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#188

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your inner muse

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go!

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JUNE – JULY 2023

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Get breathless in Lesotho – no 4x4 required
See penguins by the thousand on South Georgia

*Discover the other Stellenbosch
in the Dwaarsrivier Valley*

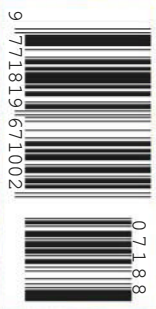
NEXT WEEKEND Lie low at Lapamanti near Lydenburg

GO GREEN Good gear for eco-friendly adventures

KIDS Say hello to the endangered Cape parrot

DAY TRAIL Look for leopards in Komati Gorge

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On 11 June it's time for one of South Africa's most legendary races – the Comrades. Here's a look at the history of this ultramarathon.

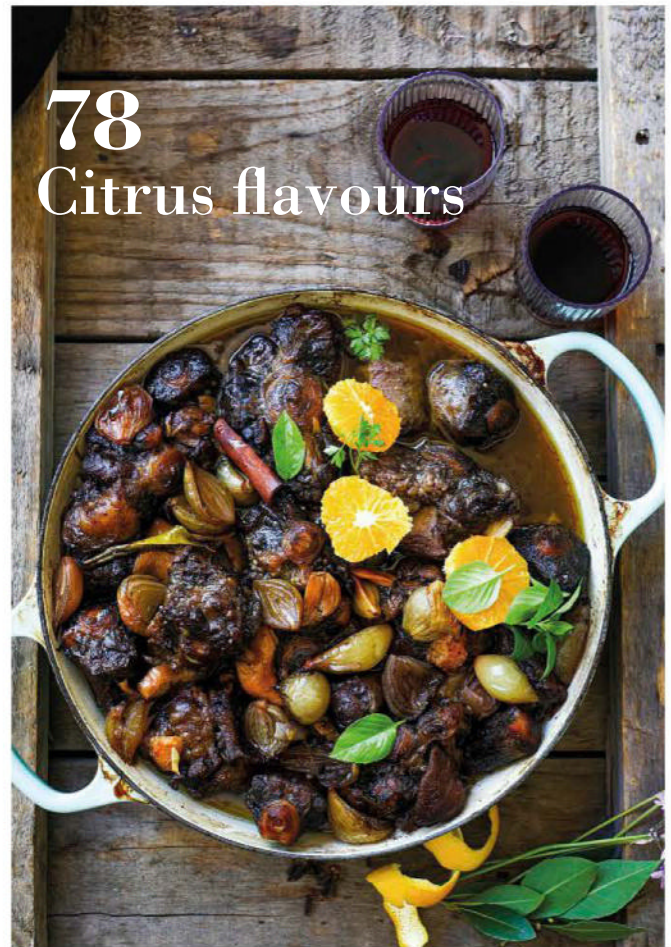
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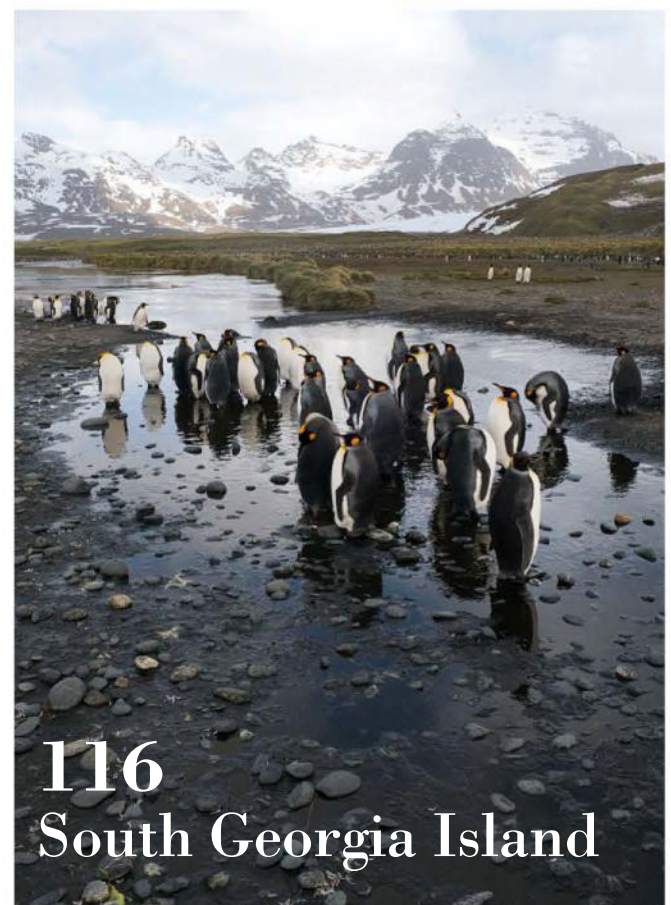
"One night after supper, I slipped away from the fire and got into my bakkie. I wound down the windows of the Hilux, inserted the CD and played the lion track nice and loud..."

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SHELLEY CHRISTIANS



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TOAST COETZER



SUSPENSION
EQUIPMENT

TAKING OFF-ROADING FROM MILD TO WILD

Off-road enthusiasts are in for the ride of their lives with the launch of internationally acclaimed suspension brand, RAW 4x4 in South Africa. The 4x4 suspension range boasts heavy-duty shock absorbers, coil and leaf springs, polyurethane bushes and torsion bars, designed and tested in Australia, in some of the most diverse and demanding terrain in the world.

The RAW 4x4 range is designed to suit all kinds of 4W driver, whether their adventures take them on tough off-road tracks, the concrete jungle or a combination of both. "It is essential that your 4x4 is equipped with the right suspension components", says Louis Fourie, General Manager of Suspension Solutions at G.U.D. Holdings. "If you are considering fitting load bearing aftermarket accessories, travelling prolonged periods on corrugated roads or just want to improve the performance of your 4WD vehicle, you should upgrade your suspension to suit your needs. Our range has a solution for you," he said.

Raw Nitro for Heavy Duty:

Nitro is a gas shock absorber that will improve the ride quality with reduced body roll and increased vehicle stability. It is well suited to the recreational 4W driver who is looking to lift the vehicle and improve overall suspension performance and longer life when compared to the original equipment (OE).



RAW Nitro Max for Extra Heavy Duty performance:

The RAW Nitro Max strut range brings uncompromising toughness without the loss of comfort and control. Ideal for carrying heavy loads over demanding terrain, the Nitro Max is built on a proven truck absorber design with highly tuned valving.



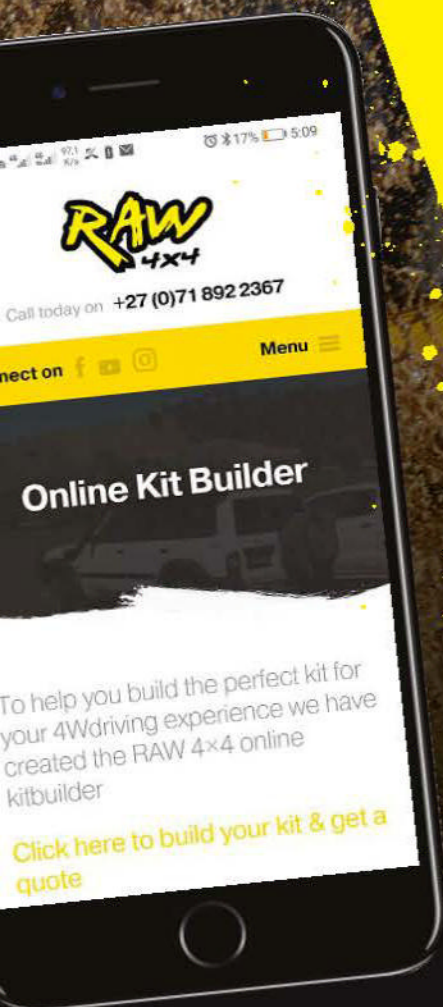
RAW 4x4 has designed a wide range of solutions to attack the terrain with confidence, whether you are travelling prolonged periods on corrugated roads or just want to improve performance.

Accessories can turn any vehicle into the perfect 4WD driving machine but it is important that your suspension is specced to accommodate them. To help you build the perfect kit for your 4W driving experience we have created an online kit builder. The RAW 4x4 online kit builder has been specifically designed to allow you to tailor make your suspension kit based on the accessories that are fitted to your vehicle such as bull bars, canopies and drawer systems. Once you have entered all your vehicle specifications simply click on the "Get a Quote" button at the bottom of the page and our sales team will contact you to discuss.

Leading brands from G.U.D. Holdings, include GUD Filters, Safeline Brake Pads, Indy Oil, Fram Filters and Holts are known for their quality and performance. RAW 4x4 is no different. "We are excited to bring RAW 4x4 to the local market. I believe that Africa is ready for the quality and performance RAW 4x4 suspension offers. We look forward to helping you discover your perfect off-road driving solution," said Fourie.

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RONEL STEYN



Raise the roof

It's a quirk of human nature that makes us think we have to travel thousands of kilometres and spend a small fortune to enjoy a truly foreign holiday. Sometimes we're so intent on peering at a distant horizon that we forget to knock on the door of our own exotic neighbours like Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Eswatini and Mozambique.

Or we forget to look up – at a kingdom in the sky that South Africa wears like a jagged

crown on its head. Lesotho might have seemed inaccessible in the past because of its mountains, snowy winters and roads that only a 4x4 could navigate. It is, after all, the only country in the world where every square centimetre of its territory is more than 1 000m above sea level. Even Nepal, home of the Himalayas, has a low point of 60m!

Unlike Toast Coetzer, I've never set foot in Antarctica (p 116) but I have been to more than 40 countries on all the other continents, and to this day I regret waiting until I was well into my 50s before I visited Lesotho. I've been making up for lost time ever since, trying to visit at least once a year. Like Evan Naudé in his feature on p 36, I'm always amazed by the mountain passes, wild landscapes and natural wonders so unlike anything we find in the Republic. With excellent new tar roads criss-crossing Lesotho (thanks, China), inaccessibility isn't an issue anymore.

Earlier this year, my wife Ronel and I were sitting on the deck at Sani Mountain Escape after ordering beers in the highest pub in Africa. I had my binoculars in hand, she had her camera, and we hoped to spot one of the bearded vultures that cruise the thermals in these parts.

We soon became distracted by the activity of what seemed like hundreds of gerbils around the deck. They were Sloggett's ice rats – short-tailed and plump rodents that have adapted to live at altitudes of more than 2 600m above sea level. These had built a massive burrow underneath the deck – they darted out to forage, then stood upright on a sunny rock to soak up a bit of heat. Some scanned the sky for raptors, others looked around furtively for challengers who wanted a warm perch of their own. Every now and then, a furious boxing match lasting two or three seconds would ensue. We found ourselves rooting for one little fellow (inset) who proved particularly adept at defending his place in the sun.

A bit like Lesotho itself, punching far above its weight.

Pierre

PIERRE STEYN

PSteyn@media24.com

DON'T MISS OUR NEXT ISSUE!

The Aug/Sep issue will be on sale at your retailer from 28 July 2023.

BEHIND THE SCENES



When **Marchelle van Zyl** is not writing and taking photos, she runs a tour company in Montagu called Flying Feet. She loves unlocking the history of small towns for visitors, so she was the perfect person to write about the Dwarsrivier Valley near Stellenbosch (p 44).

What were the highlights? I was overwhelmed by the sincerity of the residents. I walked the streets to take photos and people would stop to talk to me and invite me into their homes – a complete stranger!

Why should people visit the valley? It's a hidden paradise – the scenery is indescribable. But it's also changing as the older generation passes on and property companies discover and develop the area.

What surprised you? The hiking and cycling trails in the Banhoek Conservancy are well maintained and the views are wonderful. I also loved Lanquedoc. It's an architectural treasure chest – Sir Herbert Baker designed the village. Most of the houses are still in great condition. I really hope measures are taken to conserve the community's way of life and the architecture.

Describe a perfect day in the Dwarsrivier Valley.

Walk, run or ride in the Banhoek Conservancy, then have coffee at Beker en Bord or Banhoek Chilli Oil Company. Walk through the valley with a guide and explore the history and wine estates of the area. End your day with a glass of sauvignon blanc at Delaire Graff and watch the sunset over the valley.

Your next adventure? I'm going to hike the Whale Trail this winter. I also dream of doing a tour on my bicycle one day. I'll start close to home to work out how to do it and what I'll need. Then I'll venture further, maybe to Namibia.

What's always in your backpack? My Swiss army knife (gifted to me by a Swiss tourist), a sachet of Rehidrat and a first aid kit. A sarong is light and versatile – I use it as a sheet, blanket, tablecloth, towel, shade netting... And duct tape, of course. Duct tape can fix anything.

Visit flyingfeet.co.za before your next visit to Montagu.

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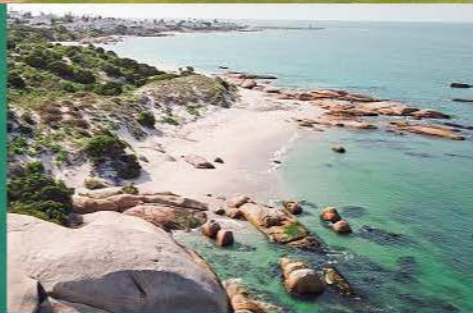
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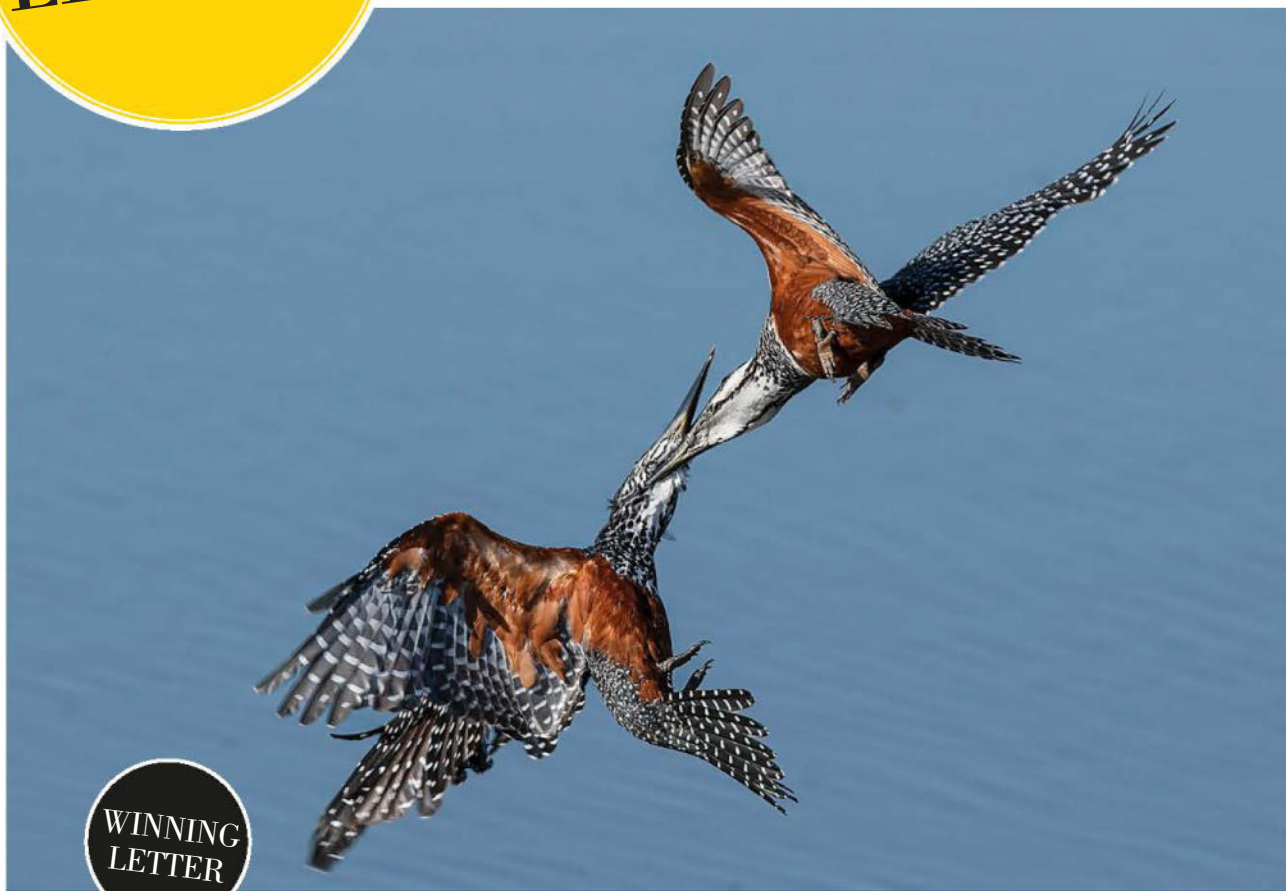
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Where have you been? What have you seen?

Write to 📧 editor@gomag.co.za

COMPILED BY MARTINETTE LOUW



WINNING
LETTER

📌 A fight in flight

We recently stopped at Sunset Dam near Lower Sabie in the Kruger Park to have our morning coffee. We noticed a giant kingfisher on the wall of the weir – it called out incessantly. A second kingfisher landed right next to the first one. They glared at each other for a long time, then suddenly grabbed each other by the throat.

This kicked off a big battle – they fought on the wall, in the air, back on the wall... they even threw each other into the water. After an ominous silence, only one bird emerged. We thought the other had drowned, but it flew away soon after. What an experience!

MARIE BOTHA, Boksburg

WRITE TO US & WIN!

Marie wins a set of Zartek ZA-723 two-way radios worth R1 760. The ZA-723 has clear, loud audio with a reach of up to 6 km outdoors, depending on the terrain. You can choose from 16 pre-programmed licence-free channels. It has a compact and robust hard casing and includes a USB desktop charging stand and mains adaptor. 📧 zartek.co.za

Zartek



SPEAK TO US

Send your letters to 📧 editor@gomag.co.za – include your name, surname and where you live. Please also include a photo if you have one (at least 2 MB in size). We reserve the right to edit and shorten letters, and use your photos elsewhere in the magazine, on our digital platforms and in our marketing material.

➤ Marakele is a must

In March 2023, I ran the 10 km event at the Marakele Marathon in Marakele National Park near Thabazimbi. It was wonderful to run surrounded by wild animals. I'd like to thank the park for a really well-organised event.

I used the opportunity to camp in the park for a few days. The new swimming pool in Bontle rest camp had just been opened and the campsite and ablution facilities were clean and well maintained.

There's so much to do in Marakele. There are game drives, hikes, 4x4 trails – and the views are amazing, like this one from the Lenong viewpoint.

It really is a special place where you can slow down and enjoy nature.

LYNN VAN TONDER, Rustenburg

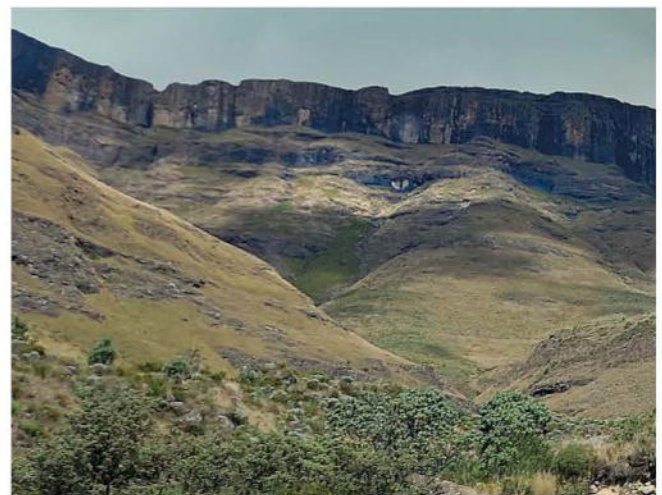


♥ A full river and a rainbow

I photographed Augrabies Falls in March 2023, when the Orange River came down in spate. It was basically raining – mist sprayed up from the thunderous waves, making it hard to take photos. I hid my phone under my shirt and brought it out quickly to capture the waterfall and this rainbow.

I like how the rainbow leads your eye from the rock in the bottom of the frame, across the gorge, up the waterfall and off into the beautiful blue sky.

DESIREE SCHLOOZ, Edenvale



⚡ Here be dragons

We recently visited the Drakensberg. One of the highlights of the trip was driving Sani Pass into Lesotho. We took lots of photos of the mountains and couldn't get enough of the scenery.

Back home, we went through our photos and couldn't figure out why we'd taken this specific one. Maybe we wanted to show the kids the majesty of the Berg? We looked closer, used our imaginations, and there it was: the eye of a reptile, the nostrils, the mouth and a dewlap – is that the dragon of the Drakensberg?

The pass is unforgettable – everyone should drive it at least once.

JOHANN & HELETTE TURCK, Lambert's Bay

Want to know more about destinations like Augrabies, Marakele and the Drakensberg?

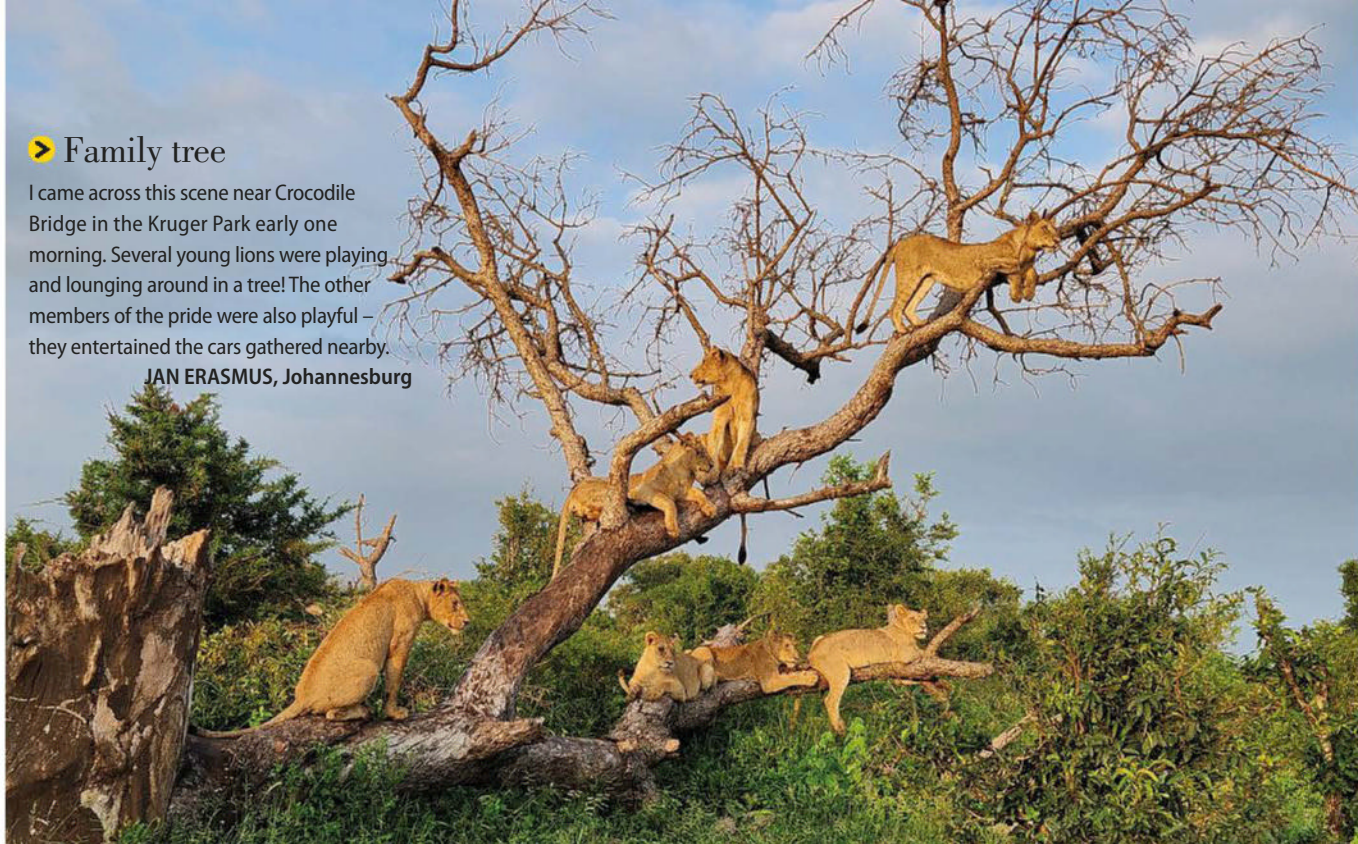
The 2023 issue of go! Wild Places (R125) is on shelf, featuring all of South Africa's favourite national parks and nature reserves. You can also order a copy at media24shop.com or e-mail yumna.tofey@media24.com



> Family tree

I came across this scene near Crocodile Bridge in the Kruger Park early one morning. Several young lions were playing and lounging around in a tree! The other members of the pride were also playful – they entertained the cars gathered nearby.

JAN ERASMUS, Johannesburg



^ Dirt road to nowhere

In March, we decided to hook up our camping trailer and go explore. This photo was taken on the longest dirt road of our trip – a district one between Middelpos and Williston in the Great Karoo. (There was no road number we could see.) We hadn't planned to drive this road, but someone at Gannaga Lodge in the Tankwa Karoo National Park told us it was worth it. There was no cellphone reception and no filling stations, just a long, beautiful stretch.

JENNI BUCK, Durban North



^ Are you a night owl, too?

I'm a Brazilian biologist, artist and photographer and I've been living in Cape Town since 2020. I've been working in the field as a bird researcher. On a trip in July 2022, I saw this spotted eagle-owl in the farmlands between Swellendam and De Hoop Nature Reserve.

It was one of those lazy, cold winter mornings when you wish you could snooze your alarm for a few minutes more. I was on my way to monitor birds for the day when the owl woke up from its slumber right in the middle of the gravel road. It flew to the nearest fence post, just as sleepy as everybody else.

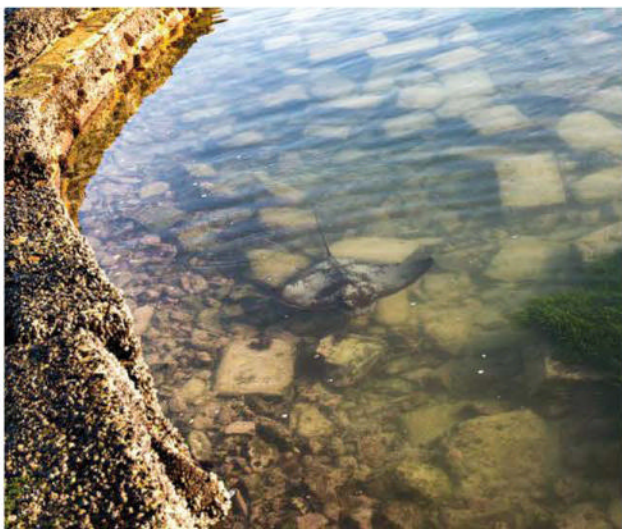
NATHALIA SERPA, Muizenberg



^ Behave yourself!

I photographed this female orb-web spider in my garden late one afternoon – if you look closely you can see the much smaller male at the top of the web. It was the first time I'd seen a male and female together. I read up about the species afterwards: Apparently, the male is very careful around the female – if he irritates her, she'll eat him before they can mate!

RIAAN HAMMOND, Hartenbos



▲ The return of the ray

I spotted some eagle rays in the Strand tidal pool earlier this year. It was rainy and windy and I couldn't get a good photo. I returned at low tide whenever the weather conditions were good, but didn't see anything for about a month.

I got lucky in early April when I photographed this ray. I walked along the wall of the tidal pool and had to take a quick shot – I couldn't admire the ray for too long because I was worried the waves might push me off the wall and I'd end up in the water with my camera!

HANNEKE FOURIE-BENEKE, Strand



◀ Have cat, will travel

I recently reread the February/March 2022 issue of *go!* and thoroughly enjoyed the article "Paw Patrol" where readers shared how they travel with their dogs.

When establishments promote themselves as pet-friendly, they generally mean that dogs are welcome. In April 2022, a tiny kitten joined our family. Miss Lucy has already travelled the length and breadth of South Africa in the year she has been with us. She's just as enthusiastic about staying in chalets as she is adventuring in our pop-top Toyota Land Cruiser.

When we camp in our Cruiser, she maintains a general radius of 20 m and can be trusted to shoot back to the vehicle and her hidey-hole if she gets a fright. It's good to know other people are sharing adventures with their four-legged fur-babies, too.

KERRITH FRASER, Pietermaritzburg

♥ You'll be missed, Sammy

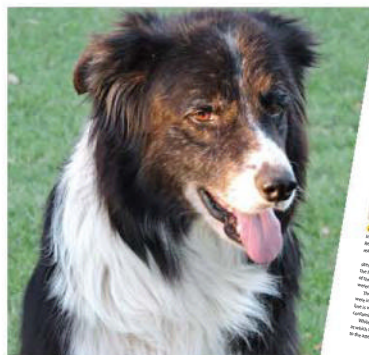
I'm part of the team at Amanzi Trails River Camp on the banks of the Orange River near Noordoewer in Namibia. Amanzi Trails' beloved border collie Sammy was very popular with our guests and many of your readers.

Sammy passed away peacefully in March, aged 14 years. He was the sweetest and most gentle camp dog. He always came out to welcome guests with a big wag of his tail and would make regular visits to everyone's campsite, lying quietly in the hope of getting a juicy titbit.

He adored children and would spend hours playing with them at the water's edge or joining in their cricket or rugby games on the lawns. He loved rolling rocks around and even featured in your magazine, in the October 2016 issue – he and a human friend spent three memorable days playing fetch with stones.

He will be sorely missed by all Amanzi staff and guests. Sammy, our river camp will not be the same without you.

COLLEEN DE VILLIERS, Noordoewer



♥ Island style forever

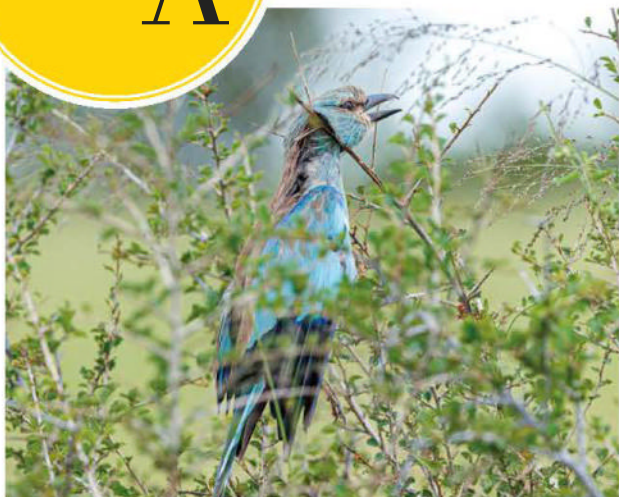
My husband Jacques and I returned to the Philippines for a holiday in March this year – this time around we visited Coron and Busuanga. In the photo, we're on Ditaytayan, one of the Calamian Islands.

I've fallen in love with the Philippines. We cruised around on boats, slept on islands and sang karaoke with the locals. We saw the most beautiful sea life, beaches and coral reefs. The people are friendly and have a wonderful sense of humour. I can't wait to go back.

LORRAINE CROUS, Nuy Valley



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

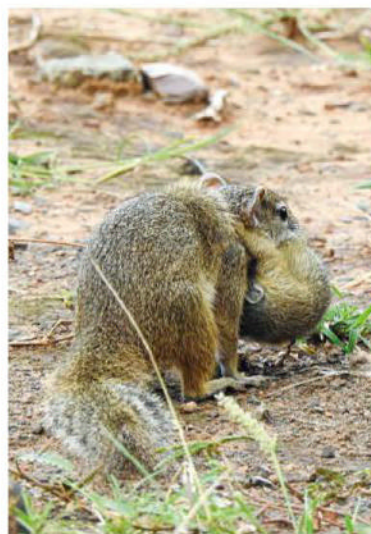


▲ Up a tree

EDWARD ILLINGWORTH from George writes: We were driving on the H1-3 from Satara to Tshokwane in the Kruger Park when I noticed this European roller hanging between two branches. What do you think is going on here?

Bird expert LUKAS NIEMAND says: Hmm... The bird is alive, which suggests the event that caused its predicament had taken place very recently. There are two plausible explanations. Firstly, it's possible that the bird detected prey (probably a large insect) from a nearby perch. These rollers are sit-and-wait predators and it probably launched itself at the prey and forced itself deeper into the bush. The insect might have escaped or fled deeper into the branches, which led to the precarious position of the bird after it attempted to catch it.

In the second explanation, the bird might have been involved in some sort of interaction with another bird, like fighting over food. It might have lost its balance during combat and subsequently got caught up in the branches. It does appear as if the bird would've been able to grab onto the surrounding branches with its feet. Hopefully it would have been able to free itself with some effort.



◀ Mom, I'm tired!

PIETER BROERE from Pretoria writes: We were in the Kruger Park during the floods in February this year and saw this squirrel carrying her pup near the Balule low-water bridge. How long do these squirrels look after their pups and how many do they have at a time?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN says:

The female squirrel carries her pup by holding its one hindleg in her mouth. The pup then holds on to her shoulder or neck with its other legs and tail. The males also look after the pups, but don't carry them – they rather protect their territory and will follow intruders over long distances to make sure they get the message. The female will also drive off intruders, especially when the pups are very young.

Squirrels have one to three pups at a time and have a gestation period of about 53 – 57 days. The pups are born hairless, blind and helpless and leave the nest for the first time after 20 days. They stay near the entrance to the nest and close to their mom for the first 4 – 5 weeks, after which they are weaned and have to find their own food. They follow the adults around to learn what to eat. The food the parents bring to the nest are for themselves – the pups are actively kept away. Squirrels reach sexual maturity at 10 months and are then cast out of the group.

A squirrel family shares a scent, which they get from sleeping together in a group and allo-grooming. The females groom their pups by holding them in their front paws to lick, nibble and scratch with their nails.



◀ Leftovers for later?

ALAN SAUNDERS from Stellenbosch writes: While visiting the Kruger Park in December, our daughter Hilde van Rooyen and her family came across a spotted hyena in the vicinity of Letaba rest camp. It carried what looked like the front leg of a zebra into a pool. It seemed to be especially aware of an eagle in a tree close by. When the eagle flew off, the hyena removed the leg from the pool and started feeding. Is this normal behaviour?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN says: This type of behaviour isn't seen very often. When hyenas have an excess of food, they're known to hide it underwater or under bushes to eat later – just like your dog buries his bone. They do this to hide the smell that will attract other predators and scavengers.

The hyena will sometimes act nonchalant. It will drop the food in the water and then sit around as if cooling down. It will also scratch around in the soil to cover the food with a layer of mud.

Unfortunately, we don't know what kind of eagle was in the tree. The presence of some raptors, like bateleurs and vultures, is an indication to other predators that there's food to be found. This might be why the hyena waited for the eagle to fly off before eating.



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Safeline recently redefined its identity with the unveiling of an exciting new look with a reinvigorated logo, a fresh design aesthetic, new sustainable packaging, a tamper-proof seal and a charcoal-grey Safetrac friction layer. Safeline's new packaging features distinct designs for Passenger, 4x4, and Taxi applications, and showcases the unique benefits that make Safeline the safest option. It also now comes in a sleek, corrugated cardboard box to reduce environmental impact.

While much has changed in terms of the packaging and branding, Safeline Brake Pads remain true to its reputable and proven quality. These facts were confirmed when Safeline was put through its paces against other leading brands. In the AMS Fade Test (an independent assessment that determines braking distance), it was proven that vehicles fitted with Safeline brakes stopped up to 10 meters shorter than competitor brands. Safeline's quality is one of the main factors that distinguish the brake pads from competitors. This is verified by its E-Mark certification and SABS approval, the marks of guaranteed quality and reliability. Not only do Safeline brake pads boast superior stopping power, but the specialised friction layer, called Safetrac, enhances the bedding-in process.



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www.safelinebrakes.co.za 



*According to comparative tests conducted by Safeline on Safeline brake pads with Safetrac® and three competitor pads.



CHECK THIS

Zebra almost disappear in the grass covering the Namib Desert plains after unusually good summer rains fell in 2022 near Solitaire.

PICTURE TOAST COETZER



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BOW TENTS NOT INCLUDED*

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SAHARA LODGE



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1.4m x 2.4m
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Optional side wall

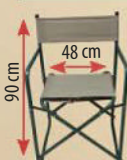
2.7m x 3m
R1 730⁰⁰



FAMILY ROOFTOP TENT

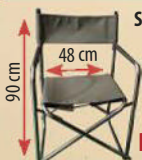
2m x 2.4m
R21 960⁰⁰

DIRECTORS CHAIR



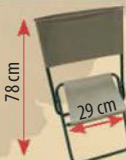
Max weight:
150kg
R870⁰⁰

DIRECTORS CHAIR



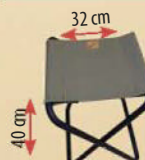
STAINLESS STEEL
Max weight:
150kg
R1 010⁰⁰

FISHERMANS STOOL



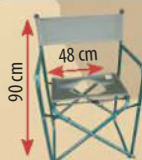
Max weight:
150kg
R450⁰⁰

BIKINI STOOL



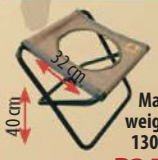
Max weight:
130kg
R320⁰⁰

TOILET CHAIR DELUXE



Max weight:
150kg
R870⁰⁰

TOILET STOOL



Max weight:
130kg
R340⁰⁰

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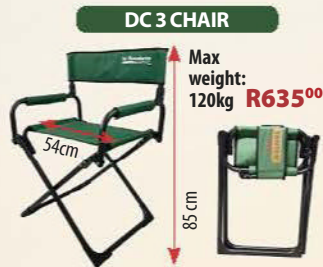
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IN BRIEF

COMPILED BY KYRA TARR



Shred some dirt in the Winelands

Surrounded by wine farms and mountains, Stellenbosch is a dream destination for mountain bikers. Despite the abundance on offer, trail designer and builder Duran van Eeden is hoping to eclipse all the current trails on offer with a new trail park in Devonbosch, a lifestyle estate just outside town.

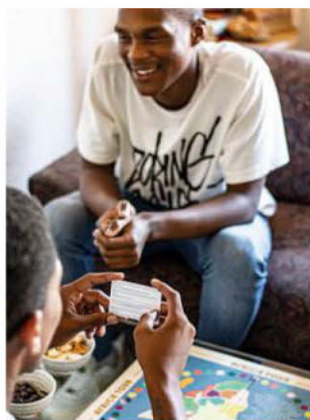
Cheekily named "The GOAT" – either the Devonbosch emblem or an acronym for "greatest of all time", you decide – the trail park is a collaborative effort by Duran, his co-trail builder Wynand Basson, and experienced local rider Eldorette Carinus. The park will be contained within the Devonbosch property and will offer yet another option for riders looking to have fun in the Winelands.

Devonbosch has introduced other alternative sports to the area, too, like eFoiling, where a rider uses an electric hydrofoil board to cruise across a body of water without the need for waves or wind.

The GOAT trail park is still under construction, but eFoiling has been on the go since January this year.

Check the website for updates:

devonbosch.co.za



Travel around Africa from your lounge

Put your knowledge of our continent to the test with the new Africa Tour board game.

Designed and created by Belgian manufacturer Spring Games, the trivia-based game has questions about culture, art, history, locations and famous people, from Cape Town to Cairo.

With winter well and truly here, board game season has begun. Africa Tour is a wonderful way to celebrate our heritage and brush up on some general knowledge about every corner of Africa.

If you can't already name them, you'll be able to list all 54 African countries in no time!

Africa Tour is available countrywide at CNA stores or from Takealot and Makro (R495). More info on Facebook and Instagram: @africatourza



New app for Garden Route hikers and bikers

The Garden Route, with Plettenberg Bay as home base, has some of the best hiking and mountain-biking trails in South Africa. Now, thanks to the new Plett Trails web app, various routes are safely accessible to any intrepid hiker or biker looking to explore the mountains between the Tsitsikamma and Harkerville.

The web app includes directions, maps, distances, contact details, permit information, difficulty ratings, elevation readings and frequently updated information on the condition of the various trails. You can also link to a Google Map of the trail in question so you can plan your route.

There are currently 29 trails listed, 16 of which have Green Flag status (the hiking equivalent of a Blue Flag beach).

How do I get it? Go to pletttrails.co.za – scan or click the QR code and follow the prompts.

FOR YOUR CALENDAR



VILLIERS STEYN

AFRICAN BIRD FAIR

Join like-minded twitchers for a winter's day of all things bird-related. The 2023 African Bird Fair, hosted by BirdLife SA, is the biggest birding event on the continent and this year's line-up promises everything from inspiring talks by internationally renowned experts to book signings and workshops.

Younger attendees aged 7 to 13 can take part in a colouring-in competition hosted by *go!* columnist and birding legend, Faansie Peacock. Yes, there will be prizes up for grabs!

Try out some of the latest photographic equipment, go on a bird walk and connect with other enthusiasts to broaden your own knowledge.

Keep an eye on BirdLife SA's social media channels for registration information: @birdlife_sa on Instagram; @BirdLifeSouthAfrica on Facebook.

When? Saturday 22 July

Where? Country Club
Johannesburg, Woodmead

Those who are unable to attend in person can watch the event on Zoom.

For more information, visit birdlife.org

PIT STOP



TOAST COETZER

Velskoendraai Farm Stall, Clanwilliam

When you drive north out of Cape Town on the N7, the world is relatively quiet and farm stall free. That changes on the other side of Moorsburg, when they start coming at you thick and fast.

You'll find one at the turn-off to Koringberg; another at the Eendevlei turn-off; there are a few manning the fort at the summit of Piekenierskloof Pass; and a dense cluster surrounding Citrusdal.

With that in mind, it's entirely your own fault if you've driven as far as Clanwilliam before the urge for a cup of coffee, and perhaps a hearty breakfast, kicks in.

Velskoendraai Farm Stall has a bit of everything. It's a restaurant and gift shop, and you can buy fresh fruit and vegetables. It's also what every good farm stall should be: a gathering place for those who live in the region.

Velskoendraai's name comes from the original farm name. Apparently this piece of land was in the shape of a velskoe if you looked at it on a map. Back in the day, the farm stall building was a recreation hall for workers who helped build the Clanwilliam Dam, and then a warehouse that stored anything from trucks to oranges.

It became a farm stall in the late 2000s and was bought by the current owner, Louise Nortjé, in 2017. Her partner Ferdie Richter joined the business in 2020 and together they ensure that the farm stall is run like a well-oiled machine. Their level of attentiveness is necessary considering the regularity with which cars stop, especially during flower season.

There's seating inside for a cold winter's day, or outside for those hot days when the kids need to run around in the garden. The menu is extensive:

Velskoe breakfast (R88), nice big pies (R50), salads (from R62), fish and chips (R110), roosterkoek with cheese and jam or with boerewors and tomato smoor (R60–R78). There are also toasted sandwiches, steak, burgers, milkshakes and delicious regional cuisine like waterblommetjie bredie (R145).

You'll find the fresh produce on the enclosed veranda: citrus, squash, sweet potatoes, potatoes, onions and more, depending on the season. Wooden toys, second-hand books, cut flowers, antelope horns and artworks are also for sale here.

Inside, the shelves are chock-full of delicacies like sultana jam (R77), custard cookies (R63) and rusks (R80), plus everything from body lotion and bath salts to sunglasses and ragdolls – gifts for anyone between the ages of one and a hundred, basically.

Despite all they have on offer, Velskoendraai's true specialty is rooibos tea. They offer rooibos tasting sessions that will help you decide what to buy, as there are more than 100 varieties to choose from!

If you've never tried loose tea leaves before, buy a pack of Ouhuis (R77 for 400 g) and try it at home – you'll notice the difference from the teabag variety immediately. Biedouw Valley's rooibos and honeybush tea costs R52 (40 bags) and organic buchu tea costs R186 – it's a remedy for all ills!

Where? Turn off the N7 towards Clanwilliam – the farm stall is on your left just before you enter town.

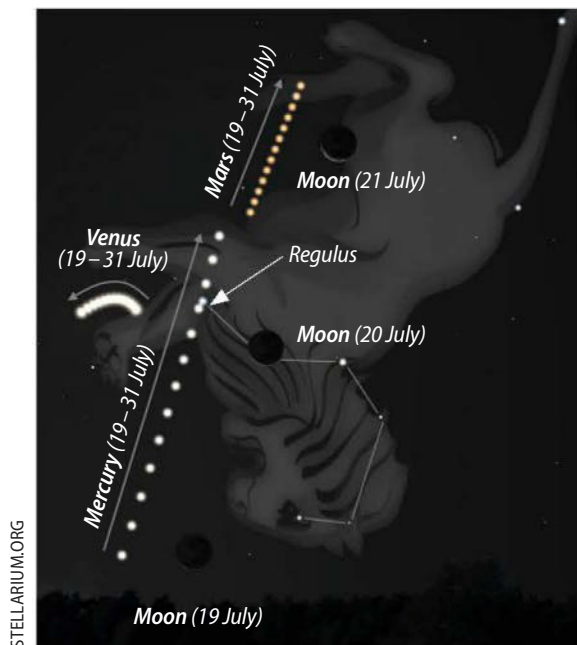
Open: Monday to Saturday from 8 am to 5 pm; Sundays from 10 am to 3 pm.

Contact: ☎ 083 460 3773 (Louise);

✉ info@velskoendraai.co.za

– Toast Coetzer

NIGHT WATCH



A dance among planets

For those who've been watching the western horizon after sunset, you would have noticed Venus as the bright "evening star" since the beginning of the year. This tenure comes to an end in July, with a noteworthy show.

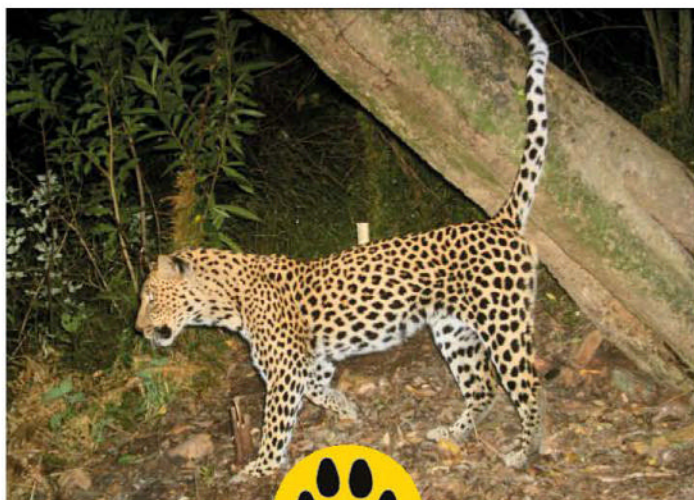
Venus's evening swansong coincides with Mercury's most prominent appearance of 2023. Mars also joins the farewell party but has lost much of its brightness over the past few months.

The graphic shows the daily positions of these three planets against a starry backdrop as they move through the constellation of Leo between 19 and 21 July. Mercury moves faster than the others. On 28 July it moves very close to Regulus, the brightest star in Leo, which looks like an inverted question mark. Mars moves in the same direction but at a much slower pace.

In mythology, Mercury is known as the fleet-footed messenger of the gods; fitting as it takes only 88 days to complete a revolution around the sun.

Venus seems to have lost its way completely, moving sideways across the heavens in an arc. If you were to watch Venus until September, you'd notice it turning – a very interesting manoeuvre. After that, it moves "backwards" then "forward" again. This is known as retrograde motion and it's due to the interaction between the relative movements of the earth and Venus around the sun.

– Willie Koorts



CAPE LEOPARD TRUST

LEOPARD LOUNGE

Social media for spotted cats

Leopards are independent creatures that lead solitary lives, but they still need to communicate with one another. Dominant, territorial cats need to make neighbours and intruders aware of their presence; female leopards need to let males know when they're receptive for mating; and mothers need to communicate with their cubs.

Leopards communicate in four main ways: using olfactory (smell), visual (sight), auditory (hearing) and tactile (touch) signals.

Of these methods, touch is the least common and occurs mostly while the female is rearing her young, although it also happens during courtship between adult males and females.

In terms of sound, leopards have a deep, guttural rasping call that is often likened to the sound of a saw being pulled through wood. Males and females both vocalise in this way – it can serve as a mating call to attract the opposite sex, or as a territorial call to warn individuals of the same sex to stay away.

Possibly the most important form of communication among leopards is olfactory, through so-called "scent-marking" and "scent-rubbing". The chemical compounds in urine, scat (droppings) and secretions from glands can persist for weeks and will remain present at a marking site long after the marking animal has left.

Scent-marking can be done in a few ways: By spraying urine as high and as widely as possible on trees, bushes and rocks; by defecating in conspicuous places (like on top of grass tufts in the middle of a trail); and by scratching trees.

Scent-rubbing involves a leopard reaching up to prominent branches and rocks and rubbing its cheeks and head against them. Leopards have sebaceous glands that coat the hair and skin with an oily secretion to make it water-repellent. By rubbing against something, a chemical signature is left behind – the leopard will mark as high as possible to amplify its size.

Leopards are creatures of habit and will mark the same trees and bushes while patrolling well-worn trails. Interestingly, where camera traps are used to study leopards, the cats will sometimes spray-urinate and scent-rub the camera because it's a prominent object usually standing at a height a little taller than the leopard – perfect for leaving a smelly message!

The last form of communication is visual. Dominant leopards will scrape or rake the ground to make a characteristic hole that is visible to other cats. Scrapes are often accompanied by scent marks.

Mostly, all these signals are enough to prevent two rival leopards from coming face to face, thereby avoiding a fight that can lead to serious injury or even death.

– Jeannie Hayward



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8X Braid**
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PROFILE

Giving back to birding

Duncan McKenzie is one of the top bird experts in the country. We sat down with him at home in Mbombela and talked about citizen scientists, narina trogons and why he feels so lucky to be able to give back to the activity that has defined his life.

WORDS **ANNEMARIE VAN DER WALT** PICTURES **MIA LOUW**

It's a wintery morning on the banks of the Limpopo River in the Kruger Park. A group of birders turn their heads from side to side as Duncan McKenzie rattles off yellow-breasted apalis, tropical boubou, African palm swift, grey-backed camaroptera, sombre greenbul, mottled spinetail...

Duncan is our bird guide on a three-day trip in the Makuleke concession in the Pafuri region in the north of the park, hosted by EcoTraining and BirdLife South Africa. He stands still, listening to bird calls in the bush, pointing in different directions as we try to get our binoculars to focus.

Duncan (44) is at home here in Makuleke, where he's been an EcoTraining instructor for years, in addition to his day job as an ecologist. He's also a trustee of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, an author, and the top contributor to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2 (SABAP2).

Months later, we sit down for a chat at his house in Mbombela. As we talk, I can see him registering every bird call in the garden. After a while his wife Linda and son Nathan (pictured, right) come home from school. Nathan is only 10 years old but he's already ticked more than 530 birds off his life list. Duncan smiles with pride – he grew up on a farm near Vryheid and only *started* his list at that age.

"My parents loved the outdoors and we travelled far and wide," he says. "But I was an only child and I had to entertain myself."

Without a mentor or even a bird club in the area, he had to teach himself. On weekends, when his parents picked him up from Weston Agricultural College in the KZN Midlands, he'd ask them to drop him off a few farms from their own so he could walk home through the veld.

"It made sense to me to learn the bird calls," he says. "Do you remember those cassette tapes produced by Len Gillard? I listened to them over and over. I had to learn the calls at home and remember them in the bush. It was hard work! And I discovered a few 'new' species this way..."

Duncan's interest in birds was bolstered when he met Zululand expert Glen Holland after he gave a talk at Duncan's school with a crowned eagle perched on his arm. Duncan found his first mentor in Glen, a position that would later be filled by the renowned Lowveld bird guide Peter Lawson.

"Peter heard of me in some way. I had just finished matric and he asked whether I'd be willing to take a group of birders on a day trip in northern KZN. He said he'd pay me but I would have done it for free!"

Duncan took to guiding like a duck to water and worked as a professional bird guide for seven years. He went on to work at Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife's Vryheid Hill

and Pongola Bush nature reserves, and he studied nature conservation through Unisa. Years later, while he was a part-time lecturer at a training institute in Mbombela, EcoTraining approached him to instruct their students in bird identification.

EcoTraining offers its courses in many different locations, including Kenya and Botswana, but Makuleke remains a firm favourite for Duncan. The north of the Kruger is at the intersection of so many species' home ranges – you can see special birds like Pel's fishing-owl, racket-tailed roller, Arnot's chat (if you're very lucky) and many other species you'd usually only see further north in Africa.

"I love getting people who aren't really birders interested in our birdlife, including the guides who often don't see it as a priority," he says. "Birding is not the easiest aspect of being a guide, but birders are growing in number and thus it's very important."

He leans forward on the table, for a moment not listening to the twittering outside. "I always ask my students: What are you giving back to this hobby? In the UK, which has a similar population size to South Africa, more than a million people belong to a bird club. Here, we don't even have 10 000 members. It's about being a pressure group with a voice, especially when developments are done without taking things like biodiversity into





Birding runs in the family: Linda, Nathan and Duncan McKenzie.

account. If you have more members, you can afford good legal representation. You don't even have to give money – give your time.”

One of the projects Duncan gives plenty of his time to is SABAP2, which relies on citizen scientists to monitor the distribution and diversity of bird species in southern Africa. Duncan has contributed data every month since the second atlas project began in 2007. (SABAP1 ran from 1987 to 1991.) He only missed the first month, when he and Linda were backpacking through South America – another popular destination for birders.

“Yes, I’m one of the top contributors,” he says matter-of-factly. “But is that really important? I spend lots of time in nature thanks to my ecological work and there are always birds around. What excites me more about the project is the data – all the ways it can be used. There are about 3 000 contributors, which gives the term ‘citizen scientist’ real meaning.”

The Bird Atlas Project has far-reaching benefits for the conservation industry: Important information like species’ conservation status and detailed distribution maps is now more accessible to ornithologists, environmental organisations and other role players.

In 2019, along with Peter Lawson, Duncan published *Birds of Mbombela*, which covered more than 340 species and made use of data collected since

the 1970s. One of the most significant changes noted over the last few decades was a decrease in grassland species and an increase in forest species – due to more trees being planted in plantations and gardens alongside urbanisation and climate change.

“Our tree-rich gardens play a big role. There are narina trogons in Steiltles [a suburb of Mbombela] and it’s not unusual to see gorgeous bush-shrike, eastern nicator, yellow-fronted tinkerbird and tambourine doves here. I hear them every day.”

Using data from the previous century, Duncan is currently adding the final touches to his passion project: the second edition of *Roberts Bird Guide – Kruger National Park and Adjacent Lowveld*. The first edition was a thin field guide; this edition will be a hybrid between a field guide and a scientific publication. His assignment brief from the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund was simply: “Update the guide as you see fit.”

The last scientific publication on the subject was AC Kemp’s *The Distribution and Status of the Birds of the Kruger National Park* in 1974.

“Bird calls weren’t considered as important back then,” Duncan says. “A few small mistakes were also made. It wasn’t as easy to identify calls as it is now with a smartphone in hand.”

Like photo negatives, Duncan is overlaying decades’ worth of information to get a new picture of the status and distribution of the feathered population in the park.

“I have hundreds of tabs open on my computer! Where was a species first recorded? When and where were the outliers seen? Can those sightings be verified? It’s like detective work.”

Duncan is the writer. Other team members include Ian Whyte as co-author, Herman van den Berg, creator of the BirdPro app, as cartographer; Ingrid Weiersbye as the head illustrator; and Hugh Chittenden, who is arranging the colour plates in a way that makes sense from an ornithological perspective. The book will hopefully be published this year.

“It’s a big job and I enjoy every moment. What a privilege to give back to something that enriches my life immeasurably every day.”

Want to get involved?

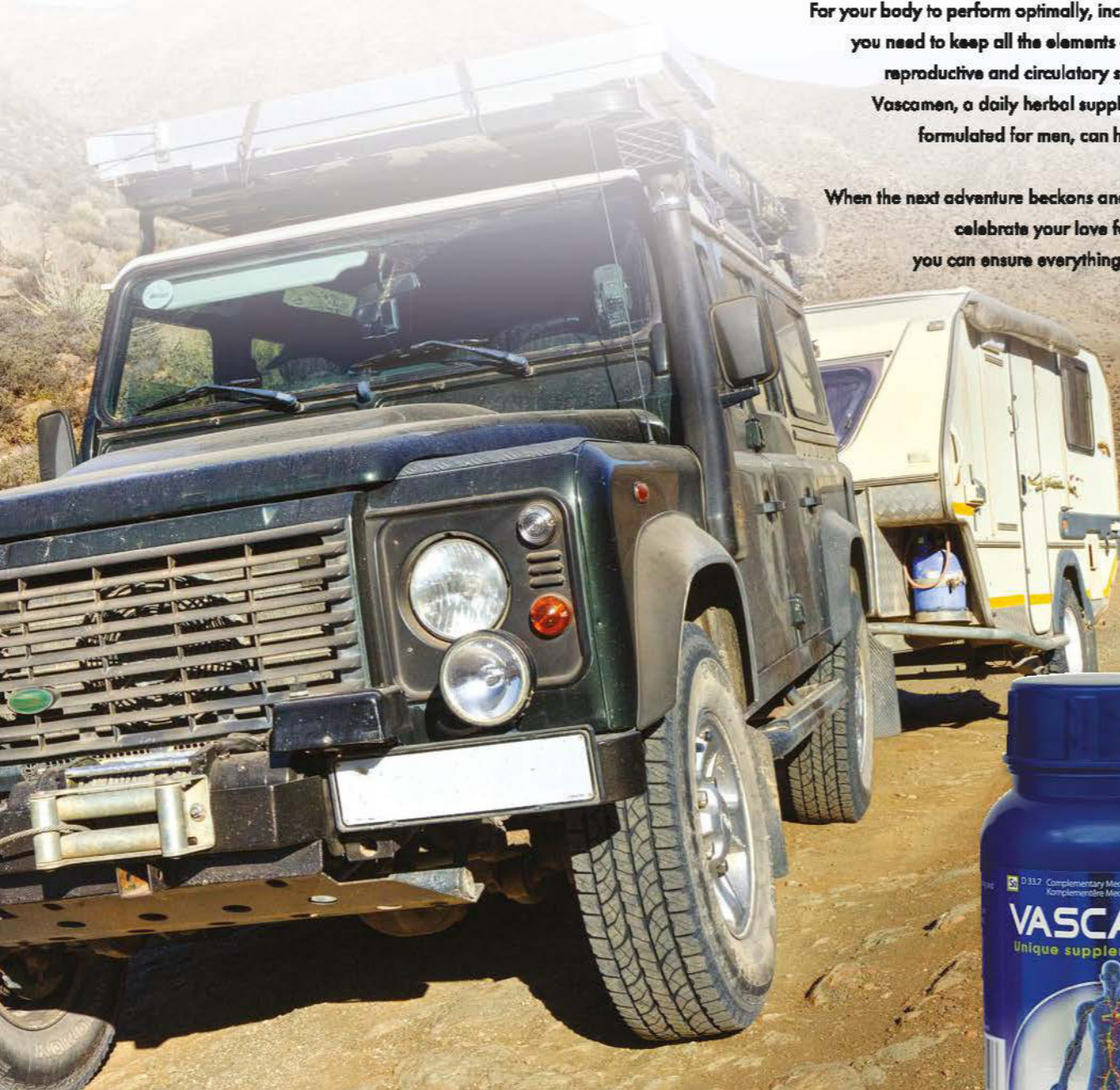
Register as a citizen scientist at sabap2.birdmap.africa. SABAP uses a grid system to divide southern Africa into sections. Next time you go on holiday, check which pentad on the map you’re in and record and upload all the bird species you see. The process is explained on the website – click “How to participate”. It’s even easier if you download the BirdLasser app on your phone.

GEARED UP READY TO GO

When the open road calls, you need to make sure
your equipment is in top condition.
Nobody wants to lose steam along the way.

For your body to perform optimally, including sexually,
you need to keep all the elements of your urinary,
reproductive and circulatory systems in order.
Vascamen, a daily herbal supplement specially
formulated for men, can help do just that.

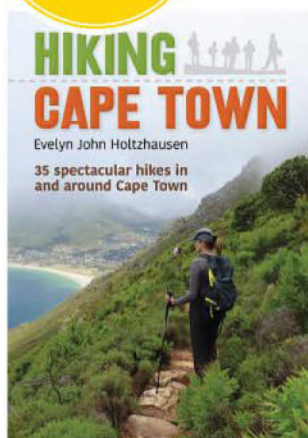
When the next adventure beckons and you choose to
celebrate your love for your partner,
you can ensure everything goes smoothly.



8 JUL 2023 Vascamen tablets [50] Complementary Medicine: Combination product.
Each tablet contains *Orostegus pinnatifidus* Bunge (Hawthorn), *Epimedium brevicornis* Maxim (Horny goat weed), *Gnaphalium* L. (Maldenhihi Tree),
Thibokus tenuistylis L. (Devil's thorn), *Saw palmetto* Small (Saw palmetto), Zinc sulphate, Selenium AAC 2%, Lycopene, Lactose, Fructose.
This unregistered medicine has not been evaluated by SAHPRA for its quality, safety or intended use.

Available from all pharmacies,
Dis-Chem and Clicks.





Hiking Cape Town

by Evelyn John Holtzhausen,
Penguin Random House
R290 in bookstores

There are hundreds of day hikes in the Cape – how on earth do you choose which trail you'll tackle next Saturday? This guide features 35 of the most scenic options and it makes the decision-making process much easier.

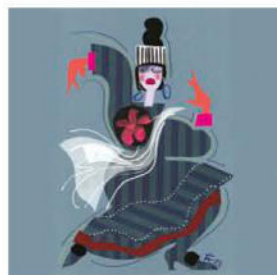
It's mainly aimed at hikers who want to explore Table Mountain and the Peninsula, but there are also a handful of trails in the nearby Helderberg, Hottentots-Holland and Kogelberg nature reserves.

A key at the start of each route description lists all the basic info you'll need: the location of the trailhead (with GPS co-ordinates), the distance and duration, a difficulty rating, the terrain and whether or not dogs are allowed. But Holtzhausen also includes an important factor that many other guides overlook: What does the weather typically do on this trail? Does the southeaster pump in the high mountains? Do you walk in the sun or is there shade? Likelihood of mist and mud? Is it dangerous after rain? The route descriptions are short but thorough, with tidbits about relevant history or plant and animal species in the area.

There are also tips about trail food, clothing and kit, and notes about safety, first aid and what to do if you step on a snake or come across a veld fire. Telephone numbers for rescue services are listed.

Each of the trails is accompanied by its own full-colour map with route and parking info, contour lines, mountain streams and summits, landmarks and other nearby trails. You won't need another trail map – the guide is A5 in size and small enough to carry in your pack.

– Sophia van Taak



ROAD MUSIC

No Wah-Wah

by Jim Neversink
€5 from bandcamp.com

As a solo artist and as a member of different bands, Durban-born Jim Neversink has supported everyone from Roxette to Rodriguez when they've played in South Africa. His solo albums – all roughly in the alternative country genre – have been highly acclaimed, but since he emigrated to Denmark some years ago he has largely blipped off the local radar.

During a recent visit back home, Jim (real name Michael Whitehead) recorded a handful of new tracks, which come together on this album. "Master Jack", a cover of the famous song by Four Jacks and a Jill, is incredibly powerful, while the rocking "Walk Out Songs" display his wicked wit: "There's a man who plays guitar, in a filthy harbour bar / He's not very good you see, but as the owner he plays for free".

On the all-too-short "Life", he greets us with: "Now that horse in the meadow starts to run / And the little boy plays with his BB gun / But there are some who are still out drinking / God bless them..."

Cool tunes for clicking over to cruise control as you head down the N3, Joburg at your back, Durbs in your sights.

– Toast Coetzer



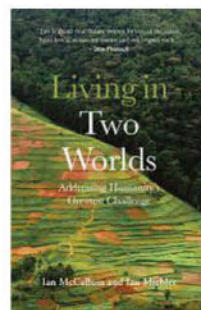
Safari Secrets – The Big Five

by Gerald Hinde
& Will Taylor,
HPH Publishing
R595 at
hphpublishing.co.za

When you see a rustle in the grass, do you furiously start firing off photos, ending up with hundreds of average shots? Slow down! This guide will teach you how to look at your surroundings with the eye of a photographer – and a tracker.

Hinde and Taylor are both old hands in the industry and have produced five books and many wildlife documentaries together. Their guide explains how to read the veld for signs of animals, and it also covers basic photography principles.

A chapter is dedicated to each of the Big Five, with information about where to look for the animal in question, the kind of behaviour you can expect, and how to take striking photos of your subject. The tips are easy to understand and to put into practice: Your photography skills will improve in no time.



Living in Two Worlds – Addressing Humanity's Greatest Challenge

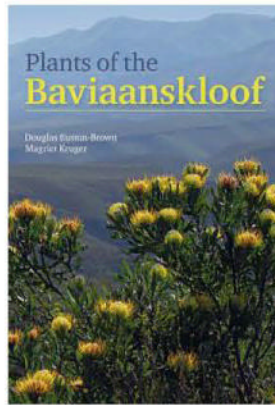
by Ian McCallum
& Ian Michler,
Quickfox Publishing
R320 in bookstores

In 2012, conservationists Ian McCallum and Ian Michler hiked, kayaked and cycled about 5 000 km through southern Africa over four months. Their plan was to follow elephant migration routes through six countries: Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa.

The result is this collection of essays. Don't expect a blow-by-blow travelogue of their journey. Instead, the duo ruminates about our place in the world and how we can co-exist with nature in a sustainable way. They explain the challenges humankind will have to address to ensure our survival on an ailing planet: climate change, habitat and biodiversity loss, human beliefs and behaviour... It's an interesting read and not all doom and gloom, but it will make you examine your lifestyle choices and inspire you to act.

MEET THE AUTHORS

Think of the Baviaanskloof and you probably picture rugged rocks and dirt-road passes. But did you know this World Heritage Site is particularly rich in plant life? Botanist **Douglas Euston-Brown** and Baviaans resident **Magriet Kruger** joined forces to publish *Plants of the Baviaanskloof*, the first guidebook of its kind for this region.



MARISKA SPOORMAKER

Why did you decide to compile a field guide?

Douglas: In 1992, I spent six months in the Baviaanskloof collecting data for my master's degree on the distribution of the different vegetation types. I've since returned many times to do further research.

This is also where I met Magriet; we started working together in 2011. There was no comprehensive guide to the area available, so we thought we'd fill the gap. I worked on the guide in my spare time and altogether it took maybe one or two years to compile, but the data and knowledge was accumulated over a 30-year period.

Magriet: I've lived in the Baviaanskloof since 1979 – my husband Pieter and I own Zandvlakte Private Nature Reserve (baviaanskloof.com). In August of that year, a week after we got married, a flood hit the Kloof and soon the veld was in full bloom. I took photos and wrote letters to attract people to the area and basically established the tourism industry in the Kloof.

Initially, Douglas and I wanted to create a pamphlet for hikers with the plants you could see on each hiking trail. We hosted a botanical workshop on Zandvlakte for 30 botanists and postgraduate students. They could stay with us for a month on condition that they help me to identify the plants I had photographed for use on the pamphlet. On the first night, when Douglas and I looked at the photos, we realised we actually had enough material for a proper field guide.

The guide covers more than a thousand species – what makes the Baviaanskloof so varied in terms of plant life?

Magriet: The Baviaanskloof is a part of the Cape Floral Kingdom, which is the richest plant

kingdom on earth in terms of biodiversity. It's a vast area and many of our country's biomes meet here. The altitude also plays a role: The vegetation on top of the mountains differs radically from down in the valleys. Likewise the geography of the Kloof, which causes different rainfall patterns: Some plants like water, others prefer drier conditions.

Which aspects of the research did you enjoy most?

Douglas: Hiking alone in the mountains to photograph plants. I sometimes spent nights in the wilderness to reach high peaks, or to give myself enough time to find rare species.

Magriet: The photography and excursions were amazing for me, as was visiting places where few or no other people had been before. It was interesting to collect and press plant specimens for the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), and to follow the verification process of new or rare species. This process added about two to three years to the writing of the book because plant names are changed based on DNA tests done internationally.

You also called in the help of botanist Ernst van Jaarsveld...

Douglas: I met Ernst in 1992 and he's been my unofficial mentor ever since. He inspired us to get the job done, sourced illustrator Megan Potgieter for the project, and wrote special features for the book. He also checked over the content, especially for the vygies and other succulents, and provided photos of rare endemic species.

Tell us about a memorable moment while researching the book?

Douglas: In 2011, two colleagues and I hiked to the top of Scholtzberg, the highest peak in the Baviaanskloof Mountains. Quite near the top we chanced upon a strange kind of erica growing in the

shade of a rocky overhang. I immediately knew that it was probably an undescribed species. It still hasn't been formally published, but it is included in the book as *Erica* sp. nov.

Magriet: A highlight for me was seeing literally hundreds of rygbossies (*Crassula pyramidalis*) on top of the mountains. It was also a real joy when some of our plant discoveries were internationally verified before the book went to print. One of these species was named after Douglas – *Felicia douglasii*.

Any tips for identifying plants in the veld?

Magriet: Our guide is a heavy item to carry in your backpack. I'd recommend that hikers take photos when they're out and about and use the guide to identify what they saw when they get home later. Take close-ups of the flowers and leaves, and photos of the entire plant and its surroundings. The illustrations in the guide make it easy to identify the different asters, vygies and ferns.

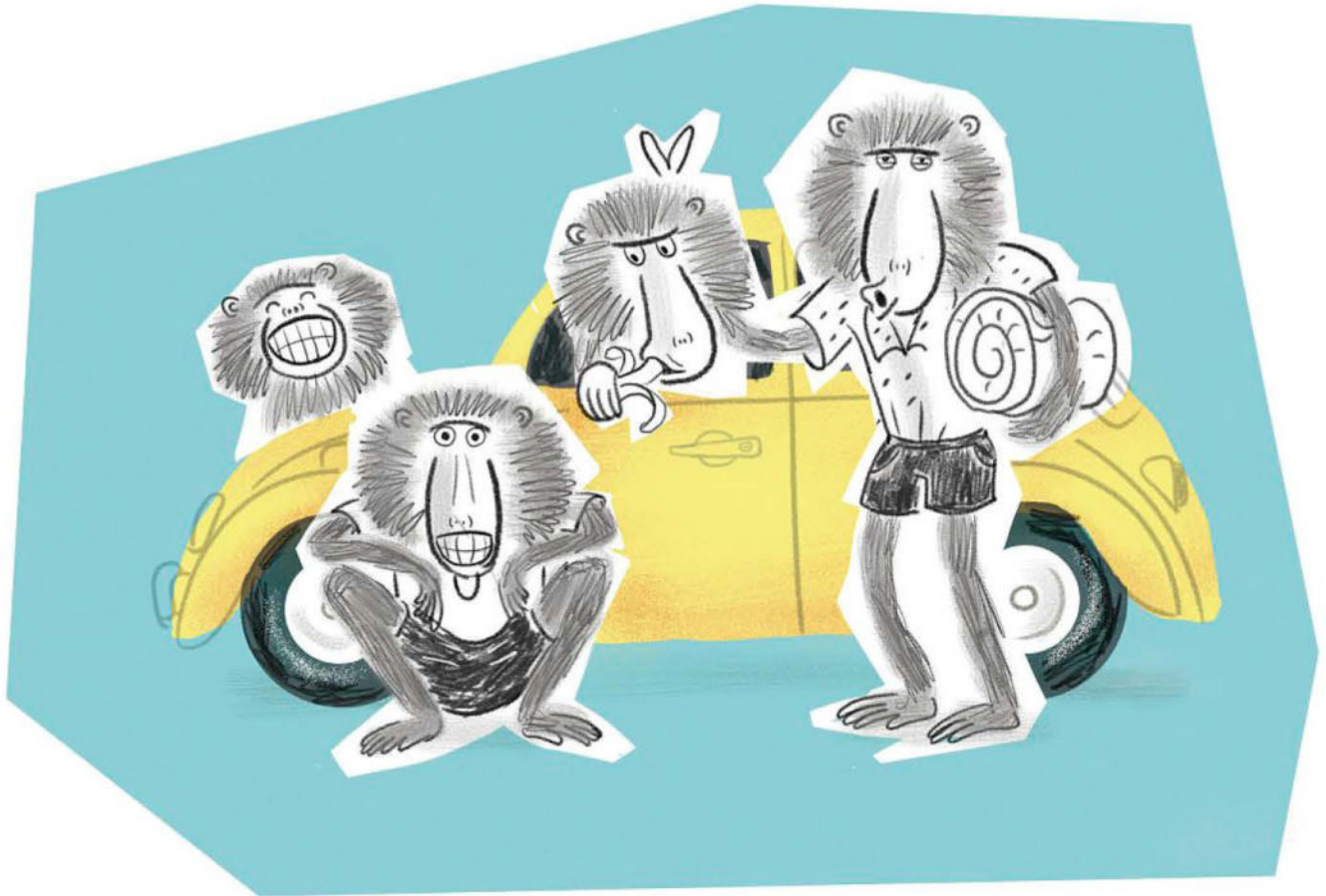
What should tourists see and do when they visit the Baviaanskloof?

Douglas: Spend a whole day driving through the reserve section at the eastern end. Outside the reserve, do a hike into a narrow gorge – there are many to choose from and they're all amazing. The Leopard Trail (63 km, four days) in Cedar Falls Private Nature Reserve is also a popular hike.

Magriet: Hike a day trail: Property owners in the Kloof have opened up many of them for visitors to explore the landscape. And chat to the residents of the Kloof – it's a friendly place where people still make time for each other.

This book is published by Struik Nature and costs about R450 in bookstores.

Beetle breakdown in the Baviaans



When your Volksie starts acting up in the Baviaanskloof, you have no choice but to make a plan, says **Deon Strydom**.

ILLUSTRATION **NICOLENE LOUW**

For the first 16 years of my life, once a month, my family packed the car and we spent a weekend in the Baviaanskloof. My grandparents were retired smallholders and lived on the farm Mistkraal. We lived in Port Elizabeth and the Baviaans was around the corner.

When we planned these visits, my parents never said they were “going to the Baviaanskloof”. To them, they were “going home”. They both grew up in the

Kloof and only left to attend high school in Willowmore, and later to work in Port Elizabeth.

The Baviaanskloof lived up to its name: We often came across baboons on our travels. “As close to human as you can find,” my dad used to say. We’d watch the baboons for a few minutes and he’d add: “Doesn’t that one remind you of Uncle So-and-so?”

In the mid-1970s I went to study at what was then the University of Port

Elizabeth. I drove a white Volkswagen Beetle with a UPE sticker on the back window – I was an Uppie through and through. I studied hard and had fun with my friends. Shortly before our final exams, three friends and I decided to go hike in the Baviaanskloof – on Doringkloof farm, owned by the Smit family. We had enough free time before the exams and convinced our parents that a break ahead of our first paper would be the perfect remedy for tired, hardworking students.

I was in charge of our transport, probably because I was the eldest and appeared to be the most responsible. My Beetle was the most reliable vehicle we had at our disposal and I knew the road well. My friend Theuns handled the logistics of the hike and Pieter and Jakkie took care of our food and finances – they were the numbers guys.

And so, one morning in late spring, we packed the Beetle for the two-day trek, with enough supplies to last two weeks! We even took frozen meat so we could braai more than once a day. Thanks to Theuns, we were prepared for any possible emergency: matches, torches, batteries, first aid kit, insect repellent... The only thing missing was antivenom.

The four of us squeezed into the Beetle, trying to find space among our bags and food stuff. The jokes and wisecracks were flying and my dad couldn't help himself: "As close to a troop of baboons as you can find..."

We made our way through Patensie; the drifts and mountains lay ahead. The Beetle was the ideal vehicle to drive the series of sharp bends in the road. Despite our heavy load, we breezed over Combrink's Pass (the locals in the kloof call it "Commering's Pass") and through the Kouga Mountains. We drove slowly and pulled over often to take in the view, to swim and to eat padkos. It was mostly smooth sailing; we only got one flat tyre. Sometimes, one of us had to wade through a drift to make sure the water wasn't too deep. Our scout would climb back into the Beetle with wet clothes.

When we reached Doringkloof in the late afternoon, the Smits gave us a warm welcome, including coffee and rusks. Then we drove to a place where we could park the Beetle under a tree, and we started our hike. The first overnight spot was an overhang next to a rock pool in the river.

We braaied, swam some more and talked around the campfire like only students can do. We philosophised, argued, solved all the world's problems and went to bed long after midnight. The next day we hiked a circular route and spent the night at the same overhang.

Our two days in the mountains were over far too quickly and it was time for the return journey. We hiked the few kilometres back to the Beetle, packed up the food we hadn't manage to eat, and set off towards Patensie.

The Beetle cruised up and down the mountains. At one point it even looked as if we'd make it to Patensie before the co-op closed for the day. Jakkie had his eye on a pocketknife there.

But as we went down Combrink's Pass, I felt something was wrong. The Beetle drifted left, towards the void on the side of the pass. No matter how hard I pulled on the steering wheel, it wouldn't shift its course. I panicked because we'd be in trouble if it was another flat tyre – we'd already used the spare.

I pulled over and we got out. The Beetle's front wheels were pointing in different directions! Our fields of study were diverse, with subjects like literature, chemistry, finance and education, but none of us was mechanically inclined. Still, we knew enough to recognise trouble. The car was going nowhere in its current condition.

Back then (and even now to an extent) the road through the Baviaanskloof saw very little traffic. Our chances of being rescued were slim – as slim as finding a student well prepared for an exam. Speaking of which, Theuns had to write his first paper in 16 hours' time...

But students also know how to make a plan. I was behind the wheel, Pieter was in the passenger seat to keep me company and shout directions to the others, and Jakkie and Theuns walked next to the left front wheel – between the mountainside and the car. They took turns to kick the wheel into place, so that it would turn with the right front wheel as intended.

By some miracle, we made it to the bottom of the mountain in this fashion. We drove into the first farm we saw. The farmer's wife was home and told us we'd have to wait until her husband returned for lunch. To pass the time, we tucked into her home-made biscuits.

I called my mom and asked her to drive from PE to come and fetch my

We braaied, swam some more and talked around the campfire like only students can do. We philosophised, argued, solved all the world's problems and went to bed long after midnight.

friends so they could get back in time for their exams. An hour and a half later, my mom pulled up in her Ford Escort. She gave me a look, loaded up Theuns, Pieter and Jakkie, and left straight away.

The farmer returned home shortly thereafter. I explained what had happened and he had a look at the Beetle. "It's the tie rod ends," he said and walked to the shed. He came back with a pair of pliers and a piece of galvanised wire and crawled under the vehicle. Ten minutes later, the Beetle and I were ready to hit the road again. I thanked him and headed out. I got up to 100 km/h with ease on the tar road outside Patensie, and near the western suburbs of PE I even overtook my mom and my friends in the Escort!

Theuns made it back just in time for his first exam and we feasted for three days on the food we didn't eat during the hike. The Beetle drove around with its galvanised-wire tie rod ends without a problem.

I only remembered them six months later, when I was about to sell the Beetle for a nice profit. My dad warned me: "You'd better put new tie rod ends in that car! You won't pass the roadworthy test without them..."



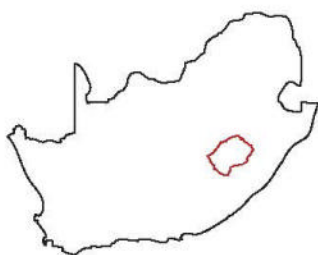
Where the road meets the sky

Fun fact: You don't need a 4x4 to explore Lesotho
– not even in winter. Stick to the tar roads
and you can see all the country's highlights
in a week. Here's what you need to know.

WORDS & PICTURES **EVAN NAUDÉ**

In winter, you often find snow at the
viewpoint at the top of Moteng Pass.
The pass leads you from Lesotho's
lowlands to the highlands, about 2 800 m
above sea level.





Opposite page, clockwise from top left:
A good network of tar roads makes
Lesotho very accessible, even in winter.
Do a dam wall tour at Katse Dam to
see the imposing structure up close.
'Masetho Elizabeth Letsie in a traditional
Basotho blanket – see info below.
The Maletsunyane waterfall outside
Semonkong plunges 192 m into a gorge.



Did you know that the colourful
blankets you see everywhere in
Lesotho are not just practical
items, but have a deeply cultural
meaning for the Basotho?
To find out more about this
tradition, visit 'Masetho
Elizabeth Letsie in Semonkong.
You will learn why women and
men wear the blanket differently,
the meaning of the design
elements and how to tell a
cheap blanket from the real
thing. Once you're clued up,
you can buy your own blanket.
Contact: Book a blanket
presentation at Semonkong
Lodge or contact 'Masetho
Elizabeth directly.
☎ 00 266 5373 9716 (WhatsApp)
Search for "The Blanket
Presentation" on Facebook.
Cost: R110 per person.

KATSE DAM TOUR

There are two dam tours per
day: weekdays at 9 am and 2 pm;
weekends and public holidays at
9 am, 11 am and 2 pm. R30 per
person. ☎ 00 266 229 10808/9;
✉ lnda.org.ls

The icy air catches me off-guard. I
climb out of the warm Mahindra
to take a photo of the dirt road
snaking down the mountain to
Matatiele and even though there
isn't a single flake of snow, puddle of ice or
cloud in the sky, it's so cold my ears and fingers
immediately go numb.

I get behind the wheel again and drive
further up the mountain to Qacha's Nek border
post. At one stage, the hill is so steep all I can
see is blue sky in front of the car's bonnet.

"It feels like we're driving in the air!" says
my fiancée Sam.

Well, Lesotho is known as the Kingdom in
the Sky...

There was a time when you needed a 4x4
to properly explore Lesotho, but it now has a
great road network that will take you to all the
highlights in a "normal" SUV like the XUV300
we're driving. Starting at Qacha's Nek, you
can see a 192 m-high waterfall, Katse Dam,
dinosaur tracks, a national park, a ski resort
and a string of mountain passes – all within
a week. And if your timing is right, you can
even build a snowman!

Along the Senqu

The road from Matatiele in the Eastern Cape
to the Qacha's Nek border post is gravel, but
from there it's tar all the way on the A4 and
A5, until you reach Semonkong. You can't
help but admire the engineers who built these
roads – the tar slings back and forth along the
contours of the mountains, down into valleys
and up again.

You might not need a 4x4 but be prepared
to travel much slower in Lesotho than in South
Africa: Straight roads and level surfaces are rare.
You also have to keep an eye out for donkeys,
goats and chickens, all of which pay no mind
to traffic. And you have to be alert for "Lesotho
handbrakes": rocks in the road that were
wedged behind the wheels of vehicles struggling
up the passes and left behind when the vehicles
drove off. As a rule of thumb, you should double
your average travelling time per distance.

For a while, the A4 runs along the course of
the Senqu River – what the Orange is called in
Lesotho. It's crazy to think that this water will
eventually flow over Augrabies Falls and spill
out into the cold Atlantic in the Richtersveld.

We turn off the A4 at Seforong and drive
52 km along the A5 to Semonkong. From
there, a bumpy stretch of dirt road takes us to
Semonkong Lodge on the western edge of town.

Smoke rises from the chimneys of the

rondavels at Semonkong Lodge on the banks of
the Maletsunyane River. Shepherds in balaclavas
and gum boots herd goats with bells around
their necks. Down by the river, a group of
children throw stones into the water. Later, after
dinner, the town's power goes out. Quiet and
cold settle over Lesotho.

From waterfall to dam wall

"When the water level is high, you can't see
the pool at the bottom, only the spray that
looks like smoke," says Ernest Lekholo Phooko
the next morning as we scramble down a deep
ravine to Maletsunyane Falls. "That's why the
Basotho call this "the place of smoke".

Ernest is a hiking guide at Semonkong Lodge.
If you're fit enough, hike to the bottom of the
waterfall with him.

"You can also abseil down the side of the
waterfall," he says. He points to two tiny figures
hanging from what looks like a thread against
the cliff.

We hike down and I'm soon enveloped in
spray. I have to hide my camera under my rain
jacket to keep it dry. Before long we're cold and
wet and turn back to climb out of the ravine.
When we reach the top, my legs are tired and
I'm out of breath due to the high altitude. The
average Basotho person is definitely much fitter
than I am!

We stroll through the streets of Semonkong
in the late afternoon and follow the river back
to the lodge. Once there, we head straight to the
fireplace in the Duck and Donkey Tavern. Two
Maluti beers, please!

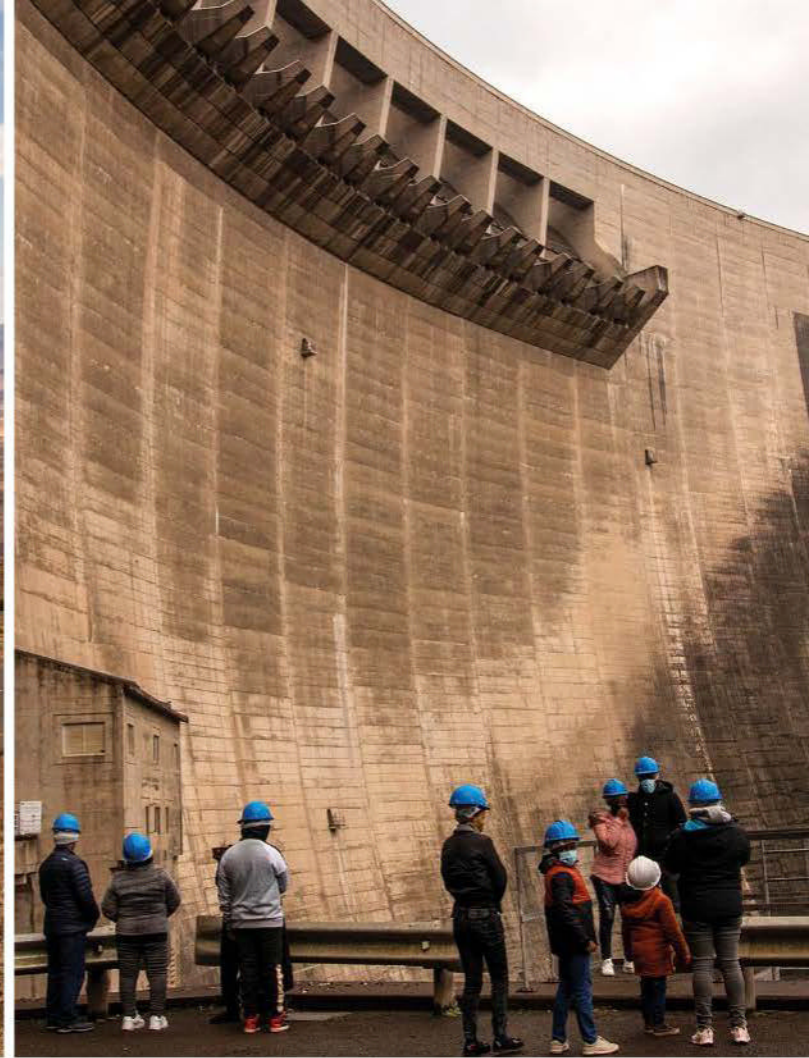
We depart before dawn. It's "only" 290 km to
Katse Dam, but the winding roads don't allow
you to drive faster than 60 km/h. We arrive just
in time for the 2 pm dam tour.

Katse Dam was completed in 1996 to supply
water to South Africa, and hydroelectricity
to Lesotho.

A guide leads us to the foot of the dam wall.
I can't help but stare at the 185m-high concrete
structure. It's a double-curvature arch dam:
From the bottom I can see the wall bending
from top to bottom and from left to right, like
something out of a science fiction film.

Inside the dam wall it's humid and musty.
The walls are 60 m thick at the bottom. Still,
I can't help feeling nervous when I think of
the mass of water on the other side... On top
of the wall later, I look over the vast expanse,
stretching 45 km into the valley.

From the dam wall, the A25 turns into the
mountains before it crosses the dam again



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: King Moshoeshoe briefly lived in Liphofung Cave near Moteng Pass. Afriski is the only place south of the equator in Africa where you can ski. On the eastern side of Lesotho, Sani Pass curls down the Drakensberg into KwaZulu-Natal. You can expect thick snow in the heart of winter in the highlands between Sani Pass and Moteng Pass.

33 km later. From there, we drive along the western shore of the dam to the village of Lejone.

It's late in the afternoon when we arrive at our overnight stop, Motebong Lodge. This is the same place where the construction workers who built the main water transfer tunnel in the 1990s took off their hard hats at the end of the day.

The next morning, we drive north up the mountain along the A25 and over the 3090m-high Mafika-Lisiu Pass. On top of the mountain is the small Bokong Nature Reserve. It has self-catering units and a visitors' centre, but the two previous times I've been here, the reserve has been closed. Maybe we'll be lucky today? Nope – closed again. And like the previous times, a security guards tells me there are plans to reopen “soon”.

We ask if we can go in to have a look around. I take a photo of the view from the visitors' centre. The buildings hug the cliffs of a deep valley. When everything is covered in snow, like today, it feels like you're somewhere in the Alps. Bokong is one of the highest nature reserves in Africa. What a shame you can't stay here.

We drive east and descend on the A25. The landscape evens out in the foothills of the mountains. It's about 33 km to Maliba Lodge in Ts'ehlanyane National Park. It might only be 56 km² in size, but Ts'ehlanyane is Lesotho's biggest nature reserve – and it's open!

We stay here for two nights and spend most of the time exploring outside, wrapped in beanies and thick jackets. The sky is blue, the sun is out and the peaks above the Hlotse Valley are white with snow. We look for a waterfall at the top of the valley, but only find a thin stream with frozen pools at the bottom. Later, back at the lodge, we look for a fireplace and a Maluti to thaw out.

The road to heaven

The A25 comes to a dead end at Ts'ehlanyane – you have to drive back to the A1 to reach Butha Buthe. On the other side of town, the road climbs again, towards Moteng Pass.

At the base of the pass, we turn off to visit Liphofung Cave (R50 per person). The cave is more of an overhang and it's a short walk from the visitors' centre – you can see centuries-old rock art and a hamerkop nest against a cliff.

I steer the Mahindra up Moteng Pass. At the summit, we're greeted by a wide, white strip on the mountain across the valley – the slope at Afriski.

Since Tiffindell in the Eastern Cape near Rhodes closed down, Afriski is the only place in southern Africa where you can carve some lines. The white stripe is permanent in winter thanks to snow machines. But ski passes are expensive and you have to stay for two nights in winter, which we sadly don't have time for. Instead, we have lunch at the Sky Restaurant and watch the skiers and snowboarders.

You'll find some of the highest roads in southern Africa between Afriski and Sani Pass, including the Tlaeng (3251 m) and Black Mountain (3244 m) passes. Pull over and take a photo of the sign at the top of Tlaeng Pass – the pass is already on top of a mountain and climbs only about 140 m, so the view isn't much to write home about, but the altitude is something else. You're on one of the highest roads in Africa. Who would've thought you could drive here in a humble SUV?

This is also the best place to look for snow in winter. Make time to build that snowman...

The tar road comes to an end at the Sani Pass border post, about 130 km later. Several 4x4s with SA numberplates are parked in front of Sani Mountain Escape.

In the bar, waiter Joseph Rabots'o is looking after a group of tourists. There are lots of day visitors who drive the pass from South Africa. We won't get to tackle the pass today because it's only traversable in a 4x4.

For many years, there have been rumours that the pass might be tarred. I ask Joseph about it.

“I don't think the pass will ever be tarred because the 8 km section between the border posts is no-man's land,” he says. “And even if they do tar it, the pass won't be usable in winter because it will ice over.”

Sam and I walk to the cliff in front of the lodge and peer down into the abyss. The Drakensberg falls away into KwaZulu-Natal below. The Mountain Kingdom, the Roof of Africa, Kingdom of the Sky... All of Lesotho's nicknames are fitting.

Tomorrow we'll return home along more high passes and in four hours we'll cross the border back into South Africa at Caledonspoort. The trip will be over.

But for now, we head back to the warmth of the pub. I can hear bells tinkling in the distance as a shepherd tends to his goats deep in the mountains.

TRAVEL TIP

Most of Lesotho's “A” roads (and some “B” roads) are tarred, but not all. Look closely when you plan your route – use satellite view on Google Maps if you're unsure. On Google Maps it looks like the A1 between Mokhotlong and Thaba-Tseka is tarred, but it's actually dirt and the condition is very poor – set aside at least four hours to drive the 100 km. Expect dirt roads as soon as you leave the main routes between towns.



IN OTHER WORDS



Joseph Rabots'o
Waiter and hiking guide,
Sani Mountain Escape

"You can't predict the snow. The weather changes in an instant and you can experience four seasons in one day. Sometimes you can wait and it will snow; other times it will start to snow as soon as you leave!"



Liteboho Moqhetsooa
Receptionist, Maliba Lodge

"If you want to see snow, head to the highlands, the area around Mokhotlong in the north or even Qacha's Nek in the east. I grew up in Mokhotlong. When I was six, it snowed so much the snowbanks were taller than me and we could hardly get the front door open. We were very happy because it meant we didn't have to go to school!"



Letuka Mika
Sales agent, Hlotse

"Thaba Bosiu is definitely worth a visit – it's the birthplace of the Lesotho nation."



STAY HERE

Semonkong Lodge

There are 23 en suite rondavels, each with a double bed and a fireplace, on the banks of the Maletsunyane River. Two bigger rondavels have bunk beds and a communal kitchen. There is also a small campsite (space for three vehicles) on the riverbank with communal ablutions and a restaurant. Spend at least one day in Semonkong: Hike to Maletsunyane Falls or abseil down the cliffs, go on a town tour or watch how traditional Basotho blankets are made. Or how about a pub crawl on a donkey?

Rates: Camping R180 per person; bunk beds R300 per person; rondavels from R830 per person, with breakfast.

Contact: ☎ 00 266 6202 1021;
📧 semonkonglodge.com

Motebong Lodge

This resort in the village of Lejone was originally where the construction workers who built Katse Dam lived. It still has a residential feel. Stay in one of 26 self-catering houses (different sizes; sleeping two

to seven people) or one of 17 single rooms (no self-catering). There's a restaurant and bar.
Rate: From R390 per person sharing.
Contact: ☎ 00 266 5974 4567;
📧 motebong.com

Maliba Lodge

Ts'ehlanyane National Park has the only indigenous forest in Lesotho, plus unique fynbos, so-called "berg bamboo" (the name Ts'ehlanyane is derived from the local common name for this plant) and the country's only five-star lodge. Six luxury chalets near the lodge overlook the Hlotse Valley, but you can also stay in a basic double room, a rondavel or a self-catering house. Take note: The rondavels are closed in winter due to the cold. There are several hiking trails to waterfalls and rivers with rock pools.

Rates: Double room R897 per night. Rondavel R1 020 per night for two people. Self-catering from R2 096 per night for four people, plus R485 per extra person. Luxury chalet R3 993 per night for two people.

Contact: ☎ 031 702 8791;
📧 maliba-lodge.com

Bird Haven Guesthouse

This guesthouse in Hlotse is a good overnight option near the Ficksburg and Caledonspoort border posts. It has 10 rondavels (two- or three-sleeper), safe parking and a small restaurant that serves dinner and breakfast.

Rate: From R1 000 per night for a double room.

Contact: ☎ 00 266 5954 3030;
📧 birdhavenleribe.com

Mants'ebo Guest House

Sleep in one of 13 en suite double rooms in Mokhotlong, about an hour's drive from the top of Sani Pass. The rooms are heated and there is safe parking.

Rate: From R817 per person sharing, with breakfast.

Contact: ☎ 00 266 5813 4804;
📧 mantseboguesthouse@gmail.com

Sani Mountain Escape

Drink a beer in the highest pub in Africa, hike with a guide to Lesotho's tallest peak – Thabana Ntlenyana (13 km, 8 hours) – or see Sani Pass from the top. Stay in one of eight en suite rondavels (two to six



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

At the border. South Africans don't need a visa, just a valid passport and your vehicle's registration documents.

Your vehicle. As long as you stick to the tar roads, you'll be fine in a sedan. A vehicle with a high ground clearance is recommended for the stretches of dirt between the tar roads, and to reach some of the accommodation options (for example between Semonkong Lodge and Semonkong itself, or the access route to Sani Mountain Escape). However, all the accommodation options in this article are accessible in a sedan.

Best time to go? The tar roads make Lesotho accessible year-round. The winters are dry and cold and it snows regularly. It rains in summer and the mountainous landscape is lush and green, but the rain also makes the road conditions (especially dirt roads) more challenging.

Food & fuel. Only the bigger towns have reliable filling stations – fill up whenever you can. The same goes for groceries because the rural areas only have small shops.

Money matters. Lesotho's currency, the loti, is pegged to the South African rand. Most places to stay and bigger shops have card facilities. You can pay in rands at smaller places, but you'll likely receive change in maloti.

people), each with a fireplace. The backpacker place sleeps 22 people in rooms with four or six beds, with a communal kitchen and living area.

Rates: Backpacker rooms (self-catering) R380 per person.

Rondavels from R1 815 per person sharing, with breakfast and dinner.

Contact: 078 634 7496;

00 266 5736 2101 (Lesotho);

sanimountain.co.za

Resthaven Guesthouse

This guesthouse in Matatiele is the ideal overnight stop before you enter Lesotho. Stay in one of 22 en suite double rooms with air conditioning, DSTV and Wi-Fi. Talk to owner and 4x4 expert Philip Rawlins about the best trails and fly-fishing spots in the area.

Rate: From R500 per person sharing.

Contact: 039 737 4067;

resthaven.co.za

Evan travelled in a Mahindra XUV300. Visit mahindra.co.za for more information about this SUV.



Discover the other Stellenbosch

The R310 between Stellenbosch and Franschhoek runs through the Dwarsrivier Valley. Visitors often speed past on their way to wine estates, not knowing that people have lived here for generations and have a rich history to share. Next time, turn off and explore the villages of Kylemore, Johannesdal and Pniël.

WORDS & PICTURES **MARCHELLE VAN ZYL**





Opposite page, clockwise from top left: It's laundry day for the local rugby team's jerseys in Johannesburg. Pniël's United Congregational church. Benita Cyster, owner of Lumley's Place. One of Lanquedoc's unique houses, designed by Sir Herbert Baker. The Dwars River flowing through the valley. Pniël residents Demorion and Matty Cyster.

“It’s heaven,” says a resident who grew up in Kylemore. “You feel the presence of the mountain,” says someone who recently moved to Pniël.

It’s rare to visit a place with such a magical energy.

The Dwarsrivier Valley is wedged between the Groot and Klein Drakenstein mountains, Simonsberg and Botmanskop. If you approach from Stellenbosch towards Franschhoek, you drive down Helshoogte Pass with Kylemore on the right, then Johannesburg and Pniël. Behind Pniël to the right, hidden behind Boschendal, is Lanquedoc – or “Lyntjiedok” as it’s known locally.

Many well-known wine estates surround the villages. Mountains tower over the villages and trees keep their charm from view. But when you turn off the R310 and venture into their streets, you discover communities built on shared values, faith and pride.

Their history is rooted in freedom and the church. On 1 December 1838, slavery was officially abolished in the Cape colony. Many of the freed people had nowhere to go and missionary societies established settlements for them.

Pniël was the first mission station founded outside Cape Town by the Apostolic Union on 6 September 1843. Pieter de Villiers and Paul Retief of the farm Goede Hoop donated 19 hectares to the mission station. During the opening celebration, Reverend GW Stegmann read a verse from Genesis 32:30: “And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”

This is how Pniël was named: Pniël means “face of God”.

The farm Papiere Molen was added later that year. According to an information board at the Pniël Museum (on the site of the original farmstead) 49,5 morgen were divided into 99 plots and given to the first residents. Each family received an erf to build on and an erf to grow fruit and vegetables. Initially all the properties belonged to the church; it was only in 1995 that the first Pniël residents received title deeds to their properties.

The church still plays an important role in these communities. Unlike the other villages, Pniël has only one: the Pniël United Congregational Church. Everything revolves around the church and it wields a lot of influence in the community – Pniël doesn’t have a liquor store, for example.

As Pniël became too small for all its people, some moved to Johannesburg next door. In general, Johannesburg is seen as an extension

of Pniël and most of its residents also attend the Congregational church.

I visit the area just before the annual church bazaar in April. I chat to Benita Cyster, owner of Lumley’s Place guesthouse in Johannesburg: She’s buzzing around trying to get everything done. The bazaar is a big deal and everyone lends a hand. There are parade floats, drum majorettes, a Miss Bazaar competition...

“This year we will also sell small portions of cake so that everyone can buy something even if they can’t afford a whole cake,” she says.

The church bazaar is the one event that lures people who have moved away back home. “It’s a big *kuier*,” explains Demorion Cyster, Benita’s sister-in-law. She has to head home to bake a milk tart and can’t stay long.

It soon becomes clear that the golden thread that runs through the valley, along with the Dwars River, is the caring hearts of its people. People look out for each other here.

“If you want to climb the mountain behind Johannesburg, let me know. I’ll post on our WhatsApp group that we have a guest on the mountain. Everyone will know to look after you,” Benita says.

Lanquedoc is sometimes seen as the stepchild of the valley because it has so many *inkommers*, but there are buildings with a rich architectural history in the main road.

Lanquedoc grew from the fruit industry. When grape phylloxera – an insect pest – brought the wine industry to a standstill in the late 1800s, Cecil John Rhodes established Rhodes Fruit Farms here in 1898.

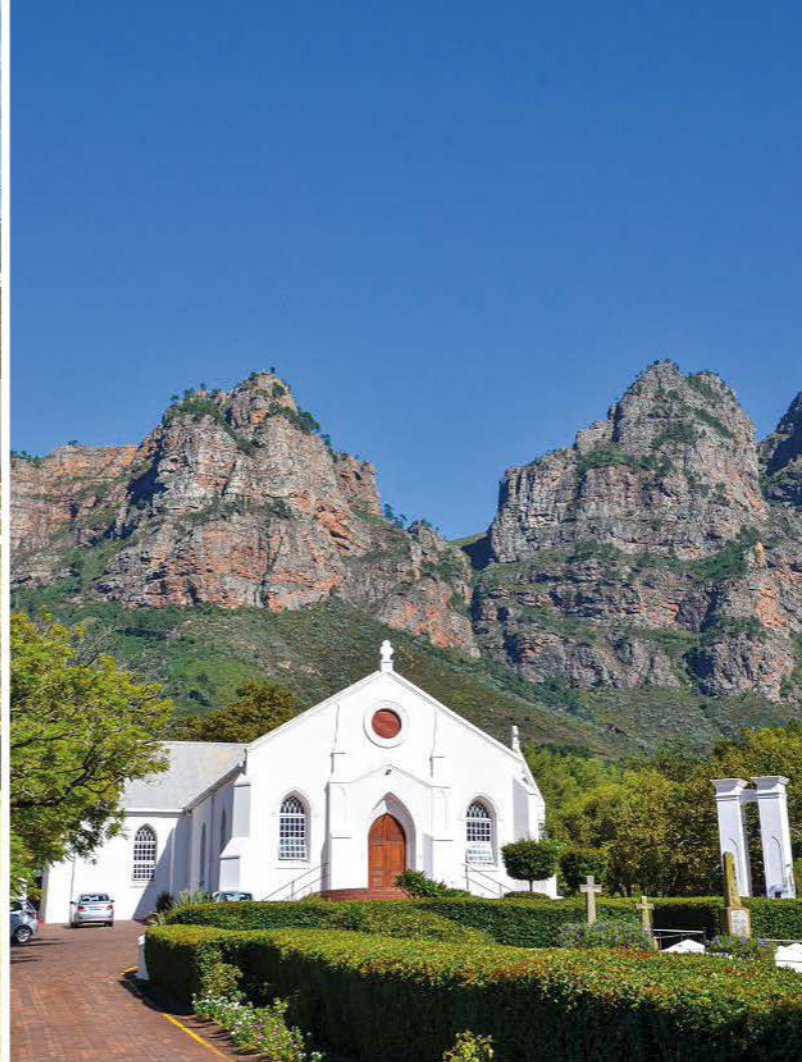
He bought farms in the area, including Boschendal. Rhodes had to compete for workers with the mines in the northern parts of the country and asked the well-known architect Sir Herbert Baker to design a workers’ village. The stone church, parsonage, school and houses they built were the origin of Lanquedoc. Each house included an erf where people could plant a garden and keep livestock.

When you drive down the oak-lined main road, these historical houses seem out of place against the unimaginative government housing built right behind them.

Kylemore was also established in 1898 when a group of Pniël residents bought a section of the Rust en Vrede farm from British immigrant Arthur Latimer Harrington Kyle.

These days, most *inkommers* stay in the Capolavoro Mountain Estate.

“The new security complex has high walls, but in the rest of Kylemore people live out in



DWARSRIVIER VALLEY

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The Dwarsrivier Valley is all about its people. Lecelin Roberts, owner of a guesthouse in Kylemore and Rachel Fortuin, another Kylemore resident. Siena Blarney Charles from Beker en Bord restaurant. The three wise men of the area: Patrick Lawrence, Seppie (Hendrik) September and David Adams. Chrysanthemum farmer Richard Williams shows just how big these flowers get.

the open. Without fences,” says Lecelin Roberts, owner of Staymore Guesthouse. “You actually have more freedom without those walls. But we should embrace the new developments. Kylemore is a close-knit community. We are a part of each other and share our lives.”

“But wait, you should meet *antie* Rachel across the road,” she adds.

Rachel Fortuin says there has always been a bit of a feud between Kylemore and Pniël. “Pniël is a bit ‘better’ than Kylemore. Kylemore is like a child born out of wedlock,” she says with a twinkle in her eye.

When she was young, the bioscope was in Pniël and the young people of Kylemore went there to watch movies. “They were fine on the way there but would come back fighting,” she says.

The valley has produced many famous sport stars, coaches and administrators – people like Herschel Jantjies, Edwill van der Merwe, Ivan Jacobs, Ivor (Pitty) Myburgh, Trevor Adams and Stacey Lackay.

Once the conversation turns to sport, especially rugby, it gets lively. At rugby matches, the spectators chant as one: “Kylemore never loses.”

“On Sundays, the women can’t sing in church because they’re hoarse after the previous day’s rugby,” says Rachel. Even the bridge across the Dwars River at the entrance to Kylemore is painted red and black, the colours of Kylemore’s rugby club.

“Things were different when I was a child. We had no streetlights. I would walk down the street in the dark and people would greet me by name because they recognised my gait,” she says. “The children are different now. We don’t struggle as much and I think the parents overcompensate. When you’re poor, you learn to depend on God and you teach the same to your children. You need that anchor. The village is now open to outside influences – there are new people, television, the Internet...”

The once-isolated communities who could choose to only let people in who understood and respected their values are now threatened by capitalism. It’s a scenic valley with relatively affordable land, especially when compared to neighbouring places like Franschhoek and Stellenbosch.

“We grew up in a community where everyone looked like us,” explains Matty Cyster, Demorion’s husband. He’s also a retired teacher.

Demorion, originally from Piketberg, has lived here for almost her entire life, but if you weren’t born here, you will always be considered an *inkommer*.

“The new people bring in new blood; they make the valley stronger and better,” Matty says, pointing to his wife.

He continues: “I can understand why the younger generation wants to sell the houses they inherit. The money gives them financial stability. And they might not be able to look after the land themselves.”

Matty and Demorion were closely involved with the founding of the Pniël Museum and the monuments on Die Werf in front of the museum.

“We ring the old slave bell at Die Werf on 1 December every year. That bell represented a lot of pain,” he says.

Former president Nelson Mandela was set free nearby. The old Victor Verster Prison, now the Drakenstein Correctional Centre, is around the corner. This is a community that has walked free and proud for many years.

I think we’re related?

Some families have lived in the valley for more than 200 years, with surnames like Cyster, Willemse, Williams, Jefthas, Lackay and Adams.

After a day or two here, you realise everyone is either family or related by marriage. You can’t get up to trouble here – someone will tell your mother what you did.

When I meet with Austin Lawrence, my guide and a resident of the valley, I tell him that his grandfather, uncle and aunt all send their love – I’ve already met them and I haven’t even been here a day!

Austin comes from a family with a passion for flowers. His grandfather Bernard Mentoor and his uncle Richard Williams have won many prizes with their chrysanthemums. His other uncle, Ashley Mentoor, farms with lilies and penny gums.

“And me? I tell the flower stories to the tourists,” Austin says.

His grandfather Bernard is considered the father of chrysanthemums in the valley. As a young man, he was introduced to the chrysanthemum farmers of Stellenbosch and started to show and farm with them until there was enough interest in the valley to create the Pniël Horticultural and Industrial Society more than 40 years ago. They later joined the National Chrysanthemum Society of South Africa.

Richard, Bernard’s son-in-law, loves chrysanthemums too. The cultivation of show-quality chrysanthemums is a dying art, but Richard and some of the older chrysanthemum cultivators offer workshops to encourage the younger generation to take up the hobby.

DWARSRIVIER TOURISM OFFICE

The tourism office is in the municipal building in Pniël’s main road. ☎ 021 885 2467;
🌐 dwarsriviertoerism.org.za

STELLENBOSCH TOURISM OFFICE

☎ 021 886 4310;
🌐 visitstellenbosch.org

"I learnt to love the cultivation of asters from Bernard," Richard says. "He even held his own shows at home when everything was cancelled during the Covid-19 lockdown."

It takes about nine months for the chrysanthemums to be show-ready. Some of the flowers are so heavy they have to be supported. Chrysanthemums need full sun but they're covered with shade netting just before a show to protect them against the elements.

"One time, a big storm destroyed all the flowers a week before a show. I cried!" Richard says.

The flowers require lots of time and attention. After a lifetime as a teacher, Richard is now retired and can finally give them all his energy.

On the subject of teachers, it seems as if every second person I talk to is either a teacher or a retired teacher. And even if you don't have a certificate to show for it, you're still expected to help educate the children in your community.

From the stoep of Lumley's Place guesthouse, Oom Solly Williams, the guesthouse owner Benita's father, reprimands children walking past in the street. They won't dare put a foot wrong here. You have to walk the straight and narrow. It takes a valley to raise a child, after all.

On my last day, I visit the three wise men of Kylemore: David Adams, Patrick Lawrence and Seppie (Hendrik) September. They're leaders in the Old Apostolic Church. As we talk, two teenagers stroll past and come up to greet everyone with a handshake.

The men share memories from their childhood years and of how things have changed and developed in the valley.

"Back then, it would rain for two weeks straight," says David. "The older generations said that if you prepared well in summer – preserved and dried everything you could – you could live off the food supplies in your attic when winter came. It doesn't rain like that anymore and people don't have gardens like that anymore."

Patrick tells us how his family came to visit from Mitchell's Plain in the past. When they arrived in the valley, they couldn't believe that a place like this existed. "We weren't really affected by the Group Areas Act," he says. "When those children saw the mountains and valley, one called out: '*Dis mos 'n dúidelike plek dié!*'"

Patrick looks up to the mountains around us and says: "Mitchell's Plain is man-made. Our place was made by God."





CYCLE WITH A GUIDE

If you're not sure you're skilled enough, don't want to head out alone, or want to ride with someone who knows the trails, get a guide (like Siyabulela Tutu, pictured) to accompany you on the Banhoek Conservancy trails. This trail network joins up with the Stellenbosch network. The guides know everything about mountain biking. You can bring your own bike or hire one.

Where? Entrance to the Old Bethlehem farm.

Cost: R350 per person per hour.

Contact: 📞 082 336 3772 (Chris); 🌐 casacerveza.co.za

1 Pop in at Pniël Museum

The staff are knowledgeable and like to tell local stories. There are different tours on offer: do a museum tour and you also have the option of visiting the Ubuntu Monument at Die Werf, and the Congregational church. Book beforehand.

Opening times: Tuesday to Friday from 10 am to 3.30 pm.

Where? River Street (diagonally across from the Congregational church on the R310).

Cost: From R20 per person.

Contact: 📞 021 885 2645; 🌐 pniel.co.za

2 Explore the villages with a guide

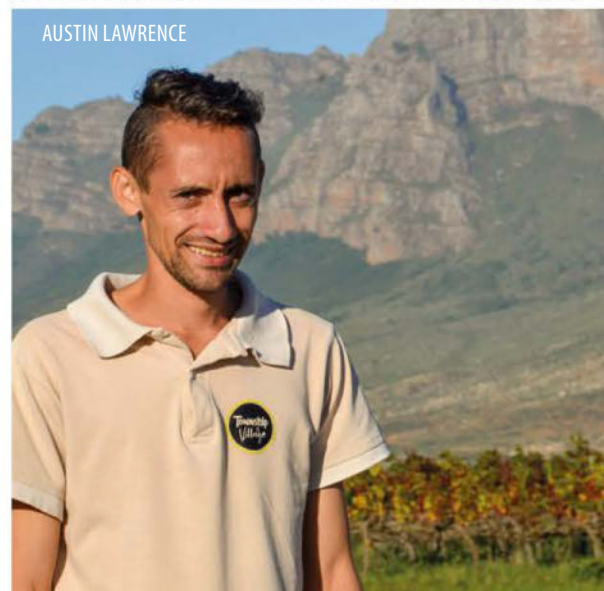
The best way to get to know the valley and its people is on a tour with local guide Austin Lawrence. Your walk starts in Pniël and you'll stroll along the course of the Dwars River to Kylemore. The tour includes a visit to the Pniël Museum, coffee with a Johannesburg local, and a meal at the Beker en Bord home restaurant, which is owned by Siena Blarney Charles. You'll be served smoorsnoek, waterblommetjie or tomato stew, sweet potato and roosterkoek.

Where? Dwarsrivier tourism office

Cost: Walking tour R650 per person; e-bike tour R1 650 per person.

Contact: 📞 083 289 0818; 🌐 townshipandvillage.co.za
Dwarsrivier Adventure 📞 061 241 2648

Short on time? Skip the tour and just book a three-course meal at the Beker en Bord home restaurant: R450 per person.



3 Go wine-farm hopping

A picnic in the Winelands sounds romantic, right? There's no shortage of wine farms with scenic views in the valley. Sit at a table or relax on a blanket under a tree. At Boschendal, Alluvia and Zorgvliet you can order picnic baskets with gourmet treats.

If you want to work on your fitness while downing wine and snacks, consider a guided wine walk or e-bike tour. There are different options and packages available depending on how many wines you want to taste and how fit you are. You can start your tour in Stellenbosch and end in Dwaarsrivier, or you can just walk from farm to farm with a guide.

Cost: Wine walk R650 per person; e-bike wine tour R1 700 per person, including lunch.

Contact: 📞 083 289 0818; 🌐 townshipandvillage.co.za
Dwaarsrivier Adventure 📞 061 241 2648

Tip: Treat yourself to a sundowner at the Delaire Graff Estate. From the restaurant, you can watch Simonsberg and the Groot Drakenstein Mountains turn pink in the late-afternoon sun.

4 Walk the Silver Mine route

Did you know there was a silver mine on Simonsberg? According to legend, a man pretended that he had discovered silver here and swindled people into investing in his mine. In the end he Steinh-offed with everyone's money. You can walk up to the "mine" with a local guide. It's only about 6 km in total, but the terrain is steep.

Cost: From R350 per person. It takes 2–3 hours.

Contact: Dwaarsrivier Adventure 📞 061 241 2648;
🌐 townshipandvillage.co.za or head to the Dwaarsrivier tourism office.

5 Visit the Banhoek mountains

The Banhoek Conservancy covers about 54 km² of private land between the Jonkershoek Mountains and the Plaisir de Merle wine estate. Outdoor enthusiasts can play outside all day: Hike, run, cycle, watch birds, or look for a waterfall. The views are beautiful and the trails are well maintained. Download a map with all the trails from 🌐 banhoekconservancy.org. (See go! #186 for more about the Duiwelskloof Hiking Trail. – Ed.)

Where? There are several entrances. The entrance to Old Bethlehem farm is in Rooi Street, Kylemore. You can also park at Banhoek Chilli Oil or at these wine estates: Boschendal, Bartinney, Vrede en Lust, Plaisir de Merle.

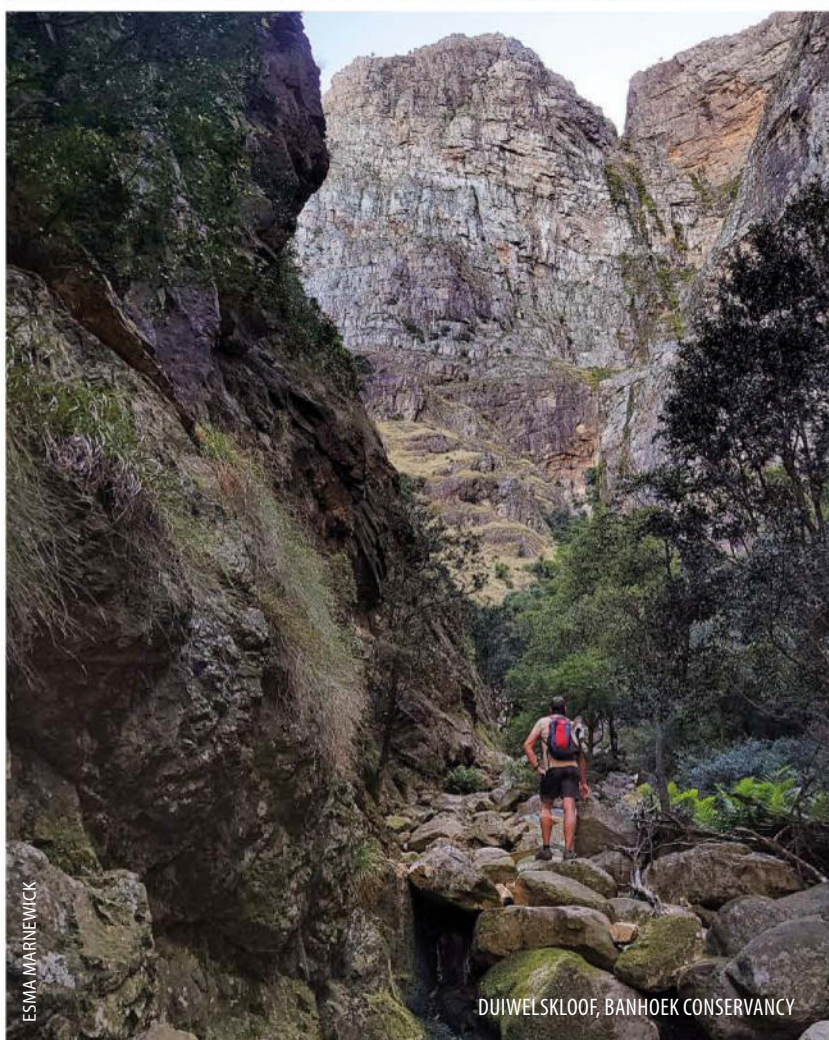
Cost: Cycling permit R60 per person. The trails at the base of the mountain on Old Bethlehem farm are free for hikers, but if you want to hike into the ravines, it costs R60 per person. You can pay with SnapScan.

Contact: 🌐 banhoekconservancy.org



VINEYARD WALKING TRAIL, THELEMA WINE FARM

ESMA MARNEWICK



DUIWELSKLOOF, BANHOEK CONSERVANCY

ESMA MARNEWICK

DWARSRIVIER VALLEY



IN OTHER WORDS

Marinda du Toit, artist

"Pniël welcomed me with open arms. When the children started calling me *antie* instead of *tannie*, I knew I was home. I love my neighbours. We swop, borrow and share with each other – maybe a ladder for a box of peaches, curried fish or succulents. I've been here for eight years now and I've attended funerals, helped to decorate graves for Christmas Day, and contributed to the church bazaar.

"I grew up on a farm and now I can once again walk in the fields and swim in the dams. I feel at home in the valley with its abundance of kindness, unconditional love and generosity. It might sound like I'm gushing but it's all true."

Dominique Enthoven Botha, author and entrepreneur

"The people here don't just speak Afrikaans – they speak pure poetry. I've landed in paradise. Bring your hiking boots to explore the Groot Drakenstein Mountains on Old Bethlehem farm. Bring your bicycle and hit the trails in the Banhoek Conservancy. Bring your appetite (and your wallet!) and have a meal at Delaire Graff, Tokara, Le Pommier, or Vrede en Lust. Drink coffee at Ou Meul on Simondium and grab something to eat at Die Werf at Boschendal."



STAY HERE

STAYMORE GUESTHOUSE

This spacious self-catering house sleeps eight people. It's about 500 m from Old Bethlehem farm and the Banhoek Conservancy – perfect for a weekend stay for a group of friends who want to hike and mountain bike. There's a nice firepit. If you don't want to prepare dinner yourself, ask owner Lecelin Roberts for a braai – book at least a day in advance. If you're lucky, Lecelin will arrange for a local storyteller and music to entertain you. You can book a room or the entire house. **Where?** 11 Adams Street, Kylemore

Rate: From R850 per night.

Contact: 083 705 9347;

staymoreguesthouse.co.za

LUMLEY'S PLACE

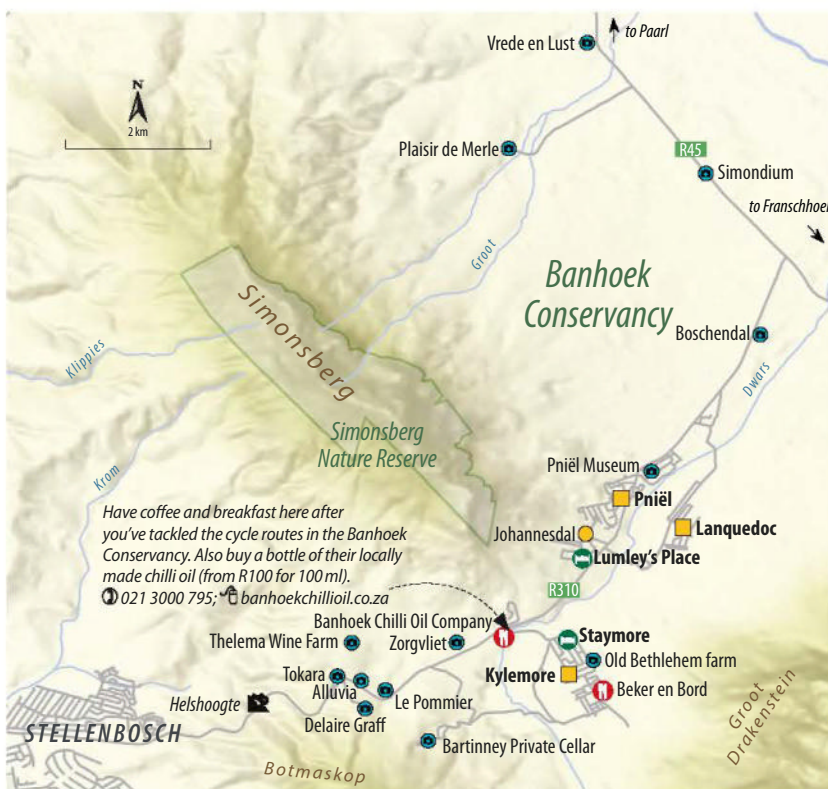
Hospitable owners Benita and Peter Cyster were born in the valley and can give you great sightseeing tips. The house Benita grew up in – called Kliphuis – is part of the guesthouse. The spacious rooms overlook the Groot Drakenstein Mountains.

Where? 5 Lumley Avenue, Johannesburg

Rates: Guest rooms from R1 200 per night, with breakfast. Backpacker double room with a communal bathroom at the back of the house: R800 per night. Dinner is also available – book beforehand.

Contact: 082 850 9007;

lumleysplace.com



FOR YOUR CALENDAR

February: Adam Small Festival

072 245 1415; adamsmallfees.co.za

Just before Easter: Annual bazaar of the Congregational Church 021 885 1300

May: Chrysanthemum Show;

rhw6220@gmail.com (Richard Williams)

September: Kylemore Charity Foundation charity ball kylemorecharityfoundation@yahoo.com; facebook.com/kylemorecharityfoundation

1 December: The abolishment of slavery is celebrated at the Pniël Museum and Die Werf. pniel.co.za

Sources: stellenboschheritage.co.za;

pniel.co.za

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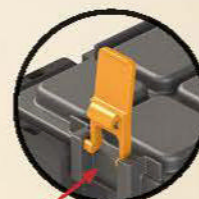
CLIP:
COMFORTABLE LOCK



SIDE:
COMFORTABLE
CARRY HANDLES



INSIDE SIZE:
46cm x 36cm x 21cm
APPROX. 35 LITRES



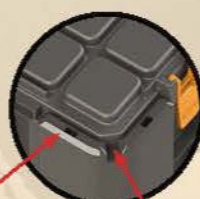
CLIP:
RECTANGULAR HOLE FOR
CLIP TO SNAP/LOCK INTO



CLIP:
EASY TO REPLACE



TOP:
SLOTS FOR CARGO STRAPS



LID:
COUNTERSUNK
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Rural charm a stone's throw outside Cape Town

At Meerendal Wine Estate you can stay in the historic farmstead, which has been converted into a charming boutique hotel, or in a garden suite tucked away between the trees. The beautiful farm outside Durbanville is ideal for those who are looking for a destination that offers peace and comfort.

When you're lounging on the patio outside one of Meerendal's garden suites, it's hard to believe you're only about 20 minutes' drive from the busy Mother City. The rust-brown vines – which shed their autumn leaves at this time of year – stretch in all directions, a bird of prey circles far above your head, while you experience tranquillity at one of the leading wine destinations in the country.

It's a special kind of treat to kick off your shoes here. The historic Meerendal farmstead has been converted into a boutique hotel that offers luxurious accommodation in six double rooms. And there is also a variety of garden suites separate from the manor house.

Meerendal, however, is no holiday farm – top-quality wines are produced here! But the estate has become a piece of heaven for city folk who want to explore the farm's many running and mountain-biking trails early in the morning and on weekends.

A sip of wine history

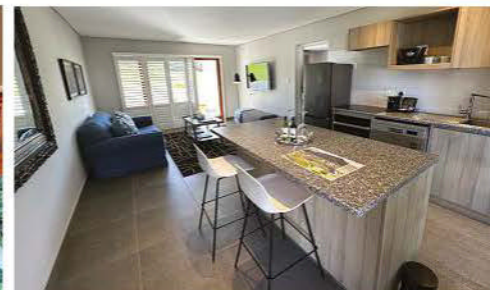
Part of the appeal of staying here is that you don't have to cook for yourself. Opposite the boutique hotel are two restaurants, LaRomantica and Bossa, where heaters and fireplaces keep guests warm and cosy in winter. Also visit the tasting room to get acquainted with Meerendal's award-winning wines. The pinotage, especially, is a must-have. Meerendal was one of the first estates to produce this variety after it was developed in 1925 by

professor Abraham Perold of the University of Stellenbosch.

Meerendal was founded in 1702 when Jan Meerland received the land from then governor Willem Adriaan van der Stel. When he died in 1714, his wife, Christina Stans, took over the farm and expanded it to 60 000 vines.

Work and play

The farm is within easy reach of Cape Town International Airport, the city, as well as the Northern Suburbs and the Boland, making it a good base if you are coming to Cape Town for business. Or bring your business here! The Loft and the elegant boardroom offer excellent conference facilities for 18 and 33 guests respectively, or up to 50 seats for a theater-style presentation. The rooms have



data projectors, Internet access, air conditioning, a coffee machine, and a generator so loadshedding will not interrupt you.

For larger events, there is the neat Marquee with its beautiful view – perfect for product launches, expos, business events or family gatherings. There are 5 000 parking spaces to accommodate all visitors, and a chapel with seating for up to 80 guests if you're looking for an intimate setting for your wedding.

If you want a farm holiday with lots of activities, Meerendal has plenty to offer. The estate forms part of a comprehensive network of running, mountain-biking and hiking trails in the Durbanville area, and it's a sought-after destination for serious cyclists. Base yourself here if you want to explore the wider region, but chances are Meerendal's beautiful surroundings will entice you to simply kick off your shoes and relax on a lounge with a glass of pinotage.

More details at meerendal.co.za



Ride the secret Baviaans

The greater Baviaanskloof region is much more than just the famous gorge. In the north, between the imposing Grootrivier, Groot Winterhoek and Baviaanskloof mountains lies a network of excellent gravel roads and great farm stays that have long begged to be explored... especially on two wheels.

BY PIERRE STEYN



It feels like I'm alone in a landscape where the last humans and domesticated animals have long since ground to dust. My riding partners are miles behind. This morning, on a smooth gravel road that gradually sweeps downhill for kilometres, with only slight inclines here and there, I give my bike free rein.

It's overcast and there are gunmetal clouds stacking up over the Groot Winterhoek Mountains. Cool but not cold – the perfect weather for long-distance cycling, provided it doesn't rain. A once stately Karoo farmhouse, now a ruin, drifts past. I wonder what happened to the people who lived there? There's no sheep, cow, goat or chicken to be seen here, no fencing either. It's just me, my thoughts and the hypnotic sound of bicycle tyres crunching gravel.

The road follows a dry tributary of the Groot River, where sweet thorn and karee trees stitch a green seam through shrubland and sunburnt rock.

Then I get the fright of my life as I hear branches crack and stones clatter. First one, then two, no five kudus burst out of the treeline and scamper across the road in front of me, vanishing up a ridge.

You know all the uphill on the farm Rietfontein were worth the slog when you reach viewpoints like this.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Cyclists spend their first two nights of the Baviaans Cycle Tour in this comfortable self-catering house at Rietfontein Farm Stay. Yes, the arrow indeed points to the Baviaanskloof Mountains. Bennie Rathbone, owner of the farm Hadley, prepares lunch. Cyclists and hikers are both welcome at Bennie's shed called Camper's Delight. Eric Stewart and Brian Schultz make sure this tortoise has right of way. Rosemary and Heinie Dorfling of Rietfontein with Tosca, Connor and Xena. As soon as Bennie Rathbone has finished renovating his shed, this 1969 Mercedes 180D might be next on his list of restorations.

Mid-gasp, a warthog (probably flushed by the kudus) darts in front of my bike and sets off along the road like a hare in the headlights of a farm bakkie. He swerves left, right and then left again before his short legs carry him into the bushes to safety. I shoot past, my heart hammering.

I'm not as alone as I thought... There might not be people here, but there's lots of life, as if nature wants to reclaim the environment for itself again.

To the Karoo

The idea of offering a tour where groups of cyclists can overnight on farms in this district belongs to Eric and Esti Stewart. Their hikes – the easy-going Chokka Trail near St Francis Bay where they live, and the tough Baviaans Camino – have won several tourism awards. Esti was convinced that the area surrounding Steytleville had a lot to offer, and Eric's love of mountain biking led to a recce about two years ago. Not only did they find well-maintained gravel roads in the Grootrivier Valley and on the northern slopes of the Baviaanskloof Mountains, but also hospitable farmers who can provide riders with accommodation and meals.

At Rietfontein, one such farm 22 km south of Steytleville, I park my Suzuki Jimny in the shade of a giant eucalyptus tree on a Tuesday afternoon in the spring of 2022. Tomorrow we start the Baviaans Cycle Tour, a route of 250 km that will finish here again in five days' time.

The Dorflings have been farming on Rietfontein for three generations, these days with angora goats and dorper and merino sheep. Heinie and his wife Rosemary walk over to the self-catering house where we'll all be staying for the next two nights. They greet me with big smiles and firm handshakes. Half of the farmyard's five dogs and nine cats join in the greeting.

The eight other cyclists on the tour – a group of friends from Joburg – arrived earlier but decided to head into Steytleville for a beer at the Royal Hotel. They seem like a friendly and relaxed bunch, Rosemary reassures me when she finds out I haven't met them before.

While I wait for my cycling partners (and the Stewarts) to arrive, I relax on the stoep with a cup of coffee and a book. The Baviaanskloof Mountains decorate the horizon. I'll soon get to know them well!

“It's technical”

On the first day of the tour, we ride a 40 km route on Rietfontein itself, just to get our legs moving. Last night around the braai, Eric told us it would be mostly jeep tracks with about

700 m of climbing along Rooikrans and over Bobbejaansberg. It turns out my new riding buddies are indeed friendly and laid-back, with ages ranging from early sixties to deep seventies. Retired businessmen, mine managers and even a former newspaper editor who is nowadays one of South Africa's leading historical biographers. It's worth the cost of this tour just to listen to them around the dinner table!

It's a group that's not easily spooked, but their eyes widen when Eric talks about some steep climbs on the route. “It's a bit technical, but not that technical,” he says. He rides along on his e-bike every day and is there to help if there are mechanical problems. Esti drives a support vehicle a fair distance behind the riders: She has space on the roof and trailer if bikes need to be loaded or exchanged.

“What does he mean it's *technical*?” the author, Richard Steyn, asks me.

“Um, I think we'll have to slow down over the rocky sections,” I say.

“Slow doesn't bother me...”

It would later become a standing joke. At 77 years old, Richard is the oldest member of our group, and every time he falls behind, he lets us know that things are becoming a little “technical”.

Day 1 is as described – there are steep climbs where we have to dismount and push, and some adrenaline-filled descents. Five hours later, just in time for chicken pie, salad and beer, we're back at the farmhouse. Time for more reading (maybe Richard's *Louis Botha – A Man Apart*) and an afternoon nap.

The bark of the Baviaans

We say goodbye to the Dorflings, who have begun to feel like family. We've been socialising for the past two nights and had breakfast together in their house every morning.

It's time to head to Grootrivierpoort, to the farm Hadley on the slopes of the Baviaanskloof Mountains, about 40 km south-east of Rietfontein.

I swap my heavy mountain bike with all its suspension for my sleek gravel bike. Today's district roads are going to be much faster than yesterday's rocky jeep tracks. Also, our climbing won't be more than 400 m in total. It feels like I've traded a pony for a racehorse. It's the first time I'm riding in this part of the Karoo and I soon realise why Eric chose these roads.

My companions only brought mountain bikes – the logical thing to do if you're going to ride a variety of surfaces and you only have space to transport one bike. But I'm glad I carted both of mine all the way from Stellenbosch. I'm devouring kilometres like



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The gravel road from Hadley near Grootrivierpoort all the way to Bucklands Guest Farm is a highlight of the tour. Danie Craven is ready to meet cyclists at Noorspoort Guest Farm near Steytlerville. There's very little motorised traffic on these gravel roads. Rini Horn of Bucklands knows the secret to keeping hungry cyclists happy: omelettes! Catch your breath on the wide stoep at Royal Karoo Safaris.

a Pacman gobbling Smarties!

There's no sign of dreaded corrugations that can punish the wrists of a rider on a bike without front suspension. I ride ahead, and then wait on summits to take photos of the riders with the Karoo as a backdrop. Once the support vehicles catch up, we enjoy Esti's home-made date balls and chocolate brownies with some drinks in the shade of a lane of old eucalyptus trees. (Thanks Esti!)

Now it's the last stretch to Hadley. It's hot and humid, with thunderclouds piling up against the mountains. Every now and then I hear a baboon sentry bark a warning to his troop. A final steep climb, a quick descent, and we turn towards Hadley – Bennie and Anine Rathbone's farm.

Just in time, too, because the first fat raindrops start to fall as thunder rolls along the cliffs. The Rathbones have prepared a feast for lunch: home-baked quiches and farm bread with jam. The spread is laid out on the ground floor of a barn that has been converted to accommodate cyclists and hikers. Tonight we'll sleep in a communal dormitory on the top floor.

Bennie is a legend in these parts, a man with an endearing spirit and capable hands. The Rathbones arrived in the Eastern Cape with the 1820 settlers, and today Bennie is one of the last farmers still actively farming here.

"In 2000 there were 120 farmers in the district, today there are probably only 60 left," he says. "The drought forced us to adapt. We rely more and more on tourism to survive." Hence converting the barn – a process that began in 2020 and is still a work in progress.

"But wait," he says, taking my arm as our conversation turns to classic cars. "Come see what's around the side of the barn..."

It's a powder-blue 1969 Mercedes 180D with a four-cylinder engine, one of only a handful in the country. It might become Bennie's next project, once the barn is finally done.

The buck doesn't stop here

Yesterday's gravel road was excellent, but it's the 50km from Hadley to Bucklands Guest Farm on the third day that will lure me back to these roads again and again. Remember *The A-Team* – the popular TV show from the 1980s? Their commander, John "Hannibal" Smith, had a catchline: "I love it when a plan comes together."

Today is one such day. The rain yesterday settled the dust, it's just north of 20° C – overcast with dramatic clouds but no rain and no wind, and the road has recently been graded. Over the course of 50km, the landscape gradually drops from 600m above sea level to

about 300m. Gravel Nirvana, in other words.

Except for my fellow riders, I don't see another human – or a car – for three hours. Just kudus, an agile warthog and a number of jackal buzzards. On long, flowing stretches where I barely have to pedal, it feels like my bike and I are the only man-made things on the planet.

I'm almost disappointed to see the turn-off to Bucklands. It's one of those days where you feel like you can ride forever. But then I see how beautiful this working sheep farm is on the banks of the Groot River...

The Horns on Bucklands have been farming here for five generations. Recently, Hannes and his wife Rini have followed Bennie Rathbone's lead and significantly expanded on what they can offer tourists.

Do you want to go to Baroe?

Today's stage of almost 70km is the longest of the tour. Unsurprisingly, at breakfast, Rini's yummy cheese omelettes and pan-fried sausages disappear as fast as she can make them. We're three days in. Our fitness has improved and so has our appetite.

We head north now, on long, straight farm roads, until we start to climb into the Grootrivier Mountains. The road signs look like they belong in a museum – so old and rusty you can barely make out the names. "Baroe" I read on one at a fork in the road. I wonder if anyone still goes to Baroe?

The only entry about the tiny railway settlement I come across later on Wikipedia is that it's the birthplace of South Africa's youngest first-class cricketer: "Dudley Theophilus was 15 when he played wicketkeeper for the Eastern Province in 1926. He didn't concede any byes in the game against the Western Province." Sadly, Dudley died on his 25th birthday.

We're not going to Baroe today. No – we're cycling due west, gradually downhill towards Steytlerville, with a lunch break at the luxurious Royal Karoo Safaris lodge to sample their pizza.

After lunch we pick up the pace, like horses sensing home. The smooth gravel and a strong easterly wind at our backs enable us to average 40km/h for long stretches at a time. I see giraffes along a game fence; springbok scatter up a ridge as we speed past.

Barely an hour later we're on the outskirts of Steytlerville, and our first bit of tarmac as we turn right onto the R329 towards Kirkwood. It's strange to be wary of traffic again. Mercifully, it's barely 2km before we turn back onto gravel towards Noorspoort Guest Farm, our last stay of the tour.

Noorspoort has a strong link with the



BAVIAANSKLOOF

“Mr Rugby” of South Africa: Dr Danie Craven. This was the family farm of Doc Craven’s first wife, Beyera. Their eldest son George started farming here in 1977. And it’s another Danie Craven, Doc’s grandson, who welcomes us on the lawn of the beautifully restored farmhouse.

It’s not just rugby and Karoo hospitality that Noorspoort can boast about. Danie is justifiably proud of the bedding we’ll sleep under tonight. The Craven family’s down and linen business, Makoti, was started in 1989 under the watchful eye of Danie’s mother, Anna-Marie. “It was a way to earn extra money after 12 years of drought. A way to keep the farm going. She started the business with a handful of geese and a piece of cloth,” he says.

Today, their down duvets and linen can be found in guesthouses and hotels across South Africa and the world.

Take me home, country roads

We slept like pharaohs under our cotton sheets and down duvets. Most of our group are starting their return journey to Johannesburg directly from Noorspoort. Yesterday afternoon, Esti shuttled them to Rietfontein to collect their cars so they could get an early start.

But not for Ian-Kilwa Anderson, Eric Stewart and me. A quick 27 km ride back to Rietfontein sounds like the perfect way to end our tour. Because once you start riding these roads, you don’t want to stop...



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How does it work? The tour spans five days and five nights. You pedal 30–70 km per day. You start and finish at Rietfontein near Steytlerville, where you can safely leave your car. Heinie will even park it for you in a farm shed if you don’t want it to stand outside. You sleep in a comfortable warm bed every night and there are always hot showers available. All your accommodation, meals and snacks are included, but you pay for your own drinks, or you can bring your own. Your luggage is transported from one farm to the next. You will probably have to share rooms, and at Hadley everyone sleeps in a rustic dormitory in a barn.

What should I bring? Mountain bike, e-bike or gravel bike, preferably with tubeless tyres, water bottles or a hydration pack, also your own cycling tools and spares in case you need to fix a flat tyre or a chain. Eric and his toolbox are also on hand

to help. Pack comfortable (and warm) clothes to wear around the fire in the evening.

How fit should I be? The routes each day are not particularly long or challenging, but get some saddle time beforehand. You must be able to comfortably spend between three and five hours a day on a bike.

Cost: R9 960 per person sharing. There’s also a six-day, six-night option for R12 775 per person. There must be at least eight people in a group.

When? Private groups of eight or more can choose their own dates, but if you want to join a group this year there are still places available from 26–31 August, 16–21 September, 5–10 October and 18–23 November.

Contact: Esti Steward at chokkatrail@gmail.com; 073 825 0835; baviaans2bayadventures.co.za

STAY HERE

You don’t have to ride a bicycle to stay at the guest farms. Visitors in cars, on foot or on motorbikes are also welcome!

Rietfontein Farm Stay

Spacious farmhouse with a big stoep and a braai area. There are seven bedrooms and four bathrooms – perfect for a big family gathering. You might encounter kudu, springbok and a variety of small game in the veld when you hike or cycle.

Where? 22 km south of Steytlerville.

Rate: R320 per person per night.

Contact: Rosemary Dorfling

rdorfling@igen.co.za;

rietfonteinfarmstay.com

Hadley Guest Farm

In addition to the barn with a bedroom and two dormitories, there are also two rustic self-catering cottages on the farm. They don’t have Eskom electricity, but they do have gas fridges and stoves, and battery lights. Gooseberry has three bedrooms and Grootrivier has five. They can accommodate seven and 12 people respectively.

Where? 48 km south-east of Steytlerville on the way to Patensie.

Rates: R400 per person in Gooseberry; R300 per person in Grootrivier. Talk to Anine directly if you want to book the barn for a large group.

Contact: anine@igen.co.za

Bucklands Guest Farm

Plan a destination wedding in the Karoo, stay in one of three self-catering cottages, tackle the Grootrivierpoort hiking trail, drive a 4x4 trail, ride your mountain bike, look at rock paintings in caves – you can even spend the night in a cave or shepherd’s hut. There’s also space for campers.

Where? 50 km south-east of Steytlerville.

Rates: Cottages R300 per adult; half-price for children under 12. Ghe Ghe shepherd’s hut R350 per person. Camping R150 per adult; half-price for children under 12. Blougat cave R1 200 per person (two people minimum, no more than five) – it’s an experience, including guided

hikes, all your meals and a 4x4 transfer there and back.

Contact: bucklands.org.za

Noorspoort Guest Farm

Stay in a luxurious guest room in the main house (six rooms in total, all en suite); in a three-bedroom self-catering farmhouse (Oudepos) on a hill about 2 km from the main house; or pitch your tent in the campsite with electricity and water.

Where? 4 km north of Steytlerville.

Rates: Main house R600 per person (or R720 per person B&B); Oudepos R400 per person; camping R150 per person.

Contact: Danie Craven

082 553 3344;

noorspoort.co.za

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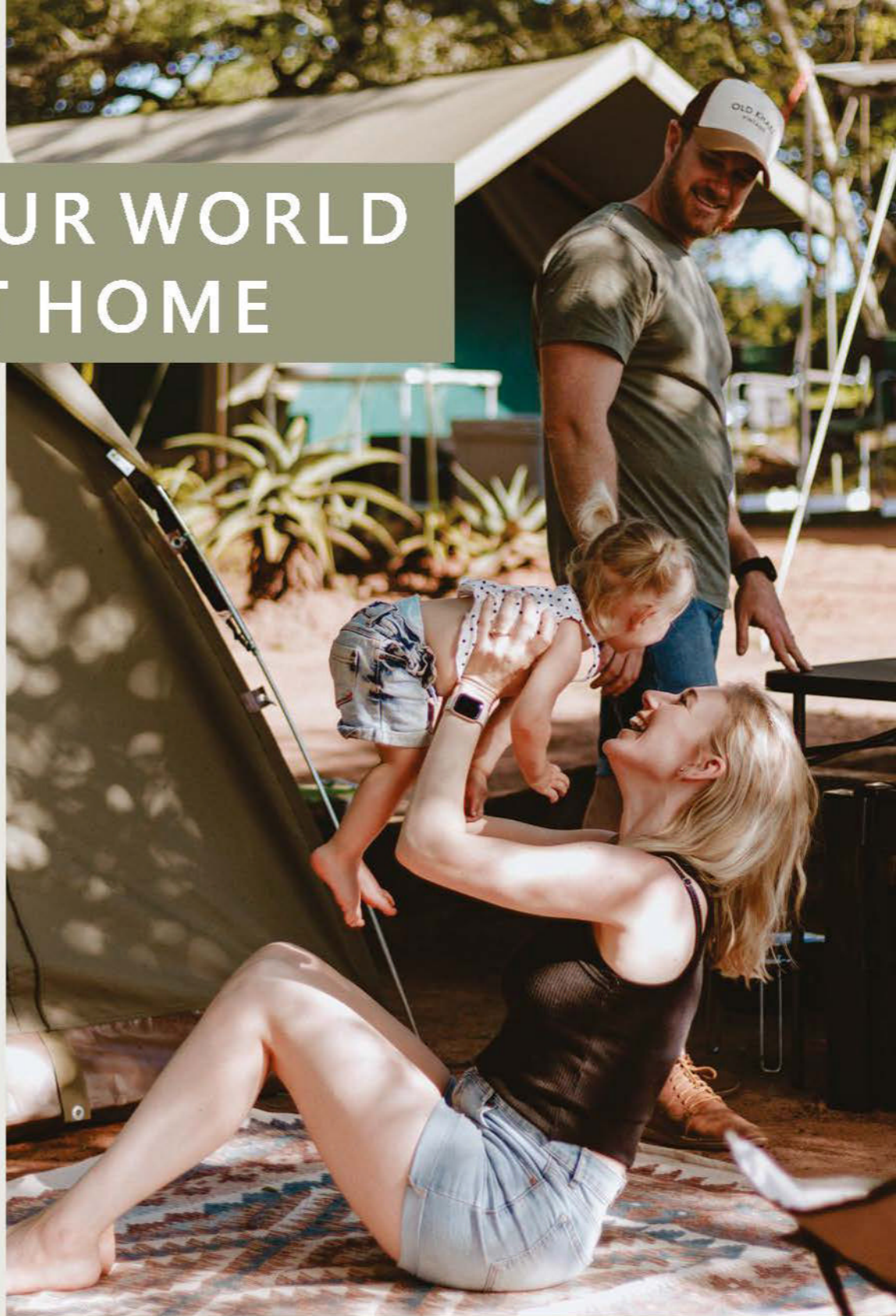
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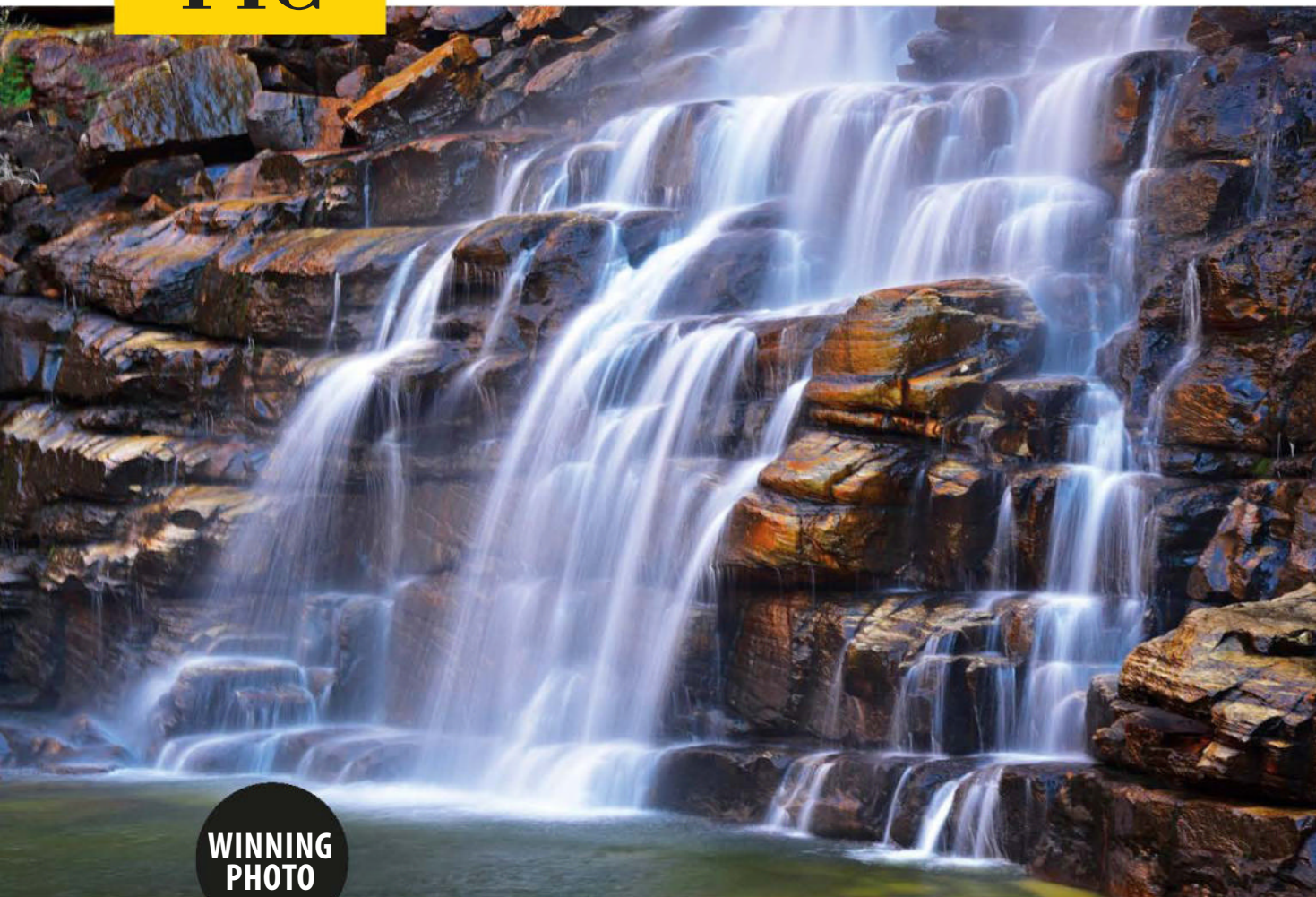
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WINNING PHOTO

NIEKIE VAN DER MERWE

Nikon D3400

Nikon 18 – 105 mm lens

NIEKIE WRITES: I took this photo at Waterval, a holiday resort outside Vanrhynsdorp in the Western Cape. The waterfall itself was full after good winter rains. It was just before 9 am and overcast. I didn't have a tripod, but there was a rock I could rest my elbows on to steady the camera.

I used shutter priority mode and I played around with a slower shutter speed. I took six photos and this one was the best. I ended up with a half-second shutter speed at an aperture

of f13, with the ISO set to 100.

I used editing software called PhotoScape to crop the photo and make small adjustments to the colour, contrast and sharpness.

TOAST SAYS: A waterfall photo is always nice to look at, and if you can blur the cascading water then your shot will really stand out.

The effect is not easy to achieve in the middle of the day when the sun hits the water directly – you'll notice that your camera can't keep up. The light is too bright to use a slow shutter speed. If you do, your photo will be overexposed no matter how small your aperture is. (Note

that you can use a special lens filter called a neutral density (ND) filter to darken the scene so you can use a slow shutter speed – some cameras even come with a built-in ND filter. Check your manual.)

Niekie was smart to take this photo on an overcast morning and in the shade. He was also smart to stabilise himself to avoid camera shake. With a slow shutter speed, it's essential to keep the static elements in sharp focus (the rocks in this case). You should preferably use a tripod when shooting at anything less than 1/60 second, but if you left home without one, do as Niekie did: Rest on something solid or lean against

a tree trunk. Keep your elbows to your sides so you create your own "tripod".

Play around with shutter speeds to see which one gets the best result. Start at 1/60 second and work down through 1/30 second until you get to half a second and maybe even slower. Use a small aperture – at least f8. Keep your ISO to 100 or maybe 200 – it's not necessary to go higher. The darker it is, the slower your shutter speed can be. I've taken photos of Epupa Falls under a full moon with a shutter speed of 30 seconds.

Congrats, Niekie, your steady hand earned you a camera bag!



 COEN OELOFSE

Nikon D800

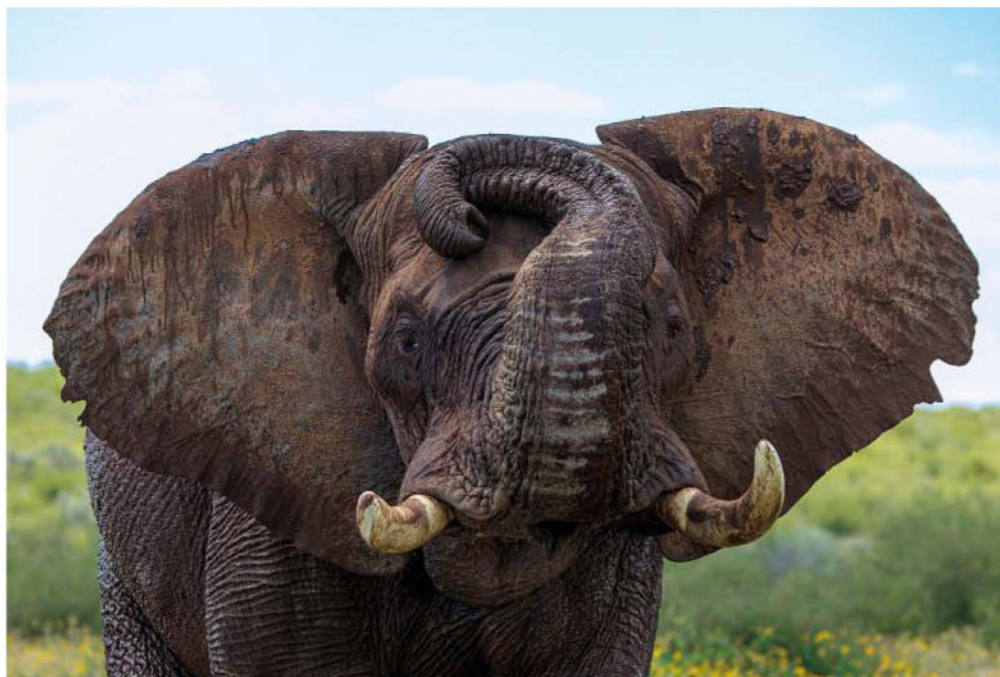
Tamron 150 – 600 mm lens

TOAST SAYS: Coen photographed this leopard in the Kruger Park. He writes that there were two leopards mating and the male rested in the tall grass at one stage.

His settings: shutter speed 1/80 second, aperture f8, ISO 400. It's always risky to use a long zoom lens with a slow shutter speed like 1/80 second, but you can get away with it if you rest your camera and lens on the door of your vehicle or something similar. Coen was zoomed in to 320 mm – the guideline is to adjust your shutter speed to match your focal length, so at least 1/320 second in this case.

I like Coen's photo because it shows a defining characteristic of the leopard – its amazing ability to blend in with its habitat. You can understand why an impala will sometimes wander right up to a leopard... It's almost impossible to see the predator.

The rule of thirds ensures a classic composition, with the leopard looking into the open space on the left.



▲ GERT KOTZE

Canon EOS R7

Canon RF 100 – 500 mm lens

GERT WRITES: I took this photo at Mooifontein Lodge in Madikwe Game Reserve. The elephant came to drink at the lodge dam. Field guide Albert Roos and I walked up to the electric fence to be as close as possible to take photos.

That's when the elephant moved in our direction. Albert has lots of experience in these situations and told me to keep calm. I did and took a series of photos as the elephant ambled past. It's a moment I'll remember forever!

TOAST SAYS: When I studied photojournalism, my lecturer always said: "The closer you are, the better your photos will be." This mantra is obviously true for news photography where you can

capture events in greater detail with a wide-angle lens if you're closer to the action, but it's not always the safest option when you're taking photos of wild animals! Luckily, we have zoom lenses to bring the action closer, without physically having to be close enough to smell a lion's breath...

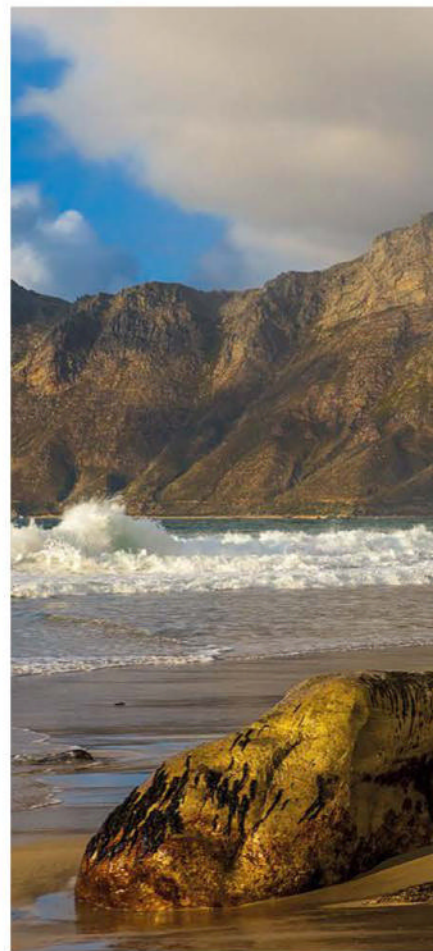
But when you zoom in on an animal from a distance, you sometimes lose a little sharpness depending on how good your lens is. That's why it's always better to drive closer to your subject if it's safe to do so. Also make sure you adhere to the rules – someone sent me a photo the other day and told me how a buffalo gave her a fright when she got out of her vehicle and

walked up to it to get a better shot!

Remember, you're not allowed to leave your vehicle in most reserves. Respect a wild animal's space at all times, and don't drive closer if it's clear that the animal is uncomfortable.

Gert did everything right – he was with an experienced field guide and he was (relatively) safe behind a fence. I'm not an expert when it comes to elephant body language, but it looks like this one is asking a question with its trunk: "Hey Gert, what's your f-stop?"

The detail in this photo is what makes it stand out. And although Gert's quality lens and camera played their part, the success of this shot is based on how close he got to the ellie.





< RENÉ WRIGHT

Canon EOS R5

Canon 24 – 70 mm lens

TOAST SAYS: René is a member of the Kleinmond Kiekieklub – a local photography club in Kleinmond near Hermanus. She took this photo at Dappat se Gat, a surf spot just below Clarence Drive on the False Bay coast.

A rainbow adds a touch of magic to any landscape, but René's photo has several strong compositional elements. There's no dead space in the frame. Look carefully – there's something to keep your attention in every section of the shot. A big rock anchors the bottom left corner of the foreground and the other small rocks lead your eye to where the reflection of the rainbow dances on the wet sand.

In the middle part of the photo, the white foam of the waves creates a strong line and the mountains provide a solid backdrop for the entire scene. I also like the low, grey clouds over the mountains and the sliver of blue sky in the top left corner. The rainbow connects the top section with the bottom.

See, it all fits together perfectly!



< FRANCES LE ROUX

Nikon D7000

Sigma 150 – 600 mm lens

TOAST SAYS: Frances and her family were in the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania when she took this photo of a mud-covered black rhino. Her shutter speed was 1/500 second, aperture f7.1 and ISO 400.

The Ngorongoro Crater is one of Africa's prime destinations for wildlife photography because it has a high concentration of big game like rhino, elephant and buffalo, plus predators like lion, leopard and hyena. The open terrain makes it easier to photograph animals because they are seldom hidden in vegetation.

It looks like Frances took her photo on an overcast day because there isn't a pronounced contrast between the shadowy underparts of the rhino and the top parts of its body where sunlight would usually be brightest. When you're photographing darker animals like rhino, buffalo or elephant, it's sometimes better on a cloudy day because you get a more balanced exposure. I'd recommend that Frances lighten the photo a bit using Adobe Lightroom or similar editing software, just to lift out some detail on the rhino's muddy skin.

I like how the hind legs and the tail are clearly visible. But compare those hind legs to the front legs and you'll see that the front legs aren't as easy to "read" because one is in front of the other.

Still, the outline of the rhino is unmistakable, especially when you see the head, ears and horns – thankfully this one still has horns! The hooked lip of the black rhino is also as clear as day.

Lekker photo, Frances!



▲ LETTIE PIETERSE

Nikon D3100

Nikon 55 – 200 mm lens

LETTIE WRITES: I photographed these giraffes at Moredou guest farm near Schweizer-Reneke in North West. It's a great place to get away from the noise of the city – the giraffes keep you company when you sit on the stoep!

TOAST SAYS: Yup, when you can see a giraffe from the stoep, you're in the right place.

As South Africans, we're spoiled with an abundance of giraffes – almost every game farm from the Western Cape to Limpopo has a small herd. And even though we often see them, they remain majestic, especially when you study them through your camera lens.

This is a classic giraffe photo in a classic thornveld habitat. The

bodies of the giraffes are hidden behind trees and their long necks and heads jut above the vegetation.

A giraffe often gives you several photo options within seconds – the head turned to this side, then that side, a straight-on shot... And when you have two giraffes in the frame, you have twice as many things to look at! The photo is also instantly more interesting because you have the possibility of interaction. A tennis match is much more riveting than a single player hitting a ball against a wall, right?

I like how the two necks originate from the same point in the photo, and how you can see small details like how long their eyelashes are.



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The people have spoken

COMPILED BY LYNNE FRASER

In issue #185 we featured a pick of our favourites from the 2022 edition of the Natural History Museum's Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. More than 50 000 entries were received but the judges could only award 100 winners. For the exhibition in London, the judges selected another 25 photos and asked the public to choose their favourite – either online or by using the interactive screens at the museum.

This is the result! After a record 60 446 votes, Sascha Fonseca's snow leopard received the People's Choice Award. The shot – and the four other highly commended images in the category – will be showcased alongside all the winners until the exhibition closes in July.

Wildlife Photographer of the Year offers a global platform for amateur and professional photographers to shine a light on stories and species around the world; and it helps support the Natural History Museum in its mission of advocating for the planet.

The 2023 edition of the competition is currently being judged and the winners will be revealed in October 2023. Visit [nhm.ac.uk](https://www.nhm.ac.uk) for more.

WINNER!

World of the snow leopard
Sascha Fonseca, Germany

Against a backdrop of spectacular mountains in Ladakh, a snow leopard is caught in a perfect pose by Sascha's camera trap. Sascha photographed the leopard during a three-year, bait-free camera-trap project high in the Indian Himalayas. The remote habitat of the snow leopard makes it one of the most difficult big cats to photograph in the wild.

HOW: Canon EOS 5Ds; 24 mm lens; shutter speed 1/200 second; aperture f8; ISO 400; with a Nikon SB28 flash and Camtraptions wireless triggers.





Fox affection

Brittany Crossman, Canada

On a chilly day on Prince Edward Island in Canada, a pair of red foxes greet one another with an intimate nuzzle. The red fox's mating season is in winter, and it's not uncommon to see them together prior to denning.

HOW: Canon 5D Mark IV; 500 mm lens; shutter speed 1/1 600 second; aperture f7.1; ISO 2 000.





Among the flowers

Martin Gregus, Canada

Martin watched this polar bear cub playing in a mass of fireweed next to Hudson Bay in Canada. Every so often, the cub would take a break from its fun, stand on its hind legs and poke its head above the flowers to look for its mother.

Wanting to capture the world from the cub's angle, Martin put his camera in an underwater housing for protection against investigating bears and placed it at ground level among the fireweed, then he moved a safe distance away and waited with a remote trigger. Not being able to see what was happening, he had to judge the right moment when the bear would pop into frame.

HOW: Nikon D850, 14–24 mm lens; shutter speed 1/640 second; aperture f6.3; ISO 100; in an Aquatech housing with a pocket wizard trigger.



Holding on *Igor Altuna, Spain*

This female leopard had killed a monkey in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park. The monkey's baby was still alive, clinging to its mother. Igor watched as the predator walked calmly back to her own baby. The leopard cub played with the baby monkey for more than an hour before killing it, almost as if it had been given live prey as a hunting lesson.

HOW Canon EOS 1Dx Mark III;
600 mm lens; shutter speed 1/2 500
second; aperture f4; ISO 800.



Zest for life

Inject some freshness into your winter dishes with a squeeze of juice, a sprinkling of grated peel, or a slice of bright citrus. Here's how to make use of those oranges, lemons and limes in your kitchen.

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



OXTAIL STEW WITH GLUHWEIN FLAVOURS

Oxtail stew with gluhwein flavours

Serves 6

Preparation time 30 minutes

Cooking time 3 hours

You need

- 2 kg oxtail, excess fat removed
- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- oil, for shallow frying
- 12 small pickling onions, peeled and halved
- 3 cloves of garlic, roughly chopped
- 500 ml red wine
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 3 whole cloves
- 3 allspice berries, bruised
- 1 tin (410 g) chopped tomatoes
- 1 cup meat stock
- juice and peel of 1 orange
- 3 bay leaves
- 2 tablespoons flour

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 160°C. Season the meat with salt and black pepper. Heat the oil in an ovenproof pot and fry the meat until golden brown. (If the oxtail has a lot of fat, use that instead of adding extra oil.) Once the meat is seared, remove it from the pot but retain 1 tablespoon of fat. Fry the onions and garlic for a few minutes until glossy. Stir in the red wine and scrape any browned pieces from the bottom of the pot. Close the lid and cook for 5 minutes.

2 Return the meat to the pot and add the spices, tomatoes, stock, orange peel and juice, and bay leaves. Close the lid and cook for about 3 hours in the oven or until the meat is tender.

3 When the meat is cooked to your preference, use a slotted spoon to remove it from the pot and to skim the fat from the sauce. If the sauce is too thin, bring it to a boil again to reduce until it's thick and glossy. Alternatively, mix the flour with some of the liquid to form a paste. Add it to the rest of the sauce and heat until

it thickens. Return the meat to the sauce, heat thoroughly and serve with pap, samp or rice. I like to serve this dish with green beans, peas or glazed carrots on the side.

Chicken with jalapeño, lime and coriander butter

Serves 6

Preparation time 20 minutes

Roasting time 1 hour 15 minutes

You need

- 1,2 kg whole chicken
- salt and black pepper, to taste
- 1 whole head of garlic
- 1 lime, halved
- 3 sprigs of thyme

For the butter

- ½ cup softened butter
- 3 cloves of garlic, chopped
- 1 lime, peel grated and flesh chopped
- 100 g feta, finely crumbled
- 1 pickled jalapeño pepper, chopped
- 1 tablespoon chopped coriander

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. Mix all the ingredients for the butter together.

2 Use kitchen paper to pat dry the chicken. Cut out the gland above the tail bone and season inside and out with salt and pepper. Carefully lift the skin from the breast and spread most of the butter under the skin. Try to work the butter in as deep as possible, to the drumsticks and thighs. Rub the rest of the butter on the outside of the chicken. Put the chicken in a roasting pan with the whole garlic, extra lime and thyme.

3 Roast the chicken with the breast facing up for 30 minutes. Lower the heat to 180°C, turn the chicken over, and roast for another 30 minutes. Turn the chicken over again with the breast facing up

and roast for 15 minutes. Let the golden-brown chicken rest for 15 minutes before serving.

TIP For a side dish, stir cooked rice through the butter in the roasting pan. Roast potatoes or sweet potato wedges along with the chicken to make the most of all the flavour.

The flavoured butter also goes well with seafood or steak. Roll the butter up in a sheet of baking paper and keep it in the fridge so it's easy to cut off a slice or two as needed.

Greek potato wedges

Makes 4 big portions

Preparation time 15 minutes

Baking time 20 minutes

You need

- 6 medium-sized potatoes, each cut into 4 wedges
- 3 cloves of garlic, roughly chopped
- about 45 ml olive oil
- stripped leaves of 3 sprigs of oregano
- salt and black pepper, to taste
- 1 small lemon
- 100 g kalamata olives, pitted and halved or roughly chopped
- 2 tablespoons capers
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped red onion

Here's how

1 Set your air fryer to 200°C. Mix together the potato wedges, garlic, olive oil and oregano. Add a big pinch of salt and freshly ground black pepper. Grate the lemon zest over and put the wedges in your air fryer's basket. Air-fry for 10 minutes. Stir the potatoes and bake for another 10 minutes or until golden brown and cooked. Let the potatoes rest in the basket for 5 minutes.

2 Mix the hot wedges with the olives, capers and red onion. Add fresh lemon juice to taste. Serve hot. You can also add more fresh herbs like chopped parsley or fennel.

TIP Cooking times can vary depending on your air fryer (I use a Philips Air fryer XXL.) If you don't have an air fryer, boil the potato wedges in salted water for 5 minutes and preheat the oven to 200°C. Season as described and spread out the wedges in an oven dish. Roast until cooked and golden brown before you add the olives, onion and capers.

Lemon-and-herb mayonnaise

Makes about 350 ml mayonnaise

Preparation time 15 minutes

You need

- 2 egg yolks
- 5 ml Dijon mustard
- ¼ teaspoon of finely chopped garlic
- pinch of sugar
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 1¼ cups vegetable oil
- 5 ml grated lemon zest
- about 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon chopped herbs (like chives, basil, coriander, parsley and fennel)
- salt and black pepper, to taste

Here's how

1 Make sure all the ingredients are at room temperature.

Combine the egg yolks, mustard, garlic, sugar and red wine vinegar in a bowl and use an electric mixer to beat at a high speed until thick.

2 Slowly add the oil while beating the mixture: Add half of the oil in drops; then add the rest in a thin stream until the mayonnaise reaches a thick, glossy consistency. (The amount of oil is a guideline; use more or less depending on the egg yolks.)

3 Add the lemon zest, lemon juice and herbs. Add salt and pepper to taste. The mayonnaise is delicious as a dipping sauce for crisp calamari, fried fish or chicken strips.



CHICKEN WITH JALAPEÑO, LIME
AND CORIANDER BUTTER



LEMON-AND-HERB MAYONNAISE



GREEK POTATO WEDGES



SPAGHETTI WITH LEMON, AVO
AND SMOKED CHICKEN



ORANGE PUDDING WITH CUSTARD

Spaghetti with lemon, avo and smoked chicken

Serves 4

Preparation time 15 minutes

Cooking time 8 minutes

You need

- 300 g spaghetti
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 200 g mushrooms, roughly chopped
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 5 ml finely grated lemon zest
- large handful of baby spinach
- 1 smoked chicken breast fillet, cut into cubes
- 250 ml guacamole, bought or home-made
- 1 ripe avocado, cut into cubes and drizzled with 15 ml of fresh lemon juice
- ½ cup grated pecorino

Here's how

- 1 Cook the spaghetti in salted water until al dente. (It usually takes 8 minutes.)
- 2 Heat the oil and fry the mushrooms until golden brown. Season the mushrooms with salt and pepper, and add the lemon zest. Stir through the spinach and chicken until the leaves are wilted and the chicken is heated through.
- 3 Once the pasta is cooked, drain and add it to the chicken mixture. Stir the guacamole through the hot pasta. (The pasta water on the spaghetti will turn the mashed avocado into a creamy sauce.)
- 4 Spoon into serving bowls or plates, divide the fresh lemon-flavoured avocado between the portions, and sprinkle over the cheese. Serve hot.

Orange pudding with custard

Serves 4

Preparation time 30 minutes

Baking time 30 minutes

You need

- ½ cup castor sugar
- ½ cup softened butter
- pinch of salt

- ⅓ cup olive oil
- 1 extra-large egg
- 1½ cups self-raising flour
- 1 small orange, peeled and pith removed (see tip)
- 500 ml custard, to serve

For the syrup

- 1 cup boiling water
- ½ cup castor sugar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- ½ cup fresh orange juice
- 1 tablespoon orange peel, finely sliced or grated
- 2 tablespoons brandy

Here's how

- 1 Preheat the oven to 180° C. Using an electric mixer, cream the sugar, butter and salt together until light and fluffy. Add the olive oil and egg and beat until combined.
- 2 Sieve the self-raising flour over the egg mixture.
- 3 Cut the orange into small pieces, working over a bowl to catch the juice. Fold the orange flesh and juice into the batter until mixed.
- 4 Scoop the batter into a greased oven dish (1 litre) and bake for 30 minutes or until a testing pin comes out clean.
- 5 For the syrup: Combine all the ingredients except the brandy and bring to a boil. Lower to a medium heat and simmer for about 5 minutes. When the mixture is syrupy, add the brandy.
- 6 Remove the pudding from the oven, prick all over with a skewer and drizzle over the warm syrup. Serve hot with custard.

TIP I like strips of glazed peel in the syrup: Cut the orange peel into 1 cm-wide strips. Press down each strip on a cutting board with the peel facing down and use a sharp knife to remove the pith. Cook the strips in water for about 15 minutes until soft. Drain and then cook in the syrup to glaze the strips.

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The Clone Wars

When **Suzuki**, an ambitious upstart on a stellar trajectory, and **Toyota**, the long-reigning heavyweight champion of the South African automotive industry, launch the same car in the same week, it makes for an interesting bunfight...

BY PIERRE STEYN

You can blame Covid-19 or the insipid economy – or both – but the trend of buying down is real. Choosing smaller and cheaper options instead of splashing out has become prevalent in all sectors, including the motoring sector. Last year, entry-level cars accounted for almost half of all the country's passenger car sales.

If you dig deeper into the numbers, you'll find that more than a third of these cheaper car sales were entry-level SUVs. As a result, the Suzuki Vitara Brezza (introduced

in 2021) and its clone, the first-generation Toyota Urban Cruiser, were both huge success stories. More so for Toyota than Suzuki... Thanks to the strength of that Toyota badge, more than a thousand Urban Cruisers were sold per month. The Urban Cruiser outsold the Suzuki by a ratio of at least two to one, even though the Brezza cost less and had a more extensive warranty and service plan.

The fact that Suzuki was being beaten by a rebadged version of its own car must have been a source of irritation on showroom floors

countrywide. Not that Suzuki was complaining too loudly... It's now the third-largest seller of passenger cars in South Africa, behind Volkswagen and Toyota, thanks to its wide offering of entry-level vehicles.

Then, in 2022, Maruti-Suzuki in India announced it would no longer produce the Vitara Brezza, which has resulted in an interesting shift in strategy regarding the Brezza's successor...

While Toyota South Africa has retained the Urban Cruiser name for the new car, and kept its focus on the entry-level market, Suzuki has

a gone a notch more upmarket by calling their version a Grand Vitara, which is more than just a nod to their capable and iconic off-roader of yesteryear. Suzuki has an all-wheel-drive flagship model with a mild hybrid system, which retails at well over R500 000, in a line-up of five derivatives.

We drove the Toyota and the Suzuki at a launch within days of each other. Except for exterior and minor interior design differences, the cars are almost identical, sharing parts (manual and automatic transmissions) and the



TOYOTA URBAN CRUISER



SUZUKI GRAND VITARA



TOYOTA URBAN CRUISER

same naturally aspirated 1.5-litre engine. Even though the new Urban Cruiser/Grand Vitara is still a Suzuki-developed product, the cars will be built in Toyota's Indian plant this time around.

It's a noticeably bigger car than its predecessor, wider and longer, with better leg room for passengers and more ground clearance (now 210 mm). The modern styling – sharper lines and angles and lots of LED lights on both cars – comes down to personal preference. I prefer the Suzuki's styling, but the slightly

more conservative looks of the Toyota will find broad appeal.

The entry-level derivatives of both brands offer excellent value for money. The Grand Vitara GL manual (R340 000) and the Urban Cruiser XS manual (R330 000) have loads of standard features such as keyless entry and start, digital display, electric windows, air conditioner, Apple Car Play and Android Auto, power steering and USB sockets. The Suzuki adds side airbags, a reverse camera and cruise control on top of the Toyota's entry-level spec, which

helps to justify the small price premium. Even though the 1.5-litre engine lacks grunt, it's a free-revving engine that comes into its own when paired with the slick manual transmission. The extra safety features on the Suzuki would clinch the deal for me at this price point.

The engine certainly labours a bit in the automatic derivatives, and especially in Suzuki's flagship hybrid model which is neither fish nor fowl. At R530 000 it's no longer an entry-level SUV, but it also won't necessarily appeal to buyers

looking for a capable 4x4.

Both the Toyota and the Suzuki are more urban cruisers than grand off-landers. If I wanted the car in a no-fuss automatic transmission, the top-spec Toyota Urban Cruiser XR offers good value at R370 000, compared to the top-spec (non-hybrid) Grand Vitara GLX at R417 000.

The Suzuki's 5-year/200 000 km warranty and its 6-year/90 000 km service plan are again more comprehensive than Toyota's 3-year/100 000 km warranty and 4-year/60 000 km service plan.

Expect both cars to be top sellers in South Africa in the coming years. Toyota's only concern – and to a lesser extent, Suzuki's – will be that they can't import them from India fast enough and in sufficient quantities to satisfy demand.



Go green!

By now we all know that plastic stuff – and having too much stuff – is bad for the planet. But don't despair, there are plenty of innovative and (mostly) local eco-friendly options when it comes to outdoor gear.

BY ESMA MARNEWICK



⬆ **K-WAY FELIXX ECO SOFTSHELL JACKET**

This jacket is made from recycled fleece and "Green Circle" polyester. Green Circle is produced by a company called Jiaren in China, by recycling old polyester fibres. You might expect the fabric to feel different, but it looks and feels exactly the same as other softshell products. The fabric is water-resistant: Raindrops run right off your back. It's durable enough for a day in the mountains and stylish enough for a Zoom meeting with your boss. The women's version is the Mira Eco Softshell. It's also available in black and red.
R1 000 📞 capeunionmart.co.za



⬆ **K-WAY ECO FLEECE BEANIE**

This beanie is made from 100% recycled polyester fleece. The strong fabric lets no cold air in and doesn't pill. About 40% of K-Way products are made from sustainable materials. Aside from the beanie and softshell jacket, their sustainable range also includes sleeping bags, travel bags, trousers, down jackets and shoes. Visit the website and click on "sustainable collection".
R150 📞 capeunionmart.co.za



⬆ **HI-TEC PUFFER JACKET**

These days, Hi-Tec puffer jackets are filled with Repreve, a polyester made from recycled plastic bottles. The label will show you how many water bottles were recycled to keep you warm. Hi-Tec has three kinds of puffer jackets: The Novara II is for men (140 g/m² recycled polyester) and the more lightweight Neva is for women (130 g/m² recycled polyester). The longer Vandi for women (pictured, 180g/m²) is just the ticket for those freezing winter mornings next to the rugby field.
From R1 300 (Neva) to R1 600 (Vandi)
📞 hi-tec.co.za



⬆ **COFFEE BAY LONG-SLEEVE SHIRT**

These shirts for men and women are made from a Taiwanese stretch fabric called S.Café. Coffee grounds are embedded in the yarn (true story!) which prevents the growth of odour-causing bacteria. The fabric is heavier than a regular nylon hiking shirt, it takes longer to dry and it's definitely warmer, but it feels cosy against the skin – great for a chilly morning in the Drakensberg. It's also smart enough to wear to the office. The S.Café range includes long-sleeve and short-sleeve T-shirts. R800 📞 firstascent.co.za



▲ **GRRITT FLIP-FLOPS**

Do you also throw out your flip-flops after one summer? According to the non-profit organisation Ocean Sole, about 90 tonnes of flip-flops end up on the beaches of East Africa every year. Grritt is the answer and their flip-flops tick all the boxes: They're made from recycled tyres; you can choose the colour and design of the sole (our fave is the sea turtle); they have a two-year guarantee (except if Rusty chews one); and they're sent to your house in plastic-free packaging, with a packet of plant seed.

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▲ **What should I do with my worn-out flip-flops?** Drop them off at Recycled Flip Flop Sculptures Studio (Rffsstudio) in the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town. Davis Ndungu and his team use old flip-flops to make all kinds of beautiful things, from big, colourful elephant and hippo sculptures to smaller items like key rings and doormats. 🐾 rffsstudio.co.za



▲ **SPIRITGIRL SWIMSUIT**

Not everyone wants to hit the beach in a bikini – think how much you'll spend on sunscreen! Like the K-Way Felixx jacket, this one-piece swimsuit is also made from recycled polyester (also by Jiaren), which is woven with spandex. The fabric has a UPF rating of 50 and blocks 98% of the sun's rays, so you can spend hours in the water as long as you apply sunscreen to your face. Spiritgirl also make leggings with different patterns: mermaid scales, leopard print, proteas...

R1 000 🐾 spiritgirl.co.za



▲ **CUSTOM APPAREL BOARDIES**

Custom Apparel specialises in golf clothes, but they also make men's swimming trunks. These Boardies are a cross between traditional trunks and longer board shorts, with no mesh inner. The material is imported, but all Custom Apparel clothing is designed and produced locally. The lightweight Boardies are well priced and available in various prints, from summer fruit and zebras to flamingos and toucans.

R400 🐾 custom-apparel.co.za



▲ **FALKE RUNNING SOCKS**

Falke has a range of socks made from recycled, eco-friendly yarn called BCool – look for the BCool logo on the packaging next time you're buying socks. The material is lightweight, moisture-resistant and breathable. Your feet will stay cooler for longer. These Pressure Free running socks are made from 85% BCool, 8% polyamide and 6% spandex. The design supports the arch of your foot, especially if your running shoes are one size bigger than your everyday shoes. Nice.

R135 🐾 falke.co.za





➤ **BACK2NATURE SUNSCREEN**

Back2Nature promises its clients that their products have no harmful chemicals, preservatives or palm oil. Their SPF 30 sunscreen with active zinc is 100% natural, vegan, coral reef-friendly, plastic-free and not tested on any animals. It's sweat- and water-resistant and has been approved by the Cancer Association of South Africa.

Outdoor enthusiasts and surfers who are used to wearing a thick zinc sunscreen will love this product, but if you're used to smooth, runny sunscreen you'll have to work on changing your mindset. This mineral sun shield has a clay-like consistency and you have to rub over it with your fingers to make it spreadable. It's available in two skin tones and the small tub lasts surprisingly long.

R245 for 50 g 📞 saback2nature.com



➤ **SIMPLY BEE INSECT REPELLENT**

Most natural insect repellents rely on citronella to irritate mosquitoes. This spray also has a strong smell but consists of a blend of essential oils including citronella, cinnamon, eucalyptus and castor oil. It will definitely drive off insects, but it might have the same effect on people!

R220 for 100 ml 📞 simplybee.co.za



WHAT ELSE?

There are many locally made sun-care products and insect repellents that are natural and effective. Check out Bytjie Salf (📞 bytjie.com), Oh-Lief (📞 ohlief.com) and Ocean Freedom (📞 oceanfreedom.com). Wherever possible, we chose products with plastic-free packaging to feature in this article.



✓ **SNOWVA ICE TRAY**

How many plastic bags of ice do you buy in one summer? Too many? With the Snowva ice tray you can make about 80 ice cubes overnight! (If loadshedding permits...)

It's basically an ice-cream tub with a silicone grid inside, designed and made in South Africa. The soft silicone makes it easy to unmould the cubes.

R270 at 📞 snowva.com



➤ **SEALAND BACKPACK**

You can sling this backpack over your shoulder with a clean conscience. Sealand uses recycled materials like yacht sails, or materials made in a responsible and ethical manner like ECONYL regenerated nylon, which consists of old carpets and fishing nets. Yes, it's a pricey backpack but it will probably be the last one you buy because it's made to last. It comes with an Evergreen Guarantee, which means Sealand will fix any craftsmanship failures for 10 years, after which they'll ask a small fee for the service.

Sealand makes several other bags including duffel bags, laptop bags and cooler bags. This Upcycled Buddy Backpack is spacious, with side pockets for snacks, keys and water bottles. Inside is a padded sleeve where you can store your laptop. The backpack also has two carry handles if you want to take it into the office.

From R1 495 📞 sealandgear.co.za



WHAT ELSE?

Sealand is a member of the 1% For The Planet initiative. Members commit to donating 1% of their sales to organisations tackling environmental and social issues. Sealand's main beneficiary is Sentinel Ocean Alliance. 📞 sentineloceanalliance.org



▲ INTOUCH CABLES

Intouch manufactures a range of smartphone accessories, all sold in plastic-free, seed-paper packaging. They also have a range of cables made from recycled fishing nets and a set of accessories (cables, charger and car charger) made from wheat-straw plastic – an agricultural by-product that's biodegradable. The company adopted two penguins called Titan and Gya in partnership with SANCCOB – they were rehabilitated and released into the wild last year. For more information, visit we-are-in-touch.com or order from online.celcom.co.za.

GREEN GEAR

When you have to buy a new piece of gear, keep the following in mind:

- Look for a locally made product – there are several small local businesses that make sustainable clothes and shoes.
- Second prize is a product that's produced locally using imported materials. When you go into an outdoor shop, ask a salesperson to point you to their sustainable range. Cape Union Mart, Hi-Tec and First Ascent all sell sustainable products.
- Consider buying the more expensive product – it will probably last longer.
- Find out about the brand's warranty policy and after-sales service. Will they repair an article of clothing or resole your shoes, for example?

Travel better

On your next road trip, make sure you pack the following:

Water bottle. Fill it at home or in the bathroom of a filling station along the way. If you want a cooldrink, buy aluminium cans or glass bottles and look for the Returnable icon when you buy carbonated soft drinks. (Look closely – the icons are also on some plastic bottles). Any shop that sells these bottles will accept your empties and pay you for them!

Straw. There are various sustainable straw options on the market, made from materials like bamboo and aluminium. Carry one in your backpack or handbag if you can't resist a Wimpy milkshake.

Coffee cup. Single-use coffee cups are a worldwide problem. Most baristas won't mind pouring your cappuccino or espresso into a sustainable travel mug you bring from home.

Knife and fork. Always decline plastic cutlery. Pack your own knife and fork in a bag or carry a Spork (a spoon, fork and knife combo) or other hiking cutlery.

Tupperware. Take your own container along if you plan on ordering takeaways on the road. Even better: Pack your own padkos!

Jammerlappie. Put a wet cloth in a Ziplock bag. This way you'll save the earth from used serviettes and Wet Wipes.



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TAKE A HIKE

Look for leopards in Komati Gorge

BY MIA LOUW



The adventure kicks off with a 4x4 ride! The last few kilometres to Kranskloof base camp are only traversable in a 4x4, but if you don't have one, you can park at caretaker Richard Gininda's house and catch a lift in his Landy.

"I've seen eland, waterbuck, zebra, kudu, wildebeest, blesbok, impala and mountain reedbuck here," Richard says as we drive. "Even caracals and leopards."

Richard has lived and worked in the private Komati Gorge Wildlife Reserve since 1998. The 25 km² reserve is halfway between Machadodorp and Carolina, stretching from the Komati River to the Highveld plateau.

We arrive at the camp at dusk. Richard helped to construct the camp, using rock and stone from the surrounding cliffs. He lights lanterns and the donkey boiler.

I can hear a stream rushing over a rocky ridge in the dark. That must be the nearby waterfall and rockpool...

The next morning, we start our hike on the Aloe Trail. You walk along the stream as you go further into the kloof. For about half an hour, the route varies between stream crossings in dense forest and sections through open grassland until we reach Fish Eagle Dam. There's a bird hide where you can look

for specials like African fish-eagle and even forest birds like narina trogon, purple-crested turaco and Knysna turaco. There are braai facilities and picnic benches on the dam wall, and trout in the water.

About 100 m further is Otter Dam. From there, the route winds upstream along the course of the Komati River to a big lawn with thatched cottages and buildings – Komati Gorge Lodge.

From the lodge, you climb out of the valley on a concrete road. The local horse herd might pass you on their way to the river.

Big aloes tower over the grassland on the plateau. Stand at the viewpoint and watch the landscape unfold in front of you like a map. You can see the two dams, the lodge and the river.

For the next half an hour, you'll follow the edge of the escarpment, past a Bokoni stone kraal and cliffs where baboons play. The Koni people lived on the mountain slopes between Carolina and Ohrigstad from 1500 to 1820 – they farmed on terraces and built these stone kraals.

I can hear baboons scurrying down the kloof. Didn't Richard mention that he's also seen a leopard up here before?

We still have lots of energy (as do our dogs) so we decide to tackle the Kranskloof Trail in the afternoon. It starts on the same path as the Aloe but soon turns

off and goes towards forested cliffs – a much more strenuous outing. We slog our way towards the escarpment, startling something big that rustles off in the bushes. A bushbuck?

We take a break under some trees at an old Bokoni kraal. The dogs look for water while we catch our breath.

The route eventually leaves the forest and goes past big aloes and cabbage trees that cling to the cliffs. Every now and then we duck under webs made by golden orb-web spiders.

After about 15 minutes, the trail descends into a kloof where red cliffs strain towards the sky, and another 15 minutes later we reach a tributary of the stream that flows past base camp.

We cross the stream several times over the next hour, climb through more forest and sometimes cut across grassland. After good summer rain, all the rock pools are full to the brim. Even the otters are having a blast – the remains of crabs litter the shore.

A white footprint points us away from the stream and before long we're back in the same kloof as the Aloe Trail. We stroll along the stream for a while then head up the cliffs again, to where Richard's leopard roams...

We amble back to camp along the cliff edge. Before we light a fire, we splash around in the pool under the waterfall with the dogs one last time.



Where? Kranskloof base camp is about 35 km from Carolina and 37 km from Machadodorp via the R36 – there's 11,5 km of dirt road to get to Richard Gininda's house. Park there and get a lift to base camp if you don't have a 4x4.

Distance: Three day hikes depart from the base camp: Aloe (6 km), Kranskloof (7,5 km) and Komati (7 km). During our visit in March 2023, a section of the Komati Trail was closed due to damage caused by earlier heavy rains.

Cost: R220 per person per night.

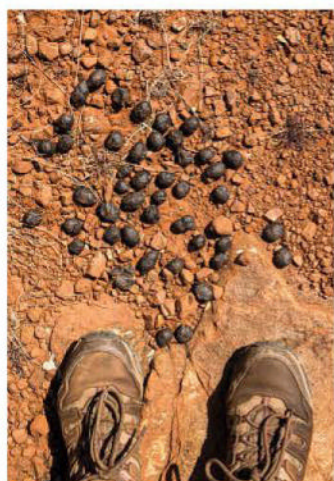
Accommodation: The base camp has three stone houses that each sleep eight hikers. There's a communal braai and living area with an outdoor kitchen, cooking utensils and a gas stove. There's no power. A donkey boiler provides hot water for the showers and lanterns and candles supply light, but bring a headlamp to be safe.

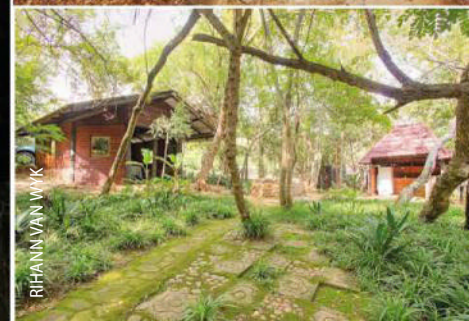
Dog-friendly? Yes, but your dog has to be on a leash. This is not always possible on the trail, if they need to cross rivers and swim in pools, but be mindful and keep them under control.

Day visitors? Yes – you can hike from the base camp or the lodge for R120 per person.

Contact: 📞 087 711 0360; 🌐 komatigorge.co.za
For a painless booking experience, contact Eco Trails SA – they ask a one-off R80 fee per group. 📞 082 663 61 68; 🌐 ecotrail.co.za

What else? If you want to stay in style, overnight at Komati Gorge Lodge instead of the base camp. The lodge has a restaurant, bar, swimming pool and activities like angling, horse riding and rock climbing. From R4 300 per night for a cottage that sleeps eight people. The hiking trails are free if you stay at the lodge.





LAPAMANTI GUEST COTTAGES, NEAR LYDENBURG

Lydenburg (official name Mashishing) in Mpumalanga has a rich history – a history in which the farm Spekboom features prominently. These days, it's the home of Johan and Louise Kruger and their sons Luan and Hanru. Johan is a sixth-generation Kruger to live on the farm, which was purchased in 1846. In its prime, the farm produced yellow peaches and other drupes; today it's a hideaway for travellers seeking serenity and simple comforts.

The Lapamanti camp is along the Spekboom River, where the Krugers once had family picnics. A lapa was built, which was eventually modified to become the current lounge area and open-air kitchen, and three timber cottages were added. Each cottage consists of an open-plan room, a kitchenette with a kettle, two-plate stove and sink, and a bathroom. Two units sleep two people on single beds, while the third unit sleeps four on bunk beds.

About 150 m upstream from the cottages is a six-arch train bridge that has stood proudly for more than a hundred years. The first train crossed in 1921 and the bridge is still in use today. The two central arches rise about 25 m above the river, and the bridge was built with a longitudinal bend – a remarkable engineering feat at the time.

Walk the 2 km river trail, which heads upstream and under the bridge before looping back along the headland

and over the railway, giving you an opportunity to take in the views from the bridge.

For more intrepid hikers, farm roads and informal tracks lead to the highest point on the farm, Spekboomkop. The farm is full of koppies where the ruins of 21 British forts can be found, all built during the Anglo-Boer War. As the British advanced, Johan's great-grandfather, Tobias Johannes, hid the family's cooking stove and some other kitchenware in a cave and fled the farm to join the local commando. His wife and their seven-year-old son were captured and taken prisoner while travelling to Ohrigstad.

Downstream from the Lapamanti cottages is a three-bedroom, eight-sleeper house called Hoep-Hoep. It has a spacious deck overlooking the river and a boardwalk that leads to another, more secluded deck – the perfect coffee corner or reading nook. Beneath this deck is the cave where the stove was hidden. Amazingly, the British never found the kitchen items and the family retrieved them all when they returned after the war.

In homage to the farm's history, the family has created a room in a shed at the main farmhouse called the Kruger Museum, filled with photos, books, newspaper clippings, vintage farm equipment, household items, war remnants and even preserved biological specimens. Guests can visit the museum by appointment.

– Grant Christie

Where? The farm entrance is 10 km north of Lydenburg on the R36, just before the historic Steenkamp's Bridge (a national heritage site). The gate is marked with a "Kruger" sign.

Rates: R1 100 per night for two people sharing, plus R350 per additional adult. Or book the whole Lapamanti camp (sleeps eight) for R2 600 per night, or Hoep-Hoep for R2 200 per night (also sleeps eight). Lapamanti and Hoep-Hoep together cost R4 500 per night (16 people). Minimum stay two nights.

Cellphone reception is scarce and a small solar rig provides lighting and power to charge devices.

Contact: 073 221 2586 (Johan);

082 850 1569 (Louise);

louise@lapamanti.co.za;

lapamanti.co.za

What else? Birders, bring your binos. Fishermen, bring your bass and tilapia gear.



TOURS

Pondoland paradise

Experience the untamed beauty of the Eastern Cape coastline
with *go!* and *Bhejane 4x4 Adventures*.

DAY 1: We meet at Mbotyi River Lodge, where we will spend the next two nights. The lodge is a nature lover's paradise and the perfect place for relaxing away from the everyday stresses of life. The facilities include a swimming pool, mountain bikes, canoes and plenty of sunny decks.

DAY 2: After coffee and rusks there will be time to walk along the beach or go for a paddle on the Mbotyi estuary. Our day trip will take us to a Cape vulture colony, where more than 170 birds nest on the cliffs of a gorge. We'll stop for a picnic lunch along the way. After our visit to the vulture colony, we'll follow meandering jeep tracks along the coastline. (Please note, we will only make use of existing tracks and will never drive on the beach.) Next up is a visit to the *Grosvenor* shipwreck. Over the years, people have attempted many treasure-hunting tactics to get to her alleged bounty. We return to the lodge in the late afternoon in time for sundowners on the beach.

DAY 3: After breakfast we make our way to beautiful Coffee Bay and our next lodge, Ocean View. Our route takes us into the heart of the rural Wild Coast as we drive through a number of spectacular river gorges. Today is a fairly long drive and we will enjoy a picnic lunch en route. After a day on the road, Ocean View is the perfect place to call home for the next two nights.

DAY 4: Today is more laid-back. We enjoy a late breakfast and some time on the beach, then head out to the mouth of the Mthatha River. Weather permitting, there's time to go for a short canoe trip or cast a line. Lunch is at the White Clay restaurant, known all along the Wild Coast for its good food. After lunch, you can relax some more and enjoy the Coffee Bay area before dinner at Ocean View.

DAY 5: After breakfast, we pack up and head out down the coast to our last destination, The Haven Hotel. Along the way, we'll visit the most popular and iconic landmark on the Wild Coast: Hole-in-the-Wall. We'll stop for a picnic lunch somewhere and then enter Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve. The Haven is on the beach in this protected area.

DAY 6: Today we'll enjoy the nature reserves on foot. There are a number of hikes you can do depending on your level of fitness. The Bhejane guide and staff from the hotel will be able to assist. Other activities at the hotel include horse riding and canoe trips. Our last day is topped off with a seafood banquet!

DAY 7: After one final breakfast together, we say our goodbyes. It's about a 90-minute drive back to the N2 near Mthatha.

DATES AND RATES

When? 17 – 23 October 2023

How long is the tour? Six days, seven nights

Accommodation: Beach lodges and hotels

Price: R14 950 per adult sharing; half-price for children under 10 sharing

• *For 300 years the amaXhosa have been the custodians of this wild part of our country. The area is still very rural and traditional, with a basic road network. It is on these roads, and many kilometres of legal jeep tracks, that we will explore the rugged coastline, shipwrecks, estuaries and waterfalls.*

• *Your tour leader is an experienced nature conservationist and adventure guide. He will be in radio contact with you at all times and impart a wealth of biological, cultural, historic and four-wheel-drive knowledge. This is not a very technical 4x4 trip, but should you experience any difficulty, the Bhejane crew have the know-how and recovery equipment to assist with any off-road problems.*



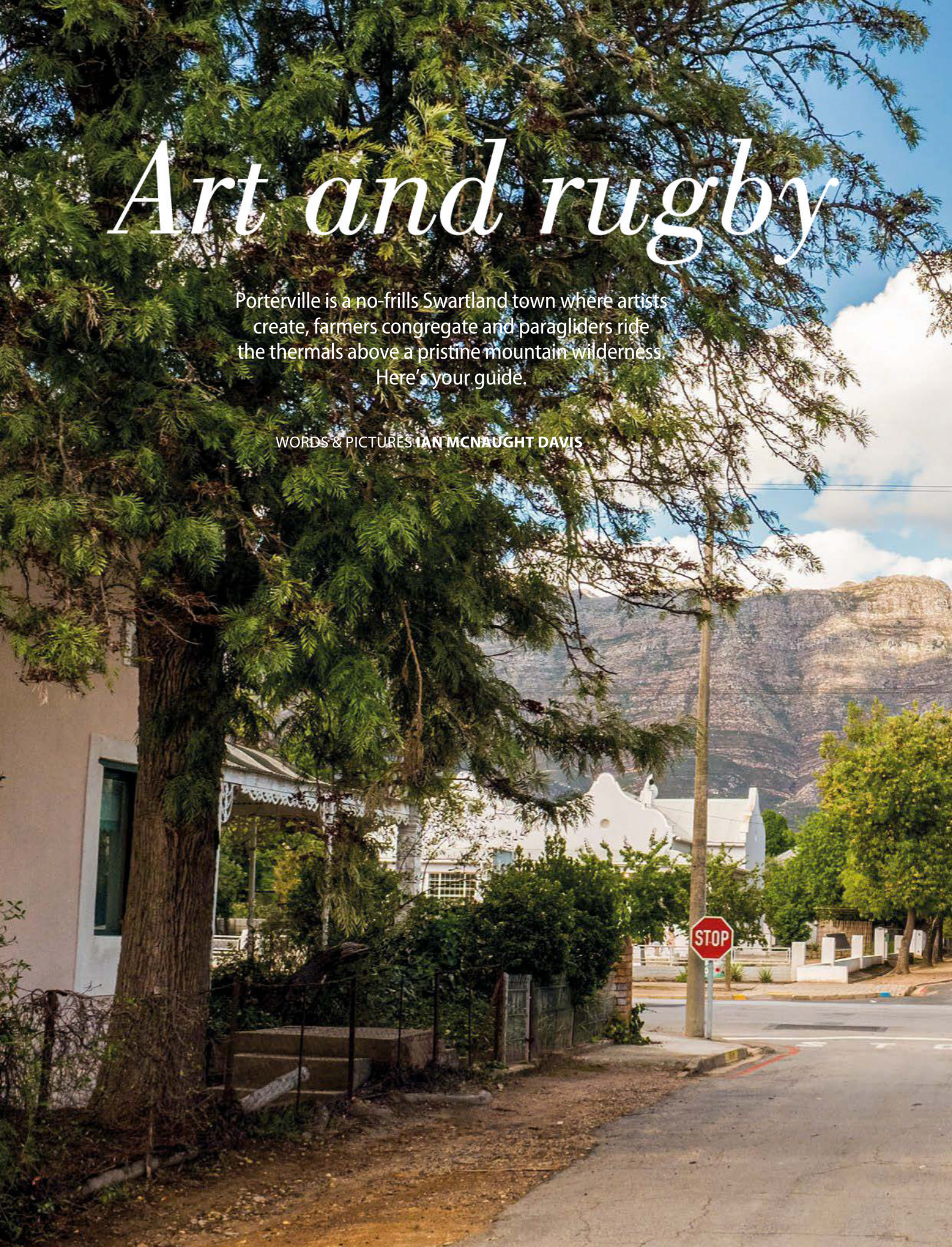
For a full itinerary and to book your place,
contact MJ at bookings@bhejane.com or 082 724 0442


Bhejane
FOLLOW ADVENTURE

Art and rugby

Porterville is a no-frills Swartland town where artists create, farmers congregate and paragliders ride the thermals above a pristine mountain wilderness. Here's your guide.

WORDS & PICTURES IAN MCNAUGHT DAVIS





Schoolchildren walk down Voortrekker Street on the eve of Porterville's annual schools rugby and netball tournament, the Bulfees.

It's a Saturday morning and Basson Street, which is perpendicular to the main road heading in the direction of the mountains, is hosting its annual traffic jam.

The street sees the occasional rumble of trucks and bakkies off to the Wesgraan silos, but today the pavement is packed with smaller vehicles and school buses with out-of-town number plates: CR, CF, CT, CBY, CJ...

The cause of the jam soon becomes clear: muffled bass from a PA system, pierced by the shriek of a referee whistle. It's Höerskool Porterville's annual Bulfees and people have travelled on empty dawn roads, over passes and across provincial boundaries for the yearly rugby and netball tournament.

The first field I pass is known as the *middelveldjie*, where spectators are watching primary school rugby. The only person on the field wearing shoes is the ref, who is especially liberal when it comes to playing advantage, calling for a scrum every second or third knock-on. Both teams follow the same game plan: swing the ball to the boy who is nearest to puberty, who then ploughs through a throng of *laaities* hellbent on grabbing his ankles. He topples over, the ball spills out. Repeat.

At this level, the game is a murmur of upsets and comebacks. Lineout calls are irrelevant and scrums are determined by whoever's mother encourages second helpings at dinner.

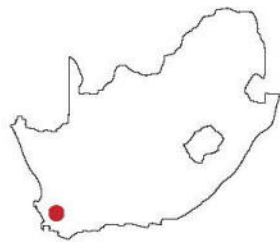
Beyond the barefoot battles, things get serious. Rows of tog bags are lined up with the precision of Japanese soldiers on parade. The high school teams are on the B-field, practising passing drills while eyeing the opposition's lineout moves. Knees are wrapped in magic tape, players double-knot their shoelaces and coaches in khaki chinos saunter about, their walkie-talkies crackling with urgency.

The PA system blasts *Kaptein, span die seile* and Mandoza's *Nkalakatha*, occasionally interrupted by the announcer asking a driver with a CY number plate to park properly. The netball court squeaks with the sliding and galloping of takkies, while blazers flap in the wind on the sidelines. Children huddle in clusters around the warmth of the tuckshop.

Die Lighuis coffee shop has a stall in the dead-ball area on the main field. They're famous for their coffee and roosterkoek, and they've closed the shop on Voortrekker Road to come to the rugby today, where they've got the longest queue. Teenagers in tracksuits make attempts at flirting while parents speculate about the first team. A man says he heard that Durbanville beat Paarl Boys. Eyebrows are raised. Just by one point. But still.

It's a privilege to be an observer here, to appreciate the seriousness of a day like this: hundreds of boys and girls playing for school pride and playground pecking order – with their parents encouraging, berating, *skinnering*, consoling and cheering.

Höerskool Porterville's Bulle, coached by the school principal Cobus Louw, charge onto the field in maroon jerseys against Höerskool Melkbosstrand. They're quick to score and they don't stop scoring in front of their home crowd until the ref's final whistle calls it a day at a substantial *pakslae* of 75–0.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Players from Hoërskool Porterville charge onto the rugby pitch at the annual Bulfees. The Dutch Reformed church in the centre of town is meticulously well kept. Working with each log's characteristics, Paul Kristafor delicately turns wood on his lathe. A Porterville resident for the past 15 years, JP Meyer's art is shown and sold all over the world. Yoko Reijn, originally from the Netherlands, creates multifaceted abstract art. Multi-skilled Katja Abbott works in a variety of disciplines in her studio.

FOLLOW THE @PORTERVILLE_CURATED ARTISTS ON INSTAGRAM

- Yoko Reijn @yokoreijn.art
- Katja Abbott @katja.abbott
- Paul Kristafor @paul_kristafor
- JP Meyer @j.p_meyer
- Shui-lyn White @shuilynwhite
- Carl Collison @carl_collison
- Andre du Toit @andredutoit1
- Aldo Brincat @brincataldo
- Carin Dorrington @carindorrington
- Annelie Janse van Rensburg @annelie_ceramics

In flight

Given the conversions and kick-offs after all those tries, the ball spends a substantial amount of time spiralling through the Porterville air, which as any paraglider will tell you is premium air.

"It's amazing up there," says paraglider Chris Anthonissen. "Wind from the Swartland blows up the mountains – those updrafts are great for flying."

The conditions allow paragliders to drift all along the escarpment.

"The mountain face is long and straight, so you can travel for quite a distance," Chris continues. "With the heat coming off of the ground below, you also get thermals kicking in, so people fly very long distances. It's an incredible place to paraglide."

Just beyond the paragliders' take-off spot at Pampoenfontein is the Groot Winterhoek Wilderness Area – more than 300km² for you to explore.

Walking through this World Heritage Site, it feels like you're treading on the collision of two frontiers. You have the starkness of rock formations you'd find in the Cederberg – surreal rock shapes in outcrops of Table Mountain sandstone, whipped by wind and drilled by droplets over eons – with a constant abundance of fynbos plants at your feet. The unspoilt terrain is a hunting ground for top predators like leopards and Verreaux's eagle, and the landscape supports diverse ecosystems like mountain fynbos, riverine forests and montane wetlands.

Analysis by botanists has shown that the Groot Winterhoek Wilderness Area is one of the richest areas of the Cape Floristic Region.

If it's orchids you want to see, you've come to the right place – rare species such as *Disa minor* and *Disa neglecta* can be found along the streams. *Sorocephalus scabridus*, an equally rare member of the protea family, grows on the Kliphuisvlakte in the reserve, and there's a splendid diversity of ericas visible throughout the year.

Porterville Curated

Abstract artist Yoko Reijn is enthralled by Porterville's mix of farming and nature. "The mountains in the distance and the lines within the agricultural part of the landscape... It's

amazingly beautiful for me. I think it must be my Dutch blood."

Yoko and her husband Willem have called Porterville home for a year and a half. They're originally from Amsterdam and lived in Germany before moving to South Africa. They lived in Somerset West, Vanwyksdorp and Gansbaai before choosing Porterville.

"The light and the sky here – the space... it evokes inner space," she says.

The landscape has also fostered the creativity of painter JP Meyer: "I love the sense of solitude," he says.

JP moved to Porterville from Prince Albert and he's lived here for 15 years. His interest in the town was geographical at first: It was on the two(ish)-hour drive radius from Cape Town – just far enough to be away from the city. Since he moved, he's seen the town's art scene expand. He organised an open studio exhibition in 2016; more artists opened their own studios in the years to follow.

At one such open studio event, Paul Kristafor and his partner Katja Abbott saw an opportunity: "Being here that weekend opened our eyes to the creative community and the possibility of landing straight into a bunch of like-minded people," he says. Paul works as a wood turner – using green wood to make elegant, sculptural vessels.

Several of the artists in town have come together to form a collective called Porterville Curated, led by Aldo Brincat.

"My husband Carl and I were talking about how lovely our home is, and how beautiful Porterville is, and we wanted to share that experience – with some art – with all our friends who live in Cape Town," he says. "We spoke to a few of the other artists and they all liked that idea – and that's how Porterville Curated came about."

Members of the collective hold an annual open studio event and exhibit their work in galleries throughout the country.

"Being connected to this awesome little group provides support," says Katja Abbott, a multi-media artist who works with fabrics, ceramics, collages and paint, depending on the project at hand. "If you're having a crisis of self-confidence, just go and have tea with JP Meyer or Carin Dorrington and see what they're doing, and you come home inspired."

Despite the perks of a city, living there comes with an artificial sense of urgency that doesn't suit creativity. "In Cape Town, you have friends and you have other artists that you know, but somehow you're always too busy – you can't connect," Katja continues. "It feels like there's peace here – an energetic sort of peace."

All in one place

In 1863, the British settler Frederick John Owen subdivided his farm Pomona, which later became Porterville. The town's namesake was a man from Northern Ireland named William Porter, who served as attorney general of the Cape from 1839 to 1866 and was described as "having an unspeakable hatred of oppression of every kind".

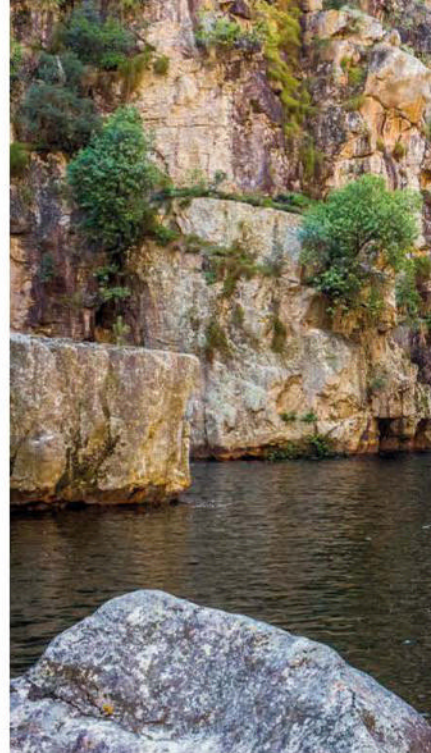
His ascendance to attorney general brought his liberal convictions into the conservative colony, and in 1854 he lent his voice to a draft constitution that prohibited discrimination on the basis of race. Porter's vision was ultimately futile when the National Party came to power in later years and changed the social and political landscape of South Africa forever. But here on the school rugby fields, I can sense something of his desire for coexistence playing out: people from different backgrounds pulling together on the pitch and in the stands.

Perhaps one of the reasons for people getting along is that there's an honesty about Porterville. There's a sense of balance. The gentle brushstrokes on Katja Abbott's canvas counter the dusty growling of grain-laden trucks. The high-end marshmallows at The Heritage Country House equalise the brannas-en-coke served behind the saloon doors of Friendz Pub.

It reminds me of a conversation I had with Yoko Reijn over a cup of coffee, about how artistic expression can be open to other influences while remaining true to itself.

"Art is about your own thing, not anybody else's. As an artist, you try to express that uniqueness. But, of course, you'll also accept that uniqueness from others. That's where you value each other; where the exchange happens. I think it works – there can be uniqueness and diversity all in one place."





4 things to do in the mountains

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Best time to visit Porterville?

Year-round, although it can get pretty hot in high summer. "We have incredible winters here," says Eugene Calitz from The Heritage Country House. "We have rainy spells but the wind dies down completely." Paragliding season is from November to February.

How to get there? Porterville is about 150 km north of Cape Town. Drive there via the N1 and the R44, or via the N7 to Piketberg and down.

Groceries and fuel: There's a Spar in town, plus an OK Foods outlet and a BP fuel station.

The Porterville Community Market takes place on the show-grounds on the corner of Park and Du Toit streets on the second Saturday of the month. Stock up on home-made products including jam, biscuits, rusks, bread, fresh vegetables and flowers. There are also horse cart rides, face painting and a kids' playground. Search "Porterville Community Market CEX" on Facebook.

1. Drive Dasklip Pass

If you travel north through the iconic avenue of eucalyptus trees to the R365 and Piketberg, you'll see the turn-off to Dasklip Pass. The road turns to gravel but it's doable in a sedan – just go slow.

At first the road goes through patchwork fields of farmland before climbing the escarpment, where the vegetation changes to mountain fynbos.

The steep part of the ascent is tarred, which is good news for the sedans. Soon you'll be at eye-level with the paragliders and jackal buzzards. The trip gives peaceful, panoramic views of the Swartland.

The pass peaks at 700 m above sea level and cellphone signal disappears a bit further after reaching the top.

It's an exceptionally good vantage point for a sunset.

2. Chase waterfalls

On the hiking trail on Waterval Farm, you don't just hike past two or three waterfalls, you hike past 22! Okay, not all of them gush down chasms like Tugela Falls – but still. The farm is situated at the foot of the Olifants River Mountain and the watery trail almost goes all the way up to the escarpment. It's an adventure – think scrambling over rocks, climbing ladders, jumping over streams and cooling down in pools... with wide views of the Swartland all around.

They only allow 20 day visitors over weekends, and you have to book ahead for the hike – it costs R50 per person. Rather stay for the weekend in the popular campsite in a woody thicket on the banks of a stream.

Rates: Camping R350 per night for four people (no electricity); R400 with power.

Where: Waterval Farm is about 4 km north-east of Porterville on the R44.

Contact: ☎ 22waterfalls.com

3. Peruse Protea Pool

Take Dasklip Pass and follow the CapeNature signs to the Groot Winterhoek Wilderness Area, where you can plunge in pools, hike on trails and swim in streams – either overnight or as a day visitor.

If you're there for a day, go and explore Protea Pool. It's 1,5 km from the parking area and should take you around 40 minutes to get there along an easy-going route through fynbos and fascinating rock formations. Bring your swimming costume, sunblock, warm clothes and a hat.

Day hikes: R80 per adult; R50 per child; free with a Wild card.

Reserve office: ☎ 087 087 4047 (7.30 am – 6 pm)

Reservations: ☎ 087 087 3005; 📧 capenature.co.za

4. Hike to Die Hel and Back

If you've got a minimum of two nights to spare in the Groot Winterhoek Wilderness Area, the route to the superb rock pool at Die Hel (while overnighing at De Tronk) is highly recommended. It's a 13 km hike to De Tronk, where you can either stay in basic huts with mattresses and bunk beds, or camp in your own tent (no facilities). From there, it's another 5 km down a steep gorge to Die Hel.

Rates: Camping costs R160 per person per night. Basic overnight huts from R500 per night in the off-season for four people, plus R80 per extra person per night.

Reserve office: ☎ 087 087 4047 (7.30 am – 6 pm)

Reservations: ☎ 087 087 3005; 📧 capenature.co.za



STAY HERE

IN TOWN

The Heritage Country House

Formerly known as Mossies Nest, the new owners have renovated this Victorian country farmhouse with its thick walls and Oregon pine floors and ceilings. Thoughtfully decorated by Eugene Calitz, it has an elegant charm that manages to be comfortable and homely at the same time. The outside is as good as the inside: There's a firepit and swimming pool, all in the shade of Porterville's oldest and largest oak tree.

They serve an excellent breakfast in the communal dining room-cum-lounge. The Heritage will also be opening up a shop twice a week, selling a selection of fragrances and delicious treats from Rü Patisserie. (The marshmallows come highly recommended.)

Rate: From R1 250 per person sharing, including breakfast.

Contact: 📞 theheritagecountryhouse@gmail.com; 📞 082 849 7192; "The Heritage" on Facebook

Villa-Cho-Co-Latt

Centrally located on Voortrekker Road, Villa-Cho-Co-Latt has a manicured garden and the Koppikofi restaurant on the premises. It's a hit with paragliders and honeymooners alike.

Rate: From R1 000 per night for a double room en suite.

Contact: 📞 022 931 3877; 📧 vccl.co.za

Akkediskis

If you'd rather bunk down near a bar instead of a coffee shop, Akkediskis is the place for you. Friendz Pub and Grill has a pool table and TV and it's on-site. Akkediskis is an affordable option and suited to those who aren't shy of a jol.

Rate: From R350 per person per night, including breakfast.

Contact: 📞 022 931 2070;

📧 info.voortrekker@gmail.com

The Flyers' Lodge

Rob Manzoni owns this lodge at 87 Voortrekker Road. It has eight en suite twin rooms with aircon. Rob also oversees all things to do with paragliding in Porterville, from access to the sites to responding to emergencies. He says the daily site briefings at the lodge are legendary – they look at the day's flying conditions and safety precautions in great detail.

There isn't a commercial tandem paragliding operation in Porterville, unfortunately. If you want to fly you need to be a qualified paraglider.

Rate: From R950 for two people sharing, including a light continental breakfast.

Contact: 📞 022 931 3416; 📧 porterville.co.za

OUTSIDE TOWN

Beaverlac

This off-grid campsite is deep in the mountains. There are no designated stands and there's no cellphone reception, but there's plenty of shade, space and rock pools to swim in. The main pool nearest to the campsite can get crowded over summer weekends, but then you should just venture further up or down the river to find a quiet spot. The campsite has shared ablutions; no power points.

Rates: R80 per adult; R50 per child aged 4 – 17; R40 per vehicle (one-off) and R50 per night for (well-behaved) dogs.

Where? The campsite is about 25 km from Porterville. Drive up Dasklip Pass and turn left at the junction on top of the mountain. Small cars have made it to Beaverlac, but phone in advance to check the condition of the road. A vehicle with high ground clearance is recommended.

Contact: 📞 022 931 2945; 📧 beaverlac.co.za



EAT HERE

Rendezvous

A mainstay on the main drag through town (Voortrekker Street), Rendezvous is the restaurant that most residents usually recommend. I had one of their wood-fired pizzas but it's their ribs that they're famous for. There's a rib special on Wednesday nights; Thursday nights are for steak. They also offer accommodation: R1 300 for a double room with safe on-site parking.

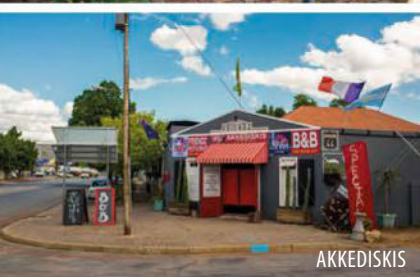
Where? 36 Voortrekker Road; 📞 072 102 7745



Die Lighuis

Swing by for a Terbodore coffee and their legendary roosterkoek as you browse the art on the walls of this pretty coffee shop and gallery.

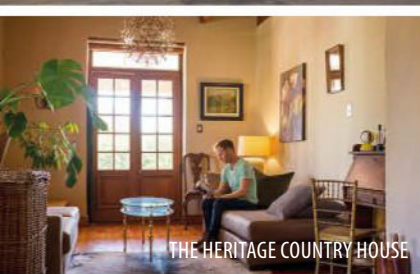
Where? 48 Voortrekker Road; 📞 072 513 6943



Koppikofi

Don't let the name fool you, there's more than just flat whites here. There's a full restaurant with a popular pizza oven. Situated on the corner of Voortrekker and Basson streets, it's easy to pop in for a cuppa if you're passing through.

Where? 39 Basson Street; 📞 022 931 3877



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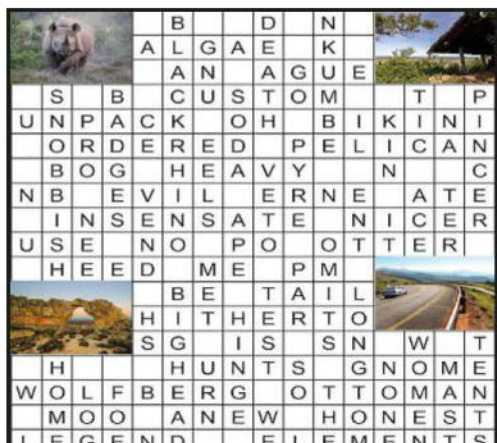
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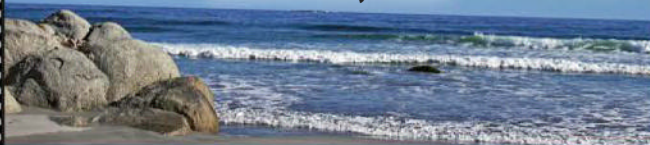
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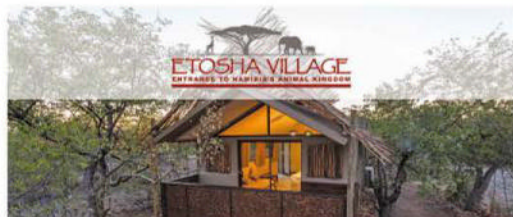
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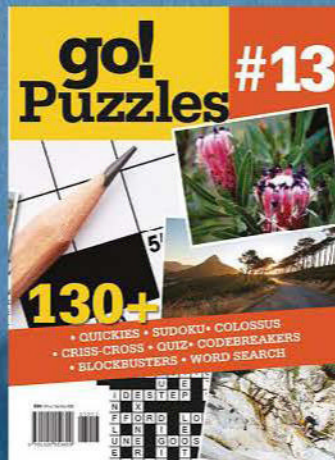
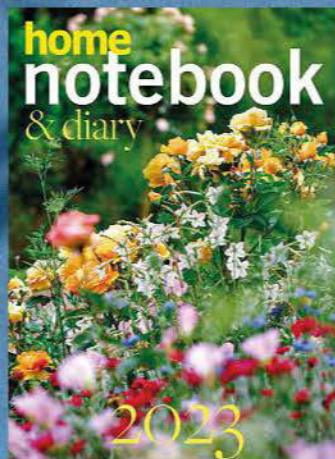
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BIRDS

BY FAANSIE PEACOCK

GAP YEAR GLORY

Were you lucky enough to take a gap year after school? I was, and I only had two plans for 2001 – to grow my hair and see as many birds as possible.

So, while fellow matriculants headed to London to earn pounds, I went to Botswana to spend pula.

To be fair, I was operating on a student budget so there was very little spending, apart from the initial capital outlay of getting to the tiny airport in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, my gateway to the region. Stepping off the plane, I was blasted by a wave of heat and cicada song; I felt as if my whole life had been leading up to that moment. It was the first time I'd travelled alone, as a so-called "adult", and I could taste freedom in the air.

I opted to spend my first night in the municipal chalets in Vic Falls. The experience was... interesting. I was concerned that there was no lock on the door, but evidently this was by design since a Zimbabwean family moved into the spare room in "my" chalet sometime around midnight.

I hitched a lift to Kasane with a couple that I knew from the birding scene. My base in Kasane was the guest room of a tiny, somewhat ramshackle cottage on the grounds of a safari lodge. Paradise! The cottage belonged to another birder friend with whom I'd crossed paths somewhere, and who had invited me to visit him in Botswana. I'm not sure if he expected me to ever take him up on the offer, but there I was: an 18-year-old with scruffy hair, binoculars and some Nirvana CDs. Richard was a distinguished, soft-spoken philosophy scholar turned safari guide, who had grown up in former Rhodesia. As a lifelong bachelor who was then in his 50s, sharing his home with a teenager must have been quite an adjustment!

One afternoon he asked if I could get dinner started while he was at work. I was too shy to admit



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LESSER JACANA

DYLANVASAPOLLI

that I had no idea how to boil a potato or fry a broccoli floret. But a desperate international landline call to our domestic worker gave me some insight.

Small household challenges were soon forgotten when Richard and I started to chat about our shared passion: birds. This hobby is a great social equaliser. Birds don't care how old, rich or pigmented you are, and neither do birders.

Every day, following a buffet breakfast at the lodge, Richard went to work and I went into the bush, exploring the sandy woodland tracks and riverine thickets in his battered old Land Cruiser. Every night we'd pore over hand-drawn maps of stakeouts for copper sunbirds, lesser jacanas, Pel's fishing-owls and brown firefinches. This was long before someone just dropped you a pin on Google Maps.

One memorable afternoon, I got completely lost in pursuit of a broad-tailed paradise whydah. Finally, after skirting a herd of elephants, I

managed to find my way back to the vehicle only to discover that I'd locked the keys inside. At that time, all a cellphone could do was make a call, send an SMS and let you play Snake. Not that there was signal anyway. Desperate, I kicked the door as hard as I could and – Hey, presto! – up jumped the pin.

On the rare mornings when I had a lie-in, Richard would reprimand me and start listing all the birds I still needed to see. "There's a pair of collared palm thrushes nesting behind the boathouse... I saw a white-crowned lapwing coming back from town. And you should check that tall jackal-berry for the western banded snake-eagle again."

I might have only stayed with Richard for a couple of weeks, but in my memory it's as if I spent an entire year in the wilderness of northern Botswana. Whenever people ask me what I did in my gap year, my reply is simple: "I went birding, of course!"



It's the BirdLife SA 2023 Bird of the Year and there are fewer than 2 000 left in the wild. You can help to protect them!

COMPILED BY
SOPHIA VAN TAAK

The Cape parrot

Think of the word "parrot" and most of us picture a tame bird in a cage. Common species of parrot that have been bred to be kept as pets include the African grey and the colourful macaw. Both of these birds two still occur in the wild, by the way: the African grey in countries near the equator like Cameroon, the Congo, Gabon and Ivory Coast; and macaws in Central and South America.

We have four species of wild parrots in South Africa: brown-headed and grey-headed parrot, Meyer's parrot and Cape parrot. The others occur in a few African countries but the Cape parrot is only found in South Africa. When a bird, animal, fish or plant is only found in one small area, it's called "indigenous" or "endemic".

ROD NICK CLIFTON BILION

CAPE PARROT PROJECT



^ WHAT DO THEY EAT?

- Cape parrots gather in noisy groups early in the morning and fly out to look for food – they can fly up to 90 km per day! Their biggest food source is the fruit of the yellowwood tree. Most of the nutritional value is in the hard stone, or pip, of the fruit. That doesn't deter the Cape parrot – it uses its strong, sharp bill to crack the stone open.
- When the yellowwood tree doesn't bear fruit, the parrot eats the fruit of wild plum and white stinkwood trees, plus seeds and even proteas and other flowers. They also love pecan nuts but can only eat them once in a while because they're so oily – like fast food!



MIKE HENSHALL

< WHAT DOES ITS NEST LOOK LIKE?

Cape parrots breed in the late winter, in a hollow in a tree trunk high above the ground. A breeding pair mates for life and the female lays five eggs at a time. The female sits on the eggs for a month until they hatch.

THREAT?

- People steal their eggs to raise the chicks as pets.
- The trees where they build their nests and find food are chopped down.
- A very contagious disease called psittacosis makes their feathers fall out and causes sores on their bills.



CASSIE CARSTENS

What does a Cape parrot look like?



When it comes to birds, the males are generally more colourful than the females. This is not true of the Cape parrot – the female is the more beautiful one!

The female has an orange-red forehead; the male's is the same olive green as the rest of its head

Whitish-grey bill with a sharp hook at the end

Darker green wing feathers

The Cape parrot is as tall as a ruler – about the same size or just smaller than an African grey. An adult Cape parrot weighs about 300 g. That's as much as a carton with six chicken eggs.

A few orange-red feathers on the legs and shoulders

Bright green abdomen

RODNEY CLIFTON BILJON



Here's how you can help

Be a researcher. Download the free BirdLasser app on your phone or a parent's phone. If you go on holiday to an area where the Cape

parrot is found and you see one in the wild, use the app to mark the exact location. Scientists use this information in their research. (The app is also great for logging sightings of other birds – see the interview with Duncan McKenzie on p 28 – Ed.)



CAPE PARROT PROJECT

Plant yellowwood trees. Do you live in an area with Cape parrots? Contact the Wild Bird Trust's Cape Parrot Project (wildbirdtrust.com).

– they'll tell you where you can collect yellowwood seeds, how you can help in a nursery or plant yellowwood trees.

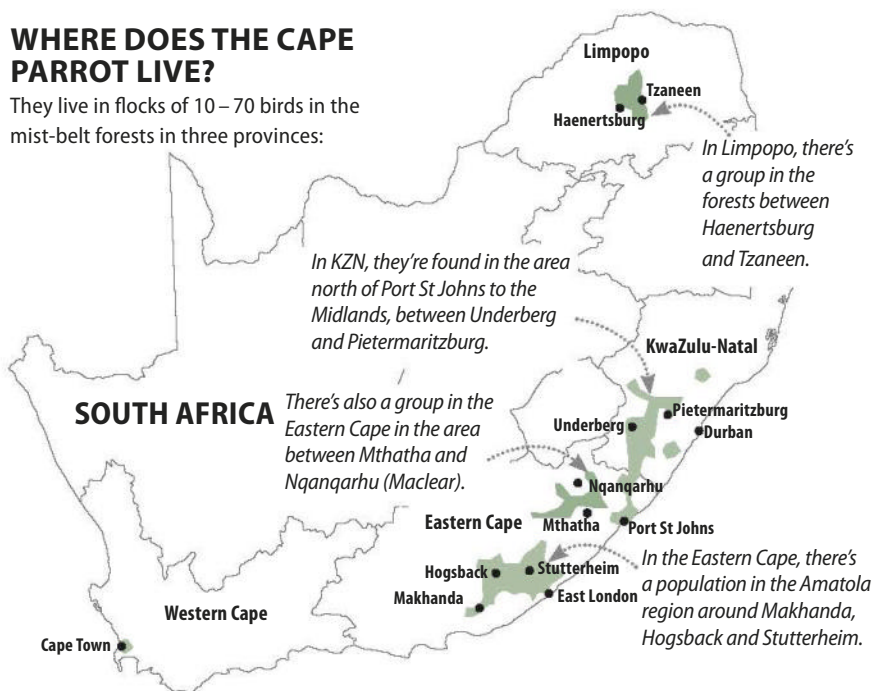


Keep an eye on Instagram. See what the Cape Parrot Project is doing to protect parrots. Follow

@capeparrotproject

WHERE DOES THE CAPE PARROT LIVE?

They live in flocks of 10–70 birds in the mist-belt forests in three provinces:



In Limpopo, there's a group in the forests between Haenertsburg and Tzaneen.

In KZN, they're found in the area north of Port St Johns to the Midlands, between Underberg and Pietermaritzburg.

There's also a group in the Eastern Cape in the area between Mthatha and Ngqanqaru (Maclear).

In the Eastern Cape, there's a population in the Amatola region around Makhandha, Hogsback and Stutterheim.



Count parrots!

The Cape Parrot Big Birding Day has been held every May for the last 25 years. Volunteers help to count birds in

about 70 different places around the country. Contact the Cape Parrot Working Group for more information: cpwg.ukzn.ac.za

Tell your teacher. BirdLife SA creates learning materials about Cape parrots that you can use in class. Visit birdlife.org.za and click on "Bird of the Year 2023".

Learn more. Do you love parrots? On the World Parrot Trust website (parrots.org) you can find out everything about them! There are videos and podcasts, forums to join and many different reference works.

Sources: Roberts Bird Guide; birdlife.org.za; biodiversityadvisor.sanbi.org; wildbirdtrust.com



Hannes van Jaarsveld from Rustenburg noticed two new arrivals in his garden in October 2022: African grey hornbills!

We live on a smallholding in Boschfontein, on the southern outskirts of Rustenburg, North West. In spring last year, I noticed

two African grey hornbills flying with food in their bills, between our smallholding and the neighbour's. I had my Nikon D3100 camera and Tamron 150 – 600 mm lens at the ready, and I started taking photos once I figured out where they were going.

There's a seringa tree near our house with a hole in the trunk about four metres above the ground – that's where they were nesting. At first they ate all the food outside the nest **1** and nothing was taken inside. I set up my camera on a tripod and waited with a beer and a book to see what would happen.

I realised soon enough that I'd be settling in for the long haul! According to my *Roberts Bird Guide*, it takes about 50 days for the eggs of a grey hornbill to hatch, and the chicks stay in the nest for another 23 days.

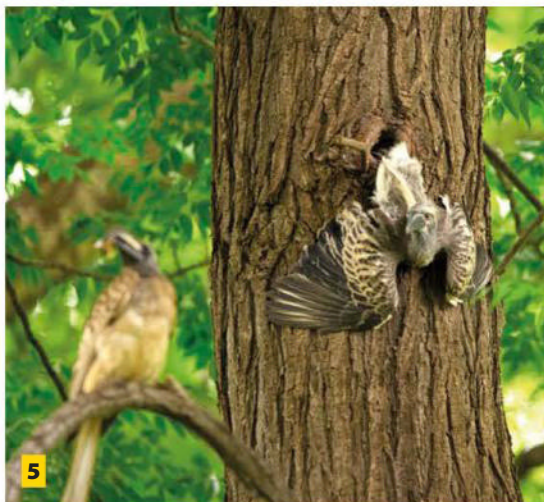
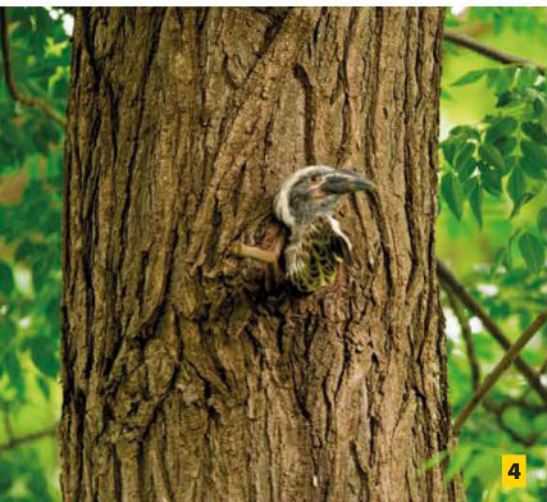
After a few days, the female no longer flew around: She was now sealed inside the nest. The nest had a vertical slot that the male used to pass her food and nesting materials like pieces of tree bark. He brought food at surprisingly regular intervals – every 20 to 30 minutes. **2, 3**

Weeks went by, then one day I saw the female outside the nest again! She was helping to feed the chicks – obviously their appetite had grown. On New Year's Day 2023, a small head appeared at the entrance to the nest **4** and a day or two later a chick wriggled outside. **5** Turns out only one had hatched. The chick flew short distances between branches and nearby trees, but always returned to the nest when mom or dad showed up with food. **6**

I saw the three hornbills together in the area for months afterwards. It was easy to pick out the chick's whistle because it was much higher in tone than its parents'.

It's amazing what you can see in your own garden if you're observant and patient. Other birds also visit the hole in the seringa tree. Who knows – maybe a barbet family will move in next?





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The penguin kingdom



When you arrive onshore at Salisbury Plain on South Georgia Island, you feel like a proper explorer. Your welcoming committee: king penguins, too many to count.

The name “South Georgia Island” means nothing until you see it for yourself – then you’ll never forget it. It’s home to penguins and seals and it was the second stop on **Toast Coetzer’s** journey to Antarctica.



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: South Georgia Island is not volcanic but a continental remnant of the break-up of South America and Antarctica. Penguin tracks leading inland – some colonies are a kilometre or more from the beach. King penguins are second in size only to emperor penguins – they can grow to nearly a metre tall. The brown, fluffy ones are chicks from the previous season, which will take to the sea by the end of the summer. Estimates put the South Georgia king penguin population at about 450 000 pairs, roughly half the entire world population.

The snow-capped peaks of South Georgia Island appeared on the horizon after 1 450 km on the open sea from the Falkland Islands, where we last saw land.

An island as remote as this is only discovered by accident. It was first seen in 1675 when a ship sailing around the southernmost tip of South America was blown off course during a storm.

Exactly a century later, Captain James Cook and some of his men on board the *HMS Resolution* were the first to step ashore. They fired a salvo and claimed the island in the name of King George III of England. But they were actually in search of Antarctica and when they sailed around the bottom of the island, they named it Cape Disappointment.

In the late 1700s and through the 1800s, South Georgia was visited by seal hunters and whalers. This rugged bunch became the first people to overwinter. What motivated them? The profits they could make by selling the fur, skin and fat of the animals they hunted.

South Georgia is sickle-shaped, about 170 km long and never wider than 40 km. There are glaciers in the deep valleys and 13 peaks higher than 2 000 m. (Mount Paget is the highest at 2 934 m). The prevailing wind blows from the south-west; man and animal can find shelter on the north-eastern coast. All the old whaling stations were built here, and penguins, Antarctic fur seals and elephant seals gather on the open beaches in early spring to mate, lay eggs or birth their young.

Our group of nearly 80 keen wildlife photographers had these super colonies in our sights. About 20 other guests and I were travelling with Guts Swanepoel and Pangolin Photo Safaris; the rest of the group was made up of mostly Americans travelling with Muench Workshops, also a photography tour company. We were on board the *MV Ushuaia* and we'd departed from Ushuaia in Argentina more than a week ago.

The only problem was Covid-19 had also boarded the ship...

The roar of thousands

We'll never know exactly how it happened because we all had to show negative Covid-19 tests before we set sail. But since then, one of the American guests fell ill and tested positive. Protocol kicked in and all passengers and crew had to be retested.

Fortunately, Guts and I and most of our guests tested negative. Those who tested positive had to isolate in their cabins – with their cabin mates. The bad news: They were not allowed to go on any of the outings.

I would have been terribly disappointed if that had been me.

So, I felt a little guilty the next afternoon when

an inflatable boat ferried me to the pebble beach of Salisbury Plain in the scenic Bay of Isles. I saw what most readers would recognise from a David Attenborough wildlife film: the black-and-white figures of king penguins, more than 100 000 pairs of them, on the coastal plain behind the beach.

The expedition team helped me from the inflatable boat and I stepped onto South Georgia. With my camera bag slung over my shoulder and my gum boots planted among the pebbles, I took in my surroundings. There were penguins wherever I looked: to the left, at the foot of a slope among tussock grass, and a few hundred metres up the mountain...

The sun sometimes broke through the clouds, making the snow-covered slopes glitter. The wind pulled at my jacket, but otherwise the dominant sound was the bray of the penguins. Although there were also elephant seals and smaller Antarctic fur seals on the beach, Salisbury is known for its penguin colony. Like the guests arriving on the beach in one boat after the other, the king penguins returned from hunting at sea. Sometimes they were so full of fish they struggled to stand upright. In extreme cases, Guts told us, an overfull penguin would lie down for a day to first digest some of the food before getting to its feet again.

The penguins had been away for a few weeks while hunting; now they had to find their chicks in the colony and regurgitate the fish to feed them. It takes about 13 months or longer for a king penguin to reach maturity and grow its "dive suit" – the waterproof layer of feathers that enables it to flourish in the cold sea.

In a colony like this, there are thousands of chicks born the previous season that now stand around covered in brown fluff. They're almost as big as the adults, but still have to be fed for an entire summer before they can walk into the sea and become fully fledged penguins. They're like students lounging around in hoodies and dirty jeans when they should actually start dressing in button-up shirts and chinos for the office.

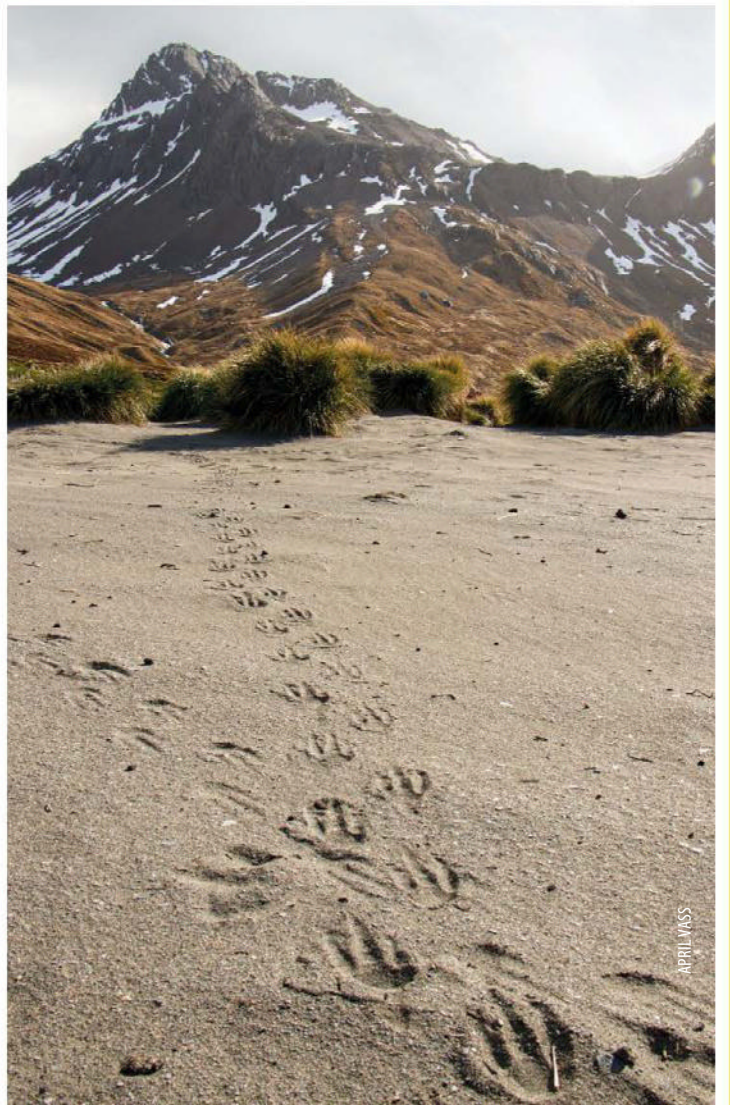
I first took photos on the quiet side of the beach where penguins emerged from the sea. We were told to keep our distance, but there were so many penguins that I would sometimes turn around to find one at my elbow, looking at me curiously.

It took about an hour for it all to sink in. As a photographer, I tried to get as many good photos as possible; as a nature lover, I sometimes lowered my camera to just appreciate the moment.

Guts, who had been here many times before, moved around among the guests and gave advice about photo opportunities. He later walked over to me.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"It's crazy," I said with a big smile on my face.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left. King penguins moult annually – during this one-month process, they remain on land (and thus can't hunt), lose their worn feathers and grow a fresh wetsuit for the year ahead. The Whaler's Church at Grytviken was constructed in Norway and assembled under supervision of Norwegian whaling pioneer, CA Larsen. It was first used on Christmas Day, 1913, to baptise his granddaughter. Davis "Bertie" Burton is a British government official stationed at Grytviken. The grave of Ernest Shackleton, and the museum, also at Grytviken. Whale bones still litter many beaches on South Georgia. The wreck of the *Petrel*, a former whalecatcher – notice the crow's nest where a spotter would sit to scan the sea for whale spouts.

*Every now and then,
a bellow rose above
the sound of the
wind. A cloud
of vapour hung
in the cold air
as another bull
complained about
losing the battle.*

In Shackleton's footsteps

In almost every bay on South Georgia, you can see rusty remnants of whaling stations that operated here in the first half of the 20th century. They date from the era before factory ships processed whales at sea. The whalers usually towed the whales to a sheltered bay to slaughter them – their blubber was rendered and the oil sealed in vats to be shipped to places like Europe where it was used for everything from lamp and machine oil to margarine, soap and even for the production of bombs. By-products like meat offal and bones were later turned into fertiliser and cattle feed – no part of the carcass went to waste.

The last whaling station on the island only closed down in 1965, when there were no longer enough whales left to turn a profit.

Aside from this destructive industry, South Georgia was also an important stop on the journey to Antarctica for many polar explorers. The name most associated with the island is Sir Ernest Shackleton. He travelled on the *Endurance* and picked up coal and other supplies here in November 1914. A month later, the *Endurance* entered the Weddell Sea and got stuck in the pack ice before it could even reach the coast of Antarctica. The crew camped on the ice next to the ship for a while. The ice eventually crushed the ship and sank it. (The wreck was discovered in 2022 by a team on board our own SA *Agulhas II*.)

Shackleton and his team floated north on the ice, but the ice sheet eventually broke up and they climbed into the three lifeboats they'd managed to retrieve before their ship was wrecked. Sea currents carried them to Elephant Island on the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula (see the map on page 125).

No one knew where they were. Shackleton and his team realised their only chance of survival was to reach the whalers on South Georgia. He and five men got into the best lifeboat at their disposal, the *James Caird*, and made the 16-day, 1 300 km crossing to South Georgia – barely. They landed on the uninhabited south-western coast and then had to hike across the treacherous mountains to the nearest whaling station, Stromness. They reached the station on the morning of 20 May 1916, but they only succeeded in rescuing the rest of their team on Elephant Island a few months later. Miraculously, everyone survived.

It's one of the most epic tales of resolve in the history of polar exploration and on South Georgia you can literally follow in Shackleton's footsteps. Our next destination was Fortuna Bay and the rocky beach where Shackleton and his men hiked towards Stromness. It was a sunny day and after we'd taken photos of the elephant seals and penguins, we gathered for a braai and a beer on the deck of the *MV Ushuaia*. Shackleton and company enjoyed no such comforts – they crossed the mountains in the middle of winter,

with only steely determination keeping them alive.

In the afternoon, we travelled to Stromness, the whaling station where Shackleton and his men saw other people for the first time in 18 months. There's a gentoo penguin colony there, on a low koppie almost a kilometre inland. I watched a penguin exit the ocean and waddle to its colony. Every step was difficult on the uneven terrain; the moss and puddles making it challenging even for humans.

Ship propellers, rusty chains and the remains of the whaling station lay on the beach – we were not allowed to have a closer look because the structures were unsafe. The bulky bodies of elephant seals filled the beach. The bulls battle for dominance and access to cows. The so-called beach master we saw had a harem of about 50 cows to himself and he had to fend off unwanted attention from rivals. We saw an injured bull licking his wounds and stones splattered with blood.

Every now and then, a bellow rose above the sound of the wind. A cloud of vapour hung in the cold air as another bull complained about losing the battle.

The next morning, we visited Grytviken, the only permanently inhabited settlement on the island. South Georgia is a British Overseas Territory and about 40 people live here in summer – a research team and a group of officials. (There are far fewer people here in winter.) Summer is also tourism season. Expedition ships like ours regularly stop here.

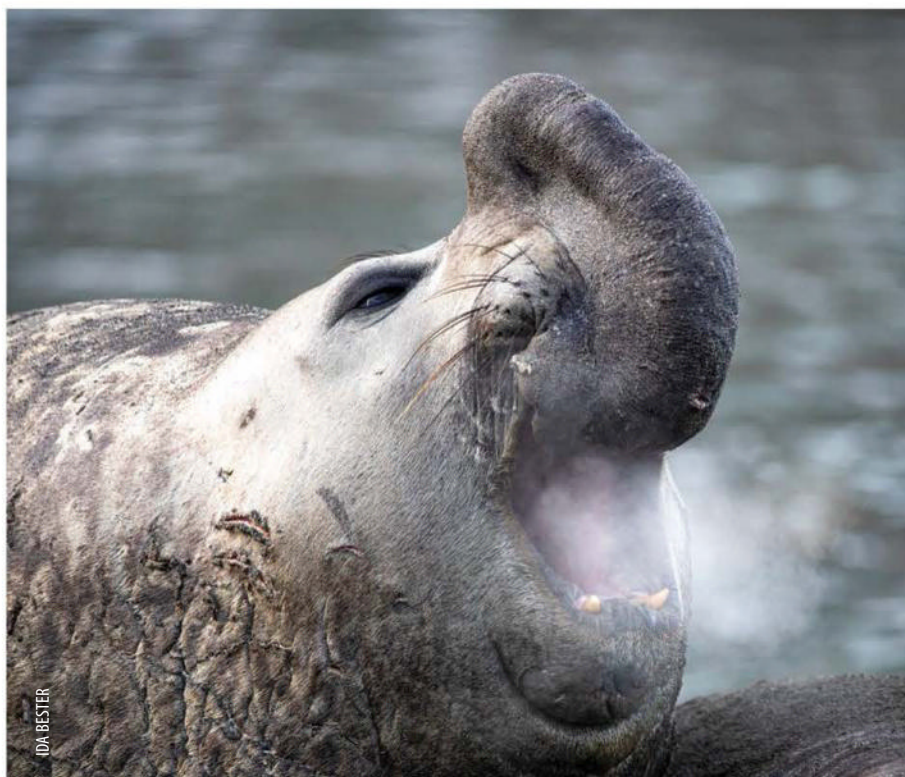
Two young British officials came aboard to make sure we didn't bring any foreign plant material from the ship to the island by accident. Every piece of Velcro on our rain jackets was carefully checked and we washed our gum boots as per usual.

By the time I set foot in Grytviken, we only had about two hours left to explore – our group had to be back on the *MV Ushuaia* by noon because the next ship would arrive at Grytviken at 1 pm. Tourist groups are not allowed to visit the same place on an island at the same time, to limit the impact on the environment.

Grytviken has a fantastic museum maintained by a team of industrious curators – you learn about polar explorers, the whaling industry, rare deep-sea fish species, seabirds and more. There's also a post office where you can send a postcard, and where you can buy books, maps and other souvenirs. On the outskirts of Grytviken, closest to the mountain, is a church built in 1913 by Norwegian whalers. Inside the small wooden building is an orange life buoy with the words "Sudur Havid – Cape Town" written on it. It's displayed here to commemorate the 17 people who drowned when this South African fishing trawler sank about 240 km from the coast in 1998 (21 of the ship's crew were saved).

I hadn't even seen Shackleton's grave yet and the expedition team was already ferrying our group back to the ship! Shackleton set out on another expedition to Antarctica in 1921 but he died of a heart attack here





Clockwise, from above left: Elephant seals look clumsy on land but are built for the ocean – they have been recorded to dive deeper than 1 km, although on average they dive to around 400 m where they catch fish and squid. The rusted remains of a steam locomotive used by whalers at Ocean Harbour. Photo guide Richard Bernabe (Muench Workshops) with guest Kertu Saarits (from Dubai) at Salisbury Plain. The wreck of the *Bayard* (1911) lies in Ocean Harbour. A large leopard seal breaches as guests watch from the safety of Zodiacs in the bay of Godthul.

in Grytviken before he got to the ice continent. Next to his grave in the cemetery is a memorial plaque for Frank Wild, Shackleton's second-in-command who took care of his crew on Elephant Island in his absence. Wild's plaque was erected in 2011. He died in South Africa in 1939 but his ashes were reburied here in 2011.

An icy farewell

Our days exploring South Georgia were blessed with mostly good weather. On the afternoon after our visit to Grytviken, we travelled south to a smaller bay called Godthul, where a curious leopard seal circled our inflatable boats.

During the night, the ship made its way to the southernmost tip of the island and at first light we were in the dramatic Drygalski Fjord. The wind was icy and rushed down the fjord to where we stood on the ship's deck in our thick jackets and beanies. Blocks of ice floated deeper in the fjord. We saw our first real icebergs – they glowed a rare, deep blue.

We turned north again and it got warmer. By the afternoon we were in Ocean Harbour and could go ashore. A noisy group of elephant seals took up half the beach, giant petrels bred in tufts of grass, small South Georgia pintails (they look like a miniature version of our yellow-billed duck) swam in the freshwater stream that flowed from the valley... There was so much to photograph! The wreck of the *Bayard*, which stranded here in 1911, also made for striking shots, as did a small locomotive left by whalers.

The weather was perfect and the light was beautiful. I dreamt of camping here for the night, surrounded by albatross calls and grunting seals. Some of the ship's crew also came ashore – I saw our pastry chef, an eccentric Chilean called Hector Campaña (he made delectable desserts twice a day), sit down to watch moulting king penguin chicks go about their day.

Snow fell on the last morning. We were in St Andrew's Bay, home to a mega colony of king penguins. The plan was to be on the beach at sunrise, but the weather didn't play along. We waited for the expedition team to let us know whether we could go ashore or not. Finally, they sent word: The weather wasn't the issue; there were too many elephant seals on the beach! Apparently the open stretch of beach where the inflatable boats usually land was absolutely packed with elephant seals; there was nowhere for us to get out safely. Even Guts had never seen it like this.

Plan B was to bring the inflatable boats as close to the coast as possible and take photos from there. It was difficult, with waves rocking us up and down, but we got a few shots.

It was the wildest day of our tour so far. Snowflakes swirled, the cold burnt our fingers, hundreds of penguins welled from the sea, elephant seals bellowed like battle tanks – I realised this island was probably the first true wilderness I'd ever experienced.

What a pity that every beach, peak and bay is named after some far-off, long-dead official or ruler. This place should have remained nameless. It should have stayed sea, mountain, snow, seal and penguin.



RICHARD VAN ZYL

"This was my first long ship voyage and it was a big adventure. I was surprised how quickly the days passed at sea. The expedition team filled the hours with nature lectures, photography and editing classes and image reviews. And in the few hours of downtime, it was great having pro photographers like Guts available for help with camera settings and editing questions, or just to have some tea and a chat."

"Salisbury Plain was my favourite place. I was blown away by the colony of king penguins. It felt as if I'd time-travelled back in history to see how the magic of Mother Nature had started. It was powerful to see the colony up close and observe their behaviour."

Thursday 20 Oct 2011

Grays & Andes known
to be at breakers about
thrust sleep in L.H.

Birds of South Georgia

Habitat education 2011-2012 - defined
area of study

South Georgia petrel
also known as
also known as on sand reserves

South Georgia pipit
almost extinct because of rats
(only preserve that breeds in 3-4
light-mantled sooty albatross
population 65-70 days / 1-2 years
Puffins 41-72 days / 1-2 years
also chicks along 1/2 years

Wandering albatross - at night 10 days
population 70 days / 1-2 years
Puffins 7-10 months / 1-2 years

Ground peckers - Pindar - 10 days
- Southern - 10 days
King penguins - Puffins 10-13 weeks





Clockwise from far left: Leatherpress sponsored journals for the photographers who joined Toast and Guts Swanepoel on this tour. Toast with Drygalski Fjord in the background. Guests on a Zodiac at Ocean Harbour. The *MV Ushuaia* in the bay of Godthul. Guts (standing) entertains guests during breakfast on the ship.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How to get there? Our return flight with Qatar Airways from Johannesburg to Doha and on to Argentina cost about R19 000 per person. Some of the other guests flew to Argentina with Turkish Airlines via Istanbul, and with KLM via Amsterdam.

How does a tour like this work? Almost all tours to Antarctica are done by ship – you always sleep and eat on board. Most tours depart from Argentina (Ushuaia) or Chile (Punta Arenas) and they only visit the Antarctic Peninsula. Our tour was a longer expedition of close to three weeks, which included the Falkland Islands and South Georgia Island.

Cost: Our 20-day tour cost about US\$20 000. This included all meals. Tours that only visit the Antarctic Peninsula are shorter and more affordable (from about US\$6 000), depending on how much luxury you want.

More about Pangolin: Pangolin Photo Safaris offer most of their wildlife photography tours in Botswana. They also have photography tours elsewhere in the world. Visit pangolinphoto.com for more information.



GEAR

Fujifilm X-H2S with a Fujifilm XF 150 – 600 mm lens

What do we have here?

Mirrorless cameras have bullied the D-SLR market over the last five years, and with models like this one you can see what all the fuss is about.

The X-H2S feels like a D-SLR in your hand. It's lighter, yes, and slightly smaller, but it doesn't bother you – in fact, it makes it easier to use for longer periods. The combination of the fifth-generation 26.1 mega-pixel sensor and the X-Processor 5 means you can take all the action photos (up to 40 frames per second!) and video you want – the camera will keep up.

What's it suitable for?

The camera and lens are a formidable duo: I used them to take all my wildlife photos on this trip. A bird in flight is probably one of the most difficult things to photograph and the X-H2S impressed me. While not every photo you take will be in focus, I got a high percentage of sharp shots.

The XF 150 – 600 mm lens is great and its range enormous – it's basically the equivalent of a 914 mm lens in 35 mm terms. In other words, you can be in Upton and your subject can be in Kakamas. (I'm joking, but you get the drift.)

Cost: R38 795 for the camera body, R32 195 for the lens at formsdirect.co.za. For more info, visit fujifilm-x.co.za



JUDY VAN ZYL

2010



**BACK
IN THE
DAY**

102 YEARS OF THE COMRADES MARATHON

The first Comrades Marathon was run on 24 May 1921. It was the brainchild of WW1 veteran Vic Clapham, who wanted to stage an annual test of physical endurance to commemorate the harsh conditions under which South African soldiers had fought and died during the Great War.

A course was mapped out between Pietermaritzburg and Durban, approximately 89 km in length, that would test athletes to the limit. And, according to the race's constitution, "celebrate mankind's spirit over adversity".

The route is as follows: Starting in Pietermaritzburg, runners pass through Ashburton, Camperdown, Cato Ridge, Drummond, Hillcrest, Kloof, Pinetown and Westville, before the final stretch into Durban. The starting point alternates between the two cities each year, creating what we now know as the "down" run towards the coast and the "up" run towards Pietermaritzburg. There are a few notorious hills in the race: the words "Polly Shortts" and "Cowies" are enough to strike fear into the hearts of the most hardened runners.

The inaugural race started in Pietermaritzburg. Thirty-four runners, most of whom had been soldiers in the war, lined up in the early morning. They were sent off with the crack of a gun under a dark sky. Back then, the route was predominantly along dirt roads – it wasn't the televised spectacle it is today. The moment the starting gun fired must have been private and profound for each runner; a feeling we can only guess at today. A time limit of 12 hours was set in which to complete the race, and that year it was won by Bill Rowan who finished in eight hours and 59 minutes. It was an unimaginable feat at the time, but officially the slowest winning time to date.

Today, the Comrades Marathon is capped at 25 000 runners. Did you know that it's both the oldest and largest (in terms of entrants) ultramarathon in the world? The field mainly consists of South Africans but runners also travel from countries like Brazil, Australia, the UK, Russia, the USA, India and other African countries like Zimbabwe, Botswana, Eswatini and Kenya.

What started as a commemoration for those who fought in the war has evolved with South Africa itself to adopt a new spirit of ubuntu. Those who've run the race say it's indeed a day of incredible comradeship; where one is tested and uplifted by fellow runners; where the spirit of our nation is palpable in the support shown on the streets; and where adversity, both personal and societal, is overshadowed and for a brief, beautiful moment, overcome.

This year's race will be run on Sunday 11 June.

– Kyra Tarr



1934



1995

DATES TO NOTE

1962: The first foreign entrants participate in the race: members of the Road Runners Club from England.

1975: The race is opened to all athletes for the first time. This includes women and competitors of colour.

1981: Comrades legend Bruce Fordyce wins the first of his eventual nine titles.

1995: Prize money is introduced to attract more foreign competitors. (This year, the overall prize purse has been increased from R2,27 million to R4,31 million!)

2010: The Guinness World Records names the Comrades as the ultramarathon with the most runners in the world.

RECORD-HOLDERS

MEN

Down: David Gatebe (RSA) in 5:18.19 – 2016

Up: Leonid Shvetsov (Russia) in 5:24.49 – 2008

WOMEN

Down: Frith van der Merwe (RSA) in 5:54.43 – 1989

Up: Gerda Steyn (RSA) in 5:58.53 – 2019

Sources: comrades.com; ultrarunninghistory.com

GALLO/GETTYIMAGES; ALAMY/ZA



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SOLUTION ON PAGE 104





Ten years ago, **Grant van der Walt** played the fool on the banks of Jozini Dam...

The shoreline of Jozini Dam is one of the most impressive places to camp. The facilities are nothing to write home about, but you always get a proper wilderness experience. It's a wild corner of KZN. The dam is part of Phongolo Nature Reserve, one of our oldest reserves originally proclaimed by Paul Kruger. On this trip back in 2014, we were there to catch tiger fish (as usual) but the tigers weren't the only beasts around: Four of the Big Five roam the nature reserve – the only one missing is lion.

We'd seen a leopard on a previous trip, lurking around the campsite, and another time we camped close to where two white rhinos were resting for the night. Sightings of elephant and buffalo were almost guaranteed, and we'd already seen both on this trip.

Hippos aren't members of the Big Five, but they should be! They can be very dangerous if you get between them and the water, and we often encountered them at Jozini. If you've ever heard a hippo honk, especially at night, you'll be forgiven for feeling a bit unsettled. There you are, trying to sleep, but now you're also trying to figure out how far away this huge animal is from your flimsy tent...

But the roar of a lion is a properly unsettling sound. With a hippo, if you stay out of its way, at least you know you're not in immediate danger. Not so with a lion. A lion isn't a vegetarian...

I like to play practical jokes on people. On this visit, I took along a CD, *Animal Calls from Africa* – one of those curios you often see in a tourist shop. It had 16 tracks of animal calls, including the cry of a fish-eagle, a howling jackal, a sniggering hyena, even a grunting hippo. But it was the roaring lion that would be my weapon of choice.

One night after supper, I slipped away from the fire and got into my bakkie. I wound down the windows of the Hilux, inserted the CD and played the lion track nice and loud.

You should have seen the reaction of the guys around the fire! I watched from inside the dark cabin. One of them heard it and then silenced the others. They were clearly uncomfortable and started looking around uneasily. I didn't want to overplay my hand, so I surreptitiously made my way back. Stoking the fire – literally and figuratively – I said: "I might be crazy, but I just heard a lion on my way back from the bathroom!"

Soon, guys started retiring to their tents until just three of us remained around the fire – me, my brother and another friend. I couldn't keep it a secret any longer: I came clean and told them I'd played the lion track from the bakkie.

But hang on, what was *that*? After adding two more logs to the fire to get the kettle boiling again for one last cup of coffee, we'd all been staring silently into the flames when we heard it again: The roar of a lion!

Now it was my turn to stress. I knew it wasn't the CD player this time. It was a single lion, clear as can be. Maybe he'd heard me playing the sound earlier and wanted to come and investigate the presence of a rival? Or was there another practical joker in the reserve?

We hurriedly went to bed and zipped up our tents. After a restless night's sleep, we were collected to go tigerfishing the next morning. I asked our skipper about the roar and he confirmed that there were indeed no lions in Phongolo Nature Reserve, but apparently a rogue lion had escaped from a park in neighbouring Swaziland and was now roaming around...

The roar was real!

With a hippo, if you stay out of its way, at least you know you're not in immediate danger.
Not so with a lion.



In February 2023, heavy summer rains in KwaZulu-Natal brought small rivers like the Hlatikulu (a tributary of the Mooi River) down in flood. Luyanda Masango (on the right) and a friend first walked across this flooded causeway to test how deep the water was, then they drove through without a hitch in their VW Polo.

This is the Mpofana Road, which runs all along the base of the Drakensberg, connecting well-known tourist areas like Kamberg and Garden Castle.

PICTURE **TOAST COETZER**



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