

BRAAI! Mains and sides to light your fire

#193

LADISMITH

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in the Little Karoo

SECRET (HER)STORY

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WWII radar stations

go!

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APRIL – MAY 2024

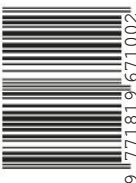
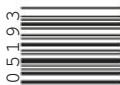
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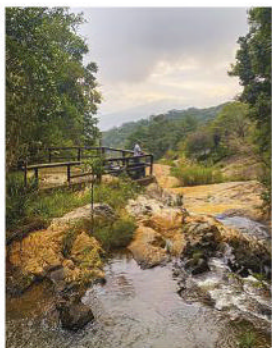
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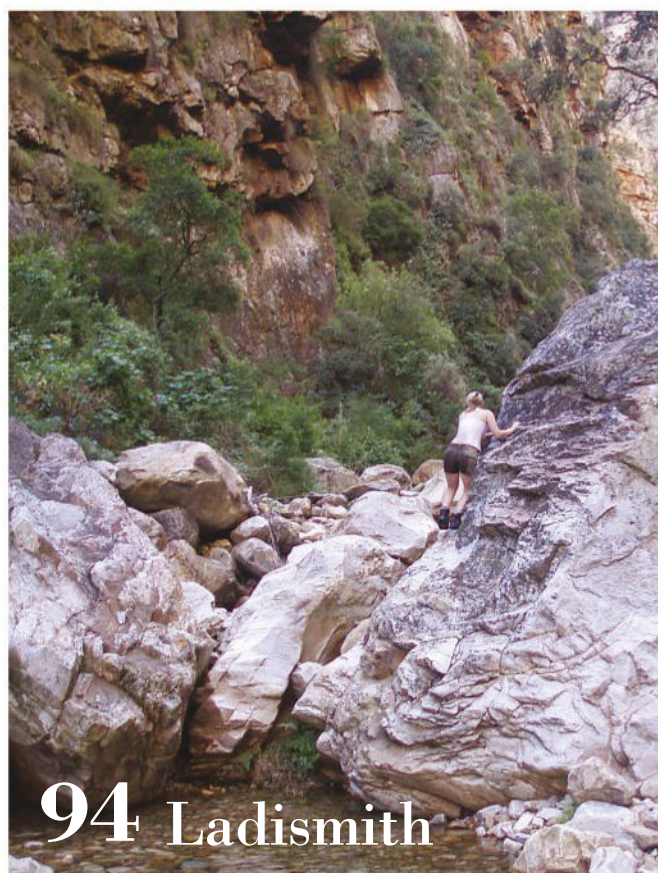
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The hit parade of life

It's one of life's greatest joys when nature and the elements align and you experience that "Wow!" moment that engraves a time and place into your brain forever. These are the hit singles of your memory that you can play on repeat when life gets rough or rushed, to give you that little burst of gratitude that puts everything else into perspective.

It could be a dark and quiet night on the Makgadikgadi Pans as you stare up at the Milky Way, or a wild and windy afternoon at Cape Point as you gaze over the Atlantic and suck fresh sea air into your lungs. We all have our own hit parade of special moments, and we experience them differently.

As I take stock of what we have planned for upcoming issues, I can see that our writers are each creating a Top 20 that's going to rock! Alongside the regular magazine that's on sale every second month, we're also working on five special editions in 2024.

Sophia van Taak has almost crossed the finish line for our next hiking guide, which will be on shelf on 3 May. Esma Marnewick travelled the length and breadth of Namibia for our annual destination guide that goes on

sale on 21 June. All the planning has been done for a brand-new guide to the West Coast and Namaqualand (on sale 19 July), and so too for our second Karoo guide, which will be in shops from 23 August. The first *go! Karoo* was published last year and it was so well received that we have no choice but to do another one.

The last date you need to jot down is 25 October, when the new edition of *go! Botswana* hits the shelves. Send our regards to Toast Coetzer if you meet up with him on a sandy road somewhere between Kasane and Maun. He's the guy in the ivory-coloured Suzuki Jimny and he's exploring the country for three weeks to gather stories.

It's our heartfelt wish that all this hard work and thousands of kilometres will inspire you, our loyal readers and enthusiastic fellow travellers, to compile your own greatest hits album.

Rock on and let those wheels roll!

Pierre

PIERRE STEYN

PSteyn@media24.com

DON'T MISS OUR NEXT ISSUE!

The June/July magazine will be on sale at your retailer from 24 May 2024.

BEHIND THE SCENES



Did you know that South African women served in World War II as radar operators? Photojournalist **Jac Kritzinger** discovered more about their role in history (p 54).

What was the biggest challenge writing this story? The lack of information. The activities of the radar operators were kept strictly confidential at the time, which resulted in very little official documentation. There's also a political aspect. Because South Africa supported Britain during World War II, the Afrikaner nationalists who came to power a few years later cared little about preserving that aspect of history. And after 1994, our participation in the war became an obscure colonial anecdote.

What surprised you? I lived in Pringle Bay for years and was unaware of what had played out right under my nose 80-odd years ago. I was also surprised to learn that the bases where the

women worked were guarded by the Native Military Corps, whose soldiers were only allowed traditional weapons. During a world war! It's funny but also sad. Only in South Africa...

What happened behind the scenes? The wind nearly blew me off the cliffs on the Lighthouse Keeper's Trail at Cape Point. I came away with a bleeding knee and a new-found respect for the southeaster. I had to stop the bleeding with my Buff, then wore it stained. I must have looked like a poor man's *Rambo* when I returned to the parking area.

Were any of the places you visited damaged by the Pringle Bay fire in January 2024? The Hangklip Hotel suffered some minor

damage to rooms and ablution facilities, which were being repaired at the time of going to print. Miraculously, given its location on the mountain, the Hangklip radar station survived unscathed.

Your next trip? My wife Leani and I are planning a holiday to Turkey. It's a fascinating country with a mix of cultures and a rich history – and it's surprisingly affordable.

What's always in your travel bag? Earplugs and my own pillow – I get very grumpy when I don't sleep well – and of course my Nikon Z5 camera.

Visit jackkritzinger.com for more of his work.

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go!

CONTACT THE TEAM

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF (WEG & GO): PIERRE STEYN editor@gomag.co.za

DEPUTY EDITOR: ESMA MARNEWICK

TRAVEL EDITOR: TOAST COETZER

FOOD EDITOR: JOHANÉ NELSON

COPY EDITORS: MARIJCKE DODDS, MARTINETTE LOUW

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR: JON MINSTER

JOURNALISTS: SOPHIA VAN TAAK, KYRA TARR

ART DIRECTOR: LYNNE FRASER

CARTOGRAPHER: FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK

WEB EDITOR: DESIREE HARTNEY

MEDIA24

CEO MEDIA24: ISHMET DAVIDSON

GENERAL MANAGER – MEDIA24 LIFESTYLE & NEWS: MINETTE FERREIRA

MEDIA24 LIFESTYLE CFO: JAMEELAH CONWAY

FINANCIAL MANAGER: MELANIE LEEMAN

DIVISIONAL OPERATIONS MANAGER: EDWINA LYNERS

CIRCULATION MANAGER: ARMAND KASSELMAN armand.kasselman@onthedot.co.za

PRODUCTION MANAGER: WENDY ADAMS

ADVERTISING SALES

HEAD OF ADVERTISING: DANIE NELL danie.nell@media24.com 082 859 0542

KEY ACCOUNT MANAGER: SHARLENE SMITH

sharlene.smith@media24.com 083 583 1604

KEY ACCOUNT MANAGER: SANETHA MEINTJIES

sanetha.meintjies@media24.com 082 957 9747

MEDIA24 LIFESTYLE CREATE STUDIO

HEAD OF STUDIO: LEA GERBER lea.gerber@media24.com

COMMERCIAL MANAGING EDITOR: GERDA ENGELBRECHT

MARKETING MANAGER: ANDILE NKOSI andile.nkosi@media24.com

MEDIA24 DIVERSE REVENUE

GROWTH MANAGER: LISE VAN BREDA lise.coetsee@media24.com

HEAD OF DIVERSE PROJECTS: FRANCOIS MALAN

DESIGNER – ADVERTISING: ELAINE SCHOEMAN

TRANSLATOR & ADMINISTRATOR: ESTELLE THOMAS

SHOP QUERIES: YUMNA TOFEY yumna.tofey@media24.com 021 406 2205

SUBSCRIPTIONS, RENEWALS AND QUERIES

FOR THE PRINTED MAGAZINE:

087 353 1300 | 087 353 1333 (WhatsApp only) | 086 296 6681

+27 21 065 0033 | subs@media24.com | "gosubs" to 32361 (R1,50 per SMS)

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WHERE TO FIND US

CONTACT: YUMNA TOFEY yumna.tofey@media24.com 021 406 2205

CT POSTAL ADDRESS: PO Box 740, Cape Town, 8000

JHB POSTAL ADDRESS: PO Box 785266, Sandton, 2146



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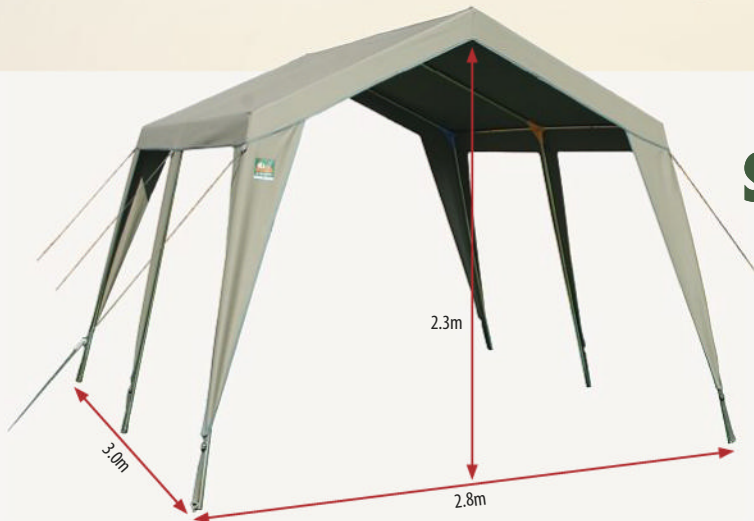
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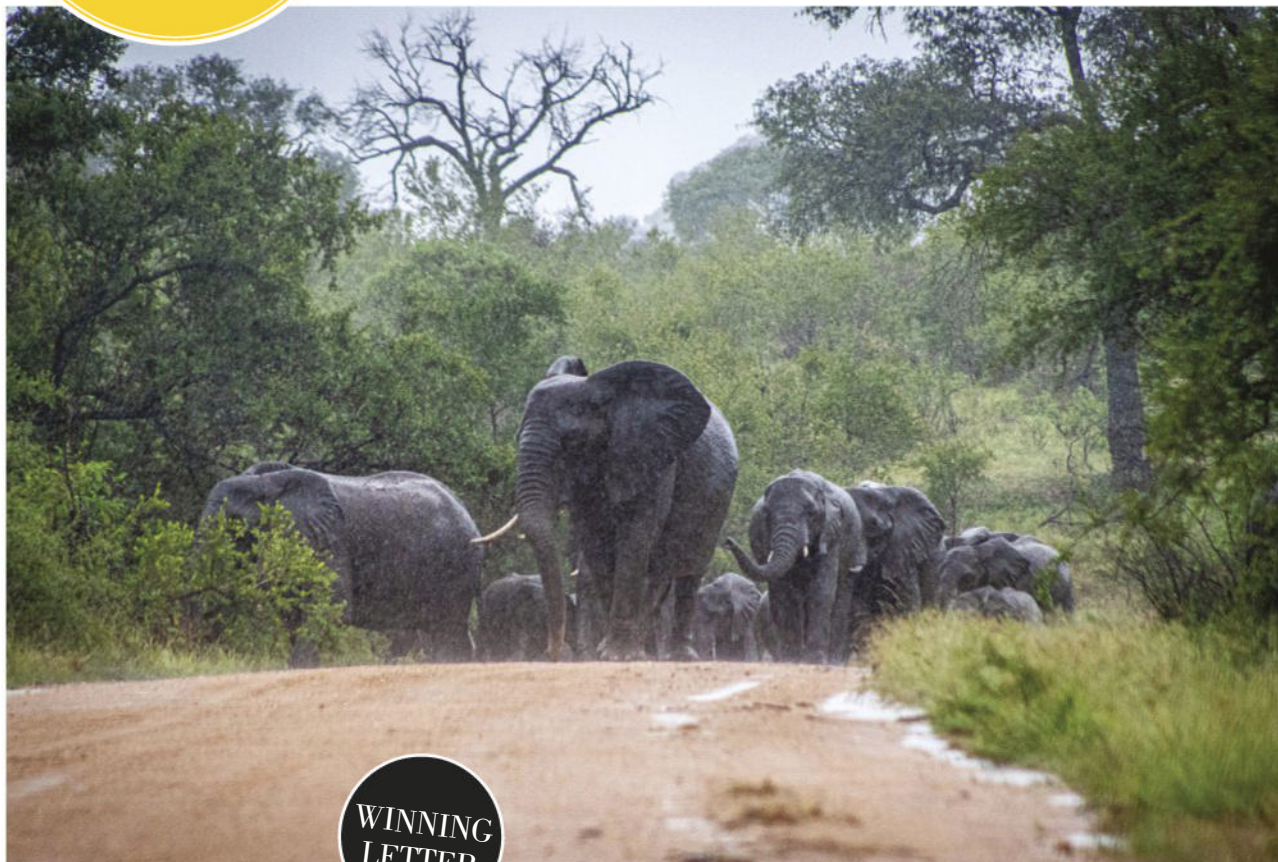
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Where have you been? What have you seen?
Write to editor@gomag.co.za

COMPILED BY MARTINETTE LOUW



^ Ellies in the rain

For 16 years, I've been dreaming of visiting the Kruger Park. In December last year, my dream finally came true. It was one of the highlights of my life – I never could have imagined that the park would be home to such a wide variety of animals. We saw lions, hyenas, wild dogs, a jackal, rhinos and many herds of elephant.

It rained a lot while we were in the park. On this day, it was really bucketing down. We were on the S114 to Skukuza and we almost drove into this herd when we came around a corner. The bull wasn't happy at all – he came at us with ears flapping. We quickly reversed the way we'd come!

KARMEN BRITZ, Amanzimtoti



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▲ The stars of Stofdam

I often visit Mokala National Park, which is close to where I live in Kimberley. On a recent trip there, I timed my visit to the Stofdam bird hide to perfection.

The veld was dry and buffalo, eland and impala had come to the water to drink. It was also happy hour for the birds: acacia pied barbet, violet-eared waxbill, golden-breasted bunting, green-winged pytilia, blue waxbill... The conditions were great for photography: The light was soft and the birds bathed and drank only a few metres away. These black-faced waxbills were some of the many beautiful creatures to cross my lens that day.

LEON VENTER, Kimberley



▲ D is for dikkop

A pair of dikkops (also called spotted thick-knees) have nested in our garden for a number of years. We began naming each generation alphabetically, starting with "D" for Dikkie. My husband Ernst and I are both keen photographers and we record their progress.

We're currently on generation "O" – our 12th batch of babies! We put out mealworms for them and continue to feed Mom and Dad when there are no youngsters around. The breeding starts in spring and there are three batches of eggs each time. Each batch almost always consists of two eggs, out of which a male and a female bird hatch. The chicks leave when the next generation is due.

We've had losses, unfortunately. Owls, cats and crows often try to hunt the chicks and we've lost some to the swimming pool. We've learnt to listen for their distress calls and have saved a few.

We hope others are inspired to enjoy their properties as we have done during this wonderful period.

JILL REX, Johannesburg

▼ Mom and me

I took this photo in Mountain Zebra National Park near Cradock. This meerkat mom and three of her babies entertained us around their burrow next to Link Road.

When a ground squirrel appeared, the little ones puffed themselves up to show that they weren't afraid – it was too cute.

NADINE LEONARD, Gqeberha



▲ Two heads are better than one

On our last few trips to the Kruger Park, we've stayed up north in Mopani rest camp. It's less busy, the gravel roads are in good condition, and the bush is fairly open, which makes it good for photography.

A short drive from Mopani is a vast open area called Mooiplaas – it's at the junction of the S49 and S50. There's a drinking trough and reservoir surrounded by a plain of short grass. Every morning, we'd drive there to see what was around. Mostly there were large herds of zebra and wildebeest, and elephants.

The zebras were always frisky in the early morning. These two look like they have two heads on one body!

STU BOWIE, Centurion



▲ Clean slate

My family and I spent some time in Agulhas National Park in December 2023. One day, we drove to Brandfontein beach – it must be one of the most scenic beaches in the country and there are usually very few people there.

There's a dune field next to the beach – my son Delano and I climbed up this massive one. The wind picked up and this beautiful photo was the result. The wind also wiped away our footprints; it was as if we were never there.

EBEN JOOSTE, George



▲ Two travellers meet

In 2017, I spent three weeks hiking in the remote Altai Mountains of Mongolia. There were many awesome moments and experiences. The views were endless, of seemingly uninhabited space.

One full-moon night I went walkabout on my own. I felt like the only living human on earth.

But on this occasion, between somewhere and nowhere, I came across a fellow traveller. We were heading in opposite directions but we both stopped, and he dismounted. We greeted each other warmly as if we were kindred spirits, even though neither of us could understand each other!

NOEL TOWERS, Muizenberg



▲ Drakensberg hikers beware

This letter is in reference to Grant Christie's excellent article about his five-day hike in the Maloti-Drakensberg Park, "Big mountain magic", in issue #192.

I was alarmed to see that the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park maps by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW) are recommended:

Hiking Map No. 1 Royal Natal (Rugged Glen – Mnweni) and *Hiking Map No. 2 Cathedral Peak (Culfargie – Monk's Cowl)*.

From 2021 to 2023, I was engaged in redrawing and publishing a completely revised map series of the Drakensberg, with the support and endorsement of EKZNW. *Drakensberg North* was the first of these Slingsby maps – *Central* and *South* are also in print. (Grant also recommended these maps. – Ed.)

During the course of this process, I was continually puzzled by inconsistencies in EKZNW's six-map series until it dawned on me and my fellow researchers that the entire series uses two different and conflicting map projections. This explained to me why – for more than 20 years – serious hikers and climbers in the Berg have complained about errors on those maps. The path projection (which differs from the topographic projection) shifts most paths as much as 500 m east or west of their true location! One is simply unable to use a GPS reader with these maps, and it would be very dangerous to try.

In addition to the above, the EKZNW maps were last revised more than two decades ago and they show many paths and routes that have disappeared entirely (often washed away) or been closed. The whole Mnweni area, for example, is completely and dangerously incorrect on those maps.

There are serious consequences here. In some places, the old maps literally show paths that plunge over vertical cliffs that are hundreds of metres high! Following these maps in misty or low-visibility conditions would be life-threatening.

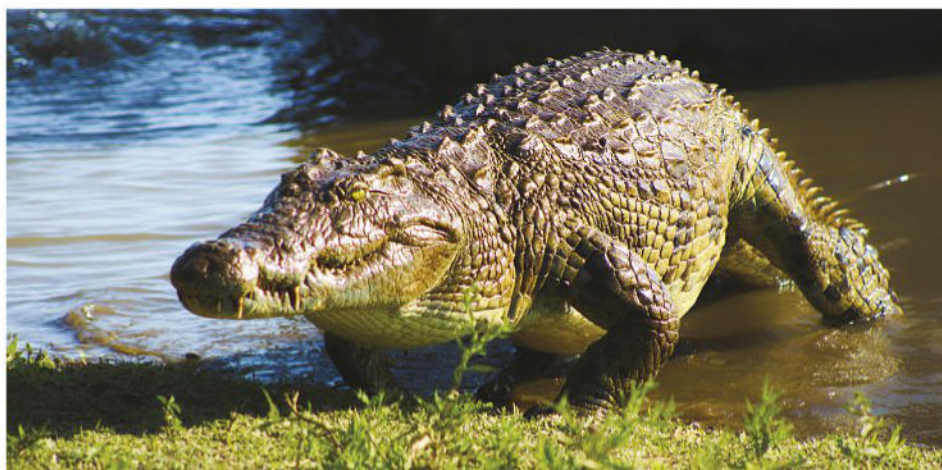
These errors and dangers were brought to the attention of all parties at the time, yet the maps are still sold. The novice hiker in the Berg will be unaware of the risks of the product they are buying. Continuing to sell them can only be described as the height of irresponsibility.

PETER SLINGSBY, Cape Town

> Croc o'clock

I visited the Kruger Park for the first time in July last year and camped at Skukuza. I was on a game drive to Satara when this crocodile exited a waterhole. It walked to a shady spot and lay down next to two waterbirds. How wonderful to see a crocodile up close in its natural habitat! You don't realise how big they are.

KYLIE VAN LUIN, Annlin



Q&A

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



A



B

^ Owl together now

FRANCOIS SMIT from Middelburg writes: I photographed these two African scops-owls on the same day, within 20 m of each other, in the Tsendze campsite in the Kruger Park. I noticed one owl looked long and lean while the other was puffy. Is there a reason for the difference?

Bird expert LUKAS NIEMAND says: During the day, African scops-owls make use of camouflage so they won't be seen by other animals. Other birds, in particular, will try to chase the owls off when spotted.

Photo A shows a characteristic camouflage technique used by scops-owls. They sleep against the base of a vertical tree trunk and will stretch themselves out to blend in with the shape and patterns of the trunk and bark.

The owl in Photo B had to use another camouflage technique because it was perched in the canopy, which was fairly open. The best option for an owl in this scenario is to "crouch" down to look like an offshoot of a branch.



^ Which wasp?

YOLANDÉ JORDAAN from Pretoria writes: I recently visited Cape Vidal in iSimangaliso Wetland Park. This insect was carrying a caterpillar. Can you identify the insect and explain this behaviour?

Entomologist DUNCAN MACFADYEN says: The insect is an *Ammophila* hunting wasp in the family *Sphecidae*. It's a solitary species with a relatively broad head and pronotum that forms a raised collar. The base of the abdomen forms a long thin waist. The species is abundant in areas with bare, sandy soil and the adult wasp visits flowers to feed on nectar.

The wasp's nest consists of burrows in the ground. Females can sting aggressively and hunt caterpillars, which are carried to a single-cell nest dug in the soil. One large caterpillar like this may be sufficient per nest.

The caterpillars are paralyzed but not killed to keep them fresh. The wasp lays an egg on the caterpillar and when it hatches, the larva feeds on the caterpillar. Interestingly, the larva feeds around the vital organs until it is ready to pupate.

It's difficult to identify the caterpillar in the photo without a dorsal view. It has four pairs of prolegs, which rules out *Geometridae* and certain *Noctuidae*. It appears to have a dorsal projection on the tail segment so it might be a *Sphingidae*.

It's amazing how these *Ammophila* wasps can carry prey that must weigh more than they do!

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CHECK THIS



When central Botswana gets good rain in summer, the water drains into the Makgadikgadi Pans and turns them into a habitat for thousands of flamingos and other waterbirds.

At Nata Bird Sanctuary you can easily access Sowa Pan, the eastern section of the Makgadikgadi complex.

Plan your next trip north with *go! Botswana* (R125), available in shops or online from 📱 media24shop.com

PICTURE TOAST COETZER



IN BRIEF

COMPILED BY KYRA TARR

MAURITIUS

Max out your Green Mamba!

Your South African passport, or “Green Mamba”, won’t get you very far in places like Europe and North America, but there are still countries where our rand holds its own and where you can visit visa-free. Here are our top five:

BALI



THAILAND

R1 = 1,90 Thai baht

With beautiful beaches, sacred temples and delicious food, it’s no wonder South Africans love Thailand. Depending on the time of year, you’ll find relatively affordable flights to Bangkok or Phuket. The exchange rate, once there, works in our favour. Accommodation, transport and activity costs are comparable, if not lower, to those in South Africa.

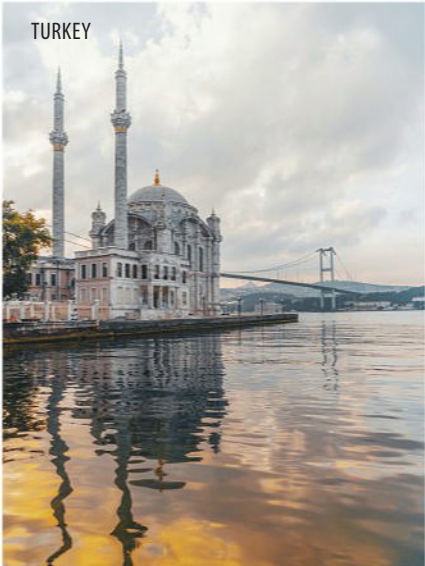
BALI

R1 = 825,77

Indonesian rupiah

Eat, Pray, Love might have brought Bali to the world’s attention, but South Africans have long favoured this Indonesian island for its culture, scenery and healing vibes. The exchange rate is a big drawback and you’ll likely find luxurious accommodation for (relatively) cheap. The only drawback is the travel time – you’re looking at 17 to 30 hours in transit, depending on your flights.

TURKEY



TIP Set a Google alert for cheap flights from South Africa to Denpasar International Airport and jump on the best deals first.

ZANZIBAR

R1 = 134,30

Tanzanian shilling

While resorts and tourist activities can be relatively expensive on Tanzania’s spice island, even with the favourable exchange rate, you’ll still get bang for your bucks. Many tour operators, like Africa Travel (📞africatravel.com), put together all-inclusive packages with return flights, accommodation and food, allowing you to plan and budget accordingly.

TURKEY

R1 = 1,63 Turkish lira

An intoxicating blend of east and west, Turkey is still a relatively affordable destination for South Africans, especially when you travel outside the urban hotspots. The capital is Ankara, but most of us are more familiar with Istanbul, the famed city that straddles Europe and Asia.

South Africans need an eVisa to visit Turkey. This is free and enables tourists to stay in the country for 30 days.

MAURITIUS

R1 = 2,49 Mauritian rupee

Like Zanzibar, Mauritius isn’t “cheap” per se, but booking an all-inclusive package in advance negates any nasty bar bills. There are so many resorts to choose from, from good-value 3-star options to dreamy 5-star locales.

Remember: Aside from flights and accommodation, lazing on a beach is free and that’s what you’ll be doing most of the time, anyway!

For a full list of the countries South Africans can travel to without a visa, visit 📞guideconsultants.com.

Note: Exchange rates were accurate at the time of going to print and should be used as a guide only.

Sources: 📞flightcentre.co.za
📞sanlamreality.co.za

BY THE NUMBERS

World Wildlife Day was celebrated on 3 March – this UN initiative honours the earth's wild animals and plants. South Africa has an extraordinary natural heritage that we so often take for granted. Here are some numbers to remind us how lucky we are to live at the southern tip of Africa.

19 485

The area of the Kruger National Park in km² – about as big as the entire country of Slovenia.

The Kruger is the ninth largest national park in the world and sees about 1,7 million visitors per year.

20 000

The estimated number of plant species in South Africa. The Cape Floral Kingdom accounts for approximately 9 000 of these species alone.

3 000

The approximate length of our coastline in kilometres, from Mozambique to Namibia.

850

The number of bird species that have been recorded in South Africa. Twitchers behold!

299

The number of mammal species recorded in South Africa.

21

The number of national parks in South Africa. This excludes other nature reserves, protected ocean areas and smaller conservancies. Overall, just over 3% of our country's area is protected for the benefit of wildlife.

Sources: 🐾 bluegnu.co.za; 🐾 bookmundi.com; 🐾 sa-venues.com; 🐾 gcis.gov.za



LEOPARD LOUNGE



JEANNIE HAYWARD

Part 2: Studying secretive cats

Last issue we looked at how camera traps have become invaluable when it comes to studying shy animals like leopards. So, how do they work?

A camera trap has a sensor, lens, flash and a few controls to change settings, all enclosed in a weatherproof housing. Most have a “passive infrared sensor” – an electronic sensor triggered by body heat and movement as an animal passes by. Occasionally, a camera can be triggered by pockets of hot air generated by large rocks heated by the sun, or by wind-blown vegetation moving in the detection zone. This can result in thousands of “empty” photos. In one Cape Leopard Trust survey, a single daisy blowing in front of a camera was responsible for 10 816 photos! It's therefore very important to choose the right site, and to properly prepare the site before arming the camera.

When choosing sites for a leopard survey, we want to be sure that the cats will pass in front of the camera at some stage. Fortunately, when given a choice, leopards usually take the path of least resistance. They often patrol their territories along game paths, hiking trails, quiet jeep tracks, dry watercourses and similar byways. These areas are normally excellent camera locations.

We also look for places where animal movement is naturally channelled by geographic features like ridge lines, saddles, thick bush or large boulders. Before deciding on a site, we scout the area for leopard spoor (tracks), scat (droppings), scratch marks and scrapes – all of which determine the likelihood of leopards being present.

Once a site has been chosen, the cameras are set up. Our aim is to obtain good lateral flank shots of a passing leopard. To achieve this, two cameras are set up opposite each other, perpendicular to the path, about 25 cm off the ground and 2–3 metres from where the animal will be walking. Each leopard has a unique rosette pattern but the left and right flanks differ, so simultaneous left and right images captured by the cameras will serve as a cat's “identikit”.

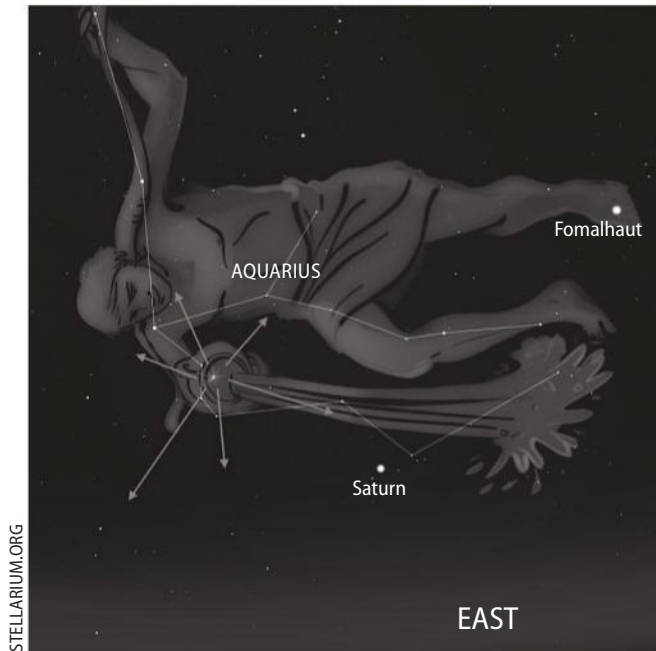
The cameras are not placed directly across from each other to avoid the one's flash “blinding” the other when an animal moves past. It's important to sync the time settings on the two cameras, and to double-check all other parameters to ensure that when the researchers visit the cameras after a few weeks, there are no data issues or gaps.

Once a camera station has been set up, the waiting game starts. It's a game informed by a good understanding of your target species, but dictated by a lot of patience and a generous dose of luck!

– Jeannie Hayward

Follow the Cape Leopard Trust on Instagram: [@capeleopardtrust](https://www.instagram.com/capeleopardtrust)

NIGHT WATCH



Bright bits of Halley's Comet

Halley's Comet is the most famous comet around. It returns to the earth's vicinity as a blazing ball every 75 years or so; the last sighting was in 1986 and it is projected to return in 2061.

That's a very long time to wait! In the meantime, see if you can spot fragments of Halley as the earth crosses paths with the comet twice a year.

As a comet moves through space, it sheds small pieces that trail in its orbit. The earth's orbit crosses Halley's in two places, which means that we also cross paths with its debris. When this happens, we see what is known as a meteor shower.

During a meteor shower, it seems as though all the meteors – or shooting stars as we like to call them – originate from the same point in the night sky. We call this the “radiant” or “point of origin”. The constellation nearest the radiant determines the name of the meteor shower.

The two meteor showers caused by Halley's Comet occur in Orion in October and in Aquarius in May. Hence, they're the “Orionids” and “Eta Aquariids” respectively.

Eta Aquariids will be the most spectacular of the year, with up to 50 meteors per hour. It will occur on the morning of 5 May 2024, between 3.30 am and 5.30 am.

The best way to watch a meteor shower is with your naked eye. Find a comfortable spot in a dark place with a good view of the eastern horizon and keep count of how many meteors you see per hour.

Enjoy the show!

– Willie Koorts



GREENPOP REFOREST FEST

If you're looking for a way to reconnect with nature, head to Greenpop's 12th annual Reforest Fest over Easter weekend.

The core objective of the event is to restore the environment through planting trees: This year's goal is for participants to plant 5 000 saplings over the long weekend.

While getting your hands dirty is encouraged, it's not the only item on the itinerary. There will also be workshops, classes, wellness activities and live musical acts, including a performance by Jeremy Loops, the celebrated South African singer and co-founder of Greenpop.

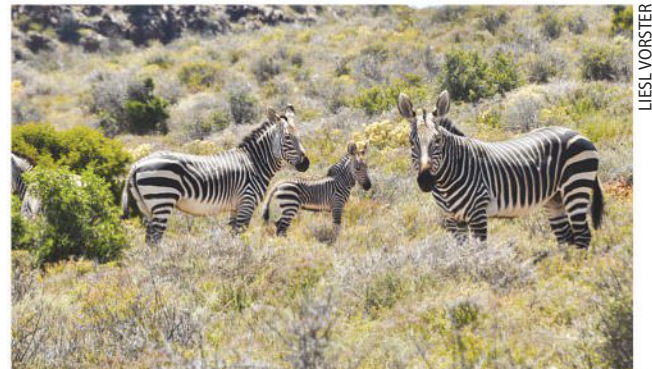
There are various camping arrangements available and this event is suited to all ages.

More info: Search “Reforest Fest 2024” on [quicket.co.za](https://www.quicket.co.za)

When? 29 March – 1 April 2024 (Easter weekend)

Where? Bodhi Khaya Nature Retreat, R43 Grootbos Road (near Stanford)

Contact: events@greenpop.org; [reforestfest.com](https://www.reforestfest.com)



ONE OF A KIND

This little guy is the only Cape mountain zebra in the world with a combination of Cradock and Gamkaberg genes.

Why does this matter?

Over the past 300 years, habitat loss and hunting have decimated Cape mountain zebra numbers, confining once-flourishing herds to three isolated populations near Gamkaberg in the Little Karoo, Cradock in the Eastern Cape Karoo, and De Hoop Nature Reserve in the Southern Cape.

With time, these three populations gradually became genetically distinct from each another. Inbreeding also became problematic in certain areas.

In response, CapeNature and Sanbona Wildlife Reserve decided to launch a genetic rescue plan in consultation with experts. The birth of this foal is a direct result of this initiative, reuniting long-isolated gene pools once more.

FOR YOUR CALENDAR

The South African Photographer of the Year competition is an annual highlight for both amateur and professional photographers.

The competition celebrates the diversity and beauty of African wildlife and nature. It's a unique platform that showcases exceptional talent and offers participants a chance to gain recognition while contributing to nature conservation.

The winning photographs and shortlisted candidates can be viewed at the South African Photographer of the Year exhibition in Cape Town.

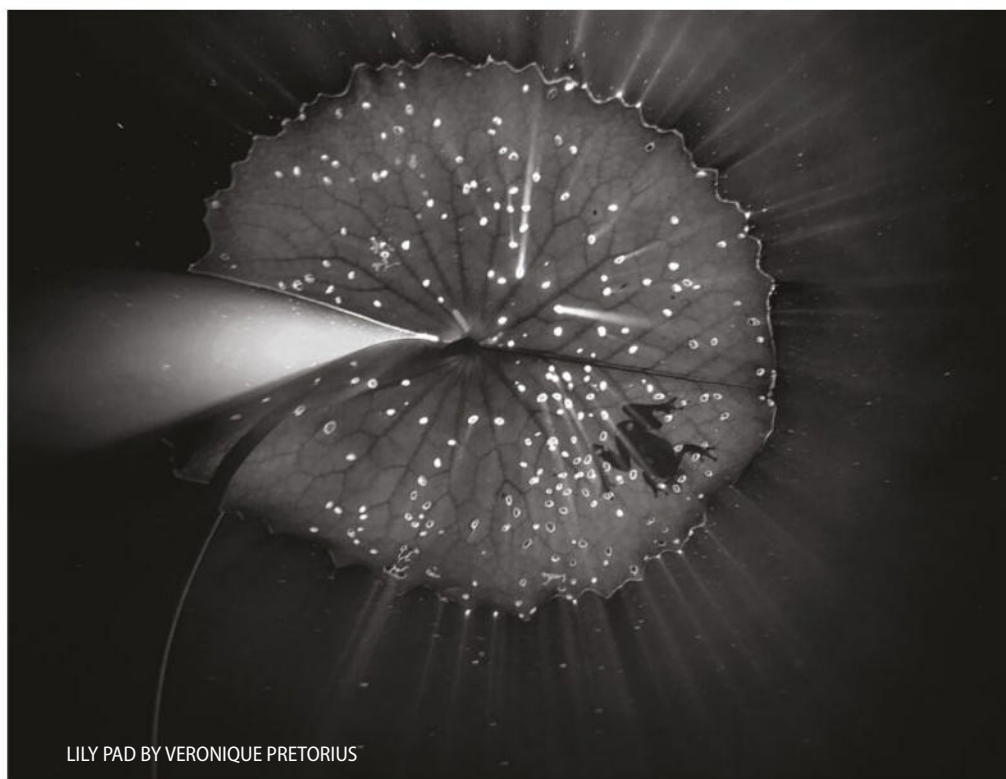
When? 5 April from 9 am – 3 pm and 6 April from 9 am – noon.

Where? Orms Showroom, 56 Roeland Street, Cape Town

Cost: Free.

More info: southafricanpoty.com

To see the winning photographs from the previous competition, go to southafricanpoty.com



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All aboard for the Andes!

Hiking the ancient Inca highway along the spine of the Peruvian Andes was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but **Nick Dall** first had to find his way to the trailhead...

ILLUSTRATION **NICOLENE LOUW**

The taxi driver didn't seem nearly old enough to be driving. "You'll have to get out and walk," he said. "I'll wait for you after the roadblock." I was sharing the taxi with an *abuela* (granny) and three youngsters wearing knock-off baseball caps. We all knew being asked to get out was not a good sign, especially considering that our destination – the high Andean town of Huamachuco – was still more than four hours away...

It was 2017 and I'd flown to the South

American country of Peru to go on a hike. Not just any hike: I was joining my friends Nick Stanziano from California and John Leivers from Perth who were midway through a 4000km adventure along the ancient Inca trail from Quito in Ecuador to Cusco in Peru.

I had noticed the young driver's fidgeting as soon as I got into his red Honda sedan in the coastal city of Trujillo, which I'd flown into from the capital of Lima. The other passengers were unperturbed, so I shrugged it off. We'd barely left when the *abuela* – sitting next

to me – started vomiting into a plastic shopping bag. If she was carsick here, on an arrow-straight road through humid fields of sugarcane, what would happen on the winding ascent to the Altiplano? (As luck would have it, I wouldn't actually find out the answer to that question...)

There was something fishy about this taxi ride and it wasn't just because the *abuela* must have eaten a plate of dodgy ceviche. Upon reaching the outskirts of town, our driver pulled over and a silver Hyundai – which I now realised must have been driving in convoy with us – drew up.

*There was something
fishy about this taxi
ride and it wasn't just
because the abuela must
have eaten a plate of
dodgy ceviche.*

We were told to move ourselves and our luggage over to the Hyundai. I was a bit baffled, especially when we swapped back to the red Honda after passing through a police roadblock. Maybe the Honda wasn't a registered taxi and the Hyundai was, and the driver and his friend had figured out how to dodge the police? Who knows, but off we went again.

The problem was that the silver Hyundai had stayed behind in Trujillo, so when we reached the roadblock in the mountains and our driver asked us to get out and walk through, we all knew we'd reached the end of the road, so to speak.

Resigned to our fate, I slung my mamba-green duffel bag over my shoulder, the *abuela* secured her groceries in a blanket, and we walked under the sweltering tropical sun. We were still about 2 km from the roadblock and managed to score a lift on the back of a tuk-tuk for a short stint, but as soon as the police roadblock came into view we were on our own again – the tuk-tuk driver was also wary to take us through.

When the cops asked why four Peruvians, one gringo and all their luggage were slogging up a country road, I pretended to speak only German. They actually pointed at the red car, which was now visible in the distance, having passed through without us. I offered a feeble, “*Nein.*”

They let us walk through anyway. The road soon got a whole lot steeper and my bag – containing a week's worth of all-weather hiking kit – got a whole lot heavier. I told myself it was great acclimatisation training for my high-altitude hike, but there was no escaping the fact that I was actually really peeved with the pipsqueak in the red Honda, which was now coming back into view.

When we reached the car, the pipsqueak was nowhere to be seen. He'd pulled up alongside a roadside kiosk and without even bothering to close the driver's door, he'd disappeared into the ravine below. I'm sure he wasn't licensed to operate a taxi and had finally decided to cut his losses and do a runner.

We stood around feeling spare for a

while, and then ordered freshly squeezed sugarcane juice from the kiosk. Soon enough, the same cops who'd just interrogated us showed up. They were surprisingly sympathetic but not very helpful in securing us an alternative ride.

One by one, all four of the Honda's other occupants managed to score lifts to Huamachuco: The still green-at-the-gills *abuela* was picked up by an unsuspecting businessman in a fancy sedan and the others squeezed into overcrowded buses. I was left behind: a sad, solitary gringo on the side of the road. Over the next four hours I chewed my way through an armadillo-sized pile of sugarcane and – thinking it might be the reason no one wanted me in their vehicle – gradually let my mute “German” persona slip.

Just when I was about to give up hope of ever joining my buddies, a Hilux containing three new Peruvian cops pulled up. The beefy, acned youngsters were headed to Huamachuco for a three-month secondment in the *gramadoelas* and – once they'd moved a box of ammunition from the backseat – had space for my bag and me.

We sped up the serpentine tar road that would eventually take us to 4200m above sea level. On their phones, they showed me GIFs of their girlfriends and nearly-girlfriends back in Trujillo and I returned the favour with pics of my wife, kids and dogs back home in Cape Town. We chatted about Mandela, the 2010 Soccer World Cup and – while snapping a selfie on a perilous hairpin bend atop a 1000-metre drop – a horrific car accident on this very road that had claimed the lives of four of their colleagues.

As we approached Huamachuco we

almost seemed to gather speed (quite something on roads designed for llamas, not bakkies) and before I knew it, I was bear-hugging my new friends goodbye and marvelling at the larger-than-life topiary kangaroo in Huamachuco's main plaza, where I was dropped off.

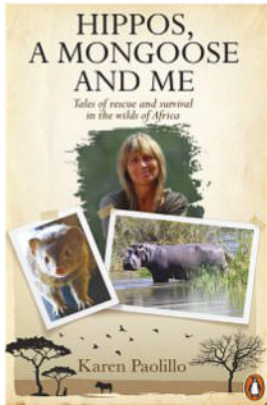
A few WhatsApps later, I found my hiking buddies and told them about my crazy day over beers and a sunset. The next morning, groggy and short of breath, I found myself kneeling in the shadow of the town's 16th-century belltower, as a shaman wearing an animal pelt and brandishing an enormous conch shell marked my cheeks with stripes of ash and gave me a bunch of cocoa leaves to chew. (Ours was the biggest hiking expedition to pass through in decades and the mayor wanted to give us a proper send-off.)

Much like the previous day's taxi journey, things got off to a good start: The trail was relatively flat and we spent the first night camped next to a spectacular snowmelt lake where we fished for trout from a leaky rowing boat.

But on day two I hit a roadblock of a different kind: altitude sickness. The trail changed radically as we headed up the so-called *Escalerillas* (“gangway” in English), a true feat of Inca engineering. Over eight gruelling hours and several thousand hand-carved stone steps, I somehow managed to summit three 3500m-high passes. I don't think I've ever felt worse than I did at the summit of the third pass, but once the waves of nausea subsided and the feeling returned to my fingers and toes, I found another gear and gradually started to enjoy the hike.

The next seven days went according to plan as we followed the ancient highway over passes and across valleys, through villages accessible only on foot and past centuries-old terraces planted with quinoa and corn.

It was one of the best weeks of my life and it had all begun when I hopped into that dodgy taxi in Trujillo. Funny how an adventure often starts before you know it. Here I was travelling halfway around the world to do a hike – but just getting to the starting point was a story all in its own.



Hippos, a Mongoose and Me: Tales of rescue and survival in the wilds of Africa

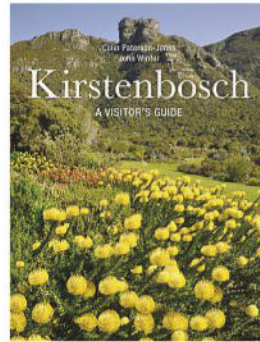
by Karen Paolillo,
Penguin Books
R300 in bookstores

British-born Karen Paolillo has spent the last three decades protecting the hippos of the Turgwe River in south-east Zimbabwe. In this follow-up to her book *A Hippo Love Story* (2014), she shares more tales from her life with husband Jean-Roger, surrounded not only by hippos but also baboons, warthogs, lions, elephants, and buffaloes. (Close calls included!)

As the founder of the Turgwe Hippo Trust, Paolillo feeds the hippos during droughts, shows volunteers the ropes and raises funds by documenting the wild hippos in their natural habitat.

It sounds blissful and adventurous – who doesn't want to live in a remote conservancy? – but she also emphasises that life in nature can be precarious. Floods, scorpion stings and fending off poachers are all part of the daily grind.

Paolillo writes with enthusiasm, humour and an eye for detail. It makes for an entertaining read and you'll soon fall in love with her menagerie of animals, like Squiggle the mongoose and Steve the hippo.



Kirstenbosch: A Visitor's Guide

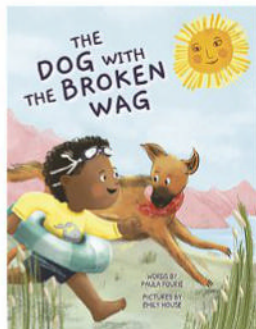
by Colin Paterson-Jones & John Winter,
Struik Nature
R150 in bookstores

If your visits to this beloved botanical garden on the lower slopes of Table Mountain are usually limited to a picnic on the lawns or a sunset concert in summer, this revised guide will help you get to know the lay of the land a little better.

Now in its third edition, the guide was updated by Alice Notten from SANBI (the South African National Biodiversity Institute) to include new additions to Kirstenbosch. You can brush up on the history and development of the gardens (established in 1913) and learn more about the plant life you can see. Chapters are dedicated to species like cycads, ericas, proteas, vygies and restios; and a map will give you an overview of where to find what. It also indicates trails for walks, climbs and mountain-bike rides.

Certain features of the garden are highlighted, like the conservatory (head there if you like succulents), the arboretum and the Boomslang, an elevated walkway through the tree canopy that offers beautiful views. Four chapters cover the seasonal treats you can look forward to, like pincushions in full bloom in spring, and there are short sections about Table Mountain and the animals and birds you might spot as you roam the garden.

It's a great way to enrich your next visit to Kirstenbosch – the guide is thin enough to carry along!



The Dog with the Broken Wag

by Paula Fourie, Tafelberg
R190 in bookstores

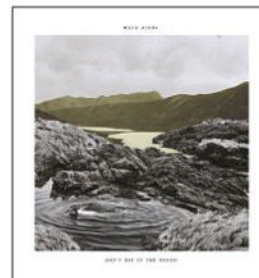
What is a dog to do when she wakes up with a tail that won't wag? This fun, original tale follows Jakkals as she figures out what happened and how to get her wag back.

Author Paula Fourie is known for her biography of the late musician Taliep Petersen, *Mr Entertainment*. This is her first children's book.

The Dog with the Broken Wag is for parents to read aloud rather than for kids to attempt on their own: Fourie plays around with words to have Jakkals speak her own doggy language.

The illustrations by Emily House capture Jakkals's zest for life and love for her humans and they'll inspire Mom or Dad to make up their own story when they tire of reading the book over and over. (It's destined to become a favourite...)

It's a cosy bedtime story about play, togetherness and the bond between all the members of a family, including the four-legged ones.



ROAD MUSIC

Don't Die in the Bundu

by Wren Hinds
Available on streaming platforms

Wren is originally from KwaZulu-Natal but is now based in Cape Town. This beautiful folk album was released internationally by the esteemed UK label, Bella Union. It's wonderful that his music will spread its wings beyond our borders.

Don't Die in the Bundu is a delicate set of songs that creates a beguiling atmosphere. There's something of an early morning mist rising from a wetland on the wonderful "Dream State"; "Wild Eyes" lightly trots along a ridge track in the late afternoon light. Having recently become a father, Wren says much of the album was influenced by this sea change in his life. "Razor Wing" explores the possibilities of a new life born into this world, while "Father" is a letter to his own dad.

There's nothing shouty here – Wren knows when and where to hold back. It's music that gently takes hold of your heart, but once it's got you, you're in for the long haul – perfect for that random, wintry day when you have to drive from Gqeberha to East London to check on a friend.

– Toast Coetzer

MEET THE AUTHOR

The South African landscape plays an important role in classic novels by some of our best-known authors. There's the Marico of Herman Charles Bosman, the Lowveld of Sir Percy FitzPatrick, the Karoo of Olive Schreiner and JM Coetzee, and the Wild Coast of Zakes Mda. Travel writer and novelist **Justin Fox** traces the literary echoes of these landscapes in *Place – South African Literary Journeys*. Toast Coetzer spoke to Justin about the book.



TRACEY YOUNG/HUSBAND

This must have been a mammoth project – when did you start working on it?

I did the first trip in 2008, chasing the tail of Herman Charles Bosman through the Marico. I tried to do one big trip every year or so, leaving a lot of time between each journey to properly research the next author – to read their books and to explore the biographies and critical works about them. Over the whole project, I must have driven nearly 10 000 km on South Africa's back roads.

The book is about writers and their “places” – the landscapes that inspired their work.

What would you say is your place? I was born in the Western Cape and have spent most of my life there, so my special places are mostly in that corner of the world. One of my contentions in the book is that the places of your childhood become the places of your heart.

Some of those places include the Langebaan Lagoon, particularly Churchhaven with its views over turquoise waters, and the Cederberg around Driehoek, Sanddrif and Kromrivier. I also have an affinity with the stretch of the Cape Peninsula from Simon's Town (where my family has a 200-year-old holiday home) to Cape Point.

Are there any other writers you considered, but who fell out? There were a lot of writers who came into play and had to be discarded for one reason or another. For example, Eve Palmer's *The Plains of Camdeboo* was too close to Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, while Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* had too much of Johannesburg in it. I wanted to write about wild places, so writers like Ivan Vladislavić and Richard Rive were too urban.

I also considered Karen Blixen's Kenya, Dian Fossey's Rwanda, Alexander McCall Smith's Botswana, and Christiaan Bakkes's Namibia but decided in the end to keep the focus local.

One of the challenges – I'm guessing – with conceptualising the book would have been

to feature writers from all over the country to have a geographical spread of sorts.

Yes, that was a concern. The Karoo is certainly oversubscribed, what with Etienne van Heerden, Guy Butler, Deneys Reitz, Pauline Smith, Eve Palmer, JM Coetzee and so many other great writers filling that arena. Then there's KZN, which is a bit thin on the ground when it came to fiction that foregrounded landscape. Had Craig Higginson's wonderful new novel, *The Ghost of Sam Webster* (Picador Africa, 2023), been published while I was researching *Place*, I would probably have chosen it.

You often travelled alone but sometimes with family – your sister and your mom feature in the book. Which do you prefer: solo travel or with someone riding shotgun?

It depends on the kind of trip or story. If I'm writing a piece of journalism for a travel magazine, it's often nice to have a friend or family member along, especially if they're willing to pose for photographs. (*We know the feeling!* – Ed.)

But if the journey is for a book or for a bigger project, I prefer to travel on my own. It provides more opportunity for introspection and for letting my mind work things through. Sitting alone around a braai fire at night in the mountains with a notebook and a glass or two of red wine can (sometimes) produce interesting material.

Having said that, my mom Suzanne's brother, the poet Uys Krige, was a friend of Herman Charles Bosman, so she was a perfect travel companion for the Marico. And my older sister, actress Grethe Fox, used to read *Jock of the Bushveld* to me when I was a kid, so she was a good person to have along for the Percy FitzPatrick meander through the Lowveld.

You're visiting places a century or more later than when the writers lived there. So much would have changed, or were there

surprising things that stayed the same?

Much of urban and peri-urban South Africa is being blighted by overdevelopment, corruption and neglect. I always turn to wild environments for solace, which is why I chose these authors and these landscapes.

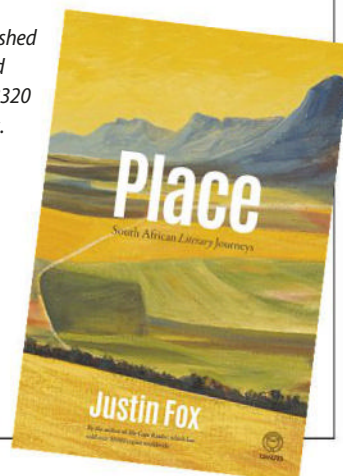
Fortunately, many of the environments have not changed too much in the intervening years. You can still get a good sense of Schreiner's world in Cradock and Gannahoeik; FitzPatrick's wagon route is still unspoilt through the Kruger National Park; much of Bosman's world is preserved in Madikwe Game Reserve; Dalene Matthee's forests are still largely intact. This is of great benefit to the literary traveller.

The late Stephen Watson – and the Cederberg – seem to be very close to your heart. Why?

Stephen was a wonderful landscape poet. He was also one of my English lecturers at the University of Cape Town and we became friends. I was particularly drawn to his essays, poems and prose pieces about the Cederberg. Of all the writers I engaged with, his approach to the mountains offered the deepest and most sustained examination of the power of landscape on a perceptive viewer.

Just like Stephen, I went for walks in the Cederberg with my dad as a child. That left a lifelong impression... and love.

Place is published by Umuzi and costs about R320 in bookstores.





PROFILE

A place to heal

The Northern Cape makes you feel good. That's what **Genevieve Maasdorp**, regional communications manager for SANParks, wants people to know. Her biggest wish is for visitors to come to the province and experience its bounty for themselves.

WORDS **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**
PICTURES **SUPPLIED**



Almost every day, Genevieve Maasdorp answers questions from tourists about roads. What are they like in the Richtersveld? What are they like in the Kgalagadi, Namaqua, Au-grabies Falls, Mokala... Every day, she has to assure them that their vehicle will be up for the challenge.

"Can we get there in our 4x4 Renault Duster?"

"What about a Ford Everest 4x2 with a diff lock and all-terrain tyres?"

"We have a 4x4 with a rooftop tent, recovery boards and a winch, but not much off-road experience..."

If only people knew that Genevieve, as the regional communications manager for the SANParks Arid Region, visits all these places in her Kia Sonet!

"Yes, people worry about the roads a lot," she says with a laugh. "Visitors who might not be familiar with the Northern Cape are afraid that if they run into trouble, they'll be stranded for days. But it's not *that* rugged or remote."

Genevieve runs the Facebook pages for five national parks and it's on those message boards that she answers questions as quickly and accurately as possible.

Her cellphone buzzes throughout our meeting in an Upington restaurant. It's August and the wildflowers are in bloom.

It's also a Saturday, but she'll answer all the questions soon, she promises.

"People get very excited during certain times of the year – especially during flower season. Everyone wants to see the best flowers and they want *me* to tell them where to go! And when. Or they want to know whether next year will be as spectacular. *O jinne*, and when they don't see flowers or when the weather is poor, they get so upset."

When Au-grabies comes down in flood, Genevieve has to be on high alert, too. "People want to know what the water flow is almost every hour. I get messages like: 'We're visiting Au-grabies in two weeks' time – will there still be water?'"

She laughs. "*Ja meneer, ja mevrou*, the waterfall will still have water! I just don't know how much. Every time I have to explain that the water level of the Orange River is determined by the outflow of several dams and that we can't say for certain how things will look in two weeks' time."

She received a strange enquiry the other day: "A man wanted to know if he could cycle through the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. I thought he was joking. He was from overseas. I told him there are dangerous wild animals in the park, but he didn't care. Then I had to explain that our lions might

injure or eat him. He still wanted to take the chance. So, I just said no. Sorry, no bicycles allowed."

You could say that Genevieve is a very patient person. And here, in the driest corner of the country, she has learnt to be so. In this part of the world, you have to wait for what you want and you often don't get what you ask for.

Genevieve grew up in the mission town of Steinkopf, near Springbok, with her mother Catherine. Her father Marthinus was in Namibia and she visited him every two years.

"My grandfather on my mom's side, Samuel Bok, had a great influence in my life," she says. He was the school principal in Bulletrap, a small settlement near Steinkopf. He decided I should go to school there and drove me every day. He taught me a lot as we travelled in his bakkie. He wasn't only book smart, he also knew about the world and about life. He told stories and pointed out things in the veld. That's where my love for nature comes from."

After school, she studied tourism management at the College of Cape Town but her heart wasn't in the city, so she returned to Namaqualand and looked for work in Springbok. All she could find was a job at a bicycle shop. "It wasn't in my field but I ended up



INSIDER INFO

Genevieve shares new developments in the pipeline at SANParks:

- Visitors to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park can look forward to the new Dawid Kruiper rest camp north of Twee Rivieren, and seven luxury campsites near the Craig Lockhart waterhole. The new Komani San information centre is also being built in Twee Rivieren.
- SANParks is currently doing environmental impact studies with a view to build new chalets in Namaqua National Park.
- A nursery is being built at Sendelingsdrift in the |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park to exhibit and protect the unique vegetation of the area.
- Meerkat National Park, recently proclaimed on the property of the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) project near Carnarvon, is the sixth park in the SANParks Arid Region. The other parks are Augrabies Falls, Kgalagadi Transfrontier, Mokala, Namaqua and |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld. Meerkat is not open to the public (yet).

working there for three years,” she says. “I might have been selling bicycle parts but I was working with people and I enjoyed it.”

Thereafter, she moved to Alexander Bay to work for a security company and that’s where she met her husband, Jean. He worked for SARS and they moved back to Springbok, where she returned to her job at the bicycle shop.

In 2006, she got the opportunity to work for the Department of Tourism, Environment and Conservation in Springbok as a receptionist. When she resigned from the department 11 years later, she was the assistant manager!

Genevieve worked at the tourism organisation Open Africa for a while, where she heard that SANParks was looking for a spokesperson for their parks in the Northern Cape. “I wasn’t sure if I was right for the job, but two hours before the applications closed, I sent in my CV. And I got it! It was July 2018. I was heavily pregnant and I started working at SANParks.”

This time, the Maasdorp family moved for *her* job – to Upington. She and Jean and their two daughters.

“The Kalahari was different to the Namaqualand that we knew and loved,” she says. “But it didn’t take long to capture our hearts, although

the summers are intense. The people are wonderful – it’s still the Northern Cape, after all. It’s a province of extremes, with the friendliest people. When I travel to other places, it’s not long before I start to miss home.”

Genevieve, a woman with a big smile and lots of love in her heart, was dealt a terrible blow by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021, within a month, she lost her father, her mother and her husband Jean.

“It was... it is difficult,” she says, tearing up. “I have to be strong because otherwise my daughters would also lose their mom. I’m sorry for the sad story. My work has really helped me to get through. It’s good to stay busy and you’re lucky when you can do so in open spaces and fresh air. This place looks harsh and inhospitable, but it’s kind to you when you feel broken.”

And because she knows how good the Northern Cape can be for body and soul, she wants more people to experience it.

“This province is severely undervalued. There’s a lot more to see and do than tourists realise. People only want to visit Augrabies when the Orange River is in flood, but there are hiking and cycling trails in the park that take you through a unique landscape. It’s one of only a few national parks where you can do these activities on your own.

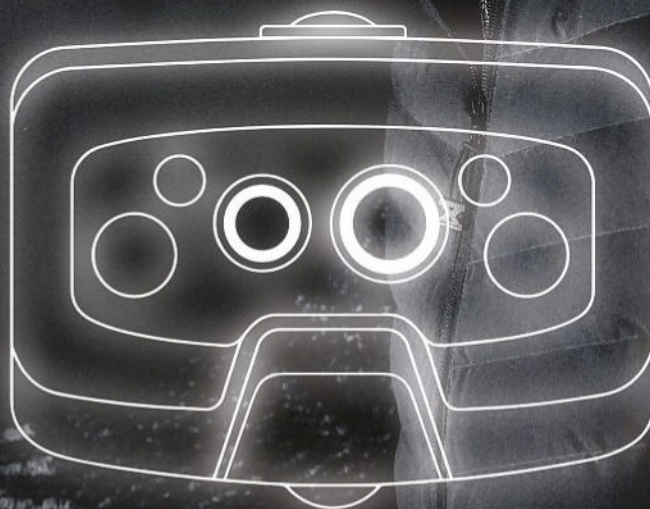
“And people only want to go to Namaqualand when the flowers are in bloom, but there’s so much more. The coastline, the mountains... You can camp in pristine wilderness.

“And if you’ve never been to the Richtersveld, you have no idea how wonderful it is. Flowers and water are a bonus. You go there for the permanent things like the stars and the silence.

“You can recharge in these places and leave with courage for life’s challenges.”



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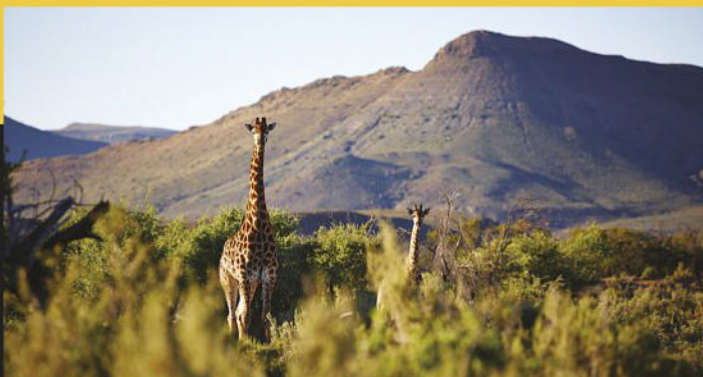


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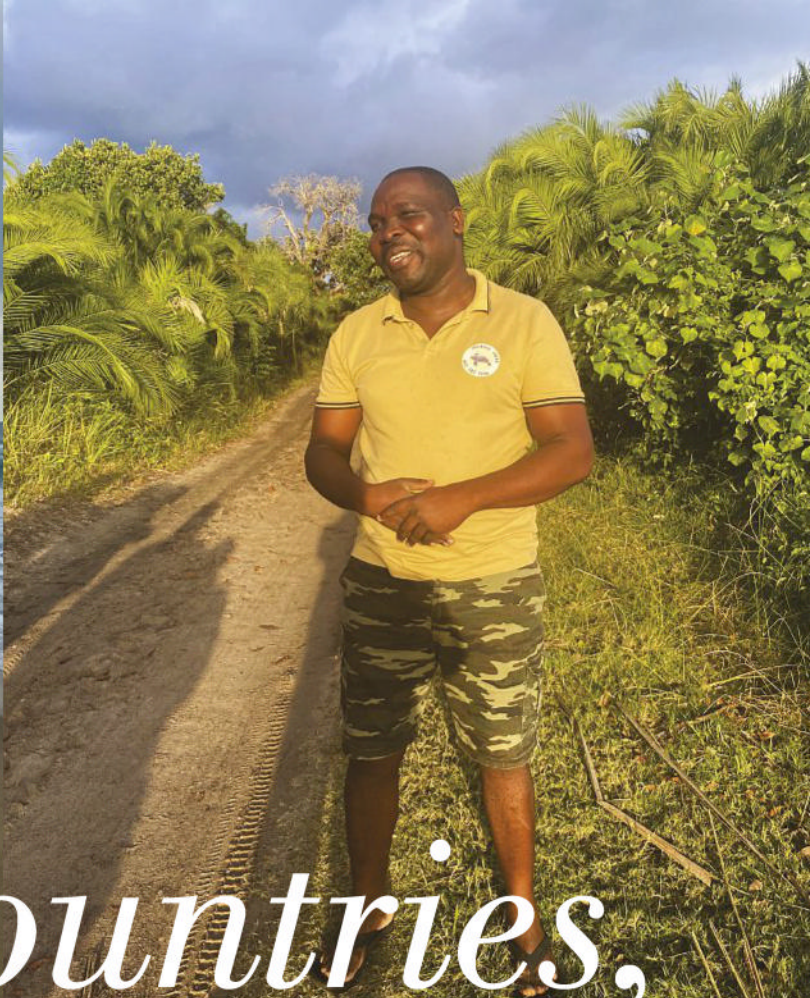
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Clockwise from left: The dirt roads branching off Saddleback Pass near Barberton are irresistible if you love back roads. Sunrise at Ponta Membene in Mozambique. Thonga guide Chris Mkhonto can show you age-old fishing methods in Kosi Bay. The lion king of Hlane Royal National Park. Certain parts of this park, eSwatini's largest nature reserve, are only accessible in a game-drive vehicle.





Three countries, one heart

The Lebombo Mountains form the spine of an enormous transfrontier conservation area that runs from South Africa through eSwatini to the Mozambican coast. The forests, waterfalls, mountains, wetlands and ocean are home to plenty of animals, birds and fish. It has almost everything in abundance, except tourists...

BY PIERRE STEYN



Opposite page, from the top: An info panel at the Makhonjwa/Lebombo viewpoint on the Makhonjwa Geo Trail reveals interesting facts about the unique landscape. Phophonyane Falls in eSwatini.

A border is a strange thing. Over centuries, people created them to protect the interests of the group inside, and to keep others out. Africa has its fair share of weird borders: long, straight lines drawn by European leaders in the 1880s without taking people, languages or landscapes into account.

Thankfully, it's sometimes possible to correct the mistakes of the past, which is how transfrontier parks and conservation areas came to be. Where wilderness areas have been cut up by borders, countries join forces to manage them as a single entity, to the benefit of nature and the people who live there.

In South Africa, the Kgalagadi and |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld transfrontier parks are the superstars of this initiative, but there are another 10 similar conservation areas in sub-Saharan Africa, from the Mayombe Forest Transfrontier Protected Area on the coast between Gabon and Angola, to the Niassa-Selous Transfrontier Conservation Area between Mozambique and Tanzania.

The Lebombo Transfrontier Conservation Area (10029 km², about half the size of the Kruger Park) is pure dynamite when it comes to scenery, biodiversity, accommodation options and activities. Not to mention wildlife – on land, in the air and in the water. The border posts are also relatively small and hassle-free.

Here's your seven-day travel plan so you can explore the region like the animals that once migrated freely.

DAY 1

Mbombela to Phophonyane

I'm travelling with Nicholas Tucker from Boundless Southern Africa, a SADC initiative that promotes tourism and investment in the transfrontier conservation areas of southern Africa. Nick wants to see how some of the community projects he's involved with are faring after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Emile van den Heetkamp, a guide from Underberg in KwaZulu-Natal, is also with us. Emile is a fixer, one of those people with a broad knowledge of nature and a contact list the length of a giraffe's neck.

From Mbombela, we travel south on the R40 to Barberton. Just outside town, the R40 crosses the Kaapmuiden road (R38). This is

the start of the well-known Barberton Makhonjwa Geo Trail. For about 40 km you crawl up the steep Saddleback Pass – a journey that takes you 3,5 billion years into the past.

Indeed, this UNESCO World Heritage Site has the oldest and best preserved volcanic and sedimentary rock on earth. There are 12 stops along the Geo Trail with info panels that reveal a lot more about the landscape than what you can see at first glance. (For more, see issue #151.) You'll want to unpack your camping chair and picnic basket at the Makhonjwa/Lebombo viewpoint, and sit for a while to appreciate the valleys, rock formations and mountain peaks. At 1800 m above sea level, it's the highest viewpoint on the route.

At the Josefsdal/Bulembu border post, we're greeted by a sight that will make any traveller sigh with relief: no other vehicles!

"Things are quiet here," a police officer confirms. He can count the number of vehicles that passed through this afternoon on one hand. Within minutes, our passports are stamped twice and we enter eSwatini.

The MR20 takes us to the tree-rich town of Bulembu at the base of Emlembe, eSwatini's highest mountain at 1862 m. In the 1930s, Bulembu was a prosperous mining town, but it turned into a ghost town when the asbestos industry collapsed. Many of the old colonial buildings have since been restored and the town is showing new life thanks to a variety of charity projects to kick-start the tourism industry, the timber industry and smaller businesses like honey farming, mineral water bottling and dairy farms.

East of Bulembu, the 4x4 hits dirt for the first time as the road winds for almost 20 km to Piggs Peak, through hills covered in blue gum plantations. By the time we see the turn-off to Phophonyane Falls, it's dark outside.

DAY 2

Phophonyane to Magadzavane

We wake to the sound of water. Phophonyane Falls Ecolodge is located above this waterfall, inside the private nature reserve of the same name in the north-west of eSwatini.

Before breakfast, Emile and I walk among the wild jasmine and tree euphorbias to look for the rare and wonderful narina trogon, but to no avail. More than 240 bird species have been recorded here, including other specials like

purple-crested turaco, pink-throated twinspot and African wood-owl. The trogons might have escaped us, but the views offer plenty of distraction.

I always judge a destination by whether I'd return to show it to my wife, Ronel. Phophonyane will definitely see me again.

Next stop is Hlane Royal National Park. The roads of eSwatini are subservient to the forests, mountains and valleys, so first we go north, then east, then south, with the country's border on our left throughout. The tar roads (MR5, MR24 and MR3) are in a good condition, the Swati drivers are polite, the towns are clean and the pedestrians wave as we go by.

Hlane, the biggest conservation area in eSwatini, covers 220km². Ndlovu rest camp, where we arrive just before lunchtime, is its heartbeat.

The park is divided into three parts. Endangered species like lions and elephants are kept in one remote section, rhinos in another, and less rare game in the third. The latter section is the only part where you can drive around in your own vehicle or hike with a guide.

Maxwell Dlamini is the man who will lead us through this landscape of grassland and knob-thorn trees on foot. Some impala watch us from a ridge and scatter when we stop next to a tall anthill. Zebras graze further on; they're less bothered by our presence. A curious giraffe pops his head out of a tamboti tree.

"It's not an anthill," says Maxwell. "The correct term is termite mound."

He's right: The termites that build these impressive mud structures aren't related to ants at all.

"Notice how the top leans to a side? It always leans to the north. Now you can find your way in the bush," he says.

I glance down at my smartwatch compass: Maxwell (and the termites) are spot on!

Later, also with Maxwell, we take a drive through the lion and elephant section in a game-viewing vehicle. The Lebombo Mountains rise to the east. Two big lions walk down the jeep track in front of the vehicle.

"They're brothers," Maxwell says. "They don't seem hungry. You're not prey – as long as you stay in the vehicle."

These are the only lions in eSwatini. Maxwell explains how they're kept separate to limit human interaction.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Phophonyane Falls Ecolodge offers various accommodation options. On a guided walk in Hlane, experienced guide Maxwell Dlamini will share the secrets of the veld with you. This road takes you through Mlawula Nature Reserve to Magadzavane Lodge, where you can enjoy sundowners next to the pool. Curious giraffes in Hlane.

Earlier, we saw a herd of white rhino at Ndlovu's waterhole – gigantic animals with their horns in place. Nick asks the uncomfortable question: Have any of Hlane's rhino been poached?

"The last rhino poaching incident here was a long time ago. The park and everything inside it belong to the king," he says, as if that answers the question.

You don't have to like King Mswati III, but no one seems to poach his rhino!

DAY 3

Magadzavane to Mhlumeni

I'm on the deck of my rondavel at Magadzavane Lodge in Mlawula Nature Reserve at sunrise. We arrived late last night. The Lebombo escarpment falls away at my feet. It's already muggy and the soft *doo-doo-doo* of a Burchell's coucal predicts rain.

Before we tackle the border post and a possible thunderstorm, we drop in at Mhlumeni Bush Camp, a community project about ten minutes' drive from Magadzavane. Nomsa Mabila, technical officer of the Eco Lubombo Programme, says that the roughly 5 000 people who live in the surrounding area are all subsistence farmers. Their land is almost surrounded by Mlawula Nature Reserve and small-game poaching was an enormous problem in the past.

Mhlumeni, which has safari tents and campsites, creates jobs and profits are ploughed back into the area.

"The camp paid for the construction of a school," she says. "Educational projects have also decreased poaching."

According to Nomsa, a two-day 24 km transfrontier hiking trail is in the pipeline to connect Mhlumeni with the Goba Cliff camp in Mozambique. "Next year you can come back to hike it," she says.

Sounds good, but for now we want to head to the coast where two marine reserves in Mozambique link up with South Africa's iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

At Mhlumeni/Goba, the eSwatini exit stamps are in our passports within minutes, but the officials on the Mozambican side work at a slower pace. All our details are carefully recorded in a ledger, by hand.

Emile shrugs. "Any border crossing you can do in under an hour is a good one," he says.

The road descends towards the coast, passing through the busy towns of Goba and

Changalane before joining up with the long straight N200 to Maputo National Park.

I visited the park more than 10 years ago when it was still known as the Maputo Special Reserve. Since then, the Mozambican government and the Peace Parks Foundation have worked hard to upgrade the infrastructure, tourism facilities and conservation efforts.

These days it's an idyllic holiday destination, with white beaches, coral reefs, coastal dunes covered in tropical vegetation, forests, grasslands, wetlands and lakes.

One of the newest accommodation options in the park is Ponta Membene. It's recently been completed and we're the guinea pigs before the real guests arrive.

DAY 4

Ponta Membene

We arrived after sunset again last night. The drive from the park gate to the lodge took more than two hours. Not because the sandy roads were particularly bad, but because we stopped so often to take photos of the landscapes and wildlife. The park is known for photos of elephants wading through shallow lakes in the distance.

This morning, the day lies ahead like an unwritten book. My chalet is one of eight luxury two-bedroom units in a forest on the coastal dune. I can hear the sea and it's a minute's walk to the beach. I went for a run down there earlier, as the sun rose over the sea. I was alone with hundreds of ghost crabs that scurried up and down in time with the waves.

Sean Wookey, manager and concession holder at Membene, sounds like a proud parent when he tells us about the eco-friendly construction project after breakfast. Food scraps generate gas for use in the kitchen and a raised boardwalk connects the units with the communal living area to limit damage to the dunes. "If you look towards the coast from the beach, you won't even know we're here," he says.

Sean lends us diving masks and points out the best swimming spots near the resort. Aside from all the tropical fish, we also see two loggerhead turtles and a ray gliding by. We ride along the beach on e-bikes you can hire at the resort, then cool down in the swimming pool. Lunch is a fish braai with salad and a 2M beer.

Sean also shows us the new campsites. "The idea is for Membene to be more accessible and not only for people who can afford the five-star



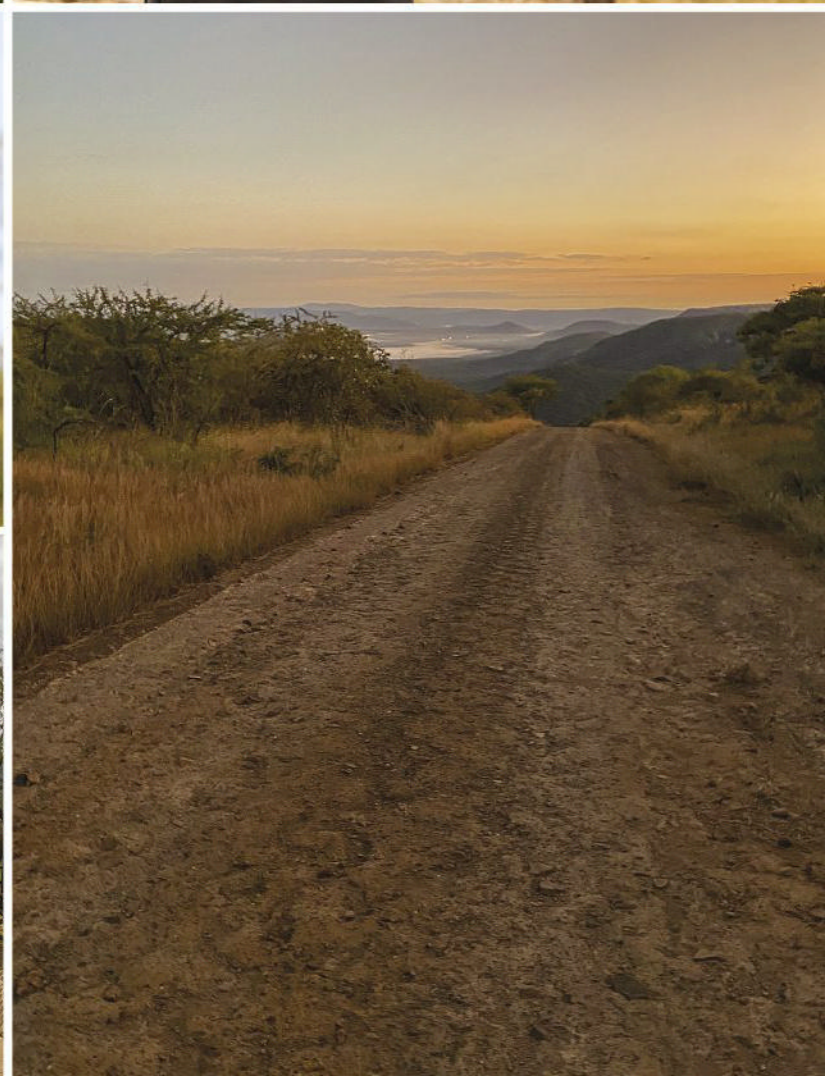
EMILE VAN DEN HEETKAMP



EMILE VAN DEN HEETKAMP



EMILE VAN DEN HEETKAMP



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Various inland lakes are hidden behind the coastal dunes in Maputo National Park. Emile van den Heetkamp (left) and Sean Wookey explore the beach at Ponta Membene on e-bikes before digging into a hearty breakfast at the lodge. Lucky Mthembeni (left), a Thonga skipper, offers boat tours on the Kosi Bay lakes. On the right is Nicholas Tucker of Boundless Southern Africa. Greater flamingos wade in the shallow waters of Kosi Bay. Ponta Membene has neat campsites like this one.

resorts in the park like Anvil Bay or Montebelo Milibangalala Bay,” he says.

I’m not the world’s most enthusiastic camper, but here – under Natal mahogany and marula trees, with a fancy bathroom – I can see myself enjoying my stay in a tent.

“The lodge isn’t even open yet, but it’s almost fully booked for Christmas, Easter and the South African long weekends,” says Sean. (The lodge opened on 14 February this year.)

DAY 5

Ponta Membene to Kosi Bay

Two days at Ponta Membene aren’t enough. I try to squeeze in as much as possible before breakfast. One last run and a swim while the sun colours the clouds.

During my previous visit to the park, it was a long and bumpy drive south to the Ponta do Ouro/Kosi Bay border post, on terrible sand roads. Now there’s a smooth tar road.

Be warned, though: You’ll wait much longer at this border than at the others on the route, especially during peak holiday times. In December and over Easter, there will be long queues on both sides of the border: tour buses packed with young party-goers on their way to Ponto do Ouro, scuba-divers, campers with off-road trailers, fishermen with ski boats... Even today, in low season, it takes a while to get everything done. We miss Emile’s deadline of one hour by a few minutes.

A few kilometres from the border, we turn left to Kosi Bay. Emile has made an appointment with Chris Mkhonto, a Thonga guide. His people have been fishing in Lake Nhlanga using traditional traps for 700 years – long before any borders existed. Nhlanga is the biggest of the four lakes connected by winding channels that empty into Kosi Mouth.

Chris is a big man with an even bigger smile. The rain clouds foretold by the coucal in eSwatini gather over the ocean. Chris has rolled his trousers up to his knees. “Come, put on your swimming costumes. I’ll show you how I’ve been fishing since I was 12 years old,” he says.

We wade through the shallows to the fish traps that have been passed from father to son for generations. Chris shows us how a carefully planned network of funnels guide fish deeper into the trap until they can’t escape.

The traps are made using wood from wild

date trees and have to be replaced every three months. Banana leaves are woven into the wood to make an impenetrable barrier to keep the fish inside. The long, sharpened stick in Chris’s hand is used to spear the fish (usually flathead mullet) and was carved from coast silver oak.

The stick alone is the product of hundreds of years of knowledge. Coast silver oak is one of the hardest wood types (used for knobkieries and roof supports) and doesn’t soften in water.

It’s easy to hurry through a landscape, but when you slow down and talk to its inhabitants, it truly comes alive. Thanks, Chris.

DAY 6

Kosi Bay to St Lucia

“I know nothing of the city, but I know Kosi Bay,” says Lucky Mthembeni as we push off from the jetty. Lucky is a Thonga skipper and he’s been offering boat tours here for the last four years.

Want to tick a mangrove kingfisher off your list? Lucky will show you one. Hippo? No problem. Greater flamingo? Give him five minutes. Tropical fish among the mangroves? Here’s your diving mask.

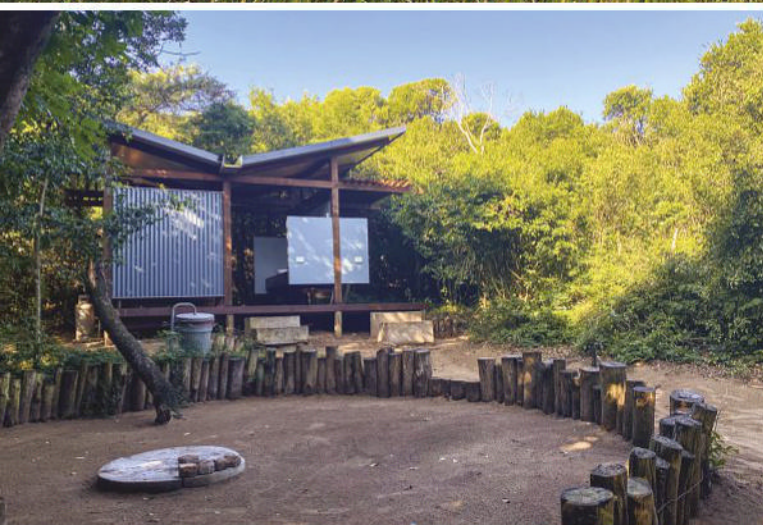
It’s almost lunchtime when we return from the water and it’s a long drive to St Lucia. But Emile has other plans.

“You can’t come to this part of the world without visiting Tembe Elephant Park,” he says. “Come on, what do you say?”

We’re easily convinced. Why arrive at your overnight stop early when you can get a look at this iconic park? Tembe borders Mozambique and is known for its enormous tuskers.

We’re barely in the park for 15 minutes when a big bull saunters down the sandy road towards us. Forest rises on both sides and “reverse” is not part of the bull’s vocabulary. *We’re* the ones who have to reverse, and reverse again, until the bull turns off into the bush. It’s so quiet in the cab of the bakkie you could hear a pin drop. Then we all erupt into giggles like toddlers, in pure relief.

It’s dark when we get to St Lucia Eco Lodge. The R22 was terrifying around sunset. We can’t decide what was worse: the trucks with no headlights that overtook us on blind rises, or that grumpy ellie in Tembe...



In Tembe Elephant Park, ellies have right of way – always.



DAY 7

St Lucia

St Lucia is a *lekker* holiday town. From here, we'll drive to Durban then split off in our own directions.

I'm not ready to say goodbye yet, so I go for a run through the streets of the town and along the boardwalk through the coastal forest to the beach. Crested guineafowl call as I pass them, and a biggish male vervet monkey refuses to budge while a female and her baby scurry off. I run around him.

A week wasn't enough to explore the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation Area, but one thing is certain: This is where you realise that artificial borders can't fence in our shared humanity, a love for nature and the desire to protect it.

DO I NEED A 4X4?

Yes, especially if you want to visit Maputo National Park. You can use a 4x2 with a high ground clearance at most of the other destinations – call beforehand to check the road conditions.

MORE INFO?

Visit boundless-southernafrica.org to learn more about the activities and accommodation options in other transfrontier parks and conservation areas.

St Lucia's boardwalk makes for a lovely amble – just don't stray into the coastal forest.



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Comfortable safari tents and traditional Swati thatched beehive huts hidden in the subtropical forest. Bring your hiking shoes, binos and bird guide – there are four hiking trails (90 minutes to three hours) where you can see waterfalls, red duiker and bushbuck.

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☎ 00 268 7677 6772
📧 biggameparks.org

MAGADZAVANE LODGE

This lodge has a swimming pool, lapa and a variety of self-catering chalets and B&B rondavels. The facilities need sprucing up, but the location is unbeatable in terms of the views and the proximity to the Mhlumeni/Goba border post to Mozambique.

Rates: From R900 per night for two people (unit sleeps four).

☎ 00 268 7806 8931; 📧 entc.org.sz
"Magadzavane Lodge" on Facebook

MHLUMENI BUSH CAMP

This community-run camp has five luxury safari tents (each sleeps two or four people) and 15 campsites

under turkey-berry and red ivorywood trees.

Rates: Camping R70 per person. Safari tent from R550 per night for two people.

☎ 00 268 7829 2617
📧 mhlumenicamp.net

PONTA MEMBENE

Luxury self-catering chalets on a coastal dune and in the forest behind the dune. Each of the six neat campsites has modern, private ablution facilities with power, a hot shower, and a braai. There's also a campsite for a bigger group or a family, where you can pitch up to eight tents – it has its own bush kitchen.

Rates: Camping from R700 per person. Self-catering chalet from R8 530 per night for two people. B&B options also available. Ask about SADC rates specials.

☎ 00 258 87 016 2730
📧 membene.co.mz

UTSHWAYELO KOSI MOUTH LODGE & CAMP

At this community camp in iSimangaliso Wetland Park, you can camp under water-berry trees or sleep in comfortable safari tents under white linen. Book a boat tour with Lucky Mthembeni or a visit to the fish traps with Chris Mkhonto – prices depend on the season and start at about R400 per person.

Rates: Camping from R260 per adult and R130 per child. Safari tent with its own kitchen from R1 550 per night for two people, R280 per child (sleeps four).

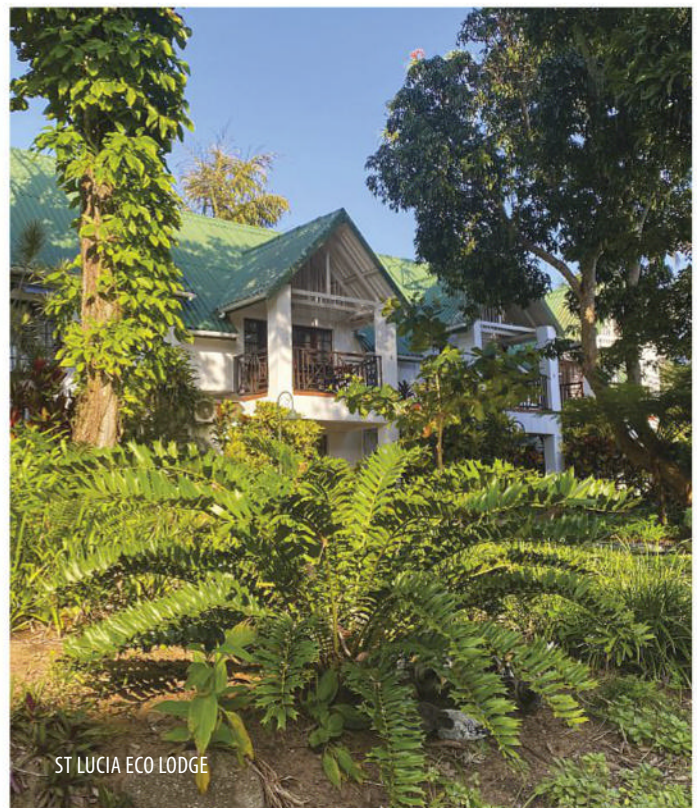
☎ 082 909 3113; 📧 kosibay.info

ST LUCIA ECO LODGE

The lodge has a scenic swimming pool and overlooks a coastal forest with the sea in the background. It has 29 luxury units (self-catering and B&B).

Rates: From R1 620 per night for two people with breakfast (units sleep two or four people).

☎ 063 622 7659
📧 stlucia-ecolodge.co.za





JUST THE TICKET

When was the last time you took a train in South Africa? Cape Town's Southern Line has recently been upgraded and it's back in (mostly) working order. Roll back the clock and experience False Bay the old-fashioned way – here's your guide to the stops.

BY NICK DALL







Muizenberg

The first attraction in Muizenberg is the station itself. It was designed by the architect John Collingwood Tully (one of Herbert Baker's pupils) and built in 1913, featuring a handsome clock tower. Back then, Muizenberg was South Africa's premier coastal resort and the train was the main way of getting there, hence the need to know the time... Before you make the (very short) walk to the beach, here are some other things to do.

FEAST OF FLAVOURS

Tucked away in a street on the mountain side of the line, the **Empire Café** is a local favourite. It's open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I've never been disappointed with a meal, but the chef has a particular way with eggs: His shakshuka is something special.

11 York Road

☎ 021 788 1250

CAFFEINE FIX

At Surfers Corner, **The Hans and Lloyd Coffee Co.** roasts its own beans and its blends are named after local surf spots. It's fully operational during load-shedding and makes a fantastic eggs Benedict. The soft-serve ice creams are gigantic!

13 York Road

☎ 021 035 1731

View of Muizenberg from Boyes Drive



HAVE A BALL

Yoffi Falafel makes some of the best falafel pitas in Cape Town – but I dare you to eat one without messing on your face. Go full Muizies and wash yours down with an African Rose Kombucha (surprisingly pleasant).
52 Beach Road
📞 084 364 8466

BOX CLEVER

Through a combination of council funding and public donations, the **Muizenberg Beach huts** have been lovingly restored to their primary-coloured glory. But they're not just for fun: You can rent a box for a day and beach it up like a bunch of Edwardian *arrivistes*. R150 gets you a lockable hut for eight hours (7.45 am – 4.45 pm).
📞 081 563 4300 (Tony)

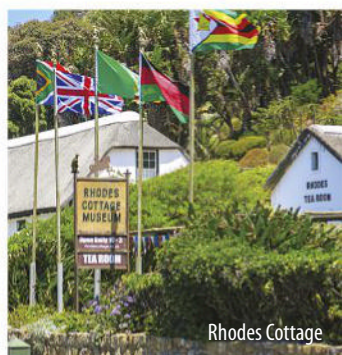
HANG 10

Muizenberg's gentle rolling waves make it the perfect spot to learn to surf. The strip is chock-a-block with surf schools. **Surf Emporium** (📞 surfemporium.co.za) is the most prominent, while **Lifestyle Surfshop** (📞 lifestylesurfshop.co.za) has a devoted following and a great selection of new and second-hand boards and suits. Check out @lifestylesurfshop on Instagram for daily surf reports.

HOT TIP: Muizenberg's waves are best in winter as the predominant wind comes from the north-west and blows offshore. If you want to learn in summer you might be better off trying Blouberg...

SLIDE INTO THE 80S

There are absolutely no frills at the **Muizenberg Water Slides**, but if the kids want some safe and affordable fun, it's still a very good bet. Open from late September to early May; R75 gets you a one-hour pass. Wetsuits are advisable outside of peak summer months.
20a Beach Road
📞 muizenbergslides.co.za



Rhodes Cottage



Yokohama House



Surfers Corner

BOTTOMS UP

The best spot in town for a *dop* is **The Striped Horse**. Right next to the station, in a charismatic old building, it's open from noon until late and can get very jolly on weekends when there's often live music. There's also a decent food menu.
12 York Road
📞 063 661 5713

WIND BACK THE CLOCK

Built in the 1600s, **Het Posthuys** is reputedly the second-oldest building in South Africa (after the Castle). During the 1795 Battle of Muizenberg, it took a direct hit to the stoep. These days it's a museum that's only open on Saturday mornings. Arrange beforehand.
182 Main Road
📞 083 726 4559 (Heather Hirschman, Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society)

TEA, DARLING?

Built in 1930 by Italian count Natale Labia and his mining-heiress wife Ida, **Casa Labia** is a beach house like no other. Forget Mr Price Home, all of the interior fittings were imported from Venice and the views are luxe, too. The high tea (R395 per head, sittings at 11 am and 3 pm) is the definition of decadence – right down to the live concert pianist.
192 Main Road
📞 casalabia.com



The Muizenberg to St James catwalk

PAPER OVER THE CRACKS

Yokohama House, on Main Road between Casa Labia and Rhodes Cottage, is built entirely out of a Japanese kind of papier-mâché called *washi*, using panels imported from Yokohama in 1906. It's privately owned but no one stopped me from (gently) knocking on the walls.
210 Main Road

THE RHODES TO HELL

Whatever your opinion of him, there's no denying that Cecil John Rhodes made an outsized impression on South Africa. The **Rhodes Cottage Museum** (open daily from 10 am to 3.30 pm) is informative. A morbid highlight is the bed overlooking the sea in which Rhodes breathed his last. There's also a tearoom in the hydrangea-filled garden.
246 Main Road
📞 rhodescottage.co.za



Empire Café



WHAT ABOUT DOGS?

From November to March, leashed dogs are only allowed on Muizenberg Beach before 9 am and after 6 pm. Free-running dogs are welcome on Clovelly (but not Fish Hoek) and Glencairn beaches – but dogs aren't allowed on the train.



Kalk Bay

Brimming with beaches, bric-a-brac, beer and ballgowns, the working fishing village of Kalk Bay is one of Cape Town's coolest 'hoods. Family destination by day; after dark it gets its groove on.

SUNRISE SWIM

Built in 1907, Dalebrook is one of Cape Town's oldest tidal pools – and one of the trendiest... Extremely popular at sunrise, you can also enjoy the panoramic views of False Bay at any time of the day. Or year: There's a crew of Wim Hof diehards who come for a spot of cold-water immersion, no matter the weather.

HOT TIP: If the weather's perfect and St James and Dalebrook are packed, take a 15-minute stroll to the hidden gem that is Woolley's Tidal Pool. It's on the bend as you leave Kalk Bay, direction Clovelly.

DUST OFF THE COBWEBS

Warm up after your sunrise swim by stumbling across Main Road (from Dalebrook) for coffee and a croissant at Chardonnay Deli. It opens at 7 am in summer and serves a range of breakfasts (try the bacon and banana flapjack stack), lunches and cakes.

20 Main Road

☎021 300 6011

A QUIET CORNER...

Slightly off the main drag, next to a lovely municipal park, **Bob's Bagel Café** serves up proper New York-style bagels (you can't go wrong with salmon and cream cheese) and they roast their own "Damn Fine Coffee". Eat inside or enjoy takeaways while the kids see-saw in the park.

6 Rouxville Road

☎083 280 0012

GET BARRELLED

When it comes to surfing, Kalk Bay Reef is everything Muizenberg is not: perfect tubes breaking onto a dry reef make this an expert-only spot. Unless you're Kelly Slater, you're probably best off observing the action from the comfort of the Brass Bell, with a beer in hand.

St James

Your next stop is St James, a sedate precursor to the bustle of Kalk Bay. Get there via a two-minute train ride or a pleasant 20-minute walk along the cliffside path known as the catwalk.

SPLISH, SPLASH, SPLOSH

The main reason people come to St James is to swim in the tidal pool. Surprisingly sheltered from the southeaster and featuring a nice sandy beach and some fascinating rock pools, this is a wonderful family swimming spot. It gets busy on weekends and public holidays, but there's usually enough space to go around.

LAZY LUNCH

Located on a sliver of land between the station and the sea, **Folk Café** has great views, chilled vibes and a breakfast, lunch and dinner menu for the whole family. The coffee and pizzas come highly recommended – and the takeaway gourmet ice lollies are a post-beach hit.

54 Main Road

☎folkcafe.co.za



CATCH OF THE DAY

You haven't been to Cape Town till you've eaten fish 'n chips at **Kalky's**. While most folks go with tried-and-trusted hake, there's usually other fresh fish on the menu, too. Snoek, hottentot and – if you're lucky – red roman are all far more interesting. Wash it all down with some *kuite* (snoek roe).

In the Kalk Bay harbour.

☎ 021 788 1726

For a fancier fish and chips option, **Lucky Fish & Chips** (there's also a branch at Surfers Corner in Muizenberg) does good hake, snoek and calamari – the oceanside dining area is special and you still pay takeaway prices if you eat in.

On the other side of the harbour parking lot to Kalky's.

☎ 021 788 7162

TEACH A MAN TO FISH

Deep-sea fishing doesn't have to cost a fin and a tail...

For only R550, you can secure a spot on a commercial Kalk Bay fishing boat. Of course, the comforts are few and you may have to report for duty as early as 3 am depending on where the fish are biting. Tackle and bait are provided and you get to keep what you catch. Bring your own food, water (lots), sun cream and warm clothing.

☎ 074 861 2667 (Fadil)

☎ 083 926 8912 (Bunny)

SHOP TILL YOU DROP

Kalk Bay has enough boho clothing boutiques, trendy art galleries and bric-a-brac shops to keep you busy for a week. You can follow your nose, but here are a few sniffers:

Kalk Bay Books is a cosy independent bookstore with a great selection of new and used books, and really knowledgeable staff. 62 Main Road

Memory Lane "shopping mall" has some quirky shops and galleries wedged into one of the narrowest alleys in the village. The staircase at the back leads to a weird place called



Whatnot & China Town, which is crammed to the rafters with vintage porcelain and other pretty things you'll never need. Between Lever Road and Main Road.

Quagga Rare Books is more museum than bookshop and always worth checking out – the old maps are special. 84 Main Road

Oh So Boho and **Casa Boho**: If you're after something frilly or wafty to wear or to throw over a couch or table, pop in here. 96 and 108 Main Road

EAT TILL YOU POP

Kalk Bay probably has the highest concentration of restaurants in Africa and they're all pretty decent. Here are a few of our faves.

Ohana: low-key with good views and tasty breakfasts and lunches. 23 Main Road

Brass Bell: iconic pub surrounded by ocean on three sides. Cold beers, good pizzas. Through the subway at the station.

Waffle & Co: amazing selection of waffles with funny names (the Paul Kruger is much sweeter than its namesake!) and a deck overlooking the harbour. 124 Main Road

Cape to Cuba: best mojitos in town and an extensive and eclectic food menu. The beach bar is good for a night-time boogie. 165 Main Road

Olympia Café and Bakery: local favourite with fab croissants and some of the best mussels in Cape Town. 134 Main Road



Nick with his catch



Fishing boats in Kalk Bay



Kalky's



Fish Hoek

Only a five-minute train ride from Kalk Bay, scruffy Fish Hoek seems half a world away. While Main Road isn't much to write home about, it also holds a few hidden treasures – and the beach is one of Cape Town's most family-friendly.

WASH AWAY THE BLUES

Don't let the 1980s *vakansieoord* vibe deceive you: Fish Hoek Beach is one of the best in Cape Town, especially if you catch it on a windless day. Cleaner and less crowded than Muizenberg, and significantly warmer than places like Clifton and Llandudno, the "shark exclusion barrier" means you don't even have to worry about the men in grey suits.

LONDON. PARIS. FISH HOEK.

One of the nicest things about Fish Hoek is the catwalk (Jager's Walk), a concrete footpath that follows the rocky shoreline from the southern end of the swimming beach to Sunny Cove Station. Look out for the steps leading down to a small but beautiful natural swimming hole called Skellies that's protected by kelp beds. (If the train is running to Simon's Town, you can jump on at Sunny Cove, or you can catch it in the other direction and go back to your car in Muizenberg. See "Tickets, please" at the end.)

LINE YOUR STOMACH

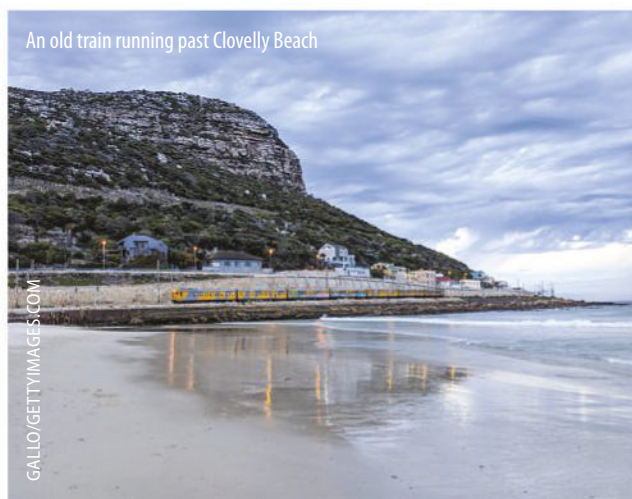
Kalky's may be iconic, but **Fish Hoek Fisheries** is a more typical Cape Town fish and chips shop. It's owned and run by the same family who moved here from the Portuguese island of Madeira in the 1950s. (Avelino de Araujo has been at the helm for the past three decades.) It's extremely popular on Friday evenings when all the locals pop in on their way home from work.

43 Main Road

☎ 021 782 2314



Jager's Walk



An old train running past Clovelly Beach



The Bookworm

BETWEEN THE PAGES

The Bookworm, tucked away on a quiet corner but still within walking distance from the beach, is one of the best second-hand bookshops in Cape Town. From light holiday reads and an extensive selection of music biographies to collectable Africana, there's something for everyone.

20 1st Avenue

☎ 079 309 8435

UPPER CRUST

It doesn't look like much from the road, but **C'Est La Vie** bakes some of the best bread you'll ever taste. Their opening hours are curious (Wednesday to Sunday from 8 am to noon), but their sandwiches and pain au chocolat are worth rearranging your schedule for.

2A Recreation Road

☎ 083 676 7430



Fish Hoek Fisheries is a weekend favourite with locals



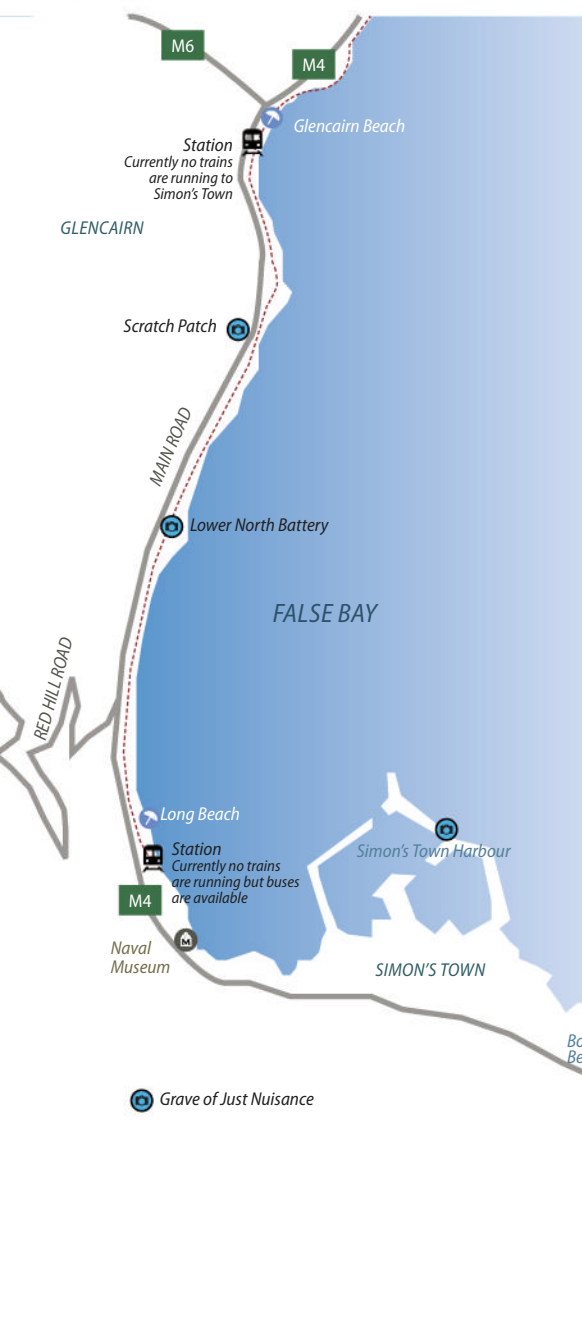
Paddlers heading out from the harbour

FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK



View of Simon's Town from Scala Drive

FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK



FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK

Simon's Town

There's more to Simon's Town than sailors, penguins and a famous dog. There's also lots on offer for thrill-seekers, fashionistas and foodies.

At the time of going to print the train was only running as far as Fish Hoek. Check before you set out because there were plans to re-open the line to Simon's Town.

TREASURE HUNT

It goes without saying that the kids will love scrabbling on their hands and knees for semi-precious gems, but what's surprising is how addictive the **Scratch Patch** is for adults... It's slightly closer (20-minute walk) to Glencairn Station than Simon's Town Station, neither of which were operational at the time of writing.

Dido Valley Road

021 786 2020

scratchpatch.co.za

TODDLE WADDLE

No visit to Simon's Town is complete without checking in on its most famous residents. The first pair of



Statue of Just Nuisance in the town square

Able Seaman Just Nuisance

Way back in 1939, a mischievous Great Dane who rode the trains in Cape Town became the first dog to be enlisted as an official member of the Royal Navy.

In the beginning he was considered “just a nuisance” and the ticket collectors threatened to put him down if his behaviour continued. So, the sailors he’d befriended came up with a solution: According to wartime regulations, enlisting him in the navy would entitle him to a free pass. Their decision made him one of the most famous dogs in the world and he remains a major presence in Simon’s Town, with a large museum display (4 Court Road; 021 786 3046) and a life-size statue in the main square.

You can also hike via the Signal School Steps starting in Barnard Road to his grave which, fittingly, enjoys views of False Bay, Cape Point and the great blue yonder. To drive there, take the Red Hill Road and turn left at the top.

penguins arrived at **Boulders** in 1983 and the colony now has more than 2000 birds. If you visit in summer you can even swim in the calm, clear water. Entrance costs R45 per adult, R25 for kids and is free with a Wild card.

3 Kleintuin Road (Take note: It’s about 3 km from the train station to Boulders.)

021 786 2329

sanparks.org

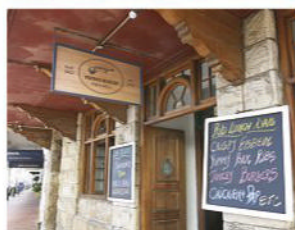


THE SEAL DEAL

Snorkelling with seals is one of the coolest things I’ve ever done. False Bay’s friendliest mammals swim right up to you (one even brushed against my chest) and the kelpy location means you don’t have to worry about sharks. As an added bonus, the boat ride to the dive spot offers unrivalled penguin-spotting opportunities. It costs R1 200 per person for half a day and you just need to bring your swimming costume and towel – all the other gear is provided.

Cape Radd; 117 St George’s Street

caperadd.com



IN OTHER WORDS

MIKE & BARBIE PERKS, Gqeberha

Barbie: “We’re staying with friends in Kalk Bay. We walked along the catwalk all the way to Muizenberg. We didn’t feel like walking back so we’re catching the train – we paid R9 for two pensioners’ tickets!”

“We love all the little shops in Kalk Bay – everything is on foot so Mike can go his way and I can go mine. We also love the harbour, with the seals and the seagulls and the fishermen... It’s a great place to spend an hour just watching the world go by.”



PRISCILLA OBIORAH, Diep River (originally from Nigeria)

“I run my own business (She supplies local shops with popcorn. – Ed.) so my schedule allows me to spend one morning a week volunteering at the Rhodes Cottage Museum. I catch the train here and back and I always spend an hour or two at the beach afterwards. If St James is too busy, I walk along the coast to Danger Beach. It’s beautiful, but beware of the rip tide it gets its name from...”



ALFRED MAONEKE, owner of Afreek Leather Designers & Crafters

“The Piping Bosun has cold beers and great burgers and is run by good people. Think Coffee has the best coffee in town. And Salty Sea Dog is the place to go for fish and chips or calamari. Afterwards you can hike up to Just Nuisance’s grave: The trail starts at the top of Barnard Street. There are more than 300 steps but the views from the top make it all worthwhile.”

Alfred sells an array of handcrafted leather bags, aprons belts and more. Find his shop and workshop at 86 St George’s Street, Simon’s Town.



TICKETS, PLEASE

The first train rolled into Muizenberg in 1882. An extension to Kalk Bay was added the following year, and the line to Simon’s Town was completed in 1890.

At the time of going to print, trains only went as far as Fish Hoek, although there are hopes that the Simon’s Town line will be up and running soon.

Trains run once an hour from early Monday morning to lunchtime on Saturday. There are no trains on Saturday afternoons or on Sundays. (My family was caught out one Saturday and we had to Uber back to our car.)

Schedule: cttrains.co.za

How much? A return ticket from Cape Town to Fish Hoek will set you back a mere R18. There are discounts for children, pensioners and for travelling at off-peak hours.

Blue or yellow? The new blue-and-grey trains are much nicer than the old yellow-and-grey ones. Luckily, almost all the trains on this line are new. There’s also been a real safety drive in recent years, so you can relax and enjoy the ride.

Wheels and woofs? You can’t bring dogs (apart from guide dogs) or bicycles on the train.



Under the radar

Several radar stations were built along the South African coastline during World War II – remote structures in rugged terrain that were mostly operated by women. Photojournalist **Jac Kritzinger** takes a look at this nearly-forgotten fragment of history.



The view from the old radar station on Blaauwberg Hill. Robben Island is on the left.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Wim Myburgh, author of *Women at War*. The ruins of the Hangklip radar station, built in 1941, are almost insignificant against the slope of the mountain. The view south from Hangklip, with the Hangklip Hotel – used as army barracks in 1941 – on this side of the tar road.

“South Africa was the only country in the Commonwealth that trained women as soldiers during World War II,” says

Wim Myburgh. “And not in one, but in two specialist fields.”

We’re chatting in a coffee shop in Pringle Bay. Wim takes a sip of water and looks up at Hangklip mountain. “Now it’s a chapter of our history that threatens to disappear.”

Wim is a retired psychologist and amateur historian. He wrote a book called *Women at War* to tell the tale of these women soldiers. It was no easy task. The Union Defence Force (UDF) archives from the 1940s didn’t offer much. And all the activities that the women participated in during the war were classified as top secret. Except for a few photographs, documents and anecdotes remembered by surviving family members, there wasn’t a lot of information available.

“You need context to understand the whole story,” Wim says.

He explains how the closure of the Suez Canal in 1940 caused increased shipping traffic around the Cape. Our waters crawled with friendly and enemy seacraft, including German submarines that moved through the depths as quiet as sharks.

Monitoring the coastline using radar technology became a priority for the UDF, but most male soldiers had already been called to the North African front. General Jan Smuts made a genius but risky move: He recruited women from civil society to fill these roles. And so the Artillery Specialists of the Women Auxiliary Army Service (AS WAAS) was established in 1941, which branched out a year later to become the Special Signal Services (SSS).

“It was a different time and there were doubts about whether the *nooientjies* were up for the task,” Wim says.

Many UDF higher-ups questioned the women’s ability to master the maths required. Recruits for the SSS were often called “*soldate sonder sense*” (soldiers without sense) by officers. But it soon became clear that these women – who had to be between 19 and 32 years old to join – knew exactly what they were doing.

“Their determination was incredible. To be stationed in Cape Town or in Simon’s Town

was one thing, but some of them served in faraway mountainous regions cut off from society... Man, it had to be tough. Many of them were still children and some lied about their age to sign up. We owe them a lot.”

I tell Wim about my plan to visit some of the bases and radar stations to get a feel for what the women went through. By 1945, there were 50 stations along the South African coast, of which 17 were in the present-day Western Cape. I’m especially interested in the top-secret stations in the most remote places. Sounds like something from an old James Bond film.

Wim looks at me wryly. “Good luck. There aren’t many left. It will be quite a search.”

Hangklip’s chastity fence

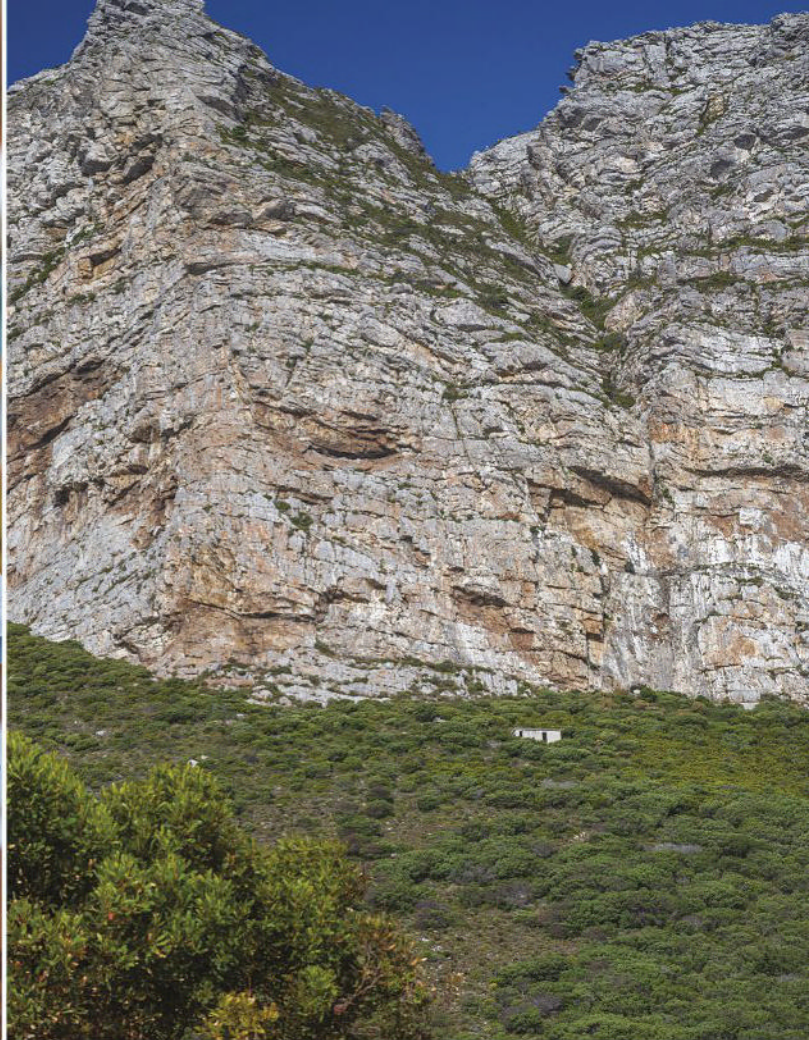
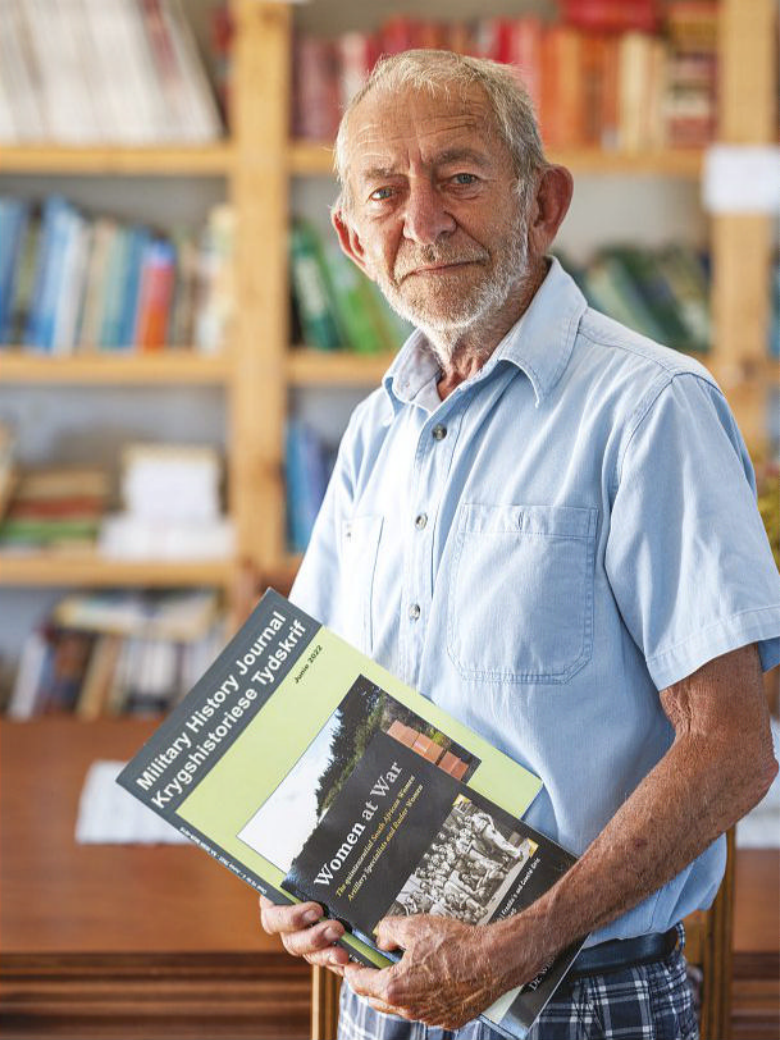
With the theme song to *Goldfinger* in my head, I stop outside the Hangklip Hotel near Pringle Bay. *Goldfinger* soon goes quiet because the place looks tired and deserted. The mountain is so close that you have to lean back to see the grey building that seems to cling to the slope at a dizzying height.

This particular radar station was built in 1941 and what’s now the hotel was the barracks for the soldiers. (A year later, a more modern station, then known as Silversands and now a self-catering unit called Hangklip House, was built nearby.)

Twenty women from the SSS served here alongside male soldiers, mainly technicians and engineers. According to Wim, the women were better equipped to do the detailed work of reading and recording the radio waves. With the equipment of the day, it required patience and finesse to “see” ships up to 200 km out at sea.

I walk around the back of the hotel to look for the path up to the station. The separate rows of barracks, now rooms and chalets for guests, stand stern in the morning sun. I smile when I think of the so-called chastity fence put up here to keep the soldiers out of trouble.

I set off along the remnants of a path going up the mountain, but I give up around the halfway mark – the overgrown fynbos is hip-high. I sit down on a rock to look at the world around me. Where there are now plots of land and service roads around the hotel, there used to be nothing. What did it feel like to spend your youth in this desolate wilderness with the roar of the southeaster in your ears?



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Ty Middleton, co-owner of Hangklip Hotel. Gavin Lundie holds a picture of his late mother, Betty Booker, taken in 1943. Betty was a radar operator. When you visit Stony Point near Betty's Bay to see the penguins, you'd never guess there once was a radar station here.

It's worth remembering that all the women also took a vow of secrecy. Not even their family or other UDF members outside the SSS knew where they were stationed.

Deep in thought, I head back to the hotel. After two beers in the bar, once used as the dining and recreation hall by the soldiers, I perk up a bit. It's an eccentric establishment, dimly lit, with colourful art on the walls. For the locals, it's a laid-back place where they can throw a big party. During the war, the soldiers also popped a cork in here from time to time.

In *Women at War*, Wim writes how there were sometimes dances held in nearby Sandown Bay (now Kleinmond) and the troops were transported there and back in an army truck in the dark. They had to be back by midnight, which gave the unlucky souls who had the 3 am shift a few hours to sleep.

Outside Prefunked, a clothing thrift store on the premises, I run into Ty Middleton. He's the co-owner of the hotel and preparing for a bachelor party tonight. As he bustles around, I'm surprised to hear how much he knows about the history and how pleased he is that someone wants to learn more.

Ty has loved the hotel since childhood and took over in 2022. "This place, this heritage, it's not something that can belong to any one person," he says. "We can only take care of it as best we can for the people who come after us."

Are they planning any changes for the old radar station?

"Ag, we maintain the infrastructure, but it's a heritage building so we can't do much." He looks at my scratched and bleeding shins and then glances at the mountain over my shoulder.

"But maybe it's time we clear up the path to the radar station again..."

The late Betty Booker was an SSS member who worked at the radar station in Betty's Bay, east of Hangklip, in 1943. She's also mentioned in *Women at War*. With luck, I track down her youngest son Gavin Lundie around the corner in Rooi-Els. He looks slightly embarrassed when we sit down to talk in a room overlooking the ocean.

"I wish I could tell you more about my mother's time in the army, but we know very little," he says.

Unlike the radar station at Hangklip, which focussed on seacraft only, the antennas at Betty's Bay pointed skyward. Gavin has a memory of being a child and hearing other

adults talking about how his mom monitored fighter aircraft during the war. "But that's all," he says. "We never knew when or where. And when you're young, you don't pay attention to these things. I never heard her say a word about it herself."

Maybe something did sink in because Gavin had a career as an aircraft designer in Kempton Park. He and his wife Leslie moved to Rooi-Els to retire six years ago, and when Leslie started to research her own family tree, she found photos of Gavin's mother in uniform.

"The badge on her beret caught my attention because I'd never seen it before," says Leslie. "It was the SSS emblem."

They later crossed paths with Wim and figured out, after so many years, that his mom had been stationed in Betty's Bay. Gavin rubs his eyes. "We were amazed. What are the chances that she did her service here, only a few kilometres from our new home? And her name was Betty!"

There's nothing left of the Betty's Bay radar station – it once stood at Stony Point, where there's now a penguin colony. (Ironically, there's a cellphone tower on the rocks.)

The old soldiers' barracks nearby, however, have been preserved in a special way... It's all thanks to JC and Elseline Hanekom who bought the historical premises in 2016 and restored it.

"I'm a big fan of World War II," says JC when we meet.

He turned the barracks into Brigadoon Village, which is a luxury retirement "resort" for people suffering from dementia. It's divided into two sections: The residents' self-catering apartments are to the east, and the old barracks, built in 1943, make up the western wing. These old wooden buildings – two rows of barracks, an officer's house where the Hanekoms live, and a dining hall now used for church services – still look new.

"I don't know why they used wood next to the ocean," JC says. "Maybe time was a factor? We kept and restored the original Oregon pine."

The Hanekoms took the concept further. Some of the old barracks have been turned into "reminiscence rooms", with furniture and knick-knacks from the past. They're used as a form of therapy to take residents back to their childhood in the hope that the journey through time will improve their memory and clarity.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: At Brigadoon Village, household items from the past are displayed in reminiscence rooms. Elseline and JC Hanekom are the owners of Brigadoon Village – they live in an old officer's house, which used to be part of Betty's Bay's radar station. A commemorative plaque hangs next to the metal door of the artillery lookout post on Blaauwberg Hill. Blaauwberg radar station's former dining hall has been converted into self-catering accommodation with views of Melkbosstrand. Roy Fuller-Gee is chairperson of the Friends of Blaauwberg Conservation Area. From the lookout point on the hill, you can see the Atlantic Ocean, with Table Mountain on the left and Robben Island on the right.

I'm overcome with emotion and say goodbye in a rush.

In the parking area at Stony Point, I watch a parade of penguins marching to the water. I can't help but wonder: Did the 21-year-old Betty Booker want to forget her time here? Or did she choose silence as a way to remember it in her own way? We'll never know.

I turn the bakkie towards Cape Town.

Women's intuition

My next stop is Blaauwberg Nature Reserve, about 10km south of Melkbosstrand. This 14km² coastal conservation area has important historical significance – it's where the Battle of Blaauwberg took place in 1806, and before that, it's where Khoi-Khoi Strandlopers lived for centuries.

The Blue Hill artillery and radar base was constructed among the fynbos on Blaauwberg Hill in 1942. You can drive to the top and the buildings are in surprisingly good condition. The steel door to the lookout bunker still has its original lock. In the radar room, a few steps below, you can see the metal frame to which antennas were mounted.

"We've tried to bring this heritage to more people's attention over the last few years," says Roy Fuller-Gee as we take in the view from the hill. The Atlantic Ocean is royal blue, with Table Mountain to the left and Robben Island so close it feels like I can reach out and touch it. With a telescope you'd probably be able to see the Old Mutual building in Cape Town, where the central control room of the SSS – mostly under the command of male officers – was hidden in the cellar. Back then, the accuracy of radar largely depended on the skill of the operators to interpret the radio-wave echoes – a whale or a large school of fish could easily be mistaken for a submarine. In the cellar control room, readings were compared to those from other stations to verify them.

Roy is the chairperson of the Friends of Blaauwberg Conservation Area and has plans to fit both buildings with replica army equipment from the 1940s. The dining hall behind us, now called Montispectus, has already been converted into a self-catering house.

Like at Hangklip, male technicians served here alongside the SSS women. No one is sure who manned (wo-manned?) the artillery lookout post. Roy says most women's bases

were guarded by the Native Military Corps (NMC) exclusively. Black soldiers weren't allowed to carry firearms and only had traditional weapons.

"It must have been difficult to listen to stories of German submarines and torpedoes all day and then stand guard with a shield and assegai at night," he says.

Roy's passion for this piece of history was sparked in 2003 when he came to this hill with Geoff Mangin, a former information co-ordinator for the SSS, and Wenda Melck, who served as a radar operator here in 1945 when she was 20 years old. It was the first time she'd been back in close to 60 years. Roy says she stood and stared out over the bay and he could see that she was lost in the past.

"It was like that moment in *Titanic* when the old lady remembers," Roy says. "I asked her: 'Wenda, what's wrong?' She told me that one day she noticed radar echoes from a strange ship in the open ocean. She knew immediately that something was wrong – it shouldn't have been there. She sent her radar reading to Cape Town, but no one else had picked it up. She didn't give up and kept following the ship and signalling Cape Town until the control room told her there was either something wrong with *her* or with her equipment."

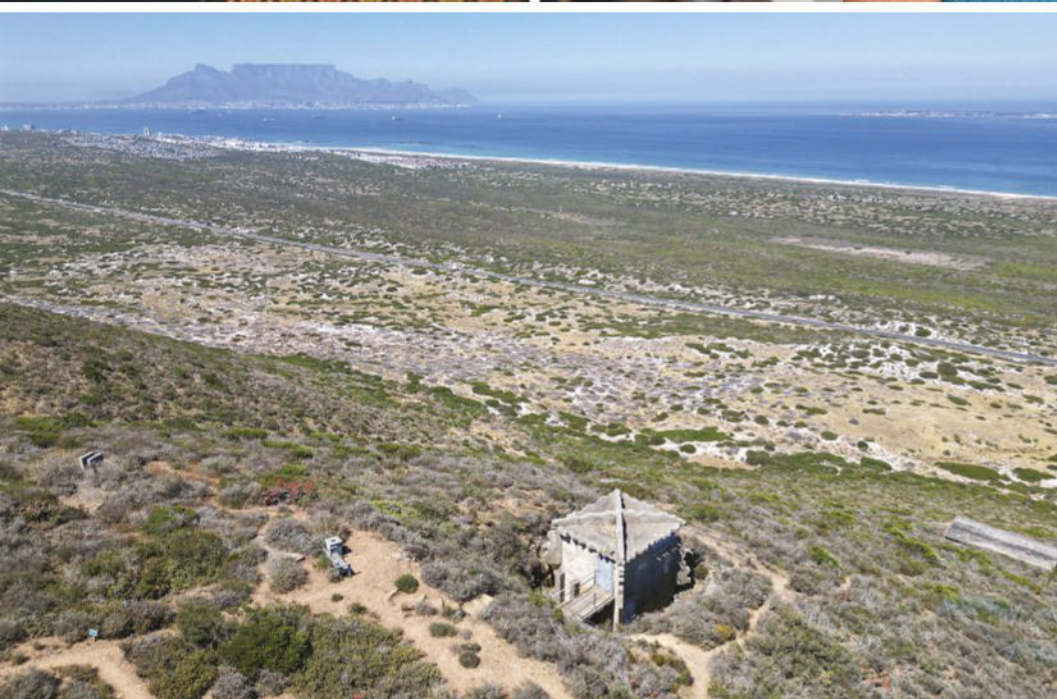
Her readings were later confirmed with visuals: It was the *Arundel Castle*, an Allied troopship that had strayed far off course.

"She looked me in the eye and said she knew she was right," Roy says.

Wenda Melck passed away soon after.

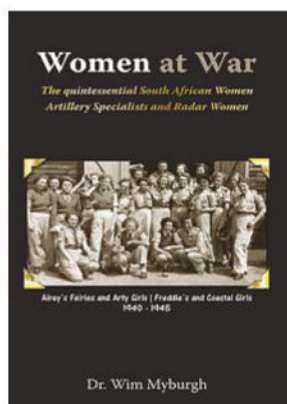
As a last hurrah, I drive south to Cape Point to see what I can find. I don't have a contact at Table Mountain National Park, but I'm armed with a print-out of an article by Professor Lynn Harris called *The Special Signal Services (SSS) Women and Native Military Corps: Operators and Guards at the WWII Secret Radar Stations of the Western Cape, South Africa* (📖 academia.edu). Lynn's mother-in-law, Doreen Russel, served as a radar operator at one of the stations in this area.

The parking area below the steps to the old lighthouse is packed with foreign tourists. In the gale-force wind, I finally find two rangers. I pull out the article and ask whether they can show me where to find the ruins in the park. They ponder, debate and point in all directions, but in the end they shrug their



HISTORY

Clockwise from right: Between the old Cape Point Lighthouse and the new one, the ruins of the Diaz radar station lie forgotten among the fynbos. The central control room in Cape Town, where all readings were sent. It's obvious why Diaz base was established at this location at Cape Point: the endless views of the Atlantic and False Bay. Sergeant Doreen Russel served at various radar station around Cape Point in the early 1940s.



Women at War by Wim Myburgh is available to purchase (R265) from Lemon & Lime Deli and Menucha – both in Pringle Bay. You can also order a copy directly from the author: doreen@compueasy.net (Wim's wife Doreen handles all orders.)

shoulders and I return the article to my backpack.

It's getting late; I'll have to sniff it out myself. I decide the best call will be the ridgeline near the new lighthouse – where Cape Point jags into the water – since it gives a strategic view over both sides of the peninsula: False Bay to the east and the wide blue Atlantic to the west.

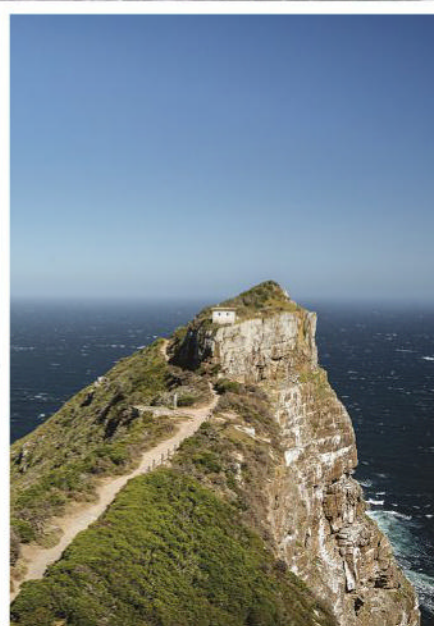
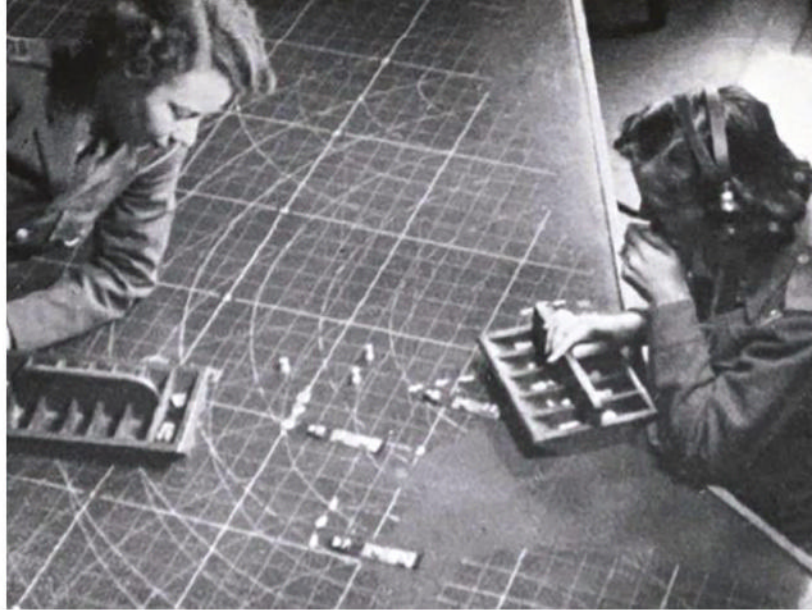
After about 20 minutes on the Lighthouse Keeper's hiking trail, I find ruins next to the deserted path with a weathered inscription that reads: 96 BW C0 SAEC 1942. No clue what that means, but the date is correct. I climb the hill behind the building and the cliffs of Diaz Beach unfold to one side, with False Bay stretched out to Hangklip on the other side. A lonely building clings to the koppie: By now I can recognise a lookout post when I see one. I carefully shuffle up the

eroded path to the top – it feels like the wind wants to tear the clothes off my body. Did sergeant Doreen Russel, a girl who grew up in the mountains of Lesotho, also struggle up this hill day after day?

A hundred metres further, a foundation and fallen bricks appear in the fynbos. Could *this* have been a radar station?

Let that remain a secret, too, I think as the sun dips low to the west. I wander among the cement blocks to take photos. Higher up, I can make out the old lighthouse where German, Japanese, American and French tourists vie for selfie space.

I unzip my backpack to put away my camera. In an instant, the wind snatches the article and sends it flying away over the sea. For a moment the pages flash white against the cliffs, then they're gone as if they never existed at all.



STAY HERE

HANGKLIP HOTEL

The hotel has seen better days. It's more geared towards a 21st birthday party than a romantic wedding anniversary. It's about 4 km south of Pringle Bay. Double room from R720 per night.

📍 thehangkliphotel.com

HANGKLIP HOUSE

The former Silversands radar station is now a self-catering house with great views of False Bay. The house sleeps eight people in four rooms and there's also an apartment that sleeps

three. There's a sheltered braai and a plunge pool. The turn-off to the house is about 1 km from Hangklip Hotel. From R4 300 per night for eight people.

📍 lekkeslaap.co.za

BLAAUWBERG NATURE RESERVE

There are great views of the Atlantic Ocean from this reserve north of Blouberg in Cape Town. You can only visit the radar station on a guided tour – visit the Friends of Blaauwberg Conservation Area website (📍 bca.org.za) or their Facebook page for upcoming dates.

Guests staying in the

Montispectus self-catering house (sleeps four) in the reserve can also explore the buildings. There are several hiking trails in the reserve.

Cost: Day visitors R20 per person and R28 per vehicle. Rates for Montispectus from R621 for two people per night, plus R148 per extra person.

📍 capetown.gov.za

📍 reservations.blaauwberg@capetown.gov.za

What else? Dave Honour offers historical tours in the reserve:

📞 082 906 4875

📍 honourguidedtours.co.za

(At the time of going to print, Dave was on a long break in England.)

CAPE POINT, TABLE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

There are several hiking trails in the Cape of Good Hope section of the national park. The ruins of the old radar station are on the Lighthouse Keeper's Trail, which runs between the old and new lighthouses. The trailhead is behind the upper cableway station.

Cost: Day visitors R100 per adult; R50 per child; free with a Wild card.

📞 021 780 9100;

📍 capepoint.co.za; 📍 sanparks.org



TAKE YOUR PIC

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WINNING PHOTO

> JURIE MAREE

Sony A7 IV
Laowa 90 mm CA Dreamer
macro lens

JURIE WRITES: I took this photo at my house in Centurion. The moth is a male from the *Diaphone* family (it's a pale cherry spot moth) and the background is a propped-up plank that I painted green. (I make these myself – I have different colours for different situations.)

I used a Godox AD 100 Pro camera flash for extra light – it was mounted on a tripod to the left of the moth and connects wirelessly to my camera. I fire the flash through a big white umbrella to dampen and diffuse the light.

The moth stayed put the whole

time I was getting the lighting, background and camera ready, which is a miracle in itself! I used an "ultra-macro" lens which offers even more magnification than the 1:1 magnification of a standard macro lens.

I was busy for hours. This is probably the most photographed moth in South Africa!

TOAST SAYS: Thanks for this masterclass in macro photography, Jurie. Now I also know how it works! This beautiful shot is the result of Jurie's skill with his camera and especially the extra lighting sources he used. Getting the lighting right takes time and Jurie certainly put in the hours. You need to be a perfectionist to take a

photo like this. It's not a matter of point and shoot.

This moth is now an artwork. It makes me think of that expensive scatter cushion you bought on a trip to Istanbul that now lives on the riempiesbank in the living room that no one is allowed to sit on.

That's how pretty Jurie's photo is and why he's the winner this time.





**▲ DUSTIN
VAN HELSDINGEN**

Nikon D500
Nikkor 300 mm lens

DUSTIN WRITES: In December 2023, I visited the Kruger Park with my family. One day around lunchtime at Crocodile Bridge, we strolled along the path inside the perimeter fence of the camp.

I noticed something strange on one of the fencepoles. On closer inspection, I saw that it was two bushbabies that seemed to be trying to escape the heat – they were hanging limply from the open end of

one pole. They normally sleep inside the poles during the day but it was obviously getting too hot in there.

We went for a game drive that afternoon. Afterwards, I went back to the same spot and this time the bushbabies were more active – and there were *three* of them!

Taking a good photo was challenging because it was already quite dark. I finally managed to get a result with these settings: shutter speed 1/10 second; aperture f2.8 and ISO 2000. The slow shutter speed unfortunately had an impact on the sharpness of the photo, but I was satisfied with the outcome.

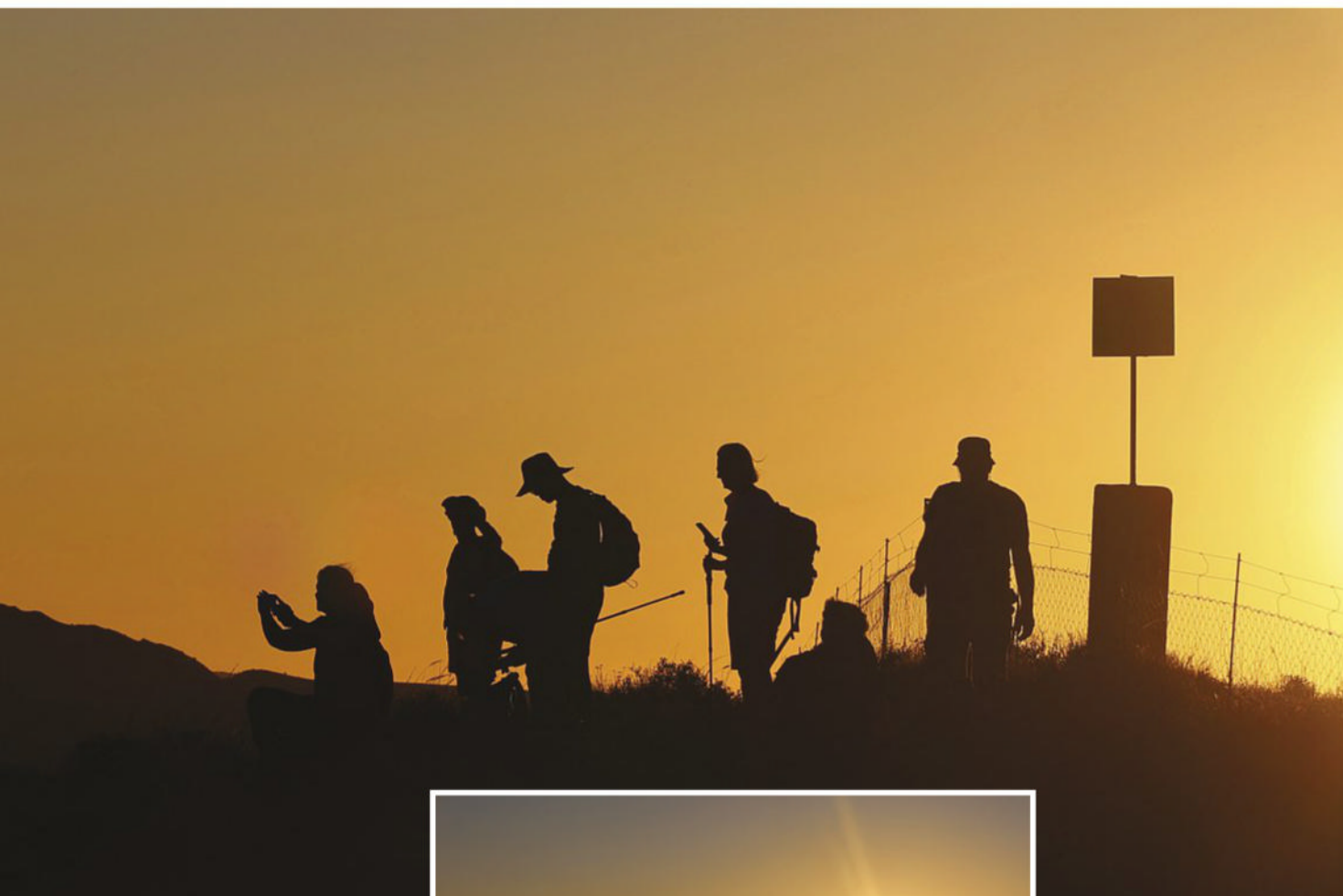
TOAST SAYS: What's cuter than a bushbaby? Correct: three of them! The way they're arranged in Dustin's photo reminds me of a bouquet of flowers – the big ears and eyes are like petals.

Using a very wide aperture (f2.8), Dustin managed to blur the background completely. The green backdrop makes the otherwise drab-coloured critters stand out like heroes on an action movie poster. But when your depth of field is so shallow, you also run into trouble when it comes to choosing where to focus, especially if you have more than one subject.

Dustin focused on the bushbaby on the right – the closest one. The one on the left is also close enough to be mostly sharp (it's a teeny bit out) and the bigger one is completely out. The slow shutter speed (1/10 second) means that even the slightest movement caused motion blur – this is most obvious with the bushbaby at the back.

But all of that is irrelevant, because Dustin's photo still packs enough of a punch. Besides the adorable ears and big, glistening eyes, it's those ET-like fingers that seal the deal.

Well done, Dustin!



▲ MARLIZE AHLERS

Canon EOS R6

Canon 24–105 mm lens

MARLIZE WRITES: In November 2023, I did a full-moon hike in the Beaufort West district of the Karoo with Heuningland Tours. It was a special experience and I met wonderful people.

I took this photo of my fellow hikers at a mountain summit beacon at sunset.

TOAST SAYS: I enjoy a good silhouette photo – it's always eye-catching. Yes, you probably want to see your friends' faces every now and then, but by day three on the trail all your photos start to look the same: another meal of Provitas; your friend Manie in his



Hi-Tecs climbing a hill, again...

A silhouette, however, is bold and graphic. You pay more attention to composition because you have less to work with in terms of detail.

There's nothing wrong with Marlize's original photo (inset) – her friends are standing apart from each other so it's easy to "read" their shapes. You can make out hats, hairstyles, cellphones and the summit beacon. But the sun is quite bright and prominent. I usually try to avoid shooting

directly into the sun, not only because it can hurt your eyes but because the harsh glare can cause lens flare that might spoil your photo.

I would suggest improving the composition by cropping a bit tighter around the people and the beacon as in the main photo. Doing this reduces the empty space in the frame (the sky and the dark foreground) and your eye is drawn to the outlines of the hikers appreciating the last light.

Beautiful!



> **GERT JANZEN
VAN VUUREN**

Canon EOS R5

Canon RF 100–500 mm lens

GERT WRITES: I took this photo at the Cubitje Quap waterhole north of Nossob in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. A female cheetah came to drink with her three adolescent cubs. The cubs are the animals in the photo; the mom was out of frame to the right.

The cheetahs had been at the same waterhole the previous day and I noticed that the three cubs interacted a lot – I wanted to capture that.

My settings: shutter speed 1/1 000 second; aperture f5.6; ISO 3 200.

TOAST SAYS: If I ever have a child of my own, his or her middle name will be Cubitje Quap. Marietjie Cubitje Quap Coetzer. Or something like that.

Cubitje Quap not only rolls off the tongue, it's also a great place

to be. Nossob is already *lekker* and as you drive further north, it gets better by the kilometre.

The Cubitje Quap waterhole is right next to the road – you don't even need a hefty zoom lens to take close-ups of animals. It's a big event when thousands of sandgrouse and doves come to drink in the mornings. It sounds like a rugby stadium in full cheer as the birds call to their friends, swear at the referee and clap their wings.

Other animals arrive at other times of the day – you might also be lucky enough to see cheetahs. I like how the two cheetahs on the sides are leaning in to touch cheeks. I also like that you can see their eyes clearly. The third cheetah completes the triangle with its raised hindquarters. It's as if the third cheetah didn't know that the other two were posing for a selfie...



< **ANDREW VAN WIJK**

Canon EOS 7d

Canon 100–400 mm lens

ANDREW WRITES: I've seen plenty of malachite kingfishers before, but I've never had my camera with me. This time was different. We were on the Breede River near Swellendam when this kingfisher brought a fish back to its nest – a tunnel in the riverbank.

Before entering the nest, the bird perched on a branch near the entrance to check that there were no predators nearby. That's when I took my photo.

TOAST SAYS: Photographers love malachite kingfishers because they're so colourful. Although they're only the size of a saltshaker, they have plenty of attitude. Just look at this one – straight-backed and proud of its catch that's almost half its length.

The bill of a kingfisher is the thing that stands out the most because it's so big in proportion to the rest of its body. Had this kingfisher turned its head to face the camera, you wouldn't have been able to tell the length of its bill. Andrew's photo shows this off well because the head is turned to the side.

I love the fine spiderwebs on the branch – they add some unusual texture to the frame. Other interesting details include the sparkle in the eye of the kingfisher and the black eye of the fish. (Can you see it?)

I also like the kingfisher's bright orange feet. It looks like he's wearing Crocs!





▲ FRANCOIS SMIT

Nikon D850

Tamron SP 90 mm macro lens

FRANCOIS WRITES: I took this photo of a scorpion at Letaba in the Kruger Park, on the path in the rest camp that runs along the riverbank. My friends Weitz Botes and Dique Smit held the ultraviolet light so I could take pictures. The scorpion was about 35 mm long – it was on a tree trunk next to the path.

My settings: shutter speed 1/160 second; aperture f4.5; ISO 3 200.

TOAST SAYS: You wouldn't want to take all your wildlife photos with a UV light because it will look like you spent your holiday in a disco, but once in a while a blue photo is special.

The photo is grainy but that's to be expected because the ISO was high. A high ISO was necessary because there wasn't much light to work with and Francois wanted a shutter speed that was fast enough to eliminate the need for a tripod.

The shallow depth of field works here – you should always try to get at least the eyes of the animal in focus, unless you want to emphasize another body part for some reason. (In this case, Francois might have chosen the pincers as a focus point.) The body and tail might be blurry but there's no doubt that you're looking at a scorpion.

Great photo, Francois. I hope you treated Weitz and Dique to a mug of Milo afterwards!



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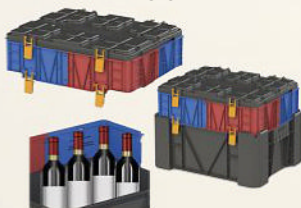
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Silent alarm

COMPILED BY **LYNNE FRASER**

The winners of the 59th annual Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition might have been announced last year but there were so many entries – nearly 50 000 of them! – that the judges selected another 25 and encouraged the public to vote for their favourite. Indeed, the WPY People's Choice Award is nearly as prestigious as the overall award, and the photos are no less spectacular.

Wildlife Photographer of the Year is for amateur and professional photographers of all ages from around the world. Entries for the 60th instalment of the competition are currently being judged by an international panel of experts and the winners will be announced in October 2024.

If you're in London, go see the winning images from last year's competition at the Natural History Museum until June 2024. Or head over to [nhm.ac.uk/wpy](https://www.nhm.ac.uk/wpy) for an online gallery. Here are our four favourites from the shortlisted People's Choice entries.



A polar bear is shown from the side, resting on a large, jagged piece of sea ice. The bear's fur is a light cream color, and its head is tucked down. The ice is a pale blue-white, with sharp edges and a textured surface. The background is a vast, dark sea under a sky with soft, grey clouds. The lighting is natural, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

Ice bed

Nima Sarikhani, UK

After three days of searching for polar bears in thick fog off Norway's Svalbard archipelago, the expedition vessel Nima was on decided to change course and headed towards where there was still some sea ice.

Here, they encountered two polar bears. Just before midnight, this young male clambered onto a small iceberg and clawed away at it to carve out a bed for himself. Nima captured the moment the young bear drifted off to sleep.

His dreamlike shot is a worthy winner of the WPY People's Choice Award. "It's a breathtaking and poignant image that allows us to see the beauty and fragility of our planet," says Dr Douglas Gurr, director of the National History Museum.

The photographer was over the moon to be chosen as the winner. "This photograph has stirred strong emotions," he says. "While climate change is the biggest challenge we face, I hope that this photograph also inspires hope; there is still time to fix the mess we have caused."

HOW: Canon EOS-1D X Mark III; 70 – 200 mm lens; shutter speed 1/500 second; aperture f5; ISO 400.



Aurora jellies

Audun Rikardsen, Norway

Moon jellyfish swarm in the autumnal waters of a fjord outside Tromsø in northern Norway, illuminated by the aurora borealis or “northern lights”. It’s common for this species to gather in their hundreds under such conditions.

Sheltering his equipment in a self-made waterproof housing, Audun used a slow shutter speed and his own system for adjusting the focus and aperture during the exposure. This enabled him to capture the reflection of the sky’s colours on the surface of the water and at the same time light up the jellyfish with flashes.

Moon jellyfish are common in all oceans and are easily recognised by their four rings, which are in fact their genitals.

HOW: Canon EOS-1D X; Laowa 12 mm lens; shutter speed 34 seconds; aperture f2.8–22 (changed during exposure); ISO 1 600; with two Canon flashes in an underwater housing.



Shared parenting

Mark Boyd, Kenya

Early one morning in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve, Mark watched as these lionesses groomed one of the pride's five cubs.

The lionesses had set off to hunt the evening before, leaving the cubs hidden in dense bush. Returning from their unsuccessful mission, they called the cubs out onto the open grassland.

Females raise each other's cubs as their own, sharing parenting duties. This youngster was clearly enjoying the moment of affection and attention!

HOW: Canon EOS 5D Mark III; 100 – 400 mm lens; shutter speed 1/320 second; aperture f5.6; ISO 12 800.



Neighbourhood dispute

Ofer Levy, Australia

A mudskipper fiercely defends its turf from a trespassing crab in Roebuck Bay near Broome in the far north-west of Australia.

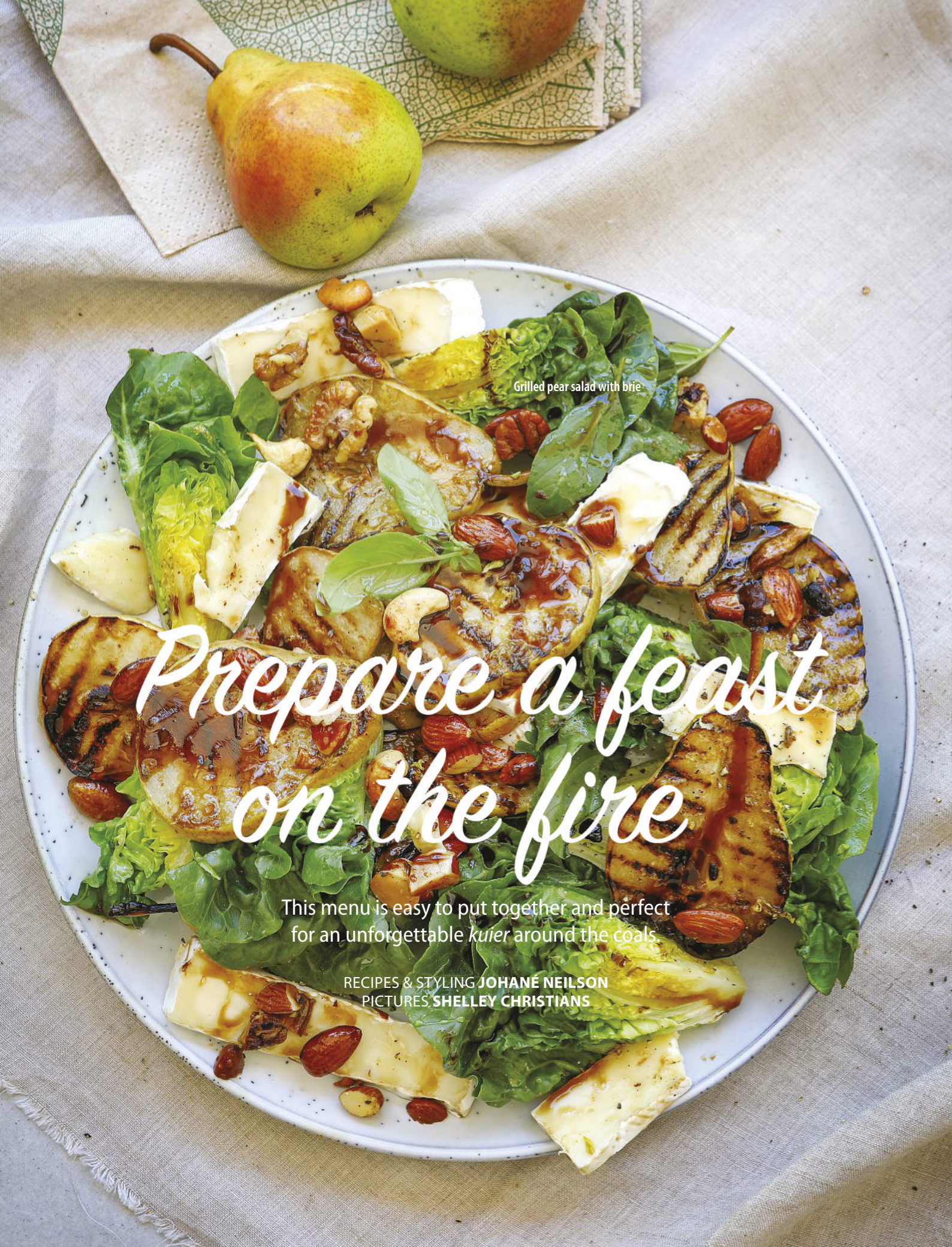
Mudskippers are extremely territorial fish, often building mud walls around their territories where they feed and breed. By opening its mouth and raising its dorsal fin, the mudskipper is challenging the intruder, attempting to scare it off with a threatening display.

Ofer watched the two confront each other over and over on the mud flat – the mudskipper always initiating the clash.

HOW: Canon EOS R5; 800 mm lens; shutter speed 1/5 000 second; aperture f11; ISO 6 400.







Grilled pear salad with brie

Prepare a feast on the fire

This menu is easy to put together and perfect
for an unforgettable *kuier* around the coals.

RECIPES & STYLING JOHANÉ NEILSON
PICTURES SHELLEY CHRISTIANS



Stuffed pork neck

Gravy

Grilled pear salad with brie

Serves **6** as a side dish

Preparation time **20 minutes**

Cooking time **10 minutes**

You need

- 4 small pears, ripe but firm
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 teaspoon whole-grain or Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- salt and black pepper
- 60 g rocket leaves or crisp baby gem lettuce heads cut into four
- 100 g mixed nuts, roasted and roughly chopped
- 1 wheel of brie, sliced

Here's how

1 Cut the pears into 5 mm slices. I like to keep the core, but you can scoop it out if you prefer. Grill the slices in a griddle pan until charred on both sides.

2 Whisk the olive oil, honey, mustard and vinegar together. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Arrange the rocket, warm pear slices, nuts and cheese on a platter and drizzle over the dressing. Serve while the leaves are still crisp.

Stuffed pork neck

Serves **8**

Preparation time **30 minutes**

Cooking time **2 hours 30 minutes**

You need

- 1,8 kg deboned pork neck
- 2 tablespoons Dijon or whole-grain mustard
- 10 large spinach leaves, veins removed and blanched
- about 650 g pork sausages, casings removed
- ¼ cup dried cranberries
- 6 sage leaves, chopped
- olive oil
- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- big pat of butter and 12 extra sage leaves (to serve)

Here's how

1 Butterfly the pork neck with a sharp knife. It's easier than it sounds: Start with a cut on the side and butterfly the meat in phases as you "unroll" the neck. The idea is to have the meat the same thickness all over so the filling is in the middle when it's rolled up.

2 Drape the meat to form an open, flat rectangle. Spread the mustard over the meat. Put the spinach on top of the mustard in a single layer. Press the sausage meat down on top in an even layer and scatter over the cranberries and sage leaves. Roll up the meat tightly and secure with kitchen twine – space the twine about 2 cm apart.

3 Brush the roll with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. You can tie extra herbs like sage, rosemary or thyme to the outside of the roll for more flavour – they will burn away during the cooking process. (You can do the preparation the day before and store the roll in the fridge. Remember to take it out in advance so it can reach room temperature before the braai.)

4 Braai the meat over medium-hot coals using an electric rotisserie until the internal temperature reaches 72°C or use your kettle braai and the indirect cooking method at about 160°C. Turn the meat once in the kettle braai when you add extra coals to maintain the temperature. Calculate the cooking time as follows: 25 minutes per 450 g, plus another 25 minutes. A 2,5 kg meat roll like this one will take about 2 hours 15 minutes to cook. Allow the meat to rest for 15 minutes before you cut it.

5 Melt the extra butter in a pan, fry the sage leaves until crisp and pour the flavoured butter and leaves over the meat just before you serve.

Gravy

Use the roasting juices of the stuffed pork neck to make a tasty gravy.

Here's how:

1 Fill an aluminium drip tray with 2 cm of water and add chopped onions, carrots, celery and two pears (sliced). Put the tray in the bottom of your kettle braai or under the rotisserie to catch all the juices while the meat cooks. Add water as needed so the vegetables don't dry out. When the pork neck is cooked, pour the roasting juices into a measuring jug, reserving the vegetables. Add stock if needed. (You'll need 1½ cups of stock in total.)

2 Use a fork to mash the vegetables in the drip tray. (I made extra to serve with the roast.) Add 1 heaped tablespoon of flour and a pat of butter to the mashed vegetables and beat over a medium heat until mixed well. Return the liquid to the drip tray and simmer until the gravy thickens. The pears lend a sweetness to it, but you can also add a teaspoon of apricot jam.

3 Stir half cup cream into the gravy and season to taste with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Pour the gravy through a sieve into a jug and serve with the meat.

Green goddess guacamole

Makes about **500 ml**

Preparation time **10 minutes**

You need

- 3 ripe medium-sized avocados
- ½ cup creamy mayonnaise
- salt and black pepper, to taste
- dash of Tabasco sauce
- juice and zest of 1 lemon

FOR THE SALSA

- 1 big plum tomato or 3 cherry tomatoes, chopped
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped red onion
- 1 tablespoon pomegranate arils
- 1 teaspoon red wine vinegar
- salt and black pepper, to taste
- scattering of basil, parsley or coriander
- 1 green chilli, sliced
- purple garlic flowers, for garnish

Here's how

1 Peel and stone the avocados and add the flesh to a measuring jug with the mayonnaise, salt and pepper, Tabasco, lemon zest and half of the lemon juice. Use a stick blender to blitz until smooth and creamy. Add more of the ingredients to taste if needed.

2 Spoon the guacamole into a flat dish. Combine the ingredients for the salsa and arrange it on top of the guacamole. The bright colours will look good, and the salsa will also give your appetiser some substance. Serve with fresh beer bread, nachos, salted crackers or vegetable sticks.

Whole-wheat beer bread

Makes **4 tin mugs**

Preparation time **10 minutes**

Baking time **35 minutes**

You need

- 3 cups bran-rich self-raising flour
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- big pinch of salt
- ½ cup seed mix
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 bottle (330 ml) beer

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 180°C. Grease 4 tin mugs with oil. (I also add a cupcake liner to each mug – it prevents the bread from sticking to the bottom of the mug.)

2 Mix the self-raising flour, brown sugar and salt together. Add 2 tablespoons of seed mix. Add the olive oil and beer to the dry ingredients and mix until smooth. Divide the batter between the mugs and sprinkle over the rest of the seeds.

3 Bake for about 35 minutes or until a testing pin comes out clean. Let the bread cool down slightly before unmoulding onto a cooling rack.

TIP If you don't have an oven available, preheat a big flat-bottomed pot (with its lid on) on a braai triangle



Green goddess guacamole



Whole-wheat beer bread



Creamy butternut pot



Crème brûlée with cinnamon

over hot coals. (Check whether the mugs will fit beforehand.) When the pot is hot, carefully remove the lid, place the tin mugs inside and return the lid. Put a few coals on the lid and bake until the bread is risen and cooked through.

Creamy butternut pot

Serves 6 as a side dish
Preparation time 20 minutes
Baking time 45 minutes

You need

- 30 ml olive oil
- 4 large leeks, chopped (white parts only)
- 4 cloves of garlic, chopped
- pinch of chilli powder (optional)
- salt and black pepper
- ½ cup finely grated parmesan
- 1 kg butternut, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1½ cups cream

Here's how

1 Heat the olive oil in a fireproof pot over the coals and fry the leeks and garlic until glossy and soft. Add the chilli powder and salt and pepper to taste. Remove from the pot and add the leeks and half of the cheese to the butternut slices. Mix well.

2 Layer the butternut slices in the pot. Pour over the cream, add the remaining cheese and bake with the lid on for about 45 minutes over the coals or until the butternut is soft.

TIP You can also bake this dish in a preheated oven at 180°C. For variation, replace half the butternut with potatoes.

Crème brûlée with cinnamon

Serves 8
Preparation time 15 minutes, plus time to set
Baking time 45 minutes

You need

- 2 cups cream
- 2 teaspoons vanilla essence
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 6 egg yolks
- ½ cup castor sugar
- 6 teaspoons light brown sugar or castor sugar

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 140°C. Bring the cream close to a boil (there should be steam but no bubbles) and add the vanilla essence and cinnamon. Remove from the heat and set aside for a few minutes to cool and infuse.

2 Beat the egg yolks and castor sugar together until the mixture is a light colour. Add the cooled cream to the egg yolks in a thin stream while mixing. Don't beat too vigorously – there shouldn't be too much foam.

3 Divide the custard between 8 ramekins (100 ml each) and place them in a deep oven dish. Add boiling water to the oven dish until the ramekins are halfway submerged. Bake for 45 minutes.

4 Remove the ramekins from the water. Let the dessert cool down to room temperature and then refrigerate until cold.

5 To serve: Dust each dessert with a layer of brown sugar and use a blowtorch to caramelize the sugar until it melts and forms a hard crust.

TIP The crème brûlée is very rich – use 1 cup milk instead of 1 cup cream for a lighter custard. Prepare the custard the day before and finish it off with the blowtorch when you're ready to serve.

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The terrain tamer

The **Toyota Land Cruiser 70 Series** is an old-school diehard: a tough 4x4 that has survived for four decades to become one of South Africa's most beloved vehicles. It uses a winning manual V8 recipe that nobody has bothered to mess with... Until now.

WORDS & PICTURES **PIERRE STEYN**



The first Cruiser 70 appeared on the scene in 1984, around the same time as *Back to the Future*. And if you get behind the wheel of one, you feel like Marty McFly on a journey back to that decade. The handles, seats and door locks make me long for the Corolla Avante that I drove in my student days.

Measured against most modern cars, the Cruiser's turning circle is ginormous and its ride on tar is bouncy. (We're still talking leaf springs at the rear...) You need a bodybuilder's left leg to change gears and the 4.5-litre V8 engine has a drinking habit that would put Oliver Reed to shame. But all this doesn't matter a bit to its owners and fans, because once you hit the rough stuff, there's no better and more reliable vehicle.

With all that in mind, you can imagine how apprehensive Toyota must have been to update this icon.

We drove the new Cruiser 70 in the Lapalala Wilderness Reserve in Limpopo. The exterior styling changes are immediately obvious, especially the round headlights and square grille, which remind me of the old Land Cruiser 75. Inside, there's a touch-screen entertainment system that talks to Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, and a built-in USB slot so you can recharge your phone. These are some of the only nods to the 21st century. The aircon dials and retro digital clock are real throwbacks to the past, but at least you can now adjust the steering wheel up and down, as well as forward and backward.

Cosmetic changes aside, the biggest and most controversial change is that the Cruiser 70 can now be bought with a four-cylinder, 2.8-litre turbo-diesel engine and an automatic six-speed gearbox. It's the same proven combo that the Toyota Hilux, Fortuner and Prado have been using for years and it totally changes the driving experience of the Cruiser. For the better!

Not only does the smaller engine have almost the same power output (150 kW at 3 400 rpm) as the old V8, but the torque (500 Nm at 1 600 – 2 800 rpm) is almost 16% greater. And, with a claimed efficiency of 10 litres per 100 km, it's much less thirsty. The 4x4 system (with low-range, fixed axles, front coil springs and front and rear locking differentials) has always made off-roading a joy, but it's even more of a pleasure now with the auto gearbox.

Overall, it's a better and more user-friendly engine choice in all respects, for the single-cab bakkie, double-cab and station wagon versions of the Cruiser 70. But if you beg to differ, you need not worry because the 4.5-litre V8 will be available for at least another two years.

Toyota plans to introduce a more luxurious VX version of the station wagon later this year. Among other things, it will have leather seats, a Rockford Fosgate sound system, a steel front bumper and a reverse camera. The price of the VX hasn't been released yet, but it will be more than R1 million. The cheapest Cruiser currently is the 4-litre petrol manual single-cab at R765 500.

The Cruiser 70 is by no means the perfect vehicle. And you're paying a pretty penny for an old-fashioned and sometimes compromised ride. But it's precisely that no-frills approach that makes it such a desirable South African icon. Long may it live!



TOYOTA LAND CRUISER 70 STATION WAGON

Engine	2.8-litre four-cylinder turbo-diesel
Power	150 kW @ 3 000 – 3 400 rpm
Torque	500 Nm @ 1 600 – 2 800 rpm
Gearbox	six-speed automatic
Fuel consumption (claimed)	9,8 l/100 km
Top speed	150 km/h
Ground clearance	230 mm
Service plan	Optional
Service intervals	1 year/10 000 km
Warranty	3 years/100 000 km
Price	R999 900

Focus on the good stuff

A decent pair of binoculars will improve your experience of being in nature, whether you're searching for a lion in the grass, finding a sugarbird in your garden or spotting a whale in the waves.

BY PIERRE STEYN

BINOS: HOW DO YOU CHOOSE?

In 1609, the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei was the first person to use a telescope, which he pointed at the moon to study its craters. But the first real "binocular telescope", similar to today's modern devices, was only patented 245 years later in 1854 – by another Italian, Ignazio Porro.

We've come a long way since then. There are hundreds of binoculars to choose from, with prices ranging from "cute birthday present" to "good grief Gertrude". So, how do you choose?

The name of the binoculars (Zeiss, Swarovski, Leica...) might be the first thing you notice, but right next to the model name are two numbers separated by an "x", like 10x42. The number before the x indicates the magnification capability of the lens. (If it's 10, as in our example, that shrike on the tree branch will appear 10 times closer than you can see with the naked eye.) The "42" refers to the lens diameter: 42 mm. The larger the lens diameter, the more light gets in and the brighter the image you see.

You don't want to go for less magnification than 8x, and for a smaller lens diameter than 32 mm. Also remember that the bigger the numbers, the heavier your binos become and the more difficult it will be to hold them still to get a sharp image.

We've chosen a selection of 10x42s. These are multi-purpose all-rounders that you can take with you on safari and use to spot lifers in the treetops around Punda Maria.



◀ **BUSHNELL LEGEND 2.0 10X42**

This American company sells about as many binoculars as Toyota sells Corollas. Chances are your first pair of binoculars will be a Bushnell – not only because they cost less than most other binoculars, but because they offer great value for money.

The Legend was updated recently – it now has a lighter body that fits more comfortably in your hands. They're water-resistant – tested by immersing the binoculars under a metre of water for 30 seconds – so an unexpected downpour won't ruin your day.

They might be a little heavier and not as sharp as the more expensive guys, but they're perfect binos for beginners on a budget.

R3 695 • outdoorphoto.co.za



◀ **NIKON MONARCH M5 10X42**

Nikon is famous for their excellent cameras, so it's no surprise they know how to work with optical glass. The Monarch range has built up a formidable reputation among twitchers over the years, and with good reason. These are no-frills binoculars, smaller and lighter than most 10x42s, but they feel solid in hand, with a rubber-armoured exterior to protect against bumps and jolts. Nikon submerges their binoculars under water for a full 10 minutes to test for leaks.

We like the wide and sharp field of view, and the smooth focus knob so that you can quickly identify a yellow-billed kite against the blue sky.

R7 495 • ormsdirect.co.za

> ZEISS TERRA ED 10X42

Not too long ago, the cheapest Zeiss 10x42s would have taken a R20k chunk out of your savings. The fantastic Zeiss Victory, for example, costs almost R50 000.

But with the Terra, the iconic German company decided to apply its expertise (and reputation) to an entry-level pair of binoculars. The Terra is a winner in its price segment: small and compact with above-average sharpness in the centre of your field of view, as well as fast and smooth focus. They feel solid and nestle comfortably against your eyes.

Now you can brag that you have Zeiss binoculars. No one needs to know that they cost less than R10 000 and you bought them on Takealot!

R8 999  [takealot.com](https://www.takealot.com)



BIRDING EXPERT FAANSIE PEACOCK SAYS:

- You can read a hundred reviews online, but in the end you have to touch and hold the binoculars to see what works for you. Make sure the ones you choose are strong, sturdy and waterproof – and that they won't break if you drop them. I once threw my bins 20 m when a wasp stung me! I've also forgotten them on the roof of a vehicle a few times...
- Make sure the focus is fast and smooth. The minimum focal length is also important – see if you can get your toes in focus.
- I use Zeiss Victory SF 8x32 binoculars (R40 800). They're small and light. I lug around heaps of equipment when I do fieldwork – I don't want to hang a brick around my neck, too. The smaller magnification gives me a wide field of view, but I also carry a Zeiss Harpia spotting scope if I want to get a closer look at something further away.
- Using a quality pair of binoculars is like getting spectacles when you're half blind – it opens up a whole new world! You're investing in your senses and how you experience your surroundings. So, if you can, pay for a good pair. I'm very happy with my Zeiss bins. I never leave home without them because you never know when a lifer will fly overhead.



> STEINER SKYHAWK 4.0 10X42

This German company built its reputation after World War II by producing binoculars for the Bundeswehr (the modern-day German army). Today, their optical products are used by military and security forces around the globe in some of the toughest conditions imaginable.

You can believe them when they say that their binoculars are water-, fog- and shock-proof. The SkyHawks look, feel and *are* tough. You can use them high in the Drakensberg snow and in the Namib Desert, in temperatures ranging from -20°C to 70°C.

They also have excellent optical capabilities. It's remarkable that you can look at an elephant a kilometre away, and then focus on a butterfly two metres away almost instantly.

R10 524  [safarioutdoor.co.za](https://www.safarioutdoor.co.za)



➤ **LEICA TRINOVID 10X42 HD**

There was a time back in the 1970s, when the Leica Trinovid was probably the best pair of binoculars in the world. But other manufacturers caught up and Leica itself banished the old stalwart when it introduced its Ultravid series in the early 2000s.

But the Ultravid 10x42 flagship costs more than R40k and Leica realised there was a gap in the market to sell a new Trinovid at half the price.

That doesn't mean the re-engineered Trinovid is half as good! These are excellent binoculars: The object in focus is bright, sharp and in strong contrast with the background. Ergonomically, one can't fault the design either. This is a high-impact player that comfortably competes with binoculars that cost much more.

R21 195 📞 ormsdirect.co.za



➤ **SWAROVSKI 10X32 AX VISIO**

In the world of binoculars, the name Swarovski shines brighter than all others. If you're fortunate enough to raise a pair of green Swarovskis to your eyes at your local bird hide, you'll sense heads turning in your direction... almost like pulling into Killarney Raceway in a Lamborghini on the day that all the Citi Golfs are racing.

The NL 10x42 (above right) costs a hefty R70k. But do yourself a favour – don't look through them if you can't afford them. It will only spoil your experience with any other binoculars! The image is exceptional, crystal clear and sharp, with no dull edges.

But just when you thought it couldn't get any better, Swarovski unleashed a crowned eagle into the chicken coop. The AX Visio (below right) is the first pair of binoculars that uses AI (artificial intelligence) to identify birds and animals at the push of a button. You can even use the binoculars to take photos and video that you can share with your community using an app on your phone.

The Visio model has just been launched and we can't wait to test it, even though the price makes your eyes water.

R100 690 📞 safarioutdoor.co.za





TAKE A HIKE

Climb Oorlogskloof's "iron path"

BY EVAN NAUDÉ

Have you seen *Free Solo*, the film about rock climber Alex Honnold who scaled El Capitan without ropes? El Capitan is in Yosemite National Park in the US and it's one of the most daunting big walls in climbing. Every time I watch the film, my palms sweat from the stress of it all.

I admire Honnold, so when the opportunity came to climb in Oorlogskloof near Nieuwoudtville, I grabbed it with both hands. (Thankfully, with the help of a harness.)

Late in the afternoon, I meet up with Jaco van Wyk, owner of the farm Papkuilsfontein about 24 km from Nieuwoudtville. Papkuilsfontein borders Oorlogskloof Nature Reserve and you can access a part of the canyon that carves its way through.

A new via ferrata, called Fynbos on the Edge, was recently installed along a cliff in the canyon. What's a *via ferrata*? It's Italian for "iron path" and refers to a route through tricky mountainous terrain featuring things like metal rungs, ladders or a permanently fixed steel cable bolted to the rock face. (See the sidebar on the opposite page.)

As we drive past sheep kraals and rooibos fields, Jaco tells me that the edge of the canyon has been a popular sundowner spot for the Van Wyks and visitors to Papkuilsfontein for years. One

December holiday, Jaco's three sons – Nicholaas, Conrad and Daniel – climbed into the canyon and discovered a route to an overhang. A conversation with a rock-climbing buddy sparked the idea for this bolted route. About six months of planning and construction later, and visitors can now channel their inner Alex Honnold.

We park the bakkie and walk to the start. Jaco showed me the ropes (so to speak) during an earlier safety session. I'm wearing a bright orange helmet and a harness with a short cable and a carabiner at the end, which I'll connect to the cable of the via ferrata – it will be my lifeline for the next hour or so.

We head into a narrow crevice, shuffling along sideways like crabs. Next, we climb down a rock face on a ladder to the edge of the canyon. Oorlogskloof yawns below. I cling to the cable and occasionally peer into the void. It makes me dizzy, so I turn my attention to the next hand- or foothold instead.

"We call this section the Grafstene," Jaco says, motioning towards a few flattened rocks that look like gravestones. I crawl through a horizontal crevice on all fours, happy to be wearing a helmet when I scrape my head against a rock.

Shortly thereafter, Jaco leads me through the Chicken Run, another horizontal crevice where you

can either shuffle around the outside with your heels over the drop, or crawl underneath on all fours (the chicken-out option).

I choose to go underneath. "Stay calm," Jaco says, guiding me along. "My dad has done this and he's 77!"

Soar like an eagle

The via ferrata ends at the overhang that the brothers discovered. The way back out is the way we came in, but first we sit for a while to appreciate the view. It's a brief moment of peace... There's another cable bolted to the roof of the overhang that you can use to swing out over Oorlogskloof.

Jaco clips me in and my heart starts to race like a warthog with a leopard on its heels. I take one last peek at the floor of the canyon then I step over the edge. I plunge down with my stomach in my throat, then my harness pulls taut and I start to swing. I soar like a Verreaux's eagle on a thermal before swinging back to the overhang.

On the way out, I feel like the main rooster in the farmyard. The Chicken Run and the Grafstene don't scare me! And by the time I'm on the back of the farm bakkie driving through the rooibos fields again, I'm already daydreaming about El Capitan...



How does it work? You don't have to be experienced or fit, but you need to be comfortable on uneven surfaces and with some climbing and heights. Groups of two to six people are guided up at a time. You have to be at least 10 years old and not weigh more than 120 kg.

Cost: R450 per person for about 2½ hours – book beforehand.

What else? Papkuilsfontein Guest Farm is in the Northern Cape near the town of Nieuwoudtville, about 370 km north of Cape Town. There are several hiking and mountain-bike trails on the farm – great for a weekend away. There are three self-catering houses (from R800 per person) and a campsite (from R200 per person). It's a beautiful part of the world to visit during wildflower season.

Contact: 072 555 1416

papkuilsfontein.com

WHAT'S A VIA FERRATA?

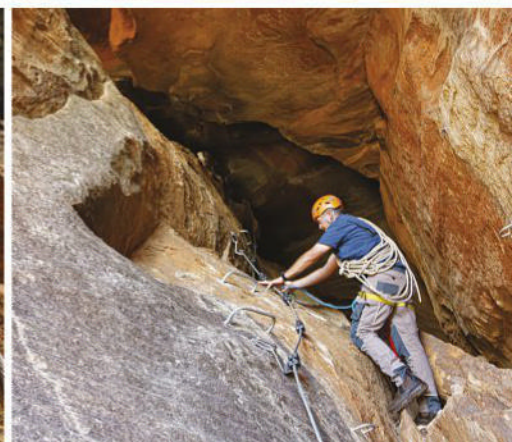
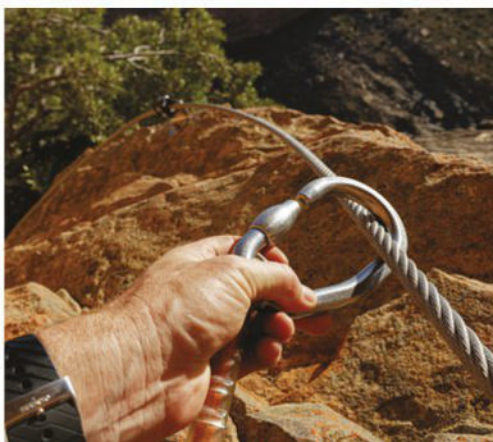
It's a route on a mountain, usually across a very steep section, with cables, ladders and rungs bolted to the rock. You wear a harness and you're attached to all the support gear with a cable. This allows people with no rock-climbing experience to complete the route.

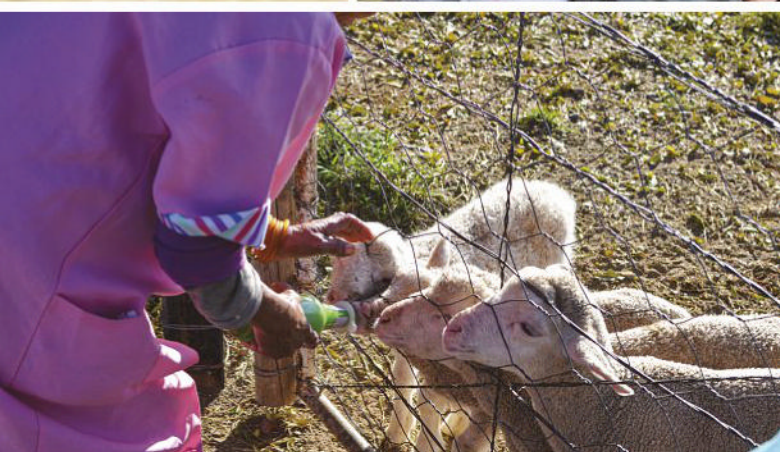
The name means "iron path" in Italian and the first one was built in the Austrian Alps in the 1840s to promote rock-climbing tourism. Soon, via ferratas were also built in the Swiss Alps, in the Pyrenees in France and Spain, and in the Dolomites in Italy.

During World War I, the Dolomites were a part of the battle front between Austria and Italy. Both countries built via ferratas to transport troops, ammunition and equipment and to defend their positions. Hikers can still climb these historical routes to this day.

Are there any others in SA? There is also a via ferrata in the Magaliesberg near Hekpoort. It's called Shelter Rock and it's part of an 8 km circular route – you can only hike it with a guide. The outing takes about 4½ hours and costs R650 per person (minimum eight people and you need to be at least 1,2 m tall).

shelterrock.co.za





KHOISAN KAROO CONSERVANCY, HANOVER

Does the mere thought of the N1 between Gauteng and Cape Town make you break out in a cold sweat? It's a stretch of road that requires good tunes (a little Mark Knopfler will make the kilometres fly by), passengers to feed you droëwors while you drive, and a can of Score to keep you awake.

Hanover in the Northern Cape is halfway between Cape Town and Joburg – both are about 700 km away – which makes it a good overnight spot on the long trek through the interior.

Khoisan Karoo Conservancy is to the north of Hanover and even though it's only 8 km from the N1, you feel light years away from the hustle and bustle when you drive onto the leafy premises. You'll probably run into owners PC and Marisca Ferreira – Marisca runs the kitchen.

The conservancy falls somewhere between a Karoo farm and a conservation project – it's home to several wildlife species and years ago PC reintroduced hippos to the Seekoei River, which cuts through the farm. This is the kind of place where you'll miss out if you only stay for one night.

Take a sunset drive on their game-viewing vehicle and go look for the last remaining hippo (R195 per person), or rise early for a guided birding drive (R290 per person) to see specials like blue crane and blue korhaan. There's also an outing to see San rock art and you can do a "Shy Five" night drive (both R295 per person). On the latter excursion, you might see aardvark, aardwolf, porcupine, bat-eared fox and black-footed cat. Overnight guests can fish in the Seekoei River at New Holme.

Facilities: Most of the accommodation options are at the main farmstead called New Holme Nature Lodge. (It has free Wi-Fi.) The Homestead has six rooms and there are also seven stable rooms. The Stoffels Rus log cabin sleeps four people and is equipped for a self-catering stay, while the tents in the garden sleep up to four people each (shared bathroom facilities). Stoffels Rus and some of the New Holme units are wheelchair-friendly. (New Holme Nature Lodge is also part of Cape Country Routes. 📍 capecountryroutes.co.za)

The adjacent property is known as Hanover Aardvark Nature Reserve – the Mieliefontein guesthouse here sleeps up to 10 people. Mieliefontein's self-catering apartment sleeps four people and it's pet-friendly. Wolmado farmhouse (also self-catering) is the biggest and sleeps up to 12 people.

Delicious meals are available but you have to order beforehand. Dinner at New Holme costs R270 per person and breakfast costs R125 per person. Dinner at Mieliefontein is R215 per person and breakfast is R115 per person.

Rates: New Holme Nature Lodge Homestead: units from R1 100 per night for two people. Stable rooms from R1 100 per night for two people. Stoffels Rus log cabin R2 300 per night. Garden tents R780 per night for two people. Mieliefontein guesthouse: rooms from R990 per night for two people; from R1 695 for up to four. Apartment from R1 300 per night for three people, plus R380 per extra person (max six people). Self-catering Wolmado farmhouse R2 750 per night.

Where? About 33 km north-east of Hanover; off the N1.

Contact: 📞 064 652 3230; 🌐 khoisankaroo.co.za

– Toast Coetzer

HOUSE FOR SALE

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waterbuck, red
hartebeest, porcupine,
aardvark, jackal
and occasionally
leopard.

Stand 138

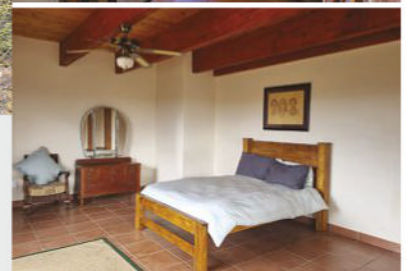
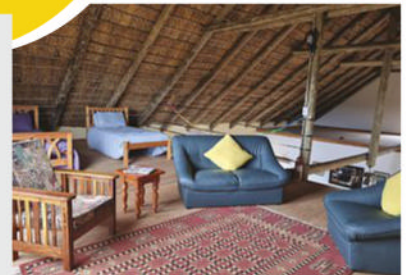
(previously stands 16 & 17)

Size of house: 155.44 m² plus verandah

Garage/cottage: 36 m²

Loft rooms: 31.5 m² (each)

Situated 28 km outside of Vaalwater
230 km from Pretoria



The estate is extremely well run and maintained by a strong, active HOA.

Situated on a double stand with 1 title deed, and 1 levy each month. No other house can be built next to, in front of or behind stand 138. Exceptionally well built house with no outstanding levies and no bond. Face brick and aluminum window frames mean no external maintenance. Pitched roof with Harvey tile exterior and double volume inside with thatch ceiling and wooden beams.

Comprises: **2 extra-large bedrooms and bathrooms**, main en-suite. The floors are terracotta tiles. The main living area has double doors opening onto the verandah. The 2nd bedroom has a strongroom, which contains the **solar system** for the lights/fridge. **The stove and 2 geysers are gas.**

2 loft rooms above the bedrooms with one set of stairs. The garage is tiled, with a tiled bathroom with gas geyser, a wooden front door and large windows.

There is a **paved braai circle** in front of the house and a **thatch lapa** in a bushy and rocky section next to the house. The 2 main rivers are within walking distance.

Fully fenced perimeter with no internal fences. The farm is 1550 ha with only 35 houses. The sand roads are kept in top notch condition. There are 4 dams. The 12th AGM has just been held. **Borehole water.** Nyathi has its **own security** staff and trained tracker dogs. Security staff are permanently on site and patrol at night. There is a well-maintained **runway** for owners to fly in.

Price: R1 950 000,00

Contact Alan 078 803 9599 or
Susanna 072 134 9466

Love abounds in the Little Karoo

Ladismith anchors Route 62 at the base of the Klein-Swartberg range. There's something special about the Little Karoo here, where the farmers greet you by name and fill your car with watermelons.

WORDS & PICTURES **MARCHELLE VAN ZYL**

My mother was born and raised in Ladismith and I've been coming here on holiday my whole life. She passed away recently, so when I was asked to write this story I saw it as a chance to revisit some old haunts and celebrate her life.

All along the Klein-Swartberg, you'll find fertile valleys fed by mountain water, and farms with the most beautiful names: Voorbaat, Dwarsrivier, Buffelskloof, Hoeko... Voorbaat, at the foot of Towerkop, was my Ouma Emmie's farm – my mom's mom. To me, it was the physical manifestation of Canaan, the Promised Land in the Bible. The bunches of grapes were longer than my arm and my dad picked cling peaches in the orchard and offered each of us a slice on the blade of his pocketknife. After a visit to the farm, the car would be so full of fruit, vegetables and KWV brandy for the Christmas cake that we hardly had space to sit.

The farm is no longer in our family but Ladismith is still a place of plenty. At Kanna Kombuis on Route 62, which runs through town, I order a Wêreldbeker breakfast: one egg, one slice of bacon, one piece of toast, one sausage, one coffee. (One point. Get it?) Next to the restaurant is a farm shop that sells fruit and vegetables from the region. A truck pulls up outside, packed with watermelons from Buffelskloof. La Grange Volschenk and his son Jan are not only the farmers, they're also the deliverymen.

"Ladismith has the friendliest people," La Grange says. "If you live here, you can't imagine moving somewhere else."

His daughter Lourensa works at Kanna Kombuis. "This is a community restaurant," she says with a laugh. "It's fun to call Oom Louis for potatoes and Oom Riaan for grapes. Pa brings the rest. Most of my products come from the area."

Like many rural towns in South Africa, Ladismith is plagued by municipal mismanagement. But despite the challenges, ordinary people are doing extraordinary things. One of the mayors has painted the words *Ons verdien beter* (We deserve better) on the wall around his house. *Práát jy!*

There are two big cheese factories in town that are important job creators: Lactalis South Africa and Ladismith Cheese. You can buy their produce at Kanna Kombuis, at the Lactalis factory shop or at some of the filling stations.

On Friday and Saturday mornings in the Lactalis parking area, you'd be missing out if you didn't order one of Lolla Hendricks's legendary roosterkoek, served with home-made apricot jam and local cheese, sausage and tomato smoor or biltong.

Lolla and I go way back. Her dad, Oom Ballies, was my uncle Stefaans's right-hand man on his farm for many years. When she heard that my mom had passed away, she sent me some roosterkoek. The Little Karoo is a place where people comfort each other with food when words seem inadequate.

But she has the words, too. "Ai, I'm so sorry," she says, giving me a hug.

The sense of community is something that Letitia and Masood Husain also appreciate. Letitia might be an *Afrikanernooi* but Masood is





Follow Church Street to the start of the Towersig Trail, with views of town and the surrounding mountains.

BUY CHEESE!

LACTALIS FACTORY SHOP

Opening times: Monday from 8 am to 4 pm. Tuesday to Friday until 5 pm. Saturday until 1 pm.

Where? Corner of South and Albert streets.

☎ 028 551 8430

KANNA KOMBUIS SHOP

Opening times: Monday to Friday from 8.30 am to 5 pm. Saturday until 2 pm.

Where? 55 Albert Street

☎ 082 831 9987

KLEIN KAROO AGRI, TOTAL GARAGE

Opening times: Open 24 hours a day.

Where? Corner of 13 South Street and the R62.

☎ 028 551 1050

originally from Liverpool in the UK. They're the owners of Gypsy's Gin Bar, Bistro, Deli in town.

"I'm a foreigner but I was welcomed even though I don't speak Afrikaans," Masood says. "The farmers have been the friendliest – and very helpful. You get about five dark days a year in Ladismith. In Liverpool you get about five sunny days!"

Towerkop (2 189 m) might not be the highest peak in the Klein-Swartberg, but it's definitely the most iconic. On a clear day, the two rock pinnacles are visible for hundreds of kilometres from all directions. Each pinnacle is about 120 m tall and the crevice between them is about 30 m wide.

Some call it Toorkop and old maps spell it Toverkop. Tower means "magic" and there are many stories about the name. According to one, a witch tried to fly over the mountain during a storm and collided with the rocky peak. In anger, she struck the rock with her broom (or summoned a lightning bolt in another version) and split it in two.

Others say the name refers to the many faces of the mountain – it looks different from every direction and bewitches (*toor*) with its appearance.

Most people who spend time here agree that

magical things happen to you in the mountains. Jo Prins, an editor and journalist from Melville in Joburg, often stays in a friend's house in Ladismith.

"Many times, I'm all alone there," he says. "Once I got lost while hiking and a sunbird showed me the way..."

Eugene Bezuidenhoudt and Debi de Jager are also originally from Joburg, but they moved to the Little Karoo permanently 11 years ago. They're the owners of Koedoeskloof Guesthouse about 11 km west of Ladismith next to the R323, which is especially popular among motorcycle tourists.

"Bikers love the dirt roads, passes and poorts," Eugene says. "They stop here on their way to the Baviaanskloof, the Swartberg Pass, Montagu, from the coast, to the Tankwa... It works. We're 325 km from Cape Town, which is just far enough for most people, especially visitors from overseas."

Koedoeskloof has campsites for bikers as well as other accommodation, and the beer is always cold in the Dwars Bar.

Rina and Kotie Smit from A Touch of Plaas about 5 km down the road also have camping stands next to their olive orchard. "One of our

Clockwise from top left: Letitia and Masood Husain own Gypsy's, a bar and bistro in town. Jan Ellis is happiest riding his bike on a dirt road. Lolla Hendricks makes the best roosterkoek on the R62. La Grange Volschenk grows watermelons on his farm Buffelskloof. Jacob Wanie with plums picked at Lofpoort. Ladismith's town hall was built in 1932. Lourensa Marais runs the show at Kanna Kombuis.



campers works for a big bank – she's using her caravan as a remote office," Kotie says.

"People come here for the sun, the silence and the stars. And the snow in winter," Rina chips in. "They enjoy the farm life. The campers become family."

I've heard this sentiment all over town. Once people have been here, they always come back.

Willemien Brümmer, journalist and author, is a descendant of the Afrikaans poet CJ Langenhoven, who was born in the local farming district of Hoeko. The family still owns a cottage on Elandsberg outside Ladismith that once belonged to Langenhoven.

"When I was a child, we had a competition to see who could spot Towerkop first," Willemien says. "It was the first bit of excitement for the holiday and we still do it as a family when we come back for a visit.

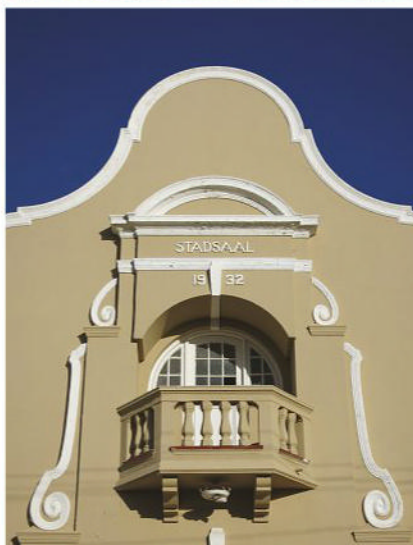
"To me, this place will always remind me of stories. My father – and all the people of the Little Karoo – is a born storyteller. My dad always claimed he could see the hazy figure of one of his ancestors next to his bed just before he fell asleep, and I once heard a strange sound like footsteps next to the dam wall... Ladismith makes me think of that line in Hamlet: 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

Yes, many people talk about an *iets* in Ladismith, a mysterious "something". Is it Towerkop? The dirt roads? The abundance? The people?

When I leave town, my car is a fitting tribute to the holidays of my youth. The boot is so full that the nose points to the heavens. I've even got one of La Grange's watermelons in there.

"My Dutch ancestors said, 'Geef wat je heeft, dan is dit werd dat je leeft' – give what you've got, so your life is worth living. That's how we were raised. We have watermelons. We give them away."

Towerkop grows distant in my rear-view mirror. I miss my mom.





5 things to do

1 Hike the Towersig Trail

This is one of the most accessible trails in town with options for every fitness level, from 2,7 km to 12 km. The trail takes you up the koppies and gives you an unparalleled view of town and the Klein-Swartberg. Can you make out the “eland” in Elandsberg right behind town? Look to the south to see the back of Sleeping Beauty, which looms over the town of Riversdale.

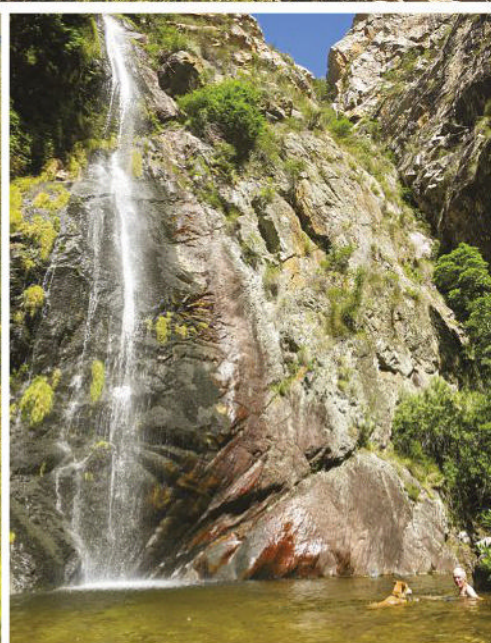
Where? Follow the signs opposite the tourism bureau up Church Street. The trail starts at the top of Hospital Street, where you can also park your vehicle.

Cost: The trails are free to hike, but donations for maintenance are welcome.

Map? Get one at the tourism bureau or visit towerkopinfo.co.za/Traverse-etc

Contact: 028 050 0158; 073 036 0255

What else? Hugh Sussen (assisted by Ladismith Tourism) maintains the trail. Hugh is a valuable source of information on hiking trails, animals and plants in the area. Follow him on iNaturalist ([inaturalist.org](https://www.inaturalist.org/people/hugh-sussen)) – search for his name. Ladismith Tourism also has a profile on the biodiversity site. ([inaturalist.org/people/ladismith-tourism](https://www.inaturalist.org/people/ladismith-tourism))



2 Sidestep Stanley to see a waterfall

The well-known Stanley's Light shines from the slopes of Elandsberg every night. Stanley de Wit put up the first light in 1963 using an ingenious contraption that generates power with water. Members of the community maintain the light, but the trail there is sometimes overgrown and washed away. Enquire at the tourism bureau before you set out – it can take up to 10 hours to complete the 13 km route.

The kloof at the start of this trail (free to hike) is mostly accessible, depending on the water level. Follow North Street out of town. Turn left at the Stanley's Light sign after about 3 km. Vehicles with a high ground clearance can drive in and park at the last gate. It's about a kilometre to the parking area. If you drive a Polo, you'll have to walk the kilometre to the start of the kloof. Hike 700 m further up and follow the orange dots to the waterfall. Get in the pool and enjoy!



3 Drive in dirt-road heaven

They say the road to heaven is gravel and it goes through the Little Karoo... You can keep yourself busy for days with outings and circular routes in your vehicle or on a bicycle or motorbike. Here are some popular routes:

- People come from far and wide to drive Seweweekspoort – a jaw-dropping 17 km natural passage through the mountains. A circular route around the Klein-Swartberg makes for a nice day out: From Van Riebeeck Street, drive west towards Laingsburg on the R323. Turn right at the T-junction onto the tar road and go east behind the mountains through the Vleiland, Middelplaas and Hartland areas. Turn right and drive through Seweweekspoort. Return via Hoeko to Ladismith. It's about 180 km.
- Drive to Gamkapoort Dam via Bosluisloof, a route of about 130 km there and back.
- Drive a circular route from Ladismith to Van Wyksdorp and then head to Calitzdorp via Rooiberg Pass – about 215 km.

4 Ride your mountain bike

Seweweekspoort should be on every mountain biker or gravel rider's bucket list. Tip: It's mostly downhill if you ride it from north to south...

- Adventurers who want to concentrate on Seweweekspoort can contact Mark and Colleen le Roux in Opsoek Valley near the poort. Mark is known in cycling circles, gives great advice and can even work out a tour for you. He can also arrange for a vehicle to drop you at the northern end. Experienced riders will enjoy the trails on their guest farm, Le KaRoux.

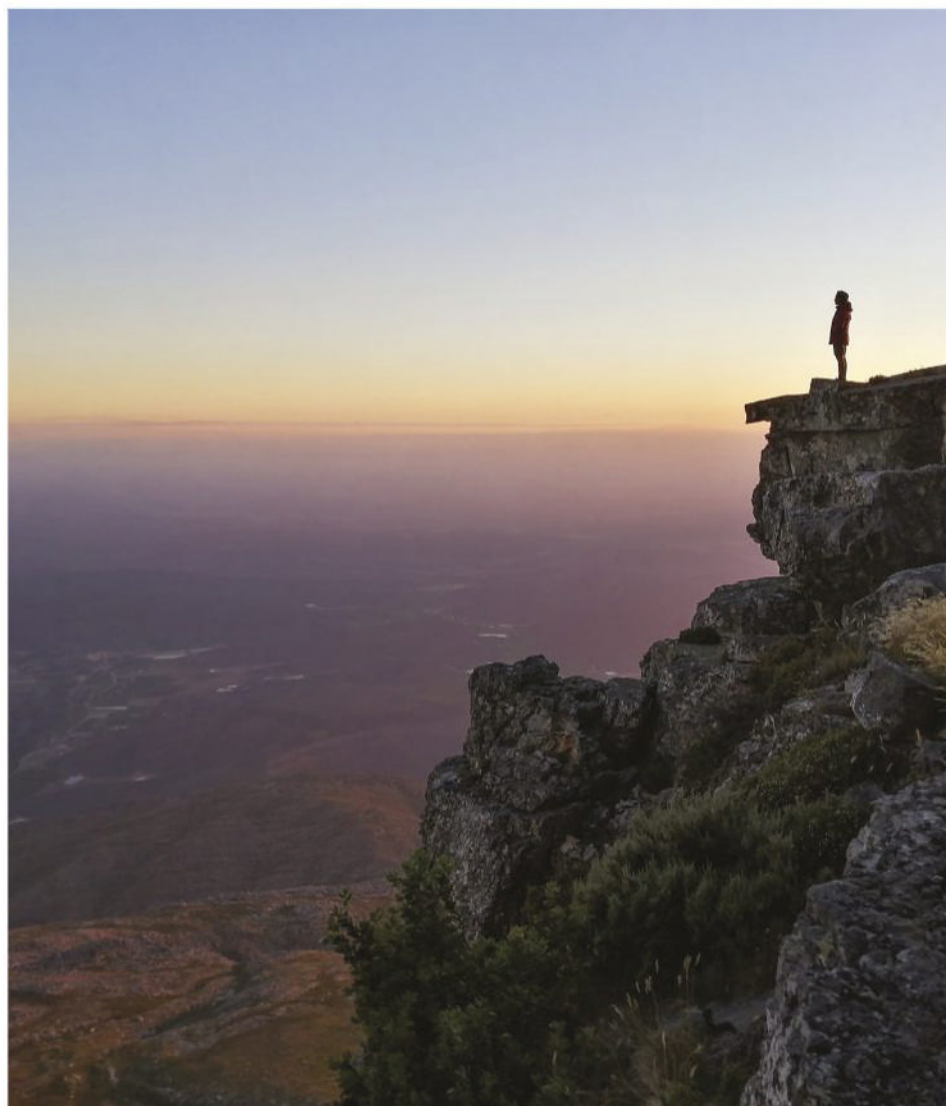
📞 083 449 4323; 📧 colleen@bigshotmedia.co.za

- There are lots of dirt roads to ride through Hoeko, Dwarsrivier, Voorbaat, Buffelsdrif, Plathuis via Prinspoort, and more. The best place for more information is Makadas Adventures, the creators of the Klein Karoo Gravel Corridor. The website has trail maps and accommodation options. You can ride on dirt roads almost all the way from Montagu to Prince Albert! 📞 083 312 7271 (Mitzi Knipe)

🌐 makadasadventures.co.za

- Jan Ellis takes people out on cycling routes. He likes to be deep in the bundu. He also repairs bicycles. Follow his adventures on his Facebook page "Fatbikewest Outventures". 📞 074 233 6691
- Vyversrus farm is huge (about 60 km²) and also includes the Naauwkloof Nature Reserve. They have enough trails to keep you hiking, cycling and 4x4ing for days. Free for overnight guests. Day visitors pay R50 per person and R350 for the 4x4 route.

📞 084 701 0370; 🌐 vyversrus.business.site



5 Climb high

The Klein-Swartberg is not small... It has six of the eight highest peaks in the Western Cape!

Seweweekspoort (2325 m) is the highest, but Towerkop (2189 m) shouldn't be underestimated. The challenging trails to these two summits, as well as the Swartberg Traverse, run across private land. Local rock climber Jan Viljoen manages access to the trails on behalf of the Mountain Club of South Africa (MCSA). The club tries to keep the trails safe and clean and ensure that the spectacular landscape doesn't get damaged. Hiker numbers are strictly controlled – enquire beforehand. It's preferable to go with an MCSA member.

Hikers can climb to the base of the pinnacles on Towerkop and overnight in a cave. Only experienced rock climbers can go to the very top of the two pinnacles.

Contact: 🌐 towerkopinfo.co.za

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Hugh Sussen and his dog Foxy on the Towersig Trail. Foxy and Hugh cool off in the waterfall pool on a hike to Stanley's Light. A labourer's cottage in the farming district of Voorbaat. The dirt road to Hoeko, north of Ladismith.

Above: The view from Towerkop over the valleys really *is* magical.

GYPSY'S GIN BAR, BISTRO, DELI



LEONIE JANUARIE, HILLOCK RESTAURANT

10 am; lunch from noon until 3 pm; three-course dinner from 6.30 pm (book a day in advance).
 ☎028 551 1548; 📧mymering.com

STAY HERE

PARKSIDE GUESTHOUSE

The six double rooms are built around a swimming pool and will suit a group of friends travelling together.
Where? 10 Frans Visagie Crescent
Rates: From R1 200 per room. Dinner from R200 per person for two courses.
 ☎083 692 0803

OAKSREST

The four camping stands are next to a dam (bring your swimming costume) and have lawn and shade. Each stand has power and a braai and there are communal ablutions with a washing machine, tumble dryer and fridge. There's also a spacious farmhouse for big groups, plus two self-catering cottages. Get to know the farm on a hike or ride your mountain bike.
Where? About 11 km west of Ladismith via the R323.
Rates: Camping from R200 per person (four people per stand). Self-catering unit from R750 per person (sleeps two, eight or nine people).
 ☎028 551 2027; 📧oaksrest.com

A TOUCH OF PLAAS

The campsites might be basic but each has its own bathroom. Braai facilities are shared. You can pay for access to power and visitors can help harvest olives in autumn. You can also order cheese-and-olive platters, fresh bread and other farm and olive products.
Where? About 14 km outside Ladismith via the R323.
Rates: From R200 per person.
 ☎072 407 1731
 📧atouchofplaas.co.za

VYVERSUS

Three self-catering units next to a dam. Sit on the stoep and gaze at the mountains. The farm has wildlife like gemsbok, giraffe, wildebeest,

EAT HERE

GYPSY'S GIN BAR, BISTRO, DELI

The widest selection of gin products in the region can be found here. Letitia mans the gin bar – go have a taste. Masood makes Indian curries that will make your tongue sing. They also have pizzas and fish fingers for those with a less adventurous palate.
Where? 12 South Street
Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 9 pm.
 ☎060 690 3902; 📧gypsys.co.za

KANNA KOMBUIS

Delicious breakfasts and lunches, and a hearty home-cooked meal on Sundays. (Shepherd's pie, leg of lamb, mielie tart...) Ask about the freshly baked cakes and tarts – there's always something sweet on offer. (Try the Oreo mousse tart!) There's also an old truck for the kids to play on.
Where? 55 Albert Street
Opening times: Monday, Tuesday and Thursday from 8 am to 5 pm. Wednesday, Friday, Saturday until 8 pm. Sunday until 2 pm.
 ☎082 831 9987

TOWERKOP COFFEE SHOP

Have breakfast or lunch in the cosy garden behind the old post office. The menu caters to people with vegetarian, vegan or other

dietary preferences.

Where? 43 Queen Street
Opening times: Weekdays from 8 am to 4 pm. Saturday until 3 pm.
 ☎066 445 8589

DWARS BAR

They serve a variety of burgers, but the kudu burger is my favourite. (And so are the views of Towerkop...) There's a campsite (tents only) and guest rooms – no children under 12.
Where? Koedoeskloof is about 11 km west of Ladismith next to the R323.

Opening times: The bar is always open for overnight guests. Open to the public on Friday nights from 6 pm. You have to book 24 hours in advance. Bigger groups can book for other nights.
 ☎083 327 9683
 📧koedoeskloof.co.za

HILLOCK RESTAURANT

Taste wine and eat among the vineyards on the farm Mymering. Open for breakfast, light lunches and dinner. Booking is essential. Dinner is a three-course meal, from R400 per person.
Where? The farm is about 12 km west of Ladismith in the Dwarsrivier Valley.
Opening times: Breakfast until



IN OTHER WORDS

Sally Andrew, author of the Tannie Maria book series

"I've been living in a nature reserve in the Karoo for 12 years. We love the thorn trees, the ancient gwarries, the red rocky slopes of the mountains, the song of the bokmakierie, the leopard tracks in the dust, and the rust-and-blue sunsets that are different every evening.

"The nights bring absolute peace and darkness unless we are outside, where we see the bright river of stars. The people are friendly and everything moves at a kind pace. The architecture is diverse and beautiful and the town is full of quirky shops and places to eat.



OAKSREST

kudu and zebra. You can hike, cycle and drive a 4x4 trail.

Where? About 17 km south-west of Ladismith via the R323.

Rates: From R1 200 per night for seven people.

☎ 084 701 0370

📧 vyversus.business.site

MYMERING

There are several luxury cottages and self-catering units, each with a plunge pool and views of the vineyards and the Klein-Swartberg. You can go for a guided walk on the farm.

Where? About 18 km west of Ladismith via the R323.

Rates: From R1 000 per night for two people (units sleep two or four people).

☎ 028 551 1548; 📧 mymering.com

THE COUNTRY GARDEN/ BEECATCHER GUEST FARM

The four self-catering cottages are tucked away at the base of the Klein-Swartberg in the Voorbaat Valley. The farm is remote with long trails for cyclists and hikers. The Manor House sleeps 10 people.

Where? About 25 km west of Ladismith. You turn off the R323 to the Voorbaat farming community.

Rates: Self-catering cottage from R800 per night for two people (the cottages sleep three to six people).

Manor House R3 000 per night for 10 people.

☎ 023 111 0133; ☎ 076 591 7829

(WhatsApp)

📧 thecountrygarden.co.za

PRINSPOORT

Here you'll be showered with luxury – expect silence, electric blankets in winter and plunge pools and aircon in summer. The Prinspoort farmhouse sleeps eight people and the two smaller self-catering cottages each sleep four. Each unit has braai facilities and if you don't feel like cooking you can order a meal from your host Lianda. Explore the trails on the farm on foot, on your bike or in your 4x4. Order a picnic basket and make the outing extra special.

Where? About 45 km south-west of Ladismith towards Anyberg Nature Reserve.

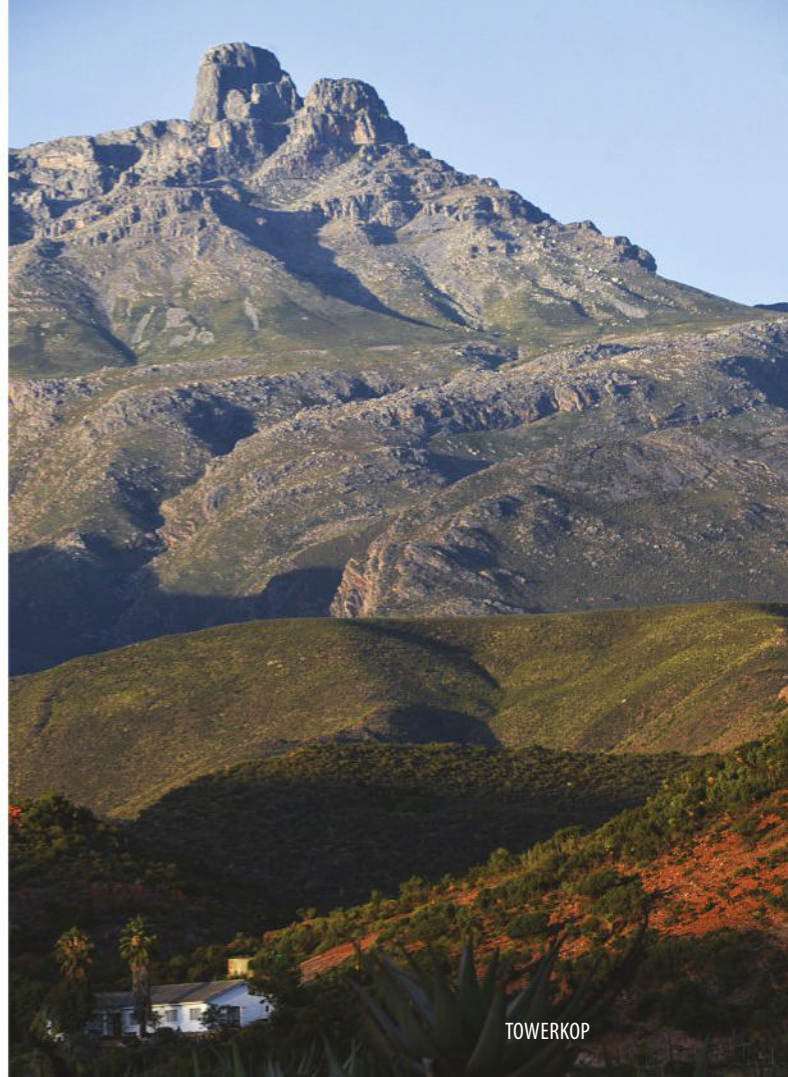
Rates: Cottages R1 400 per night. Farmhouse R1 560 per night. These rates are valid when you book directly with them.

☎ 082 948 2450

📧 prinspoortkleinkaroostay.co.za

Special offer for go! readers:

Include the code "Weg/go" when you book at Prinspoort and you can get a 15% discount on accommodation until 8 December 2024.



TOWERKOP

WHAT ELSE?

- Visit the missionary towns of Zoar and Amalienstein next to the R62. Both have rich histories. The Lutheran church in Amalienstein is worth a look.
- There's lots of rock art in the surrounding mountains, including paintings of mermaids. True story! For a guided cultural tour of the towns and/or Seweweekspoort, contact Alistair Reizenberg: ☎ 079 222 4473
- Aloes flower in June and July and set the hills ablaze. In spring, you can see wildflowers and vygies in bloom.
- Ladismith is at the intersection of several biomes, which makes it a birding hotspot. Visit 📧 ladismithtourismbureau.co.za/ladismith-birds for a comprehensive list. Birding outings are often hosted in the area – enquire at the tourism bureau.
- The tourism bureau is in the historical Otto Hager church and museum (6 South Street) where Hettie Weymar or Jenni Sharkey will help you. ☎ 028 050 0158; ☎ 073 036 0255; 📧 ladismithtourismbureau.co.za

FOR YOUR DIARY

- 26 April – 5 May: Ladismith Endemic Birding Bash. Tick off as many birds as you can during the week to help expand the region's bird list. Contact the tourism bureau.
- 26 – 28 April: Harley Burn. Ride, *kuier* and camp with other motorcycle enthusiasts. 📧 karoo62.com/event/harleyburn2024
- 28 September: Seweweekspoort MTB and Trail Run Challenge. Start training now for this race hosted by Ladismith Cheese. 📧 7weekspoortchallenge.co.za

go! &BUY GUIDE >>

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go! & STAY GUIDE

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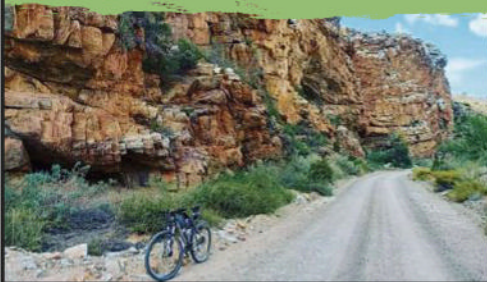
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LADISMITH Really rural



ECOTOURISM

We offer you biodiversity and stunning scenery all in less than a 50km radius from Ladismith - walk with your camera to explore for plants: Little Karoo Renosterveld (succulents), Gwarrie Spekboomveld; Klein Swartberg, Touwsberg and Rooiberg Mountain Fynbos (waboom, protea, erica); Karoo asbosveld.

Activities include various day hikes, good gravel road cycling and motorbiking, and unforgettable drives through Seweweekspoort and Bosluiskloof, or Rooiberg and Huisrivier Pass.

AGRITOURISM

A diverse variety of really rural farm accommodation and Little Karoo hospitality, providing an opportunity to be part of harvest time (14 different fruits are cultivated); vineyards (both wine and table grapes), olives; dairy, sheep and goat farming.

Farm valleys are nestled at the foot of the impressive Klein Swartberg Mountain range, so you can enjoy exploring a kloof, hiking (or 4x4 drive) up to a scenic viewpoint for a picnic, swim, paddle, or float blissfully on a dam, gaze at the starry sky after a perfect evening braai.

AVITOURISM

The Little Karoo is a rewarding place for leisurely birding – wide open spaces enable you to identify birds by their calls and observe their behaviors in home territory. Driving through these backroads you will enjoy spotting and photographing many endemics, and near endemics in a variety of habitats.

'Birdlasser' app users are invited to record species on the Ladismith 50km radius annual challenge, and join our 10 day, LEBB2024 challenge from 26 April.

☎ 073 036 0255

🌐 www.ladismithtourismbureau.co.za

📘 [ladismithtourismbureau](https://www.facebook.com/ladismithtourismbureau)

📷 [ladismith tourism](https://www.instagram.com/ladismith_tourism)

🌐 www.inaturalist.org

DISCOVER STARS, SOLITUDE, AND REST FOR YOUR SOUL
IN THE LITTLE KAROO!



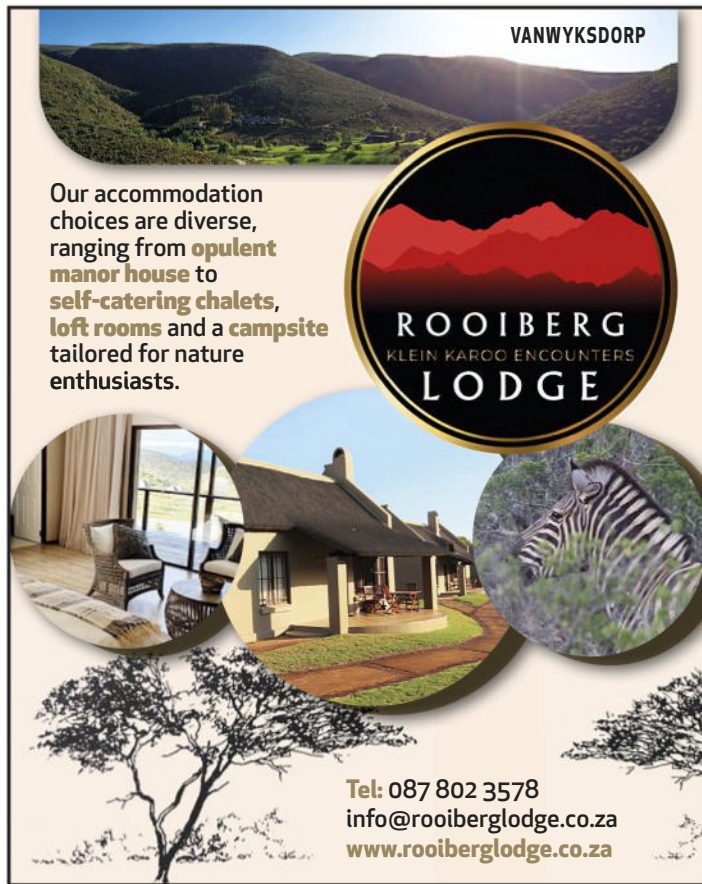
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KLEIN KAROO STAY

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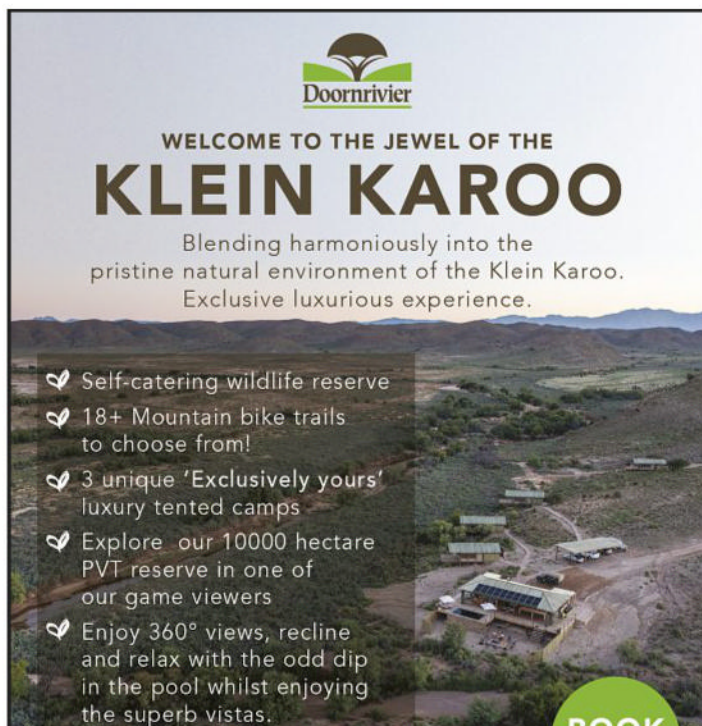
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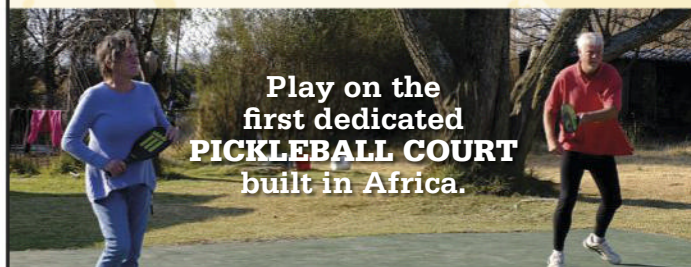
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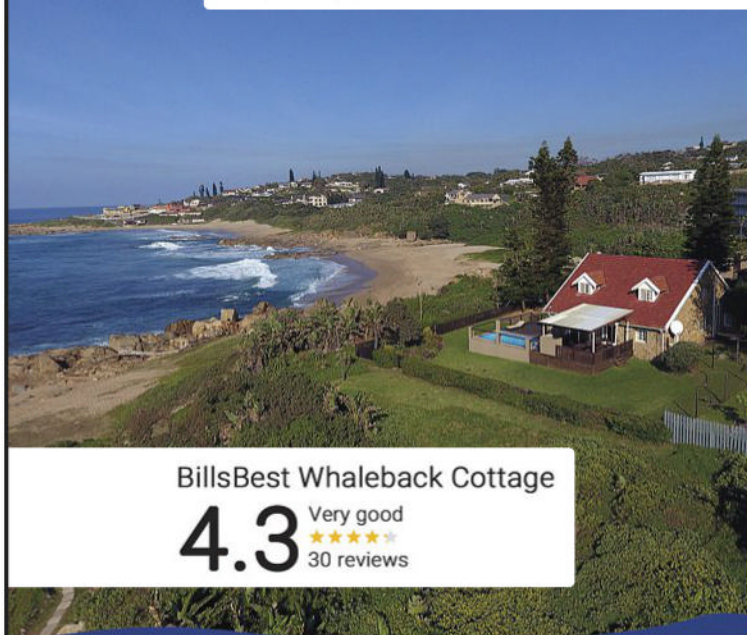
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- Bedding and camping chairs

This tour into Botswana introduces a few new destinations while keeping some firm favourites. Explore the country with Bhejane 4x4 Adventures on the journey of a lifetime and discover some of Africa's wildest places.

Our northern Botswana tour begins at the community-based Khama Rhino Sanctuary in central Botswana, where we spend our first night before moving on to the spectacular Kubu Island, a granite rock outcrop on the Makgadikgadi Pans, for a night under the stars. The next morning after enjoying coffee and rusks against a backdrop of the iconic baobabs, we head north along the edge of the empty salt pans, testing our 4x4 driving on the sandy terrain.

We have a light picnic lunch en route to our next campsite. We will spend two days on the banks of the Boteti River, 30 km from Maun. There will be an opportunity to do a flight over the Okavango Delta (own expense), explore the local markets or simply chill in camp before a late afternoon cruise on the Boteti River.

Then we continue to the Khwai River, north of Moremi, for three days of camping. The area is renowned for prolific game, beautiful scenery and magnificent birdlife. Next on the itinerary is Chobe National Park, where there are excellent game-viewing opportunities. It's one of the best places to see elephants, as well as lions, leopards, hyenas and wild dogs. (A mokoro

experience is included in the tour package.)

Leaving Khwai behind, we traverse the Savuti section of Chobe National Park to our camp on the Chobe floodplain, close to Ngoma in northern Botswana. Our transit through the park is yet another chance to see game.

By the time we arrive at our camp in the late afternoon, the Bhejane team has dinner on the fire, so the only thing left is to wash off the Savuti dust before enjoying a sundowner.

You can do a self-drive tour along the Chobe River and explore at your own pace. The area is known for its large herds of elephant and buffalo. Our camp is situated near the Ngoma entrance to Chobe National Park, so you can easily do a drive along the riverfront and floodplains in the park – good places for birdwatching and game.

And finally, we'll spend two nights on the Chobe near Kasane. There are no fences between the park and the town so it's quite common to see wildlife wandering through town!

A visit to Chobe would not be complete without a sunset cruise on the river, watching the animals make their way to the water. What a fitting way to round off the adventure.

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So ugly, it's cute!

Movies like *The Lion King* have taught us that hyenas are cowardly chancers that steal prey from other predators. But that's not true – they're nature's clean-up crew and they do a great job of getting rid of rotting carcasses in the veld.

COMPILED BY SOPHIA VAN TAAK

Common characteristics of hyenas

Hyenas look similar to dogs but they're actually not related. Their closest relatives are dwarf mongooses and civets!

Their front legs are longer than their hind legs, which makes their shoulders higher than their tail and gives them a sloped back.

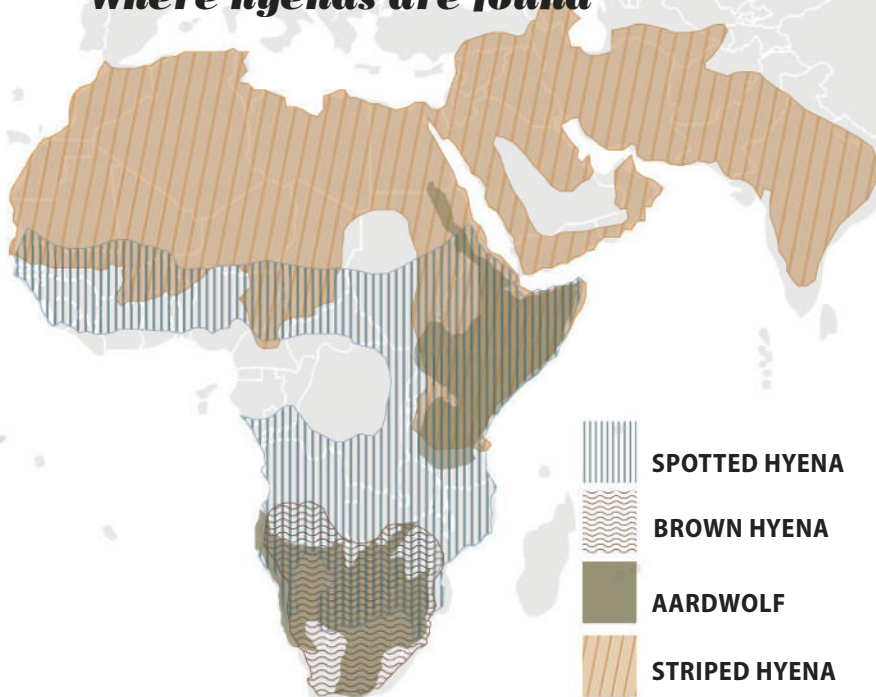
A hyena has messy, rough fur and a mane that stands up over its neck and back.

Hyenas can hunt, but they're mostly scavengers and eat carcasses in the veld. A hyena can eat up to a third of its body weight in one sitting! (Weigh yourself then work out how much food you'd be able to eat if you were a hyena.)

Hyenas live in burrows originally dug by porcupines, springhares or warthogs; or they live in small caves in rocky ridges.



Where hyenas are found



Did you know?



- 1 The jaws and neck muscles of a spotted hyena are much stronger than a leopard's. It can bite straight through a giraffe's femur (thigh bone) like it's a *slaptjip*!
- 2 A hyena's stomach juices contain lots of hydrochloric acid, enabling it to digest pieces of bone. Hyena droppings are white because they have so much calcium in their diets. (Calcium is a mineral found in bones.)
- 3 The spotted hyena has a very big heart that allows it to chase its prey for up to 5 km. The prey animal often collapses due to exhaustion.



Big, rounded ears.

Black snout.

The mane isn't very long.

SPOTTED HYENA (60–80 kg; shoulder height 85 cm)

If you've seen a hyena before, it was probably this one. They're found in the northern parts of South Africa, in our neighbouring countries and in large parts of the rest of Africa.

The spotted hyena has dull yellow fur with dark brown spots. It's the best hunter of the four species – a pack will work together to bring down prey. They have two characteristic calls: a whooping sound and a manic laugh when they get excited during a hunt. The latter will make your hair stand on end.

Spotted hyenas live in groups with a female as the leader. This female's descendants have a higher rank than the other cubs. They're part of the popular group right from birth!



Long, pointed ears.

Cream-coloured mane.

Dark-brown rings around its legs.

BROWN HYENA (40 kg; shoulder height 80 cm)

Although the brown hyena occurs across southern Africa, you'd be lucky to see one of these shy animals. The population size across the region is estimated to be 4 000 – 10 000 (the biggest population is in Botswana). Brown hyenas are considered to be nearly endangered.

They live in small groups in arid regions. They're nocturnal and usually hunt alone, often walking up to 50 km in a night to search for food. They can see and hear very well.

Research into their behaviour is being done on the Skeleton Coast of Namibia, where these animals live on the remote beaches.



Pointed ears.

Pitch black snout and black rings under its eyes.

Black rings around its cream-coloured thighs and its paws are black.

A luxurious tail, with a black tuft at the end.

AARDWOLF (6–11 kg; shoulder height 50 cm)

The aardwolf is the smallest of the four hyena species and is found across southern Africa and East Africa. It prefers deserts and grass plains. Its fur is cream-coloured with vertical black stripes.

The aardwolf lives in pairs but hunts alone. They're omnivores and will eat anything from insects and reptiles to birds and fruit, but they mainly eat termites.

Unlike other ant eaters like the armadillo and pangolin, the aardwolf doesn't have strong claws to break open termite mounds. But it does have a wide, sticky tongue to lick termites off the ground. An aardwolf can eat up to 300 000 termites per night!



Big, pointed ears.

Entire body is cream-coloured with vertical black stripes, except for the black throat.

Black rings around its legs, down to its cream-coloured paws.

STRIPED HYENA (35 kg; shoulder height 60–80 cm)

Although the striped hyena looks like the aardwolf's big brother, you won't see it here. It occurs in North Africa, East Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and on the Indian subcontinent. It's the only hyena species found outside of Africa.

The striped hyena has a similar build to the brown hyena but with a smaller head. They live in small groups and it's estimated that there are less than 10 000 of them left in the world. The striped hyena is nearly endangered.

Sources: nathab.com; africageographic.com; wf.org; krugerpark.co.za; iucnredlist.org; *Stuarts' Field Guide to Mammals of Southern Africa*



Greater flamingos, West Coast National Park

GALLO/GETTYIMAGES.COM



BIRDS

BY FAANSIE PEACOCK

AN ODE TO THE FLAMINGO

It's almost a decade since the Peacock family semigrated to the Cape. We knew we didn't want to live in a city; we wanted to be somewhere where tortoises raid the flower beds and where you occasionally find a chameleon in the garden. So, we ended up in Langebaan.

Everything was strange and new for the first few years. We couldn't get enough of our scenic surroundings. What a shame that even childlike wonder dulls over time... Take the flamboyant flamingos. In Gauteng, I'd hit the brakes and almost roll the Fortuner whenever I saw a few of these feathered ballerinas in a pan.

But here, they're a daily occurrence. In any pool of water – fresh, brackish or salty – you can see these gangly birds. The high-water mark next to the lagoon is littered with pink feathers and the water ripples as thousands of legs churn the mud.

One flamingo with an injured wing has settled on the golf course and it travels between the pools of water on foot. At night his colleagues, on their way to Veldrif or Swakopmund, *honk-honk-honk* over our house.

The other day I did do an emergency stop when I spotted a flamingo on a lawn in Vredenburg... But it turned out to be a plastic ornament!

I'm not the only flamingo fan. Paintings of flamingos have been found in a cave in Spain dating from as far back as 5 000 BC. There are six flamingo species in the world and two occur locally: the greater flamingo and the lesser flamingo. (Clearly a lot of thought went into the naming process...) The differences between the two are subtle, and it helps to go straight to the bill. If it's dark all over, it's a lesser flamingo. If only the tip is dark, it's a greater flamingo.

Their diets also differ. Greater flamingos like to feed on shrimp and smaller water organisms, so they're usually found in the shallows and near the shore. Lesser flamingos specialise in blue-green algae, which thrives in brackish or salty water. They're more inclined to be in deeper water. Both species have webbed toes and can swim well.

Flamingos get their pink colouring from the carotenoid pigments in their food. If you keep a flamingo in a cage without any supplements it will turn as white as snow. If you add carrots to its diet, however, it will pink up again. (Rather get a hamster.)

Apparently, flamingo tongue was a delicacy at ancient Roman feasts. I guess it's understandable if you consider that a flamingo's tongue is a large, swollen organ. It uses its tongue to pump water through small filters along the edge of its bill, all while its head is upside down and often underwater. Try that in a swimming pool!

It's also said that, in times of famine, flamingo parents will peck holes in their own chests and

feed their chicks their blood. Maybe you've seen a photo of it on Facebook. Utter nonsense! The flamingo parents are actually feeding their chicks a liquid they produce in their digestive system. This liquid has a reddish colour, but it's not blood.

Don't expect to find a flamingo nest (a mud mound with a depression on top) in any old place. There are only two sites where they regularly breed in our region: Etosha Pan in Namibia and Sowa Pan in Botswana. Since 2007, lesser flamingos have also been breeding on an S-shaped island built specifically for this purpose in Kamfers Dam near Kimberley. The dam is next to the N12 north of the city.

Breeding attempts often fail. In Etosha, researchers noted that greater flamingos there bred only 17 times in 40 years, and only five of those times could be called "successful". Flamingos are very sensitive to disturbances: In France, an entire colony dispersed because two people ventured too close. Another time, the same colony left after a hot-air balloon landed among their nests. Small, low-flying aircraft are problematic, not to mention natural enemies like fish-eagles and hyenas.

When the chicks (dull grey in colour) are about 10 days old, they leave the nest to join other chicks in a "crèche" on the edge of the colony. Although they can't fly yet, they're able to run very fast and can even swim in an emergency. What happens if the water dries up? They have to walk – sometimes covering up to 80 km.

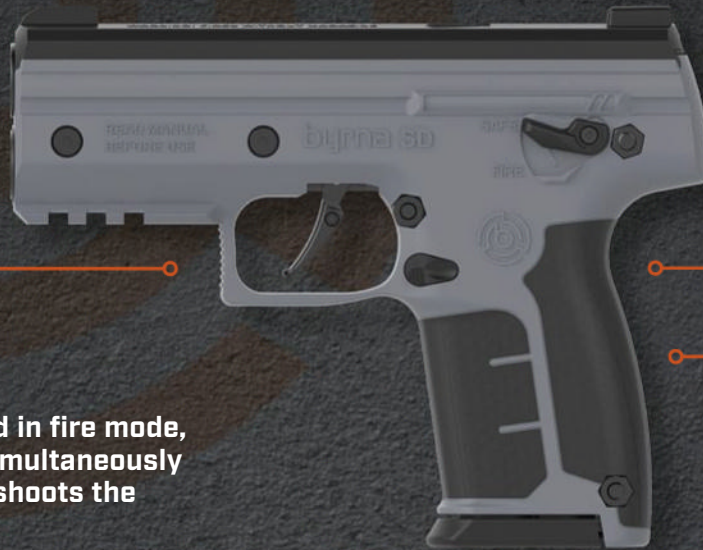
So, now you have another reason to visit the West Coast: flamingos! Who knows, they might even convince you to move here...



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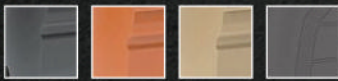
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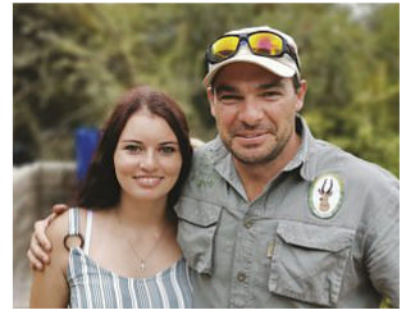
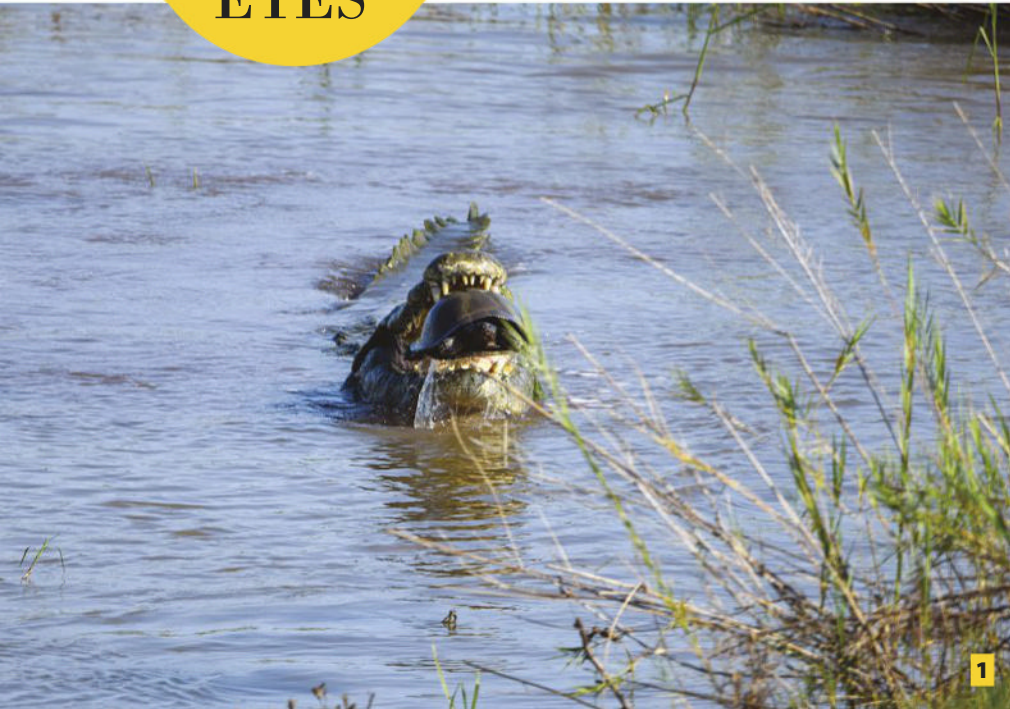
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Chenel Bezuidenhout and her husband **Ernst** are regular visitors to the Kruger Park – they live outside the Paul Kruger gate near Skukuza. But on a recent visit, she saw something she'd never seen before...



After spending some time at the Tshokwane picnic site, we drove south on the H-10 towards Lower Sabie. We pulled over on the bridge across the Sabie River and sat in the car to see if there were any animals around. The first thing that caught our attention was a crocodile lying on a sandbar.

We'd been in the Kruger Park many times before and we knew that it helps to be still for a moment; to look and listen, even if you've stopped for something as "common" as a crocodile.

I shoot with a Nikon D5300 and a Sigma 150 – 600 mm lens. I looked through the camera viewfinder and studied the scene. That's when I saw a second crocodile, floating in the water. I had just started to take photos of the second crocodile when it surfaced with a terrapin in its mouth! **1** The crocodile threw the terrapin into the air **2**, snapped at it **3** and let it fall back into the water. **4**

I kept my shutter button down and fired off shot after shot. Luckily my camera is normally set to Sport mode because things in the park can happen so quickly and unexpectedly! My shutter speed was 1/1 600 second, aperture f6.3 and ISO 400.

The crocodile disappeared underwater and only surfaced again after about five minutes – this time without the terrapin. We don't know if it ate the terrapin, but I suspect it escaped.

We live close to the Kruger and visit the park almost every second weekend, but this was the first time we'd seen a crocodile catch prey and throw it into the air.





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High mountains and hummingbirds

After the Covid pandemic kept them away for two and a half years, **Vivian** and **Hanlie Gericke** reunite with their Land Rover in South America. Next on their list: exotic Ecuador!

PICTURES **VIVIAN GERICKE**

Hiking in Cajas National Park, west of Cuenca.



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Hanlie buys fruit from a roadside stall. Hanlie and Vivian tried some mud therapy at the Piedra de Agua Thermal Baths in Cuenca. Podocarpus National Park, south-east of the town Loja, is renowned for its birdlife and diverse vegetation. Happy Fruit agroecological farm grows cocoa beans, among other produce, and Vivian learnt how to make chocolate.

Below: The well-preserved Cuenca historical centre.

Regular readers will remember that we shipped our Land Rover to South America in 2016. Since then, we've visited the continent five times, exploring for three to four months at a time.

Thankfully we were at home in South Africa when the pandemic struck, but it did delay any travel plans we had at that point. We only managed to return to Peru, where the Landy was stranded, in May 2022. We drove a route along the Andes Mountains, going north, and briefly crossed into Ecuador before crossing back into Peru and locking the Landy up again outside the city of Tumbes. Ecuador's biodiversity impressed us so much that we decided to go back a year later, in April 2023.

This time we crossed the border from Peru with trembling hearts. Because of the clampdown on drug trafficking in Colombia, many cartels have moved their operations to Ecuador and they use the city of Guayaquil near the border as a base. Just before we entered, the decapitated body of a gangster was hung from a bridge in Guayaquil as a warning to rival cartels...

But our fear was tempered somewhat by the excitement of returning to Ecuador, a small but diverse country. (It's only 21% the size of South

Africa.) From the border, we mainly followed the Andes as we drove north, experiencing a different landscape around every corner. Ecuador can broadly be divided into five habitats: the Andes, the coastal plains, the cloud forest and the Amazon rainforest to the east. It also owns the Galápagos Islands, a thousand kilometres to the west.

There are more than 1 600 recorded bird species in Ecuador (South Africa has about 850) and more than 25 000 recorded plant species – more than the whole of the USA. About 17% of the landscape falls within protected areas.

As the name suggests, Ecuador straddles the equator and tropical fruit grows in abundance. We camped close to the city of Machala for three nights, on a farm called Happy Fruit (fincahappyfruit.com), where owner Tanya Romero farms sustainably with fruit and cocoa beans.

"I believe in preparing every part of the fruit or vegetable for a meal," she told us during dinner one evening. "That includes the peel and the pips. I grate jackfruit pips to make flour, which we use to make bread."

As a starter, she served us green banana, the peel fried in thin strips and the flesh grated and fried as a crunchy patty.



A place to retire

Zaruma is about 100 km south-east of Machala. It's an isolated former gold-mining town that reminded us a bit of Pilgrim's Rest, with the same wooden buildings and Wild West vibe. Because of extensive mining in the past, the town has been hollowed out underneath in many parts. A few months before our visit, a section of the town caved in and a few houses disappeared into the gaping hole...

We parked the Landy close to the main square, where we met a local writer called Mauricio Carrion. He was once a minister in Ecuador's parliament and later an ambassador in Sweden. He invited us to park in front of his rambling, dilapidated house, which he told us had been ransacked of electrical fittings during Covid. He offered us cognac and shared stories and photos of him with various political dignitaries. We were grateful to be able to have a (cold) shower by candlelight.

We popped the rooftop tent and spent the night in the street, but not before answering numerous questions from curious passers-by. On the main square, a young woman invited us to the tourist bureau where our details were recorded, and our photos were taken for the town's Instagram account. When we left, with a police escort guiding us through the maze of narrow cobbled streets, we felt like celebrities.

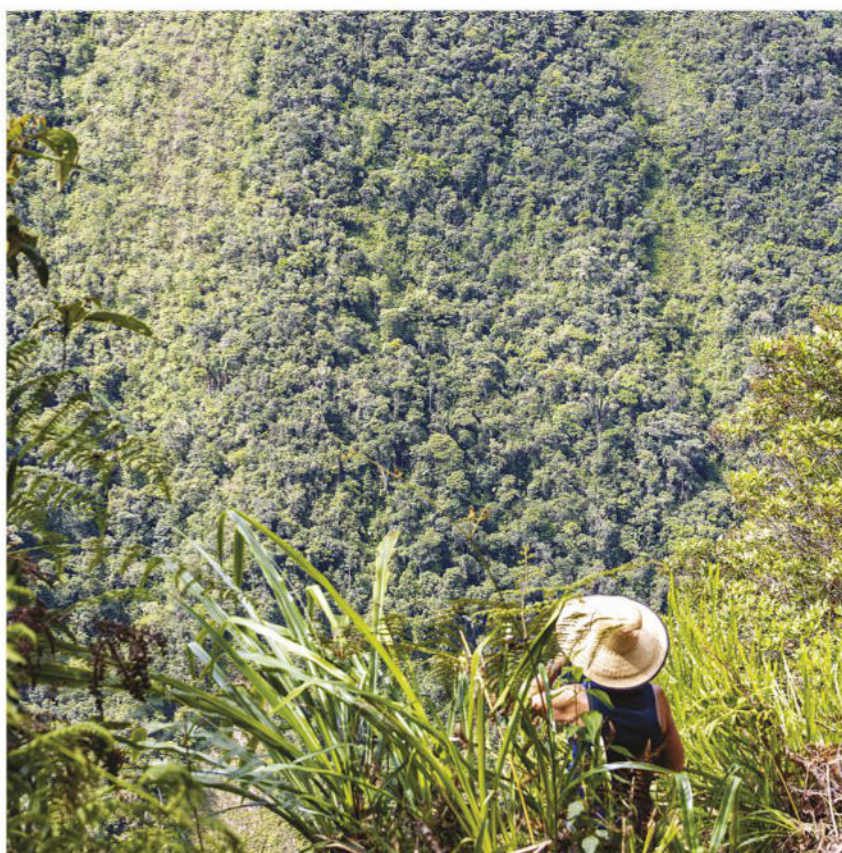
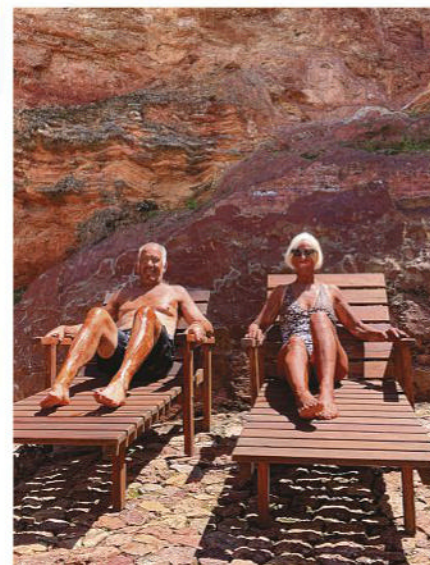
Our next stop was the city of Cuenca, which was in far better shape than Zaruma. The cobblestone streets scrolled past well-kept colonial buildings, and entrance to all the museums was free. We took a stroll along the Tomebamba River, with its unique hanging houses all along the steep bank.

One of those houses is now the Remigio Crespo Toral Museum. You enter the building at river level, work your way through the various rooms and exit on the fifth floor, straight into the city centre.

We also went to the Pumapungo Museum, which depicts the history of Ecuador with displays of life in times gone by.

As we ambled around the historical centre (Centro Historico), with its beautiful, restored buildings, Hanlie and I agreed: Cuenca is a place where we could easily live. And that's exactly what many North Americans do: They retire here. With a population of about 450 000, Cuenca is quite small. The climate is moderate, the people are friendly and it's relatively cheap and safe.

We were also offered free entry to the Piedra de Agua Thermal Baths. We obliged but felt quite self-conscious. Mud baths are not really our thing.



Clockwise, from top left: Hanlie marvels at the Ingapirca architecture. The couple got permission to camp on a private farm with a volcano in the distance. The small town of Baños is at the foot of an active volcano. It had a lovely green campsite. The train at La Nariz del Diablo is not currently in operation, but when it was running it had to reverse into a dead-end to change direction. Market day in Alausi is a highlight of the week. Young and old dress up in traditional clothes to sell and socialise.

Did you know that the famous Panama hat doesn't come from Panama, but from Ecuador? Cuenca is one of the important centres for the manufacturing of these hats. They're breathable and light – made from fine toquilla straw from the coast. The straw is boiled and then dried before being woven by hand. The quality of the hat is measured by the weave count per inch, anything from 100 to 2 000. The higher the weave count, the more expensive the hat.

It was a treat to watch an expert weaver at work. Seemingly without looking, she bound the straws into the final product.

Although there was no room in our small Landy for such delicate articles, Hanlie couldn't resist and yet another straw hat made its way to South Africa...

To the west of Cuenca, at altitudes of 3 000–4 700 m, is Parque Nacional Cajas. Our day hike on a loop trail in the park took us around lakes in a landscape reminiscent of Scotland – cold, windy and wet.

We also visited Ingapirca, about a two-hour drive north of Cuenca, and the site of the largest known Inca ruins in Ecuador. It's not nearly on the scale of Machu Picchu in Peru (about 1 300 km to the south as the condor flies), but it's still fascinating to stand there and ponder the vastness of the Inca network and imagine what it must have been like at its heyday, with its temples, command centres and communication routes all along the Andes.

We drove another two hours north to the narrow-gauge railway at La Nariz del Diablo (the Devil's Nose) near Alausi. The zigzagging tracks through a steep valley were once part of a railway line from the city of Guayaquil to Quito. When it opened in 1910, it reduced a nine-day mule trek to two days by train.

A ride on this train was once Ecuador's main tourist attraction and delivered heart-in-the-mouth moments with near-vertical drops on the sides of the carriage. The train would chug up the steep valley by advancing and then reversing at a series of dead-ends in the track.

Unfortunately for us, the train had been out of operation since Covid. Nevertheless, it was still impressive to stand on the nose of the devil and peer into the depths of the abyss below.

In the small town of Alausi, we camped for a few nights in a resident's backyard. When he mentioned that the next day was market day, we were excited to experience it. During our travels, we're always intrigued to see how people still adhere to centuries-old traditions – market day is one of those traditions. There's more to it than simply exchanging goods; market day is the social highlight of the week. The farmers from outlying areas bring their families and everyone dresses in colourful traditional clothes to sell produce, socialise and catch up on the latest gossip, just as they did 500 years ago.



Each town has a specific day, known as *día de mercado*. Neighbouring towns have theirs on different days to give the farmers a chance to participate in more than one market in a week.

Volcano higher than Everest?

Apart from lying on the equator, Ecuador is also on the horseshoe-shaped Pacific Ring of Fire, a massive tectonic belt that skirts the Pacific Ocean, known for volcanoes and earthquakes. The country has more than 50 volcanoes; eight of them are active and erupt from time to time.

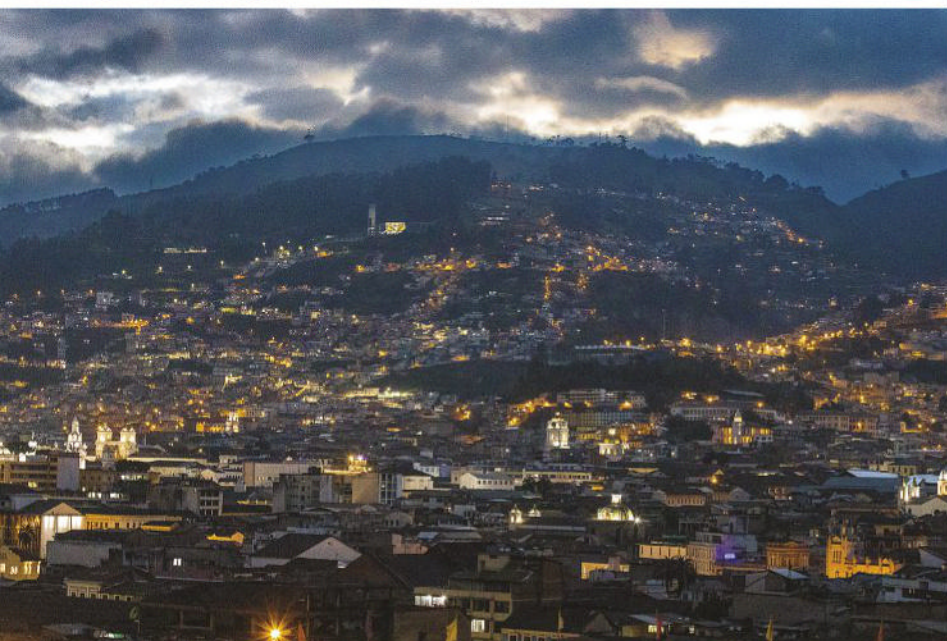
Baños is a small town at the foot of one such active volcano, called Tungurahua. It was dormant for years but activity restarted in 1999. Tourists flock here for the hot springs and various waterfalls that pour down the mountainsides.

We spent a few days in a campsite with green lawns next to a raging river within walking distance of all the attractions.

Next stop was another volcano – this time a dormant one. At 6 263 m above sea level, Chimborazo is the highest mountain in Ecuador and the highest point in the Andes north of Peru. It's also the furthest point from the centre of the earth. Huh? Well, the earth has what's called an "oblate spheroid shape", which means it's slightly squashed and wider at the equator. Since Chimborazo is right on the equator, it's summit is further from the earth's centre than the summit of Everest. Now you know.

It's a popular, if dangerous, mountain to climb. We hiked to just above base camp at 5 100 m, passing many graves of climbers who had not managed to tame this giant. The air was thin and since Hanlie and I were not acclimatised to the altitude, we had to rest every few steps.





Clockwise, from top left: Cotopaxi seen from a distance during the Gerickes' first visit in 2022. Birds are a big attraction in the town of Mindo. Restaurants like Los Armadillos Café have birdfeeders outside and you can also feed a hummingbird. The view over Quito from the hostel.

Next stop, Quito. On our way there, we turned off at Parque Nacional Cotopaxi, which surrounds the almost perfectly symmetrical, snow-capped mountain of the same name. At 5 897 m – two metres higher than Kilimanjaro – it's one of the world's highest active volcanoes.

We had visited the park previously, in July 2022. Cotopaxi is a popular mountain to summit and during that first visit we hiked to where the snow line starts at about 5 000 m, just above the base camp hut. (We were acclimatised to altitude then and one can drive quite high up, so it was not a difficult hike.)

This time, we were perplexed to find the mountain without any snow whatsoever. Could this be due to climate change? Apparently not: Cotopaxi had since become active and was spewing out ash, which had melted the snow!

Quito and surrounds

At an altitude of 2 850 m, Quito is one of the highest capital cities in the world. It sits between two spurs of the Andes – a long, narrow city with high mountains on both sides. Quito was founded almost 500 years ago and the colonial architecture has been well preserved. We couldn't find any places to camp in the city, so we stayed in the Secret Garden Hostel (secretgardenquito.com) with a view over the city from the garden on the fourth-floor terrace.

Most cities in South America offer free walking tours, which is an excellent way to familiarise yourself with the lay of the land. In Quito, we did three such tours. Our favourite was the one that focused on traditional local food. Our guide took us from one small, family-run eatery to the next. One of the stops sold sweet treats: We bought *habas*, which are toasted beans covered in sugary candy.

In the cloud forest to the north-west of Quito lies the one-street town of Mindo, described by some as the "birding capital of the world". Thanks to the habitat diversity on the slopes of the Andes, more than 500 species have been recorded in the area, including 20 different hummingbirds and other charismatic species like toucans and parrots.

Most of the town's establishments and restaurants have bird feeders outside, including the Los Armadillos Café where there were so many hummingbirds that it sounded like mosquitoes buzzing around our heads!

We camped outside town for a few days. With binoculars always at the ready, we tried our best to identify as many birds as we could. But the task proved overwhelming. Next time we'll go with a professional guide.

North of Quito is Otavalo, where the local women still wear traditional black and white dresses and the men often have Inca-like braided ponytails. The Otavalos are known for their excellent handcrafts, especially woven products. On Saturdays, the market becomes one of the largest in South America and takes over the main square, Plaza de los Ponchos.

This is the best place in Ecuador to buy crafts, and Hanlie did not hold back... As the name of the plaza says, she added a poncho to her collection!

A few days later we were on our way to the border with Colombia, in a Landy full of goodies and our heads full of high mountains and hummingbirds.

NEXT MONTH: Vivian and Hanlie spend 10 days on the Galápagos Islands.



Hanlie and Vivian on a hike up the Chimborazo volcano. At this point they were further from the centre of the earth than the summit of Mount Everest.

QUICK FACTS

Approximate daily budget? Ecuador is relatively cheap – cheaper than South Africa. We spent less than R1 400 per day. Fuel is subsidised: During our visit, diesel sold for less than R9/ℓ.

Currency? Ecuador gave up its local currency, the Sucre, for the US dollar in 2000. Ecuadorians told us this brought financial stability to the country, although not without pain. The switch caused many families to lose all their life savings and many banks went bust during the turmoil. Ecuador, Panama and El Salvador use the dollar as currency and Argentina has recently vowed to follow suit.

Getting around? Flights to Quito are cumbersome from South Africa as you first have to transfer through São Paulo, Europe or the USA. Within Ecuador, there are lots of buses and airlines to choose from.

Camping? Camping as we know it in South Africa hardly exists. We use the iOverland app ([ioverlander.com](https://www.ioverlander.com)) and we almost always found somewhere to park our car and enjoy a safe night. Camping in protected areas is free, but that mostly means that the rangers allow you to park your camper in the parking area.

Safety? We were welcomed with open arms and we never experienced any safety threats despite our concerns about cartel activity. Note that at the time of going to print, Ecuador was under a state of emergency due to an internal war between the cartels and the army. Overland travel is currently not feasible.

Handy resources? Information is hard to come by. We mainly used the Thomas Cook Travellers guide *Ecuador & the Galápagos Islands* and asked advice from other overlanders and the locals.

Visas? South African passport holders can get a free 90-day tourist visa at the border.

Follow the Gerickes on Instagram @between2safaris

MEET THE AUTHORS

VIVIAN AND HANLIE GERICKE

In their previous lives, Hanlie was a biology teacher and Vivian was a consulting engineer. Over the years, they travelled with their three children through southern Africa. When they retired in 2016, they looked for new adventures and decided on South America. In October 2016, they shipped their Land Rover Defender to Montevideo in Uruguay and went overlanding through Patagonia (see issue #150). Since then, they've travelled through Peru, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, French Guiana, Suriname, Chile, Argentina, Colombia and Ecuador (see issues #167 to #171). Their vehicle is now in Mexico. They've driven more than 70 000 km and crossed international borders 54 times.

During 2024, they plan to explore Mexico, the USA and Canada.



Weg! Stapfees go! FESTIVAL OF Hiking

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OUR FIRST HIKING FESTIVAL WAS A GREAT SUCCESS

Hundreds of enthusiastic outdoor fans participated in the first *go!* Festival of Hiking, brought to you by Hi-Tec. Here are some of the highlights.

Hikers of all ages, fitness levels and experience came together at Meerendal Wine Estate outside Durbanville to take part in a weekend of outdoor fun. Participants travelled from as far as Robertson and Beaufort West, even Amanzimtoti!

The inaugural *go!* Festival of Hiking took place from 16 to 18 February, with different distances and trails offered on each day.

• On **Friday** at 6 pm, the first group of about 200 hikers set off on a leisurely 5 km walk among the vineyards. It wasn't long before strangers were chatting to each other like old friends. Later, people *kuiered* around the

braai fires while musicians and performers kept everyone entertained.

• **Saturday** was the main day of the festival – more than 700 hikers participated in the 5 km, 12.5 km and 25 km events. The two longer distances included a steep trek up Dorstberg, before taking in the farms in the area.

• On **Sunday**, the final hike kicked off at 8 am. The 10 km trail followed a beautiful route including both sides of Meerendal Estate, along the dam and around the hill.

The weekend ended on a high note when great prizes sponsored by Hi-Tec and Stanley South Africa were handed out.

We hope to see you again next year!

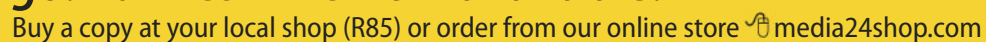


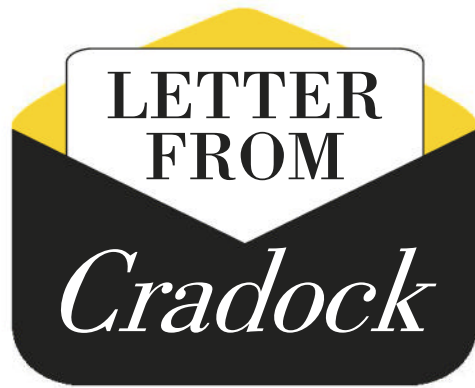
GO! FESTIVAL OF HIKING PROMOTION

An aerial view of a festival site set up on a grassy field. A large white tent is the central feature, surrounded by smaller blue and white tents. A black banner with the 'NI-TEC' logo runs along the perimeter of the site. In the background, there are rolling hills, some covered in green vegetation and others in brown, under a clear blue sky.

An aerial view of a hiking trail winding through a hilly landscape. A large crowd of hikers is seen from behind, walking along a dirt path that cuts through a field of dry, brown grass. In the distance, there are rolling hills, some covered in green vegetation and others in brown, under a clear blue sky.



SOLUTION ON **PAGE 102**



A walk to the spring on his family farm in the Karoo never fails to elevate **Toast Coetzer's** spirit.

After breakfast, I round up Misha and Billy Bob. I find them on the stoep and I don't even have to say anything. I just give them a look and they know: walkies!

Misha is an elderly Labrador and walks with a limp, but there's still plenty of life in her tail-wag. Billy Bob is a rescue, mostly Border collie judging by his flamboyant tail. A visitor from the city, Billy Bob is on the farm for the December holidays.

The spring is about 700m from the farmstead, upstream along a little river. At the spring, water is diverted into a furrow that leads to a cement dam near the house. The water is used to irrigate my mother's expansive garden: flowers and vegetables, plus a small orchard of fruit and walnut trees.

This walk is a farm ritual. Any guests visiting my mom will almost certainly be encouraged to do it. Besides being fun, a walk to the spring also has a practical application: As you walk, you must keep an eye on the furrow and stoop to remove any blockages like rocks or branches that might have been kicked into the furrow by kudu or livestock.

I leave the fenced farmyard via a small, ancient gate, holding it open for Billy Bob and Misha. Misha immediately waddles towards the furrow and lies down in its ankle-deep water. Billy Bob is less interested in getting wet. Instead, he sniffs all the foreign smells that he never gets to experience in Cape Town: baboon droppings, warthog spoor, a whiff of scrub hare. Nothing like the chicken bones and car tyres of the city pavements.

The weather is strange. Heavy clouds billow over the mountains from the west, but they're moving too fast – it will rain further east today. "Our turn will come," I hear my mother's voice in my head. There's no breeze down here though, just a hushed sense of anticipation, as if the creatures of the veld are also watching the skies with bated breath.

How many times have I walked to the spring? I grew up here and did the walk with my brother, sister and parents almost every weekend when we were home from boarding school.

The path is shaded by sweet thorn trees. They're in bloom now, with scented yellow flowers like twinkling Christmas decorations – no surprise that we always use such a flowering branch as our Christmas tree.

The dogs are relaxed. Since neither is young anymore, they don't scam off after every noise in the veld. Misha has seen it all. She has spent her whole glorious life on this farm. Billy Bob's ears prick up from time to time, but he trots along steadily, sometimes leading, sometimes lagging.

We pass through a second small gate and enter the camp where the spring is situated. Soon the path slips under the exotic leafiness of a poplar grove. The furrow runs along the riverbank here, bottlenecked for the last 150m or so to the spring. Misha spots a pool in the river and galumphs into it, pleased to the bone.

Inside the poplar grove, a different, more solemn mood prevails. Not heavy, mind you – more like the feeling you get when you enter a heigh-ceilinged church full of shafts of sunlight shot through with specks of dust. It elevates your spirit.

I reach the end of the furrow and look at the place where the spring bubbles from a shallow pool. How many others have stood here before, looking at the water and thanking the heavens for its presence? Without this water, people would not have lived on this farm. I do the right thing and express my gratitude, too.

I hear clicking hoofs on rock from the steep slope on the opposite riverbank: They're four young kudus, as stately as bishops parading along a cobblestoned street.

The dogs are waiting. Wordlessly, I turn around and so do they. With every step I take, I feel more connected. Flanked by two faithful dogs and with nature's softness nudging me from all sides, I understand myself better. I doubt I would have become the person I am today without this very walk to the spring, and all previous times I've done it.

Do the dogs realise this? They look at me and seem to know.

This walk is a farm ritual. Any guests visiting my mom will almost certainly be encouraged to do it.

AFRICA AT ITS BEST

On day three of the Whale Trail (5 days, 55 km) in De Hoop Nature Reserve near Bredasdorp, the route follows the coastline from the overnight huts at Noetsie to a hut called Hamerkop. Verna Jooste from Cape Town pauses to appreciate the view towards Stilgat, a popular rest spot for hikers where you can swim and explore a huge sea cave. (Bring a torch!)

Between June and November, hundreds of southern right whales congregate along this protected stretch of coast to mate and calve. When Jean Tresfon and Dr Els Vermeulen did an aerial survey in 2023, they counted 587 whales at De Hoop between Koppie Alleen and Cape Infanta!

Find out more: 📍 capenature.co.za; 📧 dehoopcollection.com

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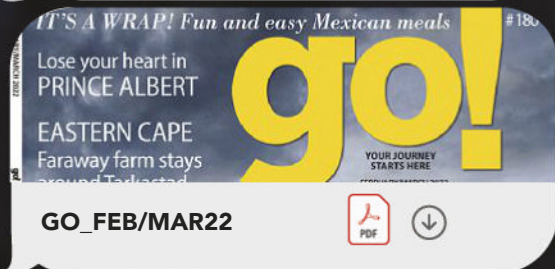
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