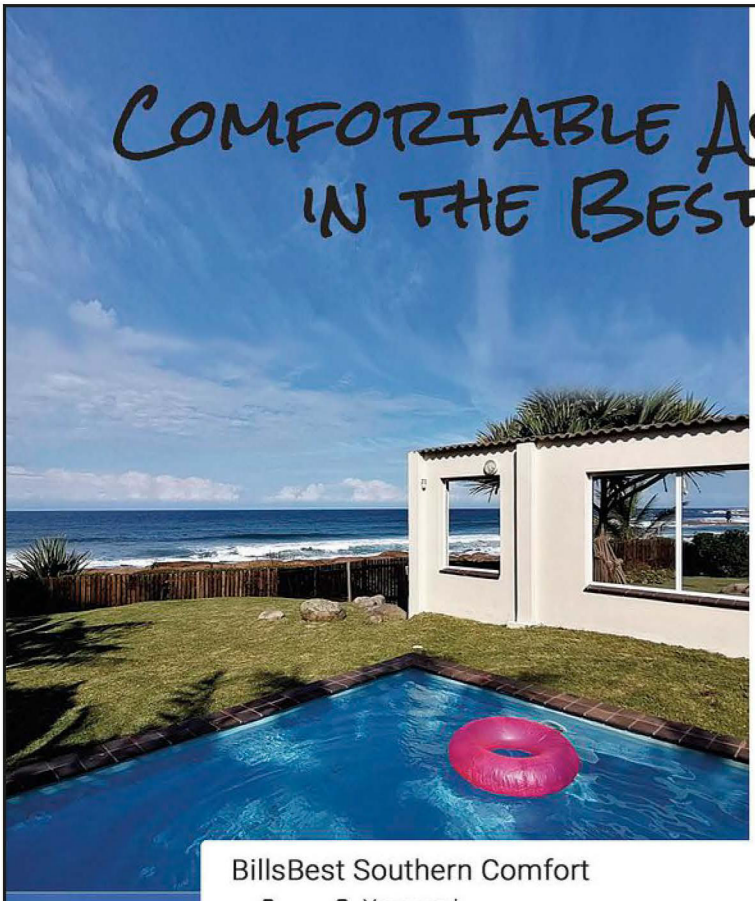
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WITH MY OWN EYES





When **Sumarie Rossouw** from De Doorns visited the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, she was delighted to see a honey badger. And then she looked closer…

In May 2023, I spent a week in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park with my parents, André and Adanda. We arrived soon after veld fires had ravaged the area and we didn't see many animals. Most of the big herbivores had migrated to the Mabuasehube area on the Botswana side of the park in search of food, and the carnivores had followed.

But you should never underestimate the Kgalagadi. There's always something to amaze you; it just takes patience and a keen eye.

Late one afternoon, as we were driving back to Twee Rivieren, we saw a vehicle pull over. We quickly scanned the landscape and saw a honey badger among the shrubs with what looked like a rugby ball-sized rock. I zoomed in using the Sigma 150 – 600 mm lens on my Canon 90D and realised it wasn't a rock, but a leopard tortoise on its back. **1**

The honey badger couldn't get its claws into the tortoise's shell to reach its legs or head. It tried every possible angle – it even lay down on its side. When it did this, it sometimes covered itself in sand. Maybe it was a sign of frustration, or a way to cool down?

After a long struggle, the badger flipped the tortoise the right way up again. **2** It seemed to have given up, then surprised us by shoving sand into the tortoise's shell! **3**, **4** We think the badger was trying to suffocate the tortoise and force it to stick its head out.

Unfortunately, we had to return to the rest camp before the gates closed for the night. We'll never know who emerged victorious from this battle, but the badger's resourcefulness definitely gets an honourable mention.









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Treasures of the sea

Did you know that seashells are the skeletons of ocean creatures called molluscs? Let's look at some of the seashells that wash up on South African beaches!

COMPILED BY **SOPHIA VAN TAAK**

What is a seashell?

It's the skeleton of a mollusc, a kind of sea animal that doesn't have a skeleton inside its body. The shell forms a protective layer around the animal – it's called an exoskeleton; "exo" means outside.

There are two types of molluscs. Gastropods look like slugs and have a "foot" on the bottom of their body which they use to move around. Their shells consist of one piece. Then we get bivalves, like mussels – their shells are made up of two pieces, or "wings".

The shell grows along with the mollusc. When the animal dies, the shell remains and sometimes washes onto the beach or into a rock pool.

Is a shell made of bone?

Not quite. A shell is composed of calcium carbonate crystals (like an eggshell). There are layers of conchiolin between the crystals – a type of protein that strengthens the shell.

There are many different types of seashells, but when you look closer you'll see that they're all spiral-shaped. Some are sharply pointed while others are wider and flatter.

COMMON SEASHELLS



Black mussel
120 mm long
These shellfish live in big colonies on rocks along the western and southern coasts of South Africa, all the way to the Wild Coast. The shell is usually purplish or blueish black, with concentric growth lines along the smooth outer layer.



Finger plough shell
60 mm long
You often see these animals moving along the wet sand in masses. The smooth shell has clear spirals and a sharp point – it looks like an ice cream cone. They eat any dead animals that wash up on the beach, especially bluebottles.



Giant periwinkle
100 mm long
This is the biggest spiral shell found in South Africa. They wash up on beaches from Saldanha to the Wild Coast. The shell is a mixture of black, grey, orange and silver.



Hairy triton/Basket shell
80 – 110 mm long
This toffee-brown shell has a nice shape with clear ridges around the opening. It's found all along our coastline. While the animal is still alive, the shell is covered with "hair" or fibres to help it blend into its surroundings. This type of shellfish eats redbait.



Spindle shell
105 mm long
A remarkedly long shell with a sharp tip on both sides. It's usually reddish brown and you can clearly see the spiral pattern.



Sea urchin
40 mm in diameter
These dull green pumpkin shells are beautiful but very delicate – be careful when you pick them up! You won't want to pick up the live animal… It's covered in dangerous spines, which are normally purple.

GETTY/GALLOIMAGES.COM

PRETTY BUT RARE



Nerita 35 mm long

The nerita is found from the Wild Coast to Kosi Bay. It has a rough, ridged surface and black-and-white marks. You usually find it in deep fissures in rocks in the intertidal zone.



Cone shell 50 mm long

A light, delicate shell with an orange or pinkish colour. Some kinds also have brown or white specks, strips or dots. Look for it from Cape Agulhas to Coffee Bay.



Gold ringer cowrie 24 mm long

This shell has thick edges, a white base and a clear yellow or orange ring around the dome. It occurs in KwaZulu-Natal. The yellow-and-white money cowrie and the big tiger cowrie with brown specks are also found here. On the South Coast, be on the lookout for the cream-coloured Cape cowrie or the toothless cowrie, which is white with red-brown specks.



Onion 30 mm long

With its rounded shape and its colouring, this shell will make you think of an onion! It can be found from Cape Agulhas to Durban, but only in winter.



Harp shell 90 mm long

Harp shells are only found on the beaches of northern KZN. There are clear rib-like patterns along the length of the shell and it has a small tip. It's usually yellow-brown or pink.



Paper Nautilus 150 mm long

This seashell washes up on beaches from Cape Point to Kosi Bay, but it's rare to find one intact. Birds often break them while searching for food. The shell is as big as your hand and has fine curves on its sides.

Only the female animal lives in a shell; she lays her eggs inside.



Best time to look for seashells?

If you want to look at seashells, go at low tide when more sand and rocks are accessible. Keep an eye on the tide table and wait for a full moon or new moon – the tide is even lower then (tidetime.org).

Think twice before you pick up a seashell to take home. Remember that seashells are part of a delicate ecosystem, and hermit crabs use the empty shells to live in. Don't pick up shells in marine protected areas.

Sources: *Sasol First Field Guide to Shells of Southern Africa; Gids tot die Kusgebiede van Suid-Afrika;* scsa.co.za; oceanadventures.co.za; marinedimensions.ie

BIRDS

BY FAANSIE PEACOCK

THE UNFATHOMABLE FLUFFTAIL



SERGEY DERELIEV

What's the rarest bird in South Africa? There are a few contenders for this not-so-coveted title. African penguin and Botha's lark are declining alarmingly fast, and vultures are slowly losing the war against the myriad threats they face. But if you're talking numbers, then the white-winged flufftail might be your guy.

Fifty. That's how many individuals are thought to remain in the cold, windswept marshes that these birds haunt.

Finding a flufftail is a fool's game. There are five species in our country, and very few birders have seen them all. The white-winged version is about the size of a tennis ball; it lives in dense, impenetrable and often flooded wetlands; it's incredibly sneaky and elusive, partly nocturnal and almost never flies.

Think about it this way: Take 50 tennis balls, paint them in camo brown and toss them into the depths of a massive wetland every 300 metres or so. Would you ever find one again? And how about if that tennis ball was trying its utmost to avoid the noisy giant lumbering its way?

Where would you start looking? The species was first described in Potchefstroom in 1877 and its scientific name – *Sarothrura ayresi* – honours Potch's local ornithologist and craft beer brewer, Thomas Ayres. These days, the bird's range has been reduced to a handful of high-altitude wetlands. All of them are around rural upland towns along the escarpment; towns where city-slickers head on long weekends to catch a trout and a cold: Dullstroom, Belfast, Wakkerstroom, Memel, Ngula and Franklin. And elsewhere on the planet? The only other known population is around three small sites in the Ethiopian Highlands.

At one point in my life, I was tasked with performing surveys to count white-wings. I spent a miserable week camping next to Middelpunt Vlei outside Belfast in winter. At least when the temperature dropped below zero, the mozzies gave me a break… Anyway, we collected sedge samples, recorded frogs, mapped drainage canals and dug holes. It was the only place where I've crossed paths with a leopard outside a game reserve, but we saw exactly zero flufftails.

One of the main problems – besides being bloody invisible – is that no one knew what they sounded like. To help save the bird from extinction, BirdLife South Africa (BLSA) set up an array of camera traps in Middelpunt Vlei. In

early 2018, the team recorded video footage of recently hatched chicks. Can you imagine how cute the little fluffball babies are? It was the first confirmation that these birds breed in South Africa. Until then, we weren't sure whether they migrate to Ethiopia to breed and just holiday here.

And its call? For many years, a recording of a deep hooting sound floated around. Ultimately, this turned out to be a sound from a grey crowned crane. So, back to square one. There was some excitement when videos surfaced of a migrating flufftail that got lost and was rescued by good Samaritans. As the bird explored its temporary, carpeted habitat, you could hear a strange creaking sound. Unfortunately, this too was not the flufftail's call – it was a wonky office chair!

Technology came to the rescue again. BLSA researchers planted special microphones in the vlei and recorded thousands of hours of audio. In among a million Levaillant's cisticolas and little rush-warblers, they heard a sound that no one could identify. Theories were flying, but the last piece of the puzzle dropped when a camera trap caught a white-winged flufftail making this sound, complete with excited wing-flicking.

Because this species is so vulnerable, it was decided that the recordings would not be released to the general public. Territorial birds are sensitive to playback of their calls because they interpret it as an intrusion. Imagine if you suddenly heard a stranger in your house, claiming loudly that they own it. It would be stressful, to say the least.

So, the recordings are hidden in a super-secret underground vault. To get your hands on a copy, you'll have to hang from a cable like Tom Cruise, *Mission Impossible* style, while avoiding the laser grid and pressure plates.

But I can give you a few hints. The white-winged flufftail doesn't sound anything like other local flufftails, which all make hooting sounds by inflating their bodies. Instead, white-wings make a sort of harsh, staccato clicking, in a specific rhythm. You could easily dismiss it as some sort of frog.

Now that we had this evidence, the same call was recorded in Ethiopia. Finally, one of the most enduring mysteries in African ornithology had been solved!

BIRD BRAIN



DYLAN VASAPOLLI

ANSWER #2

Do you also find it difficult to identify raptors? They always have me scratching my head! One of the reasons they're hard to identify is that it takes a raptor many years to reach maturity. And during this time the bird's brown plumage goes through about 6 million variations (or that's what it feels like at least). Fortunately the bird in the photo is an adult – and very beautiful!

Sometimes the shape of a raptor is a better clue than its colouring. This one has fairly short but wide wings and a heavy tail. The tail is designed for hunts at high speed and quick manoeuvres in the sky, not for surprise attacks from a perch or for riding the thermals for hours.

When you page through a bird guide (or scroll through a birding app) you'll see there aren't that many raptors with black-and-white plumage. In birding circles, this pattern is called "pied". When you see this raptor in flight, you might think it's a peregrine falcon. But the speedy peregrine has a dark eye, a black cap on its head and finer spots.

Is it maybe a black sparrowhawk? This species is increasingly seen in urban areas so it's a possibility. But no, the black sparrowhawk has red eyes, shorter wings, solid black flanks and wing feathers finely streaked with white, and long, bare legs.

Okay! What about some kind of hawk-eagle? Getting warmer! But is it the African hawk-eagle or the Ayres's hawk-eagle? Look closely at the patterns on the tail and wings: The African hawk-eagle has only one wide black band along the bottom edge of its wings and tail. The Ayres's hawk-eagle has several such bands. The African hawk-eagle also has white leggings.

So, there you have it: It's the rare Ayres's hawk-eagle, an aerial hunter that mostly terrorises pigeons. Well done!

Firefinch
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Few people are as passionate about birds as Faansie Peacock is. His Firefinch app includes calls, illustrations and photos of all the birds in southern Africa. It's incredibly intuitive and fun to use. Faansie also posts new articles every week. Search the Apple App Store or on Google Play.

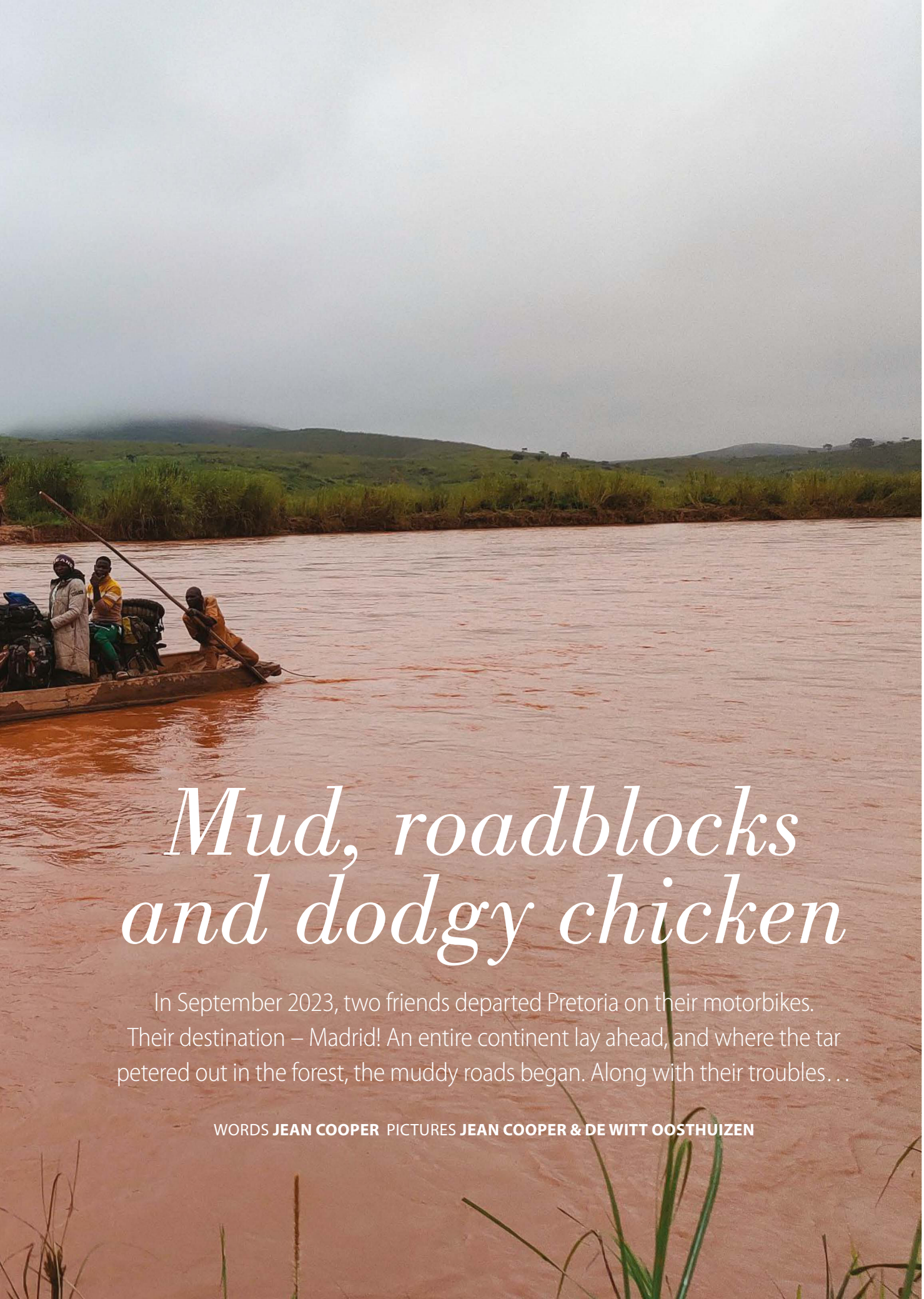
AFRICA BY BIKE

Part 2

TRAVEL JOURNAL



De Witt Oosthuizen and his Husqvarna motorcycle are being paddled across the fast-flowing Donga River, between Dorofi (Cameroon) and Gembu (Nigeria).



Mud, roadblocks and dodgy chicken

In September 2023, two friends departed Pretoria on their motorbikes. Their destination – Madrid! An entire continent lay ahead, and where the tar petered out in the forest, the muddy roads began. Along with their troubles…

WORDS **JEAN COOPER** PICTURES **JEAN COOPER & DE WITT OOSTHUIZEN**

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: De Witt and Jean enjoy a beer on the beach at Pointe-Noire. In Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, De Witt stopped to check his phone for directions. He had reason to smile after finally tracking down their knobbly tyres. The N2 tar road on the plateau between Brazzaville and Gamboma runs through a vivid green landscape. A pretty river scene in the Congo rainforest. This patch of beach next to a small bar in Pointe-Noire made for a handy informal camping spot.

The spinach (if it was spinach) and street chicken from the previous night woke me in the early morning. Breakfast consisted of black coffee, a malaria pill and stomach medicine. It was going to be a long day.

Our experience at a filling station in Cabinda in Angola made us think… We'd arrived in the city looking for petrol, but all the pumps were dry. Then, suddenly, we found a station with a long line of motorcycles and old cars. A guard waved us forward and signalled us to ride past everyone right up to the pump. No one complained or swore at us or threw things. In fact, people waved and took photos.

That evening, after eating fish and talking about the day, we wondered about our initial hypothesis that white privilege had given us priority at the pumps. But what if it was merely hospitality?

To be honest, thus far we'd only experienced tremendous generosity, without which we'd never make it to Spain.

DAYS 19 – 27

Cabinda & The Congo

We rode through the rest of Cabinda Province, a narrow enclave of Angola wedged between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Republic of the Congo.

The Republic of the Congo (sometimes called Congo-Brazzaville) was our next destination, or more specifically, the city of Pointe-Noire (137 km). The tyres we'd couriered at great expense from South Africa were also on their way – we'd need them for the muddy roads ahead.

But first we had to cross the border… We were sent to the police office, inside a ruined building. The constable said I must sit down. I handed over our passports and he started writing. Slowly. Letter by letter. Time stood still. In the room next door, on the floor, there was a pot with different cuts of chicken inside. A woman in a police uniform was preparing lunch.

With our passports stamped, we navigated through the Pointe-Noire chaos until we reached the sea and set up camp on the beach. We were now almost 4 500 km from Pretoria…

We woke early and I went for a run on the beach. Then we started calling The Courier Guy and DHL. Apparently the tyres were "in transit" in the capital of Brazzaville. It would take a week for them to arrive in Pointe-Noire! To expedite the process, we decided to go to Brazzaville to pick up the tyres, despite the detour.

The road between Pointe-Noire and Dolisie (162 km inland) was a winding fairy-tale over hills and valleys, through the Congolese forest. Freshly paved. When we stopped for water, all we heard was birdsong.

That night we slept in a pleasant little inn in Dolisie. The security guard showed us where to eat with the locals. We invited him along. Three heavily loaded plates of street-grilled chicken with rice, and three big Ngok' beers cost R185. There was music and plastic chairs on the street.

The next day, we rested in Dolisie and gave our Husqvarna Norden 901 Expedition motorcycles a once-over.

On Day 23 we rode along the Congo's N1, which was also beautiful. As we climbed higher and it got cooler, we realised we were now on their high plateau. The landscape was sparse, with fewer big trees. As Brazzaville approached, we started to worry: What if the tyres weren't there?

We found a place to sleep in Brazzaville, right next to the airport and about a kilometre from the Congo River. (Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, was on the opposite bank.)

It was pouring when we woke the next morning. It was 7 October 2023 and we heard the news about Israel and Hamas. We kept an eye on the clock because at 8 am we needed to call DHL.

I called at 8.01 am. "*Bonjour*, is this Michelle?" I asked, then listened. The tyres were sent to Pointe-Noire early this morning. Yes, by plane. *What?!*

We called Patrick in Pointe-Noire. "You promised the tyres would be kept in Brazzaville!"

Patrick called Michelle to find out what the… (To make this more confusing, Michelle was a man and Patrick was a woman.)

She called back. Sorry, but someone from South Africa had called to make sure the tyres got to Pointe-Noire as soon as possible!

As much as we wanted to blame "Africa" for the mess, we realised it was partly our fault. The tyres had originally been shipped using The Courier Guy, via DHL. When we got impatient and told DHL directly that we'd just pick up the tyres in Brazzaville, nobody informed The Courier Guy. Turns out some diligent Courier Guy (or Girl) had suddenly started worrying about our package taking so long – on a Sunday – and fired off at DHL to send the package to Pointe-Noire immediately!

The next morning, De Witt flew to Pointe-Noire to pick up the tyres. When he arrived at DHL, he had to pay about R3 600 in customs duty – in cash and they refused to provide a receipt. (Yes, these tyres were becoming very expensive!)

Four hours later, when the DHL office closed, Patrick beckoned for De Witt to join her in her car. They drove down an alley. There, on the damp back steps of a pub, stood a man next to a package. Finally, De Witt could fly back to Brazzaville with our precious cargo.

We set off the next morning, with tyres and luggage loaded. (We still had about 1 600 km of tar road to go before we'd need the knobblies.) Before we left Brazzaville, we stopped at the Cameroonian embassy to get a visa sticker in De Witt's passport. (*Jean got his Cameroonian visa in Pretoria. – Ed.*)

The day's ride took us north, on the N2 tar road, first through the forest and then up to a plateau where we

saw rolling green hills stretching into the distance and touching the clouds.

The clouds gradually got darker. Should we stop and put on our rain jackets? Nah. We reasoned that we'd pass quickly through the storm and then dry just as quickly in the heat. Mistake. It *rained!* Later, soaking and cold, we stopped under a tree to find some shelter while we put on our rain jackets. Shortly thereafter, the rain cleared up and we rode through the scenic landscape to Gamboma (315 km), where we ate street food and slept at a dirty inn.

The spinach (if it was spinach) and street chicken from the previous night woke me in the early morning. Breakfast consisted of black coffee, a malaria pill and stomach medicine. It was going to be a long day.

The (good) tar road wound through the forest. Our stomachs might have been upset but the roadside vegetation was so thick that we'd have needed a machete to cut enough space for a bush toilet. We clenched.

Just after 1 pm, we encountered yet another roadblock. There were a few barrels in the road with a rope strung across. The officials let us pass without getting up from the shade, and we stopped a little further at a shop to get something to eat.

Suddenly, three men approached. Police without uniforms. They wanted to see our passports. The leader said our visas had expired and pointed to a date. I showed him the expiration date – he was looking at the date of issue. "Oh," he said.

The closest thing to "food" we could find was Coke, Red Bull, biscuits and chips. It was hot. We continued riding. The next stop was the town of Makoua, on the equator. Here, we absolutely had to get petrol. All the pumps we'd encountered so far had been dry.

To mark the equator, there was a small monument with a globe and the Congo's motto: Peace. Work. And something else.

Makoua didn't have petrol. A young man gestured that he could get us 10 litres. He swore it was clean but our filters would remove any impurities so we weren't too worried. He also helped us buy bread in the village. We had enough petrol for 230 km. The next village was 200 km away. We continued slowly as the forest closed in.

De Witt's stomach had settled but mine was still churning. Suddenly, we saw three little gorillas and one big one running across the road right in front of us!

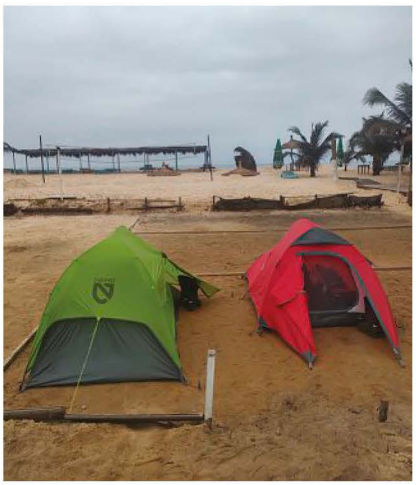
We arrived in Ouesso an hour after dark. We'd been on the road for 11 hours and 500 km. The motorcycles – and our bodies – were running on fumes.

DAYS 28 – 33 Cameroon

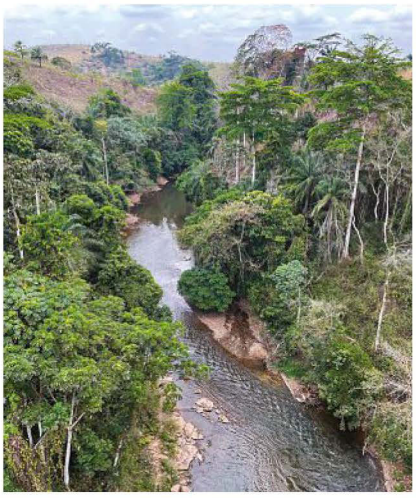
We were no longer in the world of flush toilets. I woke at 4 am with a runny tummy. Our city bellies were being initiated.

Our map said it was 350 km to the Cameroon border













Opposite page, clockwise from top left: On the way to Mayo-Darlé in Cameroon, Jean and De Witt met the British long-distance athlete, Russ Cook (with the red beard – follow his adventures on Instagram @hardestgeezer). In 2023-24, Russ ran from Cape Town to London! Jean "ran" into some mud pools on that same stretch. This eroded ditch between Cameroon and Nigeria was nearly impossible to traverse. The Burger Bar in Yaoundé, Cameroon, offered some familiar-looking food. Going out for a meal on a moto-taxi in Mayo-Darlé. The much-anticipated tyres were fitted to the motorcycles in Yaoundé.

along a dirt road. Fortunately, that road turned out to be tar.

The morning progressed and my stomach felt better. Unfortunately, De Witt's got worse. A shop owner in a small village took De Witt to his home toilet. When De Witt reappeared, the shiny layer of sweat on his forearms betrayed that what he'd done hadn't been easy.

We rode with the visors of our helmets open. This way, we could smell the forest, fresh from the rain and warm from the equatorial heat. Sometimes, when the forest folded extra high over the road, I felt something akin to coolness against my skin.

A dragonfly smashed itself against my sunglasses and I stopped to remove its remains. To paraphrase Robert M Pirsig in his famous book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: "When you're in a car, you see the picture around you. But when you're on a motorcycle, you're part of the picture."

We arrived in Ntam in Cameroon just before dark, after spending two hours at the border post. We slept at a small motel. The news of our arrival must have spread quickly because a young woman with skimpy clothes arrived to offer us her services. The people were so poor. We locked our doors from the inside. Note: doors – plural. Because in Cameroon, two men can't share a room. It was Friday night and the disco next door pumped until 3 am, when the generator ran out of diesel.

Day 29. Our destination was Sangmélima, 350 km to the north-west. The clouds hung dark and heavy. Our riding rhythm was repeatedly broken by armed guards who wanted to verify our legitimacy. And by our stomachs, which just wouldn't settle down.

The first drops started to prick our faces like little needles because our helmets were open. The drops got fatter. We stopped, put on our rain jackets and immediately started sweating and steaming. The jackets are uncomfortable in high humidity. We pulled away, hoping the rain would cool us down. Later, when it stopped and we were drenched in sweat, we pulled over and took off the jackets. Relief!

The next day, our 30th on the road, the clouds were even more gloomy, as was my mood. We were tired. Everything was dirty. We were ill. The hotel where we stayed in Sangmélima was strange. The other guests were mostly the local elite who drove expensive German vehicles. They avoided eye contact. A saying by Gaddafi against the wall behind the receptionist read: "Common enemy. Common destiny. Africa for Africans!"

Just before we left, a well-groomed man flashed an Immigration Official card and sent us to our rooms to go get our passports. Showing your passbook 10 times a day makes you feel unwelcome. It's how people must have felt during apartheid.

Now we rode through light rain, trying to make sense of the contrast between the rich and poor, and why we felt so much more unwelcome here among the elite, than we felt among the ordinary people. I think it's because there's no middle class. You're either super rich, with government contracts, or you wear a uniform which gives you some degree of power, or you're part of the extremely poor masses, struggling to survive. Our presence here, as middle-class people, in this hotel-for-elites, was perhaps an intrusion or an indictment of a failed system.

We were stopped a few more times before the capital of Yaoundé (170 km). Roadblock after roadblock. It started to irritate us, but there was only one way to handle it: with a smile. The problem is, when you're tired, thirsty, drenched in sweat, dirty and smelling bad, your ability to uncritically bow to authority with a smile thins out.

We realised we needed to rest. For the next two nights we stayed in Yaoundé so we could watch the Rugby World Cup and change the tyres. Two guys with bright eyes welcomed us warmly at our hotel, helped us unload and brought us each a beer.

The Springboks won against France and we momentarily forgot about the muddy off-road path that awaited us after Yaoundé. And about the potential threat of kidnappings in Nigeria.

For a moment, all was well again.

It was time to switch to our Mitas E-09 Dakar tyres for the muddy roads ahead. The next morning, we weaved through traffic to reach a renowned workshop owned by a man called Didier. All the way from Pointe-Noire, we'd heard about Didier via the overland grapevine – apparently his workshop is a mechanical oasis for travellers.

When everything was done and ready, Didier told us we could decide what we wanted to pay. That's how he operates. We sent a WhatsApp to Riaan Koen at Trax Moto in Pretoria (where we'd bought our motorcycles) to find out what they charge for a tyre change and paid Didier the equivalent.

That evening, we ate hamburgers at a place called Route 66 Burger Bar. Finally food that our stomachs understood! We acknowledged to ourselves that we needed this break and a bit of comfort. We are products of our worlds, after all, and the world we had come from was nowhere near as tough as this one.

On Day 32, on the road to Foumban (340 km to the north), we saw bushmeat for sale once again. Grilled monkey on a stick. Chunks of pork or antelope. A Gabon adder, gigantically thick, folded over a stick, ready to be braaied…

In two days, we'd cross the border into Nigeria. The adrenaline rushed each time I thought about it. We looked at the clouds and hoped the sun would come out and dry most of the mud up ahead.

Day 33 – it was about 150 km from Foumban to Mayo-Darlé, but it took all day. Somewhere along the way I fell in the mud when I tried to overtake a struggling truck. Immediately, De Witt and three or four other people rushed to help. They ran through the muddy water without caring about their clothes.

The first drops started to prick our faces like little needles because our helmets were open. The drops got fatter. We stopped, put on our rain jackets and immediately started sweating and steaming.










ALGERIA LIBYA EGYPT
WESTERN SAHARA
MAURITANIA MALI NIGER CHAD SUDAN
SENEGAL BURKINA FASO
GUINEA COTE D'IVOIRE
CAMEROON CNTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
GABON CONGO UGANDA
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONG
ANGOLA TANZANIA
ZAMBIA MOZAMBIQUE
NAMIBIA ZIMBABWE
BOTSWANA
SOUTH
AFRICA



PROTECTIVE CLOTHING

Helmet. Although no African country north of Namibia requires you to wear a helmet, it's non-negotiable. Buy a proper helmet from a well-known brand like Shoei (Jean) or Arai (De Witt). Make sure the helmet fits well – if you can chew gum while wearing it, it's too loose. Budget to spend about R5 000 to R10 000.

Neck brace. It costs about R5 000 and will protect you against severe whiplash if you fall.

Riding suit. Jean wore a BMW Venting suit and De Witt wore a similar product from Klim. Both are made from mesh for improved ventilation, but still offer enough protection against a fall. The suits are reinforced at the knees, elbows, shoulders and back. Cost: R10 000 – R25 000

Boots. Jean and De Witt both wore Sidi Adventure leather boots (about R6 000 per pair). The boots extend to just below the knee and have a hard plastic hinge system around the ankles to prevent lateral extension.

Gloves. They have to be able to breathe and offer protection on the palms and knuckles. Jean wore Husqvarna's lighter summer gloves; De Witt used Klim gloves. Prices range from R500 – R800 per pair.

Jean says: You can buy your clothing and accessories online, but it's better to go to a store and try everything on. You spend all day in the clothes and they have to fit perfectly.

I was completely drenched in red goop from my immersion. We found a spot under a tree to rest from the struggle. A man rode by on his little motorcycle, saw us standing there, smiled widely and shouted: "Welcome to Cameroon!"

A bit further, I fell again and this time I twisted my ankle. Again, people came to help. An old man, concerned because I was limping when I got up, took my shoulder, looked me in the eye and asked if I was okay.

Each fall makes you more tired. You can't concentrate well, and you fall again. With the swollen ankle, I couldn't change gears properly and I couldn't stand on the foot pegs and ride. The indescribably beautiful landscape – forests covering mountains upon mountains – and the openness and care of the people, offered some relief.

We slept in a half-finished hotel outside Mayo-Darlé, welcomed by friendly hosts who saw how tired we were. They helped us unpack, sent someone to buy us beer, and later took us into the village for dinner.

Days 34 – 35 Nigeria

I never thought it could be this bad. I hoped we wouldn't have days like this again. There was no road from Mayo-Darlé to Gembu in Nigeria. Just a ditch, up and down the mountains. You won't find this route on Google Maps – the one that's indicated has washed away.

From Mayo-Darlé, we travelled to the border town of Dorofi. The official there had an AK-47 but no stamp. Our passports would have to wait until Gembu.

Our next destination was Mang on the Donga River. At one point, after I'd fallen several times, I found myself on a narrow path, as wide as a ruler, steeply descending. To the left, a cliff dropped to an abyss. To the right was the impassable eroded ditch that used to be the road. De Witt was ahead of me and suddenly shouted over the helmet intercom: "Stop, buddy! Stop!" I stopped and realised I was scared. Fear wouldn't work for what lay ahead. One mistake, one slip of the wheels in the mud, and the trip would be over.

Just then, a Good Samaritan came by. His name was Panyo and he was one of the many locals who knew every nook and cranny of these passes. Guys like him transport people and goods on small motorcycles in places you wouldn't believe. He stopped and asked if I'd ridden this path before. I said no. He was shocked: "But you can't ride here with that big, heavy bike!"

I found myself caught between my ego, which wanted to prove I could do it because De Witt had just gone through, and a part of me that realised our real goal was to ride through Africa for another two months. With De Witt and Panyo's help, and many others, we continued. We wouldn't make it to Gembu before dark. And we were exhausted.

Someone rode ahead and asked the chief of a small





community – a dignified man in a long Muslim robe – if we could spend the night in his "guest room", which was a mud hut. We were overwhelmed by the hospitality. People gathered to look at us. Panyo said it was because we were white. White people never come through here.

The next day would only be two hours to Gembu, Panyo promised.

It rained during the night and the mud was like paste. I fell again a couple of times. Panyo rode my motorcycle to the strong-flowing Donga River, where the bikes (and us) were paddled across by canoe.

About 8 km from Gembu, on an unthinkable incline where the road had been eaten away in deep erosion fissures, a lorry was stuck. One of its front wheels had broken off. It blocked the ditch and no one could get through. Later, two guys chipped away at the rock wall to make the gap wider, and we decided to unload the luggage and squeeze the bikes through. We pushed and pulled with five others, and we eventually got past.

A two-hour ride had taken us five hours, but we finally arrived in Gembu. Slightly rattled, but miraculously, still in one piece.

NEXT ISSUE: What does the rest of Nigeria hold? This article is an edited version of Jean's blog posts as published on expedition-h2o.org. Read Part 1 (South Africa, Namibia, Angola, DRC) in issue #196.



Left: The road completely washed away between the Donga River and Gembu in Nigeria. Panyo, De Witt and Jean's Good Samaritan, just before they crossed the Donga River.

WHERE THEY STAYED

The rates listed here are from 2023 – use them as a rough guide only.

Day 19: Cabinda, Hotel Pôr do Sol (room, R404 per person)
Day 20: Pointe-Noire, camp on beach, free
Days 21 – 22: Dolisie, Hotel NiTel (room, R300 per person)
Days 23 – 25: Brazzaville, Hotel de l'Aéroport (room, R616 per person)
Day 26: Gamboma, Hotel Maps (room, R150 per person)
Day 27: Ouesso, Hotel Ouesso (room, R535 per person)
Day 28: Ntam, La Forestiere Plaza (room, R150 per person)
Day 29: Sangmélima, Hotel L'Afamba (room, R760 per person)
Days 30 – 31: Yaoundé, Residences Micheline et Emile (suite, R1 130 per person)
Day 32: Foumban, Hotel Pekassa De Karche (room, R378 per person)
Day 33: Mayo-Darlé, Siddi Hotel (room, R303 per person)
Day 34: Mang, the chief's hut, free
Day 35: Gembu, Gechaan Guest House (room, R173 per person)





VISAS

Angola: South Africans don't need a visa.

Democratic Republic of the Congo: R2 625 each, arranged beforehand through the DRC embassy in Pretoria.

Republic of the Congo: R1 500 each, arranged beforehand through the embassy in Pretoria.

Cameroon: R5 300 each – Jean got his from the embassy in Pretoria; De Witt got his from the embassy in Brazzaville.

Nigeria: R3 500 each, through the Nigerian embassy in Pretoria.

In Mang, Nigeria, this hospitable chief (far left) and his people offered the riders a place for the night.

MEET THE ADVENTURERS

Jean Cooper and De Witt Oosthuizen have known each other since their university days in the late 1990s. They were both in Sonop residence at the University of Pretoria, where De Witt studied medicine and Jean studied industrial psychology.

Jean later completed his doctorate and works as a management consultant for different organisations. He and his wife Fransie live in Pretoria and they have three children – Riëtte (15), Rose (17) and Francois (19).

De Witt grew up in Amersfoort in Mpumalanga. He has lived in Australia since 2005, where he works in Wangaratta, Victoria, as the clinical director of emergency services at Northeast Health Wangaratta Hospital. He and his partner Lindsay have eight-year-old twins, Maggie and Jack.

Jean and De Witt named their Africa trip "Expedition H2O" – they raised funds to buy and install rainwater tanks in Ezenzeleni near Warden in the Free State, a project supported by the Direct Transact Foundation (directtransact.co.za).

To date, they've raised enough money to install 17 tanks that will give 820 people access to clean drinking water. Visit expedition-h2o.org for more information. Contact Jean directly (jean@tiltinternational.com) if you want to make a donation.



CROSSWORD PUZZLE

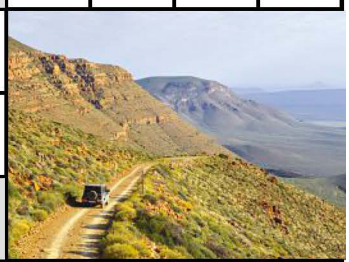
BY GERDA ENGELBRECHT

SOLUTION ON **PAGE 103**





Seethe
Marine algae
. . . a tent
While
Type of spider (5,6)
Personal assistant (abbr)
West Side Story, eg
Ran into
Drain
Best-seller
Yellow-billed . . .
Agree
Tantalum (symbol)
Cereal grass
For every
Calcium (symbol)
Secret system of symbols
Lady's fingers (veg)
Frozen rain
Includes
Beat
Ad copy
Pepsi or Coke
Not off
Whatever number
Edible root
Grown-ups
Reserved
Refers to a female
Primate
Closed
Jetty
10 x 10
Sink
Faulty
Porcino
Put in place
Period
Scoffs
Hafnium (symbol)
Sustain
Soil
Spirit
Indicate origin
Prominent peak in the Cederberg
Payment (abbr)
Lane (abbr)
Tugs
Solemn procession
Pass in the Tankwa Karoo





Relating to teeth
Radon (symbol)
Wild cat
Big celebration
Arduous hike
100%
Mineral spring
Cancel
Regarding (abbr)
Chlorine (symbol)
Blunder
Chivalrous
Cleave
Star
Whirl
Males
Light source
Single unit
Our magazine
Kind
Nobleman
Not out
Gallium (symbol)
Operating room (abbr)
Made of many parts
Blood vessel
Angry
Self-esteem
Wing (building)
Breeze
Listen to (4,2,3)

SOPHIA VAN TAAK; ESMA MARNEWICK; ALAMY.COM/ZA; TOAST COETZER

LETTER FROM *Palapye*

It can be good when people leave a place, because when they do, nature moves back in. **Toast Coetzer** ponders this paradox from Palapye in Botswana.

A cool breeze stirs from the east – it must have rained somewhere over there during the night. It almost rained here as well, but the few drops that fell left no trace in the sand.

Yesterday was a scorcher – close to 40° C – and today might be the same. But for now, the morning is soft and benign. Earlier, an African paradise-flycatcher fluttered in from the marula tree next to my tent to catch an insect. Two Meyer's parrots also rushed past. Somewhere between coffee #1 and coffee #2, a groundscraper thrush arrived to patrol the area with its resolute stride.

My laptop is open on a wooden table under a thatched roof in the campsite. From my "desk", through the branches of silver cluster-leaf trees, I can see a small, ploughed field where crowned lapwings are surveying the clods of dirt. In the distance is a house with a brown water tank next to it. It's not a JoJo because Botswana has its own brand: the Mokoro tank. A man called Tendai lives there – he welcomed me to Aqua Nature Farm yesterday afternoon. The owner of the farm is apparently in Gaborone and Tendai collected my P100 camping fee on his behalf.

The farm is unique because it borders Old Palapye – the original location of the modern town. Modern Palapye is about 24 km to the north-west, at a junction where the busy A1 highway between Gaborone and Francistown meets the road linking the Grobler's Bridge border post and Serowe.

My first visit to Palapye was in 2000, when I travelled to Botswana with a few university friends. (My friend Leanne's family hails from Serowe.) Back then, the town had a rural feel – there were a few filling stations, hardware stores and small supermarkets – but it has since boomed: an example of Botswana's prosperity. Palapye now has a university, big hotels next to the highway, two coal-fired power stations and a Mokoro factory, which makes bricks as well as water tanks. It's a busy place and vehicles fill the streets.

Yesterday afternoon, I set off to Palapye on a mall mission. One of my favourite drinks in Botswana is Supermalt, a non-alcoholic beverage sold in brown bottles, similar to those dumpies used for beer in the 1980s. Supermalt is made in Denmark, but for some reason it's popular enough in Botswana to pop up on the shelves of Spar and Choppies. I wanted to stock up on "takeaways" so I could sip a Supermalt when I was back home and missing Botswana.

Supermalt was sold out in the first two shops I tried (PnP and Spar), but I tracked down six bottles at a Choppies. The malls amazed me. Maybe it's because you travel to Botswana to see elephants and baobabs that the presence of malls feels so incongruous. They have the same architectural DNA as malls all over the world: an imposing entrance, wide hallways, bright advertisements and exhibits of everything from trendy takkies to cellphones and expensive whiskey, all designed to lure you in and make you buy.

Back in Old Palapye, though, such modern luxuries are superfluous to my spiritual wellbeing. It was here, in the foothills of the forested Tswapong Hills, that the first European missionaries encountered the Bangwato people of the area. Before long, in the 1890s, the London Missionary Society built a church; visitors come to see the crumbling red-brick ruin.

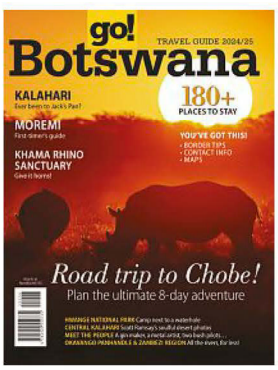
In the end, it was a lack of water to sustain the growing population that drove people to new Palapye, where there was a more reliable source.

It's a good thing people moved away because in doing so, they left the essence of Old Palapye intact. Yes, there's now a tar road to bring you closer to this historical site, but the feeling of rural serenity remains; the distant jingle of cattle bells, a rooster crowing and the chirr of a crested barbet in the woodland.

Sometimes, we need much less than we think we do. For me, just sitting here is enough. In fact, it's everything.

Yesterday was a scorcher – close to 40° C – and today might be the same. But for now, the morning is soft and benign.





Have you been to the Chobe River? Did you know you can drive there in a normal car – no 4x4 required? Yup, it's a tar road all the way from Joburg to Kasane, the main tourism town on the banks of the river, from where you access Chobe National Park.

Check out the latest issue of our Botswana travel guide for an eight-day itinerary that explains exactly how to do this trip on your own. Along the way, you'll see the gorges of the Tswapong Hills and watch the sunset over the Makgadikgadi Pans. We suggest campsites to stay at and recommend activities and sights in each area.

The ultimate reward on this adventure is a classic Chobe moment, when you're on a boat cruise, metres away from elephants drinking in the shallows.

PICTURE **TOAST COETZER**

go! Botswana costs R135 and is available in shops or online from media24shop.com

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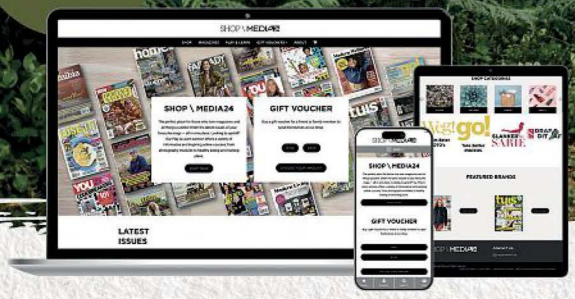


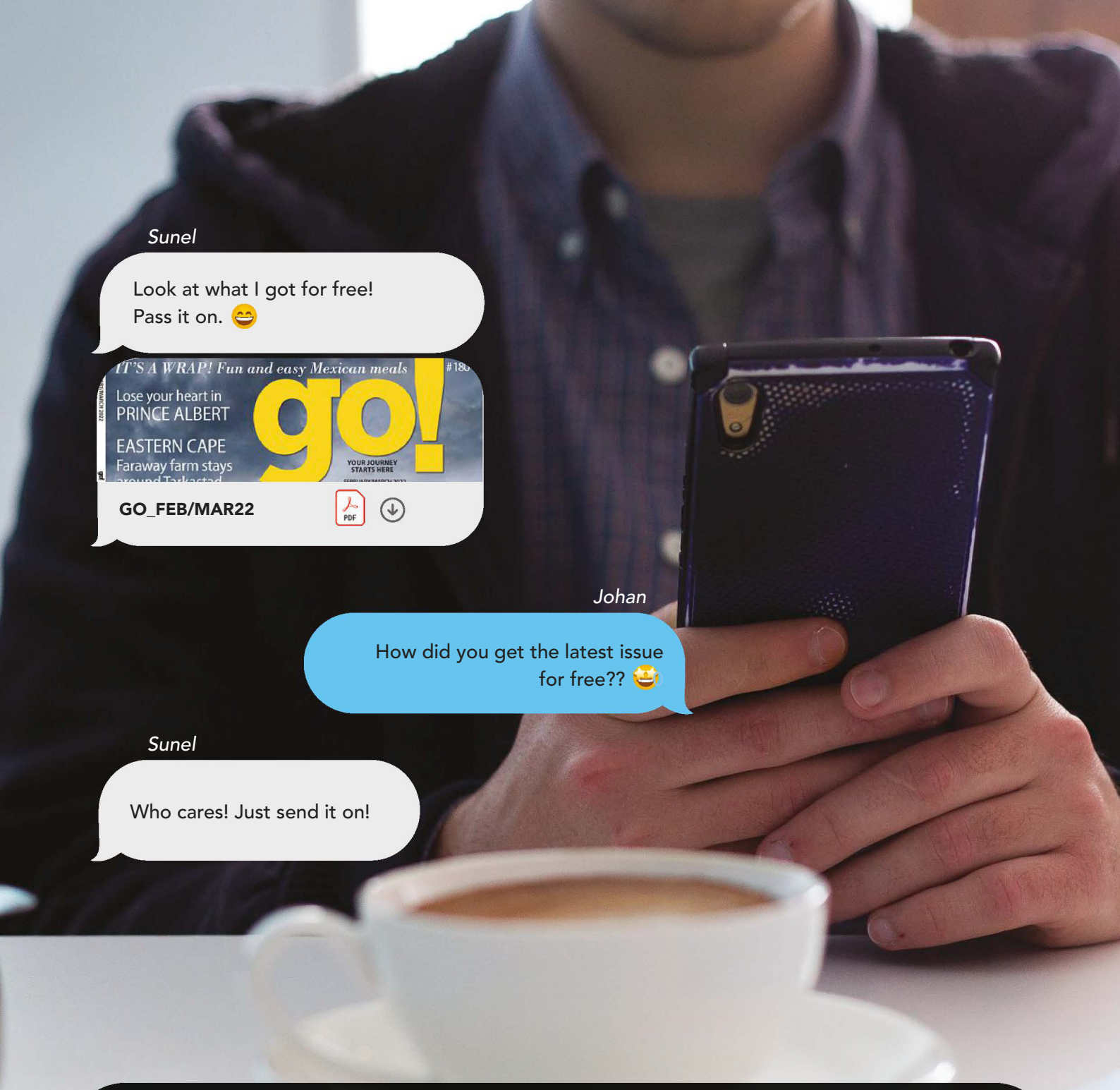
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