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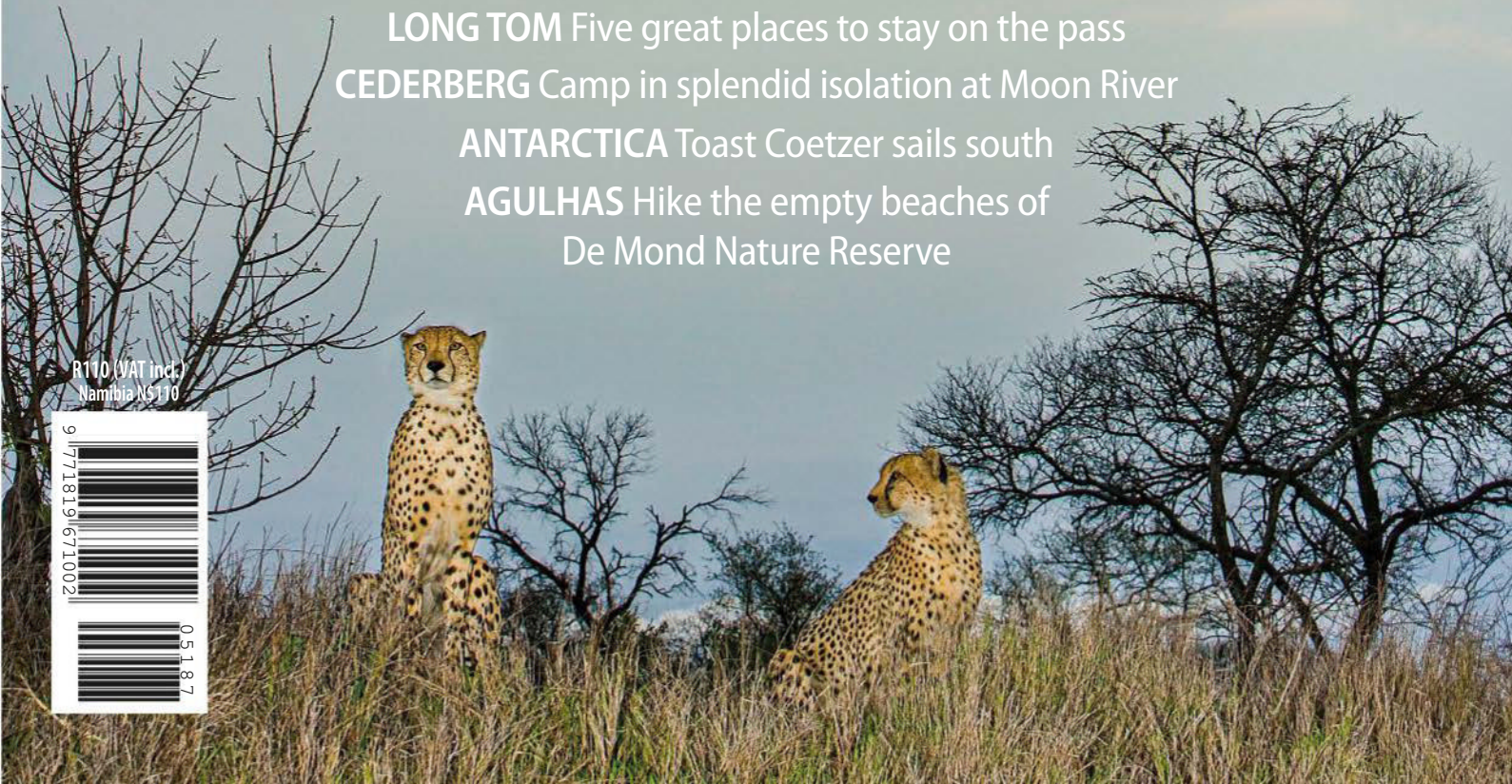
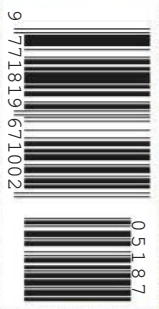
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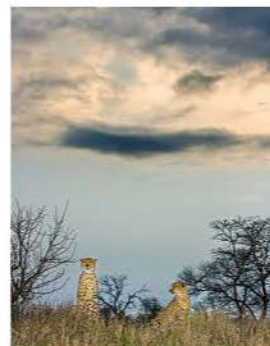
"In summer, the different shades of green are an assault on the senses – the emerald canopy, the khaki grass, the almost neon trunks of the fever trees... Pops of complementary colour are provided by the yellow legs of an African harrier-hawk, the red bill of a wood-hoopoe, the purple wing of a Meves's starling..."

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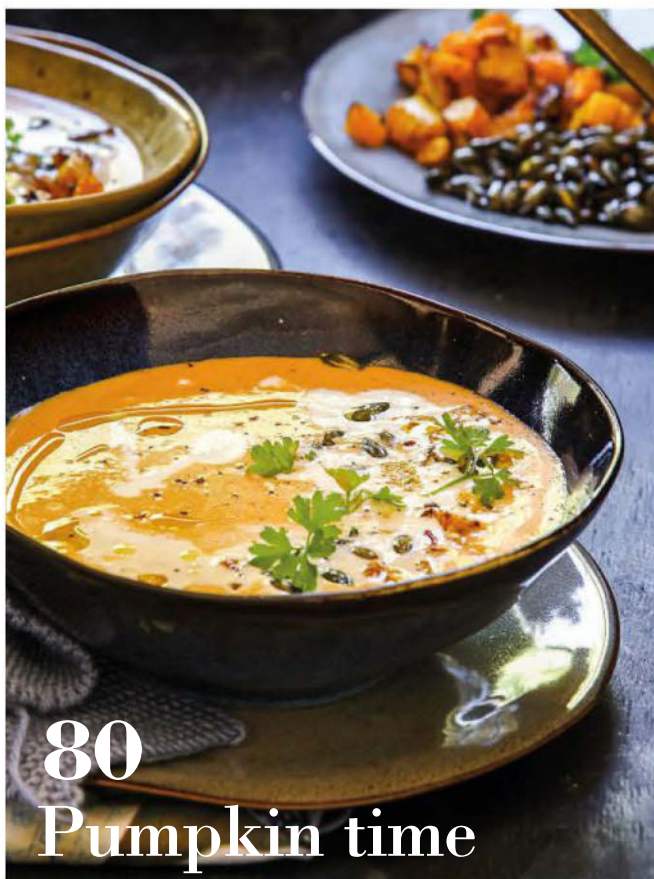
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GETTY/GALLOIMAGES.COM

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AWAY



the new fragrances for men and women

STOP!

SAFELINE JUST GOT A NEW LOOK

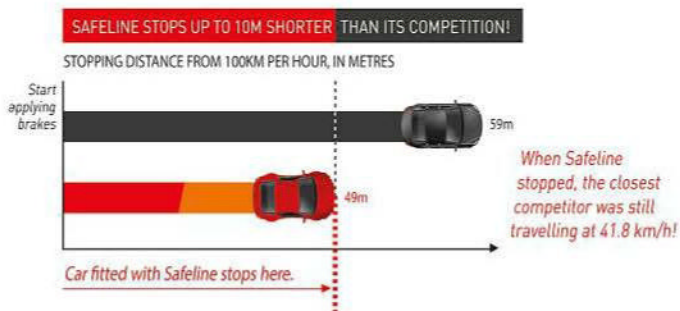


NEW LOOK, SAME PERFORMANCE!

Brake pads may not be the most flashy automotive component, but they are certainly among the most critical.

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

RONEL STEYN



Beyond the city lights

My mother-in-law could hardly wait to tell me the news: She'd snapped up seven gently used Lawrence G Green books at a local library sale for the exorbitant sum of R35. Not R35 per book – R35 for the whole lot!

She knows I'm a huge fan of the late South African journalist and travel writer. Green had no delusions of literary grandeur but instead wrote the way he travelled – for the sheer joy of it.

My favourite book of his has always been *A decent fellow doesn't work*, which is prefaced as follows: "Experiences of an easy-going traveller in search of pleasure, interesting people and places inside and outside Southern Africa – with a little wisdom gathered on the way."

Lawrence Green died 50 years ago, but I like to think that his philosophy lives on in the work we do at *go!* and our Afrikaans sister publication, *Weg*. Like Green, our writers go far beyond the city lights to explore the frontiers and those truly wild places that speak to our souls.

In this issue, Toast Coetzer first heads north to Botswana to meet the people who call the Okavango Panhandle home (p 56) and then he goes south – very far south – as he explores the Falkland Islands, South Georgia Island and the Antarctic Peninsula (p 120).

If you've never driven the length of the Kruger Park before (and even if you have), Esma Marnewick's classic travel guide from Crocodile Bridge to Crook's Corner is all you'll need for an unforgettable 10-day holiday (p 36).

There's a wealth of practical wisdom in these stories, but also an appreciation of the people our writers met and the wonders they beheld – the same people and wonders *you'll* experience when you get out there and explore.

I think Mr Green would approve.

Pierre

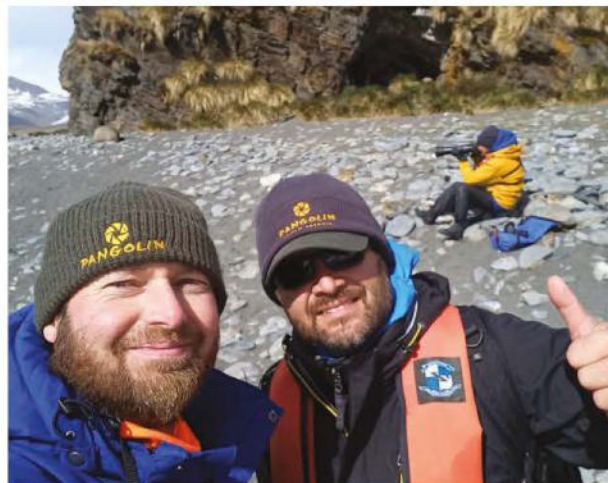
PIERRE STEYN

PSteyn@media24.com

DON'T MISS OUR NEXT ISSUE!

The June/July issue will be on sale at your retailer from 25 May 2023.

BEHIND THE SCENES



Toast Coetzer travelled to Antarctica in October and November last year. Read the first instalment of his Travel Journal on page 120.

When did the Antarctica bug bite? Ages ago! I think any curious South African traveller will glance at a map at some point and wonder about that big white continent lurking at the bottom. South Africa has a real connection with Antarctica. Besides the fact that we have a research station there, Cape Town was always one of the last ports of call for the polar explorers of yore.

Who did you travel with? Guts Swanepoel (pictured above right) was the tour leader and I was his assistant – a bit like Batman and Robin. I met Guts many years ago in Kasane, Botswana, where he runs the wildlife photography company Pangolin Photo Safaris. Chobe and Moremi might be in his backyard, but he also leads tours to other iconic international destinations. It was incredible to see him in action – he's a consummate professional and a legendary travel partner.

We had about 20 guests on the trip, some from South Africa and others from elsewhere in the world.

Was it freezing? We travelled in early summer. The temperature was usually a few degrees above freezing during the day, but the wind could cut through you. I mostly used clothes I already owned, although I did buy new gloves. Guts organised gear rental for our group: When we got to Ushuaia in Argentina (our departure point) we each got a proper jacket, raincoat and waterproof pants. Everything starts smelling of penguin poo after a while – it was great to just hand the gear back after the trip...

What's next? Antarctica again! This trip was a wonderful introduction to the region. We also visited the Falkland Islands and South Georgia Island. The latter, especially, keeps me up at night. What a wild place! The spirit of adventure and exploration still feels alive there. I'd love to go back.

See more on Instagram: Follow @toastcards, @pangolinphotosafaris and @gomagsa



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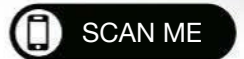
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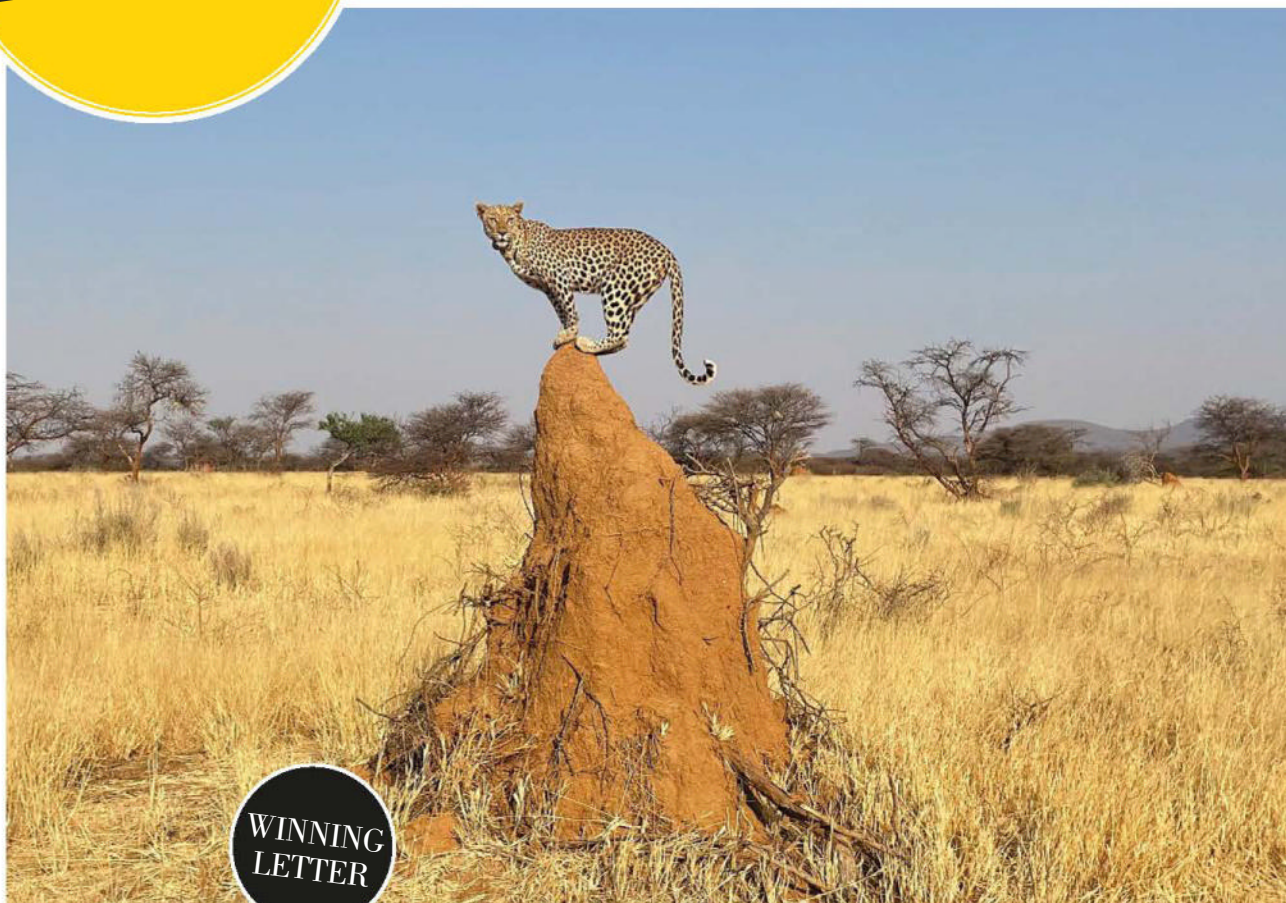




Where have you been? What have you seen?

Write to 📧 editor@gomag.co.za

COMPILED BY MARTINETTE LOUW



📌 Balancing act

My husband Johannes and I visited Namibia last year. We did a guided game drive in Okonjima Nature Reserve near Otjiwarongo. This young female leopard was in the northern part of the reserve – what a sighting!

Our guide told us she was only nine months old. She climbed to the top of the anthill to scan for prey. After she'd had a good look around, she leapt off and lay down behind a tree.

Our guide was excellent. He knew the common and scientific names of every shrub, bird and animal. We've travelled extensively over the years but this moment is something I'll remember forever.

ESTELLE VOS, Ermelo

WRITE TO US & WIN!

Estelle wins a Zartek ZA-476 LED spotlight worth R2 249. This rechargeable spotlight delivers a 6 300-lumen beam over a distance of up to 1,1 km. It has a run time of 2,5 – 40 hours depending on which of the five lighting modes you use.

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SPEAK TO US

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▲ Get fit with Flipper

I've never been too keen on exercise, but I do try to go for a run every morning to stay healthy. It's much easier when I'm on holiday at the seaside because the view helps to distract from the pain!

Early in December, while we were on holiday in Reebok near Groot Brak, I went for a run along the beach with my daughters Mariné and Anke. Near the end, we saw dolphins playing in the shallows. We ran back to the car, raced home to get our cameras, and returned to take photos. A moment like this makes exercise worth it!

ELIZMA JACOBS, Potchefstroom



▲ Otter surprise

My family spent some time in Karkloof Nature Reserve near Howick in November 2022 – we stayed at Rockwood Karkloof Lodges. We had planned to go mountain biking, but weather conditions were poor and the trails were too muddy.

So, I looked for birds instead. I ticked off several new species, but the highlight of the holiday was not an avian sighting, it was these two otters in a dam. They're usually shy, but these ones paid me no attention. They disappeared underwater and popped up with something to eat. It was very special to see!

REUBEN JONKER, Potchefstroom



▲ Perilous pit stop

My son Lloyd lives in France. He visited us in November 2022 and we went on a road trip to the Lowveld. We stayed at Ngwenya Lodge on the banks of the Crocodile River just outside the Kruger. There was a small crocodile in a dam near our chalet. When it moved out of the shadows, I tried to take a photo of its eye. As I was getting everything in focus, a dragonfly landed on the crocodile – just in time for a snap!

LEON VENTER, Kimberley



▲ Bloem from above

I'm always fascinated by photos that give a bird's-eye view of a landscape. I took this photo from Naval Hill in Bloemfontein – the koppie in the heart of the city. You get a great view of the CBD – the church known as Towers of Hope is a local landmark.

You can't see it from a distance, but Bloem is in poor shape. Refuse is seldom collected and potholes abound. It's not the place I remember growing up in, but the tree-rich suburbs are still beautiful after rain and the sunsets from the hill are still spectacular.

JURIE MAREE, Centurion

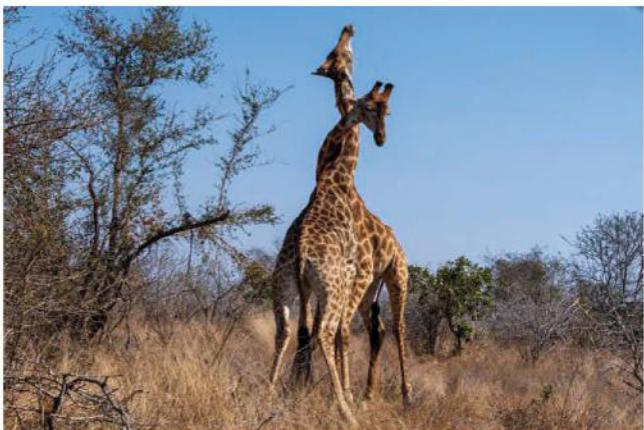


▲ What are you looking at, Mom?

I'm from the Netherlands. In December last year, I visited South Africa for the fourth time. On this occasion, I explored the Garden Route. I can understand a little Afrikaans (when spoken slowly) and can read it well, so I bought a copy of your Afrikaans sister magazine, *Weg*. As an amateur photographer, I especially enjoyed Take Your Pic.

All tourists want to see the Big Five, but after spending time in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, I've learnt that the smaller creatures are just as interesting. That said, I was very excited when our guide in the Amakhala Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape showed us this lioness and her cub. The cub was hidden in the bushes but it was curious and popped out to see what was going on.

ROB NIEBORG, the Netherlands

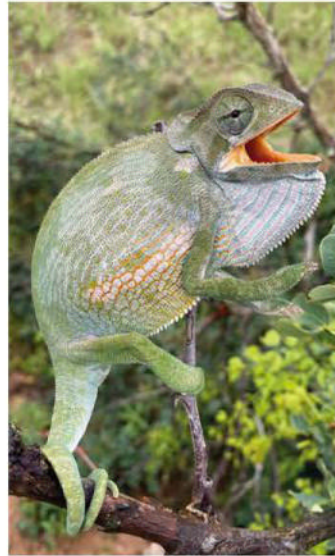


▲ Head butts allowed

My wife, Doreen, and I spent time in the Kruger Park in June 2021. We stayed at the Kruger Gate Hotel, just outside the Paul Kruger gate, and did day drives into the park from there.

One afternoon, on the H4-1 on our way back from Lower Sabie, we saw these two giraffes. They were locked in a serious battle and repeatedly smacked each other with their heads and necks. We watched them for a long time before we had to make space for other visitors to also enjoy the spectacle.

PEET MARAIS, Amanzimtoti



◀ Ready for your close-up?

There's not much of a story behind this photo, but I think it's special because it gives you the opportunity to appreciate all the small details on the chameleon.

My husband Hennie and I were in the Kruger Park in December 2020 and we saw the chameleon on the Sweni Road near Satara. It's not every day a chameleon will pose for you on a branch right next to the road! Hennie snapped this photo with my cellphone.

MARELIZE OTTO, Pretoria



▲ Spot the difference

Every issue of your magazine has something to tug at the heartstrings or stimulate the brain cells. Marlene Bernhardt's photo of the baobab and giraffe on Bowkerkop in the Kruger Park in issue #185 caught my eye.

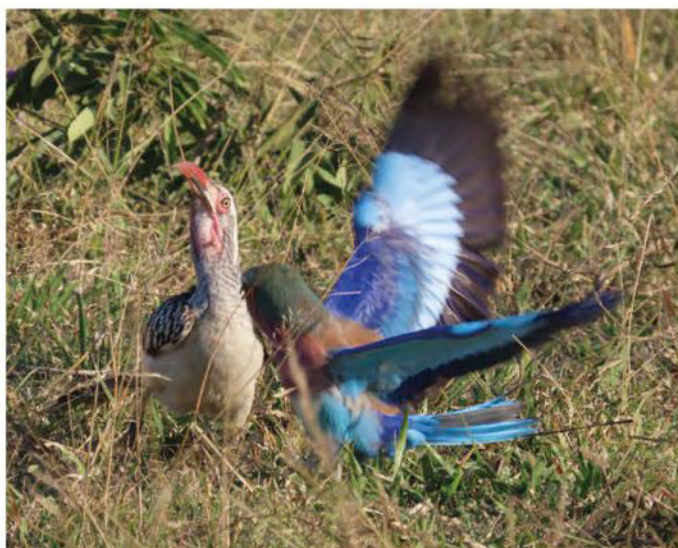
Bowkerkop is a basalt hill about 5 km north of Mopani rest camp. It was named after Miles Robert Bowker who owned a hunting camp there in 1888. If you travel along the H1-6 from north to south, you'll see the hill on the right.

The baobab on the slope is striking. I took a similar photo in November 2018. At that time, the tree had bright green summer foliage, in contrast to Marlene's more wintry photo taken in 2022.

How interesting to compare how much the landscape has changed in four years! The trees and bushes to the right of the baobab have grown significantly and there's a bigger clearing to the left of the giraffe than in 2018. Some bushes are much denser and others have died off.

Such is life: Nothing stays the same. If you were to zoom in on both photos and look at the horizon in the top right corner, there's a sharp rock standing upright – the only constant!

NICO LAUBSCHER, Stellenbosch



⚠️ One scorpion to go, please

My family and I toured the Kruger Park for the first time in July 2022. I had just started taking photos as a hobby and I was in my element. My poor husband Hendrico was very patient and stopped every time I saw something I wanted to capture.

The colours of this lilac-breasted roller drew my eye, but we almost drove past because we'd seen so many of them already. This time there was action! The roller dove towards the ground and a southern red-billed hornbill did the same soon after. I watched the birds through the lens of my Canon PowerShot SX70HS. The hornbill robbed the roller of its lunch – a big, fat scorpion!

ELOÏSE SWANEPOEL, Potchefstroom



⚠️ Tortoise on the menu?

I stumbled upon this interesting scene one afternoon at the Craig Lockhart waterhole near Mata-Mata in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. The lion was part of a pride but moved off to "play" with the tortoise. It threw the tortoise in the air repeatedly and also gnawed on it. The tortoise usually landed on its stomach and it didn't look like the lion was injuring it too badly.

We later left for the rest camp and returned the next morning. The lions were gone and the tortoise was nowhere to be seen. Hopefully it survived and fled as soon as it could.

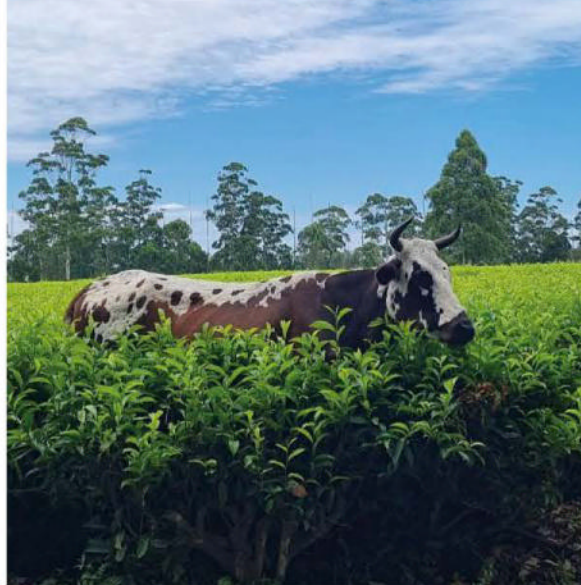
RENÉ BOSHOF, Wilderness

✔️ Mo-oo-agwa

There is not much in the way of towns or cities between Coffee Bay in the Eastern Cape and Port Edward in KZN, but you've come to the right place if you're after remote beaches, rolling hills and scenic landscapes.

I photographed this Nguni at the Magwa Tea Estate in Lusikisiki. The nearby Magwa Falls and Angel Falls are also worth a visit.

CAMIEN ERASMUS, Port Edward



✔️ Too comfortable to move

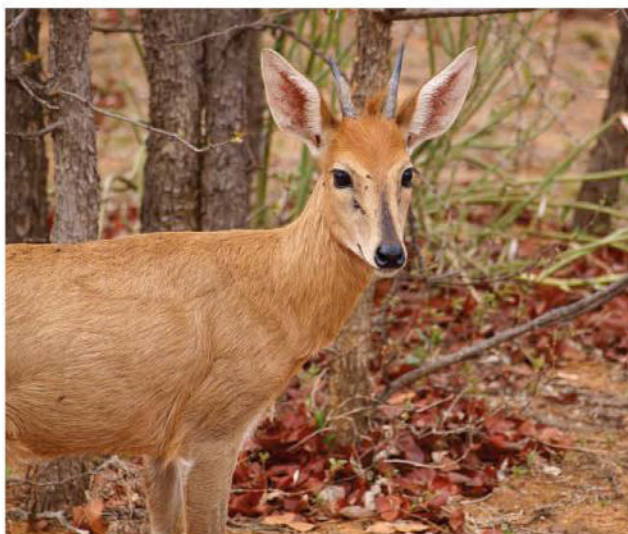
Last July, I travelled to the south of the Kruger Park with my sister Bernadette. Around Malelane and Berg-en-Dal, we had five leopard sightings in just 48 hours! At this particular sighting, a leopard was eating its kill in the branches and this little hyena's mom was sitting at the base of the tree waiting for scraps. Junior was not going anywhere so we all had to drive around him. You can imagine the traffic chaos!

WIN FELDTMAN, Randburg



Q&A

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



▲ Film buff in the bush?

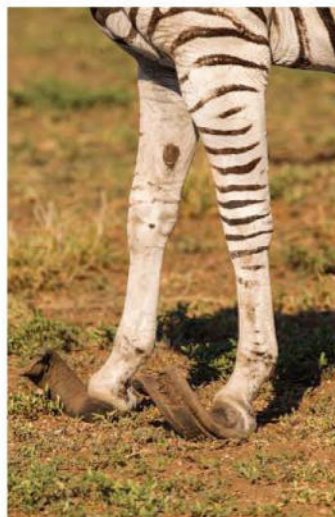
GRAEME BREMNER from Palapye writes: We screen outdoor movies in the bush in Botswana. Much to my surprise, one of the regular patrons is this duiker. It comes to test screenings when there are no strangers around and watches from the sidelines. We use a 6,5 m screen, so the images are quite large and the flicker rate of the projector is 24 frames per second. Do we know anything about the vision system in duikers and what it might be able to see on the screen?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN says: The answer lies in the structure of the eye and how it functions. The eye has two kinds of photoreceptor cells: cones and rods. The cones are responsible for the observation of colour and the rods for the observation of light.

Antelope like this duiker have dichromatic vision, which means there are only two kinds of cones in the eye, spread across the entire retina. Humans have trichromatic vision with three kinds of cones, which are concentrated in one part of the retina, called the fovea. Humans have focused and excellent colour vision, while antelope have limited colour vision.

The rods in the eye function best in low light. Humans don't have rods in the fovea and we generally can't see colour at night. Animals have a layer of tissue behind the retina called the tapetum lucidum, which reflects light. This layer gives the rods in the eye a second opportunity to absorb light and therefore improves night vision. This also causes the reflection you see in animals' eyes at night when you shine a torch on them.

Animals' eyes are more sensitive to blue and ultraviolet wavelengths than ours. The screen gives off blue light and it also flickers. The human eye stops detecting flicker at 50 Hz (50 frames per second); animals can still detect flicker at 70–75 Hz. I don't think the duiker is looking at the events on screen, but its attention is definitely being drawn by the blue, flickering light.



◀ Time for a mani-pedi?

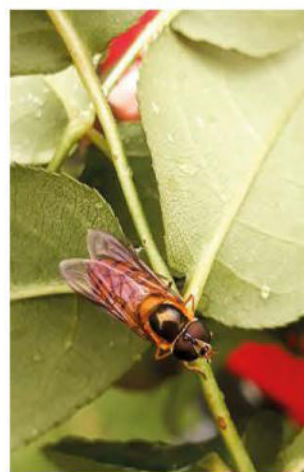
STU BOWIE from Centurion writes:

During a recent visit to the Kruger Park, we saw a large herd of zebra near Mopani rest camp. One of the zebras had these deformed hoofs. They were only on the front legs, and the zebra was in perfect health and walked normally. What could have caused this?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN says: Overgrown hoofs in the wild can have many causes, including a nutritional deficiency, trauma to the hoof (which causes inflammation or affects the hoof's anatomy and functional integrity), a change in environment (moving animals from hard veld to soft veld, for example) or a genetic disorder.

Since only one individual in the herd seems to have the condition, we can eliminate nutritional deficiency and environmental change as the causes. It's also highly unlikely – though not impossible – that trauma affected both front hoofs at the same time. This leaves us with a genetic disorder, which might have caused the issue in this specific zebra.

That said, without additional information on the zebras in that part of the park and whether the condition is more widespread, I can't give a definitive answer.



◀ ID, please

CAROLINA FULLER from Lichtenburg writes: I

photographed this insect in my garden and can't identify it. What is it?

Entomologist DUNCAN MACFADYEN says: This is

a hover fly from the family *Syrphidae* – a honeybee mimic with characteristic yellow and black stripes and a dull orange thorax. It mimics bees to discourage predators.

The fly is well known for its precise hovering flight. The adult feeds on nectar and pollen, often on flat white or yellow flower heads. It's known to buzz aggressively when caught but is totally harmless. It's a regular visitor to gardens and parks and is relatively common and widespread in South Africa, but often overlooked.



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IN BRIEF

COMPILED BY KYRA TARR



Something's brewing in the Karoo...

Coffee is made from coffee beans, right? The Coetzee family from Prieska in the Northern Cape have discovered another kind of "coffee" made from the pods of the mesquite tree, which grows wild on the banks of the Orange River.

They call their creation MannaBrew, and although it's not coffee per se, the rich, dark liquid can be made and enjoyed in precisely the same way.

Mesquite trees are an invasive species and this project is helping to curb their spread. During the two- to three-week window each year when pods can be harvested, community members get involved and they sell the pods to the Coetzees by the kilogram. After the pods have been hand-sorted, they're bagged and transported to Somerset West, where the processing plant is located. There, the pods are roasted and ground, making them compatible with almost any coffee-making instrument.

MannaBrew ticks all the boxes when it comes to being organic-certified and vegan-friendly, the packaging is 100% recycled and biodegradable, and it's caffeine free. Give it a try!

How do I get it? Available at mannabrew.co.za and Takealot

CONSUMING FIRE FILMS



KRUGER – THE BEST OF THE BEST!

The Kruger National Park has made it onto TripAdvisor's "Best Nature Destinations in the World" list for 2023.

The list is based on reviews and ratings by travellers over a 12-month period; other contenders include Mauritius, Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, Kauai in Hawaii and the island of Barbados.

View the full list by typing this link into your browser: t.ly/gQtn





Back from the brink

For years, scientists thought that the strikingly coloured orange sandveld lizard was extinct. There were only two recorded sightings in history and the last one was more than 10 years ago.

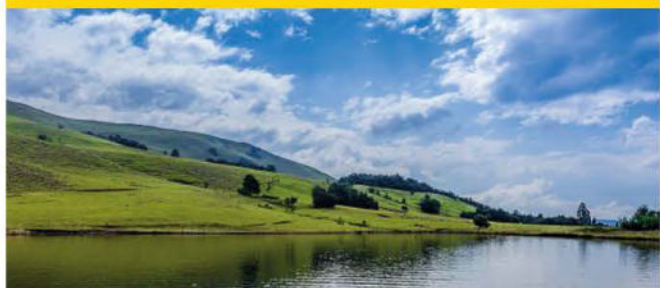
But at the end of 2022, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and various collaborators caused much excitement when they announced a sighting on the West Coast.

Besides the obvious relief that human expansion hadn't wiped out yet another species, the presence of these lizards could mean a lot to conservation efforts in a region recently granted wide-ranging mining prospecting rights.

If an animal is up-listed from "data deficient", (the current status of the orange sandveld lizard) to "red listed", then the EWT has more legal clout to protect the animal's habitat.

As explained in a recent EWT newsletter: "The species and its conservation status will then have to be accounted for during future EIAs [Environmental Impact Assessments] in the region, ultimately helping to protect the West Coast and its wildlife from further unregulated and harmful developments."

FOR YOUR CALENDAR



SPLASHY FEN

First held in 1990, Splashy Fen is South Africa's oldest music festival. It's also the so-called "friendliest festival", thanks to its chilled-out location in the foothills of the southern Drakensberg, and because it's suitable for families with a line-up that caters to all ages.

Some of this year's headliners include the Ndlovu Youth Choir, GoodLuck, Jeremy Loops, Desmond & the Tutus and Mango Groove.

When? 6 – 10 April 2023

Where? Underberg, KwaZulu-Natal

Tickets: [splashyfen.co.za](https://www.splashyfen.co.za)

NIGHT WATCH



The Tale of Scorpius and Orion

The change in season is visible in the heavens, just as it is in nature. After the Southern Cross, Orion is arguably the most recognisable constellation in the night sky. This is mostly thanks to Orion's Belt, which is clearly visible in South Africa in the summer months.

Across from Orion is the scorpion, Scorpius. It's our dominant winter constellation and is easy to spot because of its curly tail, which doesn't take much imagination to see. (Unlike some of the other constellations...)

Orion and Scorpius are not perfectly opposing, so they can be seen simultaneously during April and May. Just before Orion sets in the west, Scorpius rises in the east. Make it your mission to catch them both at the same time.

There's a charming bit of Greek mythology about how they ended up across from one another in the sky. Orion was a mighty and fearless hunter but his arrogance became so great that he threatened to kill all the animals on earth. This upset Gaia, the goddess of the earth and protector of the animals. She asked Scorpius, the giant scorpion, to kill Orion. Scorpius's armour was impenetrable to Orion's sword and the great scorpion stabbed the hunter to death with his tail. As a reward for his brave act of saving the animals, Gaia placed the scorpion in the night sky.

The goddess Artemis, queen of the hunt and a great admirer of Orion, requested that Orion be honoured in the same way. Zeus obliged and placed them on opposite sides of the night sky to prevent further trouble between the two.

– Willie Koorts



ESMA MARNEWICK

Hang out at Hangklip

If you've hiked the Hangklip Trail in Pringle Bay, you've probably noticed the white house in the valley near the trailhead. You might have thought, "Who's the lucky owner of *that* place?"

Wonder no more, because Bliss on the Bay belongs to the WWF and is managed by CapeNature – and it's open to the public.

The interior looks like something out of Scandinavia – lots of white, grey, duck egg, wood and natural fibres. There's art on the walls and big windows with views of the sea and the fynbos-clad mountains.

It's a self-catering house with a huge *kuier* area that includes an inside braai and eight-seater dining table. There's also a games room with table tennis and foosball, and a smart TV. Not that you'll spend much time inside. It'll be a toss-up between drinking coffee on the stoep overlooking the ocean or sipping sundowners in the wood-fired hot tub with a view of the mountains.

Bliss on the Bay is perfect for six adults and four children – there are three double rooms and a loft room.

Rates: from R3 950 per night.

Contact: 087 087 8250; capenature.co.za

– Esma Marnewick



CAPE LEOPARD TRUST

LEOPARD LOUNGE

Leopards of the Cape

If you think of a leopard in South Africa, the first image that probably comes to mind is a big Bushveld cat, probably lounging in a tree in the Kruger Park. Or maybe you think of a similarly imposing specimen patrolling the duneveld of the Kgalagadi.

These leopards are bulky – males weigh around 80 kg on average; females average about 40 kg. In places like the Lowveld and the Kalahari, where the habitat is ideal, leopard population density can be very high. For example, at Singita Sabi Sand, a private reserve bordering the Kruger, up to 12 animals have been recorded in a 100 km² area.

But there are other leopards in SA that far fewer people are aware of – the elusive cats of the Cape Fold Mountains in the Western, Eastern and Northern Cape. These enigmatic creatures are the epitome of wilderness – they survive in unbelievably rugged and inaccessible terrain. They're known as the "ghost cats" of the mountains and are very seldom seen by people.

The best way to study these leopards is by using field cameras triggered by motion and heat. Indeed, camera traps are the most important component in the research tool kit of the Cape Leopard Trust – an organisation focussed on the conservation of leopards in the Cape region.

Using camera traps, photos of leopards are obtained in wilderness areas like the Cederberg, Little Karoo, Outeniqua and Baviaanskloof. But they're also photographed in the mountains close to big towns like Paarl, Stellenbosch, Grabouw, Gordon's Bay and Hermanus.

These leopards are physically smaller and weigh less – males average 35 kg and females about 20 kg. They occur at much lower densities (fewer than two per 100 km²) and have substantially larger home ranges.

Because of these differences, people often refer to them as "Cape leopards", but this is a confusing term. Currently, all leopards in the Western, Northern and Eastern Cape are the same subspecies as those elsewhere in Africa – *Panthera pardus*. Although leopards in the Cape mountains are geographically restricted from other populations in the country, and they have some unique morphological and genetic characteristics, this is not enough to classify them as a different subspecies. We therefore rather refer to this population as "leopards of the Cape" to avoid confusion.

Next time you travel through the mountains or fly overhead on a flight via Cape Town, consider that wild leopards still survive here – 400 years after European settlement. Long may it remain so!

– Jeannie Hayward

If you see a leopard or signs of a leopard in the veld, like tracks and droppings, or if you see any threats to leopards like snares and traps, report them on the Leopard Data Portal: app.capeleopard.org.za. Queries can be sent to clt@capeleopard.org.za

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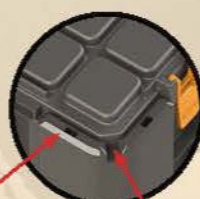
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PROFILE

'The one who gathers knowledge'

For **Moji Kitsi**, the bush is the best teacher. We joined this inspirational wildlife education guide on one of his outings in the Waterberg.

BY TOAST COETZER

It's a hot November morning when I meet Moji Kitsi at the gate of Welgevonden Game Reserve, about 24 km north-west of Vaalwater in Limpopo. He's dressed in the colours of the bush: olive-green cargo shorts and a golf shirt that's clearly seen a lot of sun. His short dreadlocks are rolled up under his cap.

We shake hands, then I hop into the white and green minibus used by the Welgevonden Environmental Awareness Programme (WEAP). As co-ordinator of WEAP, Moji spends a lot of time on the road in this bus, carting schoolchildren back and forth between towns like Vaalwater and wildlife refuges like Welgevonden.

Three youngsters from Vaalwater are already on the bus: Thembi Momene (22), Thabang Mkoie (18) and Mpho Motsomane (19). Moji has worked with them before and knows them well. He imparts knowledge about the bush as we go, in an easy, conversational tone.

A solifuge (a sun spider) scurries across the road and we all get out to take a look before it disappears. Moji segues smoothly into a lesson: "In nature, nothing functions by itself," he says. "We have three types of symbiotic relationships – do you remember them? Mutualism, parasitism, and commensalism. Mutualism is like when you buy bread, your friend

buys chips, and then you eat together. Commensalism is when you buy bread and your friend buys nothing – but that's okay because she doesn't eat with you anyway. And parasitism is when you buy bread and your friend buys nothing – but she eats all the bread!"

He laughs and then moves onto explaining how lichen is a composite organism in which algae and cyanobacteria share a mutualistic relationship.

"Lichen only grows where the air is pristine," says. "You kids always want to go to Pretoria or Joburg but you won't find lichen there..."

We're standing under a silver cluster-leaf tree and Moji doesn't waste the opportunity to level with the kids in a way that they understand: "This time of year you can smell the pollen of this tree – it smells like someone who has come from playing a soccer match and taken off his shirt.

"Can you see that agama there?" We crane our necks and spot it on the trunk of another tree. "It's a male, you can see by its breeding colours. In nature the male is usually more beautiful because he must attract a female and spread his genes – not *jeans*, not your Levi 501s! *Genes*, as in genetics..."

Our time with the kids ends a couple of hours later, after Moji helps them dig up a giraffe skull. The animal died in the reserve some time ago and Moji got

the kids to bury the skull so they could understand the decomposition process.

After his demo, Moji and I find a quiet place near the reserve reception to sit down and talk. Born in Brits in 1983, he's the second youngest of seven children. His mother, Elizabeth, is from the Free State and his late father, Tsietsi, traced some of his roots to Botswana.

It's strange how a name can manifest the person who carries it. Moji tells me that in Setswana, his name means something like, "the one who eats", or more figuratively "the one who gathers, who brings things together".

"And 'Kitsi' means 'the one who knows, who understands'. In Setswana, knowledge is 'kitso', and if you know and have knowledge, you're a 'kitsi'," he says.

Moji Kitsi has been gathering knowledge about nature from an early age. He was just 10 years old when he realised what he wanted to do with his life. That year, in 1993, some SANParks rangers came to his school to do a talk about the environment. "They brought feathers, animal skulls and a tortoise shell," he says. "Every time, when I wonder whether we're making a difference – whether we're winning the battle of environmental education – I think back to that day. For us as the Welgevonden Environmental Awareness Programme, even if we just inspire ten kids who are half as crazy as I am, it's



Welgevonden
Game Reserve

“Every generation has its own struggle. For your generation, it’s an environmental struggle. And you can’t win a struggle unarmed, so we’re arming you guys now, with knowledge.”

a victory in the long run. Every inspired person is an investment, because they can reach even more people in turn.”

Earlier, I heard him tell the youngsters: “Every generation has its own struggle. For your generation, it’s an environmental struggle. And you can’t win a struggle unarmed, so we’re arming you guys now, with knowledge.”

Moji grew up in a village called Maboloka just north of Brits. His mother raised him and his siblings, and four other children, on the R180 a week she earned working at a shop.

His father was responsible for imparting much of Moji’s early knowledge of nature. “He was closely related to the Bushmen in Botswana. He used to fight with the cattle herders in our area because he would remove the snares from the veld. Every Saturday morning we went together to remove snares, and I didn’t know why. He told me: ‘You only kill something that you are going to eat.’ Snaring, he said, was inhumane and not even real hunting – if you hunt something you must give it a chance. He ate from the bush, from the soil, and he loved fishing. He could track like no other man I have ever met, and he knew bird calls and whether it was a mating call or something else. He even knew when the butterflies would arrive every season.

“I remember when he told me about the coming of the common mynahs. He said that the first time he observed them in our village was in 1988. Most people from the township didn’t notice such things, but my father did.”

After Moji matriculated in 2001, he stayed at home even though he had the chance to study. Some teachers at his school had put money away to help him, but Moji felt he had to stay home for his mother’s sake. His parents had been divorced for almost a decade at this stage, and a sense of stability was hard to find.

“We moved houses four times during my teenage years, trying to find a stable place. Eventually my mother bought a stand and we built a house with our own hands. My mother still lives there. I would be lucky if I have a fraction of my mother’s strength,” he says. “I wouldn’t have survived without her.”

Moji first worked as a volunteer for

a local HIV/Aids awareness organisation, and then as a welder in Brits. A factory job in Garankuwa followed, but he still spent his weekends at home in Maboloka whenever he could, educating others in the township about how they should be looking after their dogs, or going fishing with his father to learn more about nature.

“Things changed for me in 2007. I joined Facebook and quickly found anti-poaching groups, animal rights activism groups and so on. In 2009 I got arrested at the Chinese embassy because we held a march against rhino poaching. This was all organised via Facebook by a group of middle-aged white women with whom I became close friends.

“I was sitting in the back of the police bakkie with these women, and one of them asked me: ‘Moji why don’t people in the township understand that it’s important to save the rhino?’ I told her that it’s impossible for somebody to care about something they’ve only ever seen on TV or read about in books. She asked, but how can we change this? And I said, ‘Education, education, education. There’s no other way.’”

In 2012, a couple of things fell into place. Moji briefly worked at a game reserve near Mookgophong and was sent to do anti-poaching training in the Western Cape. There, he met a man called Chase Jordaan who worked at a game reserve in the Waterberg. Chase immediately recognised the natural educator and communicator in Moji and tried to convince him to move to Vaalwater.

In 2017, after his father passed away, Moji made the move. “When my father was on his deathbed, he told me: ‘No matter what you do in life, you must never leave the bush.’”

Moji spent a while with Chase, familiarising himself with the landscape and reading guidebooks to educate himself.

“I also met the legendary conservationist Clive Walker,” Moji recalls. “We got on like a house on fire! Soon after, the job I’m doing now came up. Back then it was all just an idea: to take kids from the township and expose them to the bush. I came for the interview and got the job.”

It wasn’t plain sailing at first and

Opposite page, from the top: Moji Kitsi (far right) shares his knowledge with a group of students while Michelle Thompson (third from the right), media and communication co-ordinator from Welgevonden Game Reserve, looks on.

Moji holds a giraffe skull which he had previously buried to show his students how it would decay over time.

Moji spent time trying to figure out which approach would work best. “Every school is different, the demographics are different, the realities of the townships are different... You can’t just come up with a single environmental education programme. It might work in one place but it will be useless somewhere else. So, I went back and redesigned it. I wanted it to be relevant, to resonate with everyone. It shouldn’t just be about bringing kids to the reserve. They see animals and go back. There must be a link, something to measure our success with. I took the concept to the Department of Education and they loved the idea of bringing our programme into the schools.

“Currently, we work with about ten schools in the Waterberg. In the primary schools our programme is fused with Natural Science. I go to a school, look at the curriculum and see where my work can fit in with theirs. The programme is now seen as a necessity rather than a nuisance. It mustn’t be seen as extra work for the kids but as something that complements what they’re already doing.

“With high schools, we blend the programme with Hospitality Studies and Tourism. A big percentage of the economy of the Waterberg revolves around tourism. We visit lodges and hunting farms and we interview everyone from the manager to the guy who sweeps the floor, to show how each person adds to the package that the tourist buys.

“One of the first things we do with the kids is to introduce them to plants. You put a seed in the ground and you look after it, and eventually it sprouts and grows. These days people don’t find pride in hard work, they want things to come fast and easy. The seed helps to instil an understanding that patience is an investment.”

Because Moji is largely self-taught, he pays attention to the kids and the sometimes surprising knowledge that they share.

“It’s not always about the stuff in books,” he says. “You can learn so much from being observant in the veld. For example, I’ve seen a fork-tailed drongo take a burning leaf from a fire and use it to start a fire elsewhere. The new fire drives insects into the air – easy prey for



the drongo. I told my father and he said, 'Ja, ja, they do it often.' But I couldn't find anything in the books to back it up. Fast forward to 2019 when I was doing a lesson at the farm school at Boschdraai. I was talking about the weird things that animals do and an 11-year-old boy told me he and his father have seen a drongo do the same thing on several occasions."

Helping hands have sometimes come from unexpected places. Once, Moji was busy with a class at another district farm school when his lesson was interrupted by a man who told him his employer, a certain Mr Willie Botha, wanted to see him. Not knowing Mr Botha, Moji thought he might be in some sort of trouble but he went along after he finished his class.

"So, I get to Oom Willie's farm and he points to me in front of all his workers and says: 'This is the guy I've been telling you about!'"

"Some see nature as a place where you can go to find peace and quiet, or beautiful scenery. But I think nature is a place where you can find yourself. Nature starts with you."

Although Moji had never met Willie, word had got around and he wanted to offer the use of his farm for Moji's educational programmes.

"The great thing about Kleinplasia – Oom Willie's farm – is that you can walk safely because there aren't any big, dangerous animals. It's one thing when you take kids out on a game drive and show them elephants, but you miss out the small things. On Oom Willie's farm, we can walk for two hours, covering just 2 km, stopping to study droppings, tracks, a toktokkie... My father told me the bush floor is like a book. You read and learn what happened the previous night. After the walk, Oom Willie provides some refreshments for the kids. I have a very strong bond with him now.

"Everyone learns differently – some kids learn in a classroom, but others must go into the veld, touch the ground, feel the dung in their hands, touch the grass, smell the terminalia plant. That's how I learnt. I didn't learn from sitting in a classroom. I think that's how kids should be taught about the environment, by going out and seeing it."

Although Moji clearly loves his job, he yearns for his own children. Vaalwater is about 250 km from Brits and Maboloka, where his wife, Grace, lives with their daughters Kemoneetswe (7) and Kemoneilwe (3).

"I can only visit them on weekends and that breaks my heart because they're the centre of my life," he says. "Everything I've ever known I've learnt from that place, Maboloka. Even if I win the lottery I won't move away. I know I'll never be able to repay my mother for everything she's done for me, but I want to help support her for her remaining years."

He would love to find someone to train as his successor, but Moji knows that the kind of passion he brings to the job is hard to find.

"You can have all the degrees in the world, but if you're not passionate about something you won't do it adequately. Once you see environmental education as a job, you've lost before you've even started. This is a way of life. I get people knocking on my door in the middle of the night because they've seen a weird

spider in their house. By getting up and addressing it, you show these guys how important all living creatures are. You can't ignore people with a trivial request or question. If you do, you've missed out on an opportunity to educate them."

Moji is forever looking for people who share his "madness".

"That's how you find your brothers and sisters!" he says. "Being siblings is the mere coincidence of being born from the same parents, but brotherhood and sisterhood are relationships that you work on – relationships that you water and nourish. It's important to nurture my successors and to make sure the kids that we influence don't just disappear into the township again. When new field guides need to be trained for working on game reserves, these kids must be first in line.

"Some see nature as a place where you can go to find peace and quiet, or beautiful scenery. But I think nature is a place where you can find yourself. Nature starts with *you*. We need to discard the notion that humans and nature are separate. We're not – we're part of it, and every part of nature has a right to be here as much as we do, maybe even more so. Every single thing in nature functions for the betterment of the whole system. Except us, we're the only species that works against nature, even though we claim to be intelligent."

Moji's work brings him into contact with many kids, and he shares in the harsh realities of their lives.

"When I go into the township to teach a child about a tree – if that child was raped two days ago, if that child slept on an empty stomach five days ago, if that child doesn't have clothes – then my message will not get across. I must be aware of these things, sometimes even address them directly. Some of these things mess me up, and when I feel messed up I go into nature, often to a mountain near Melkrivier, and I sit there and I speak those things out loud to get them out of my system.

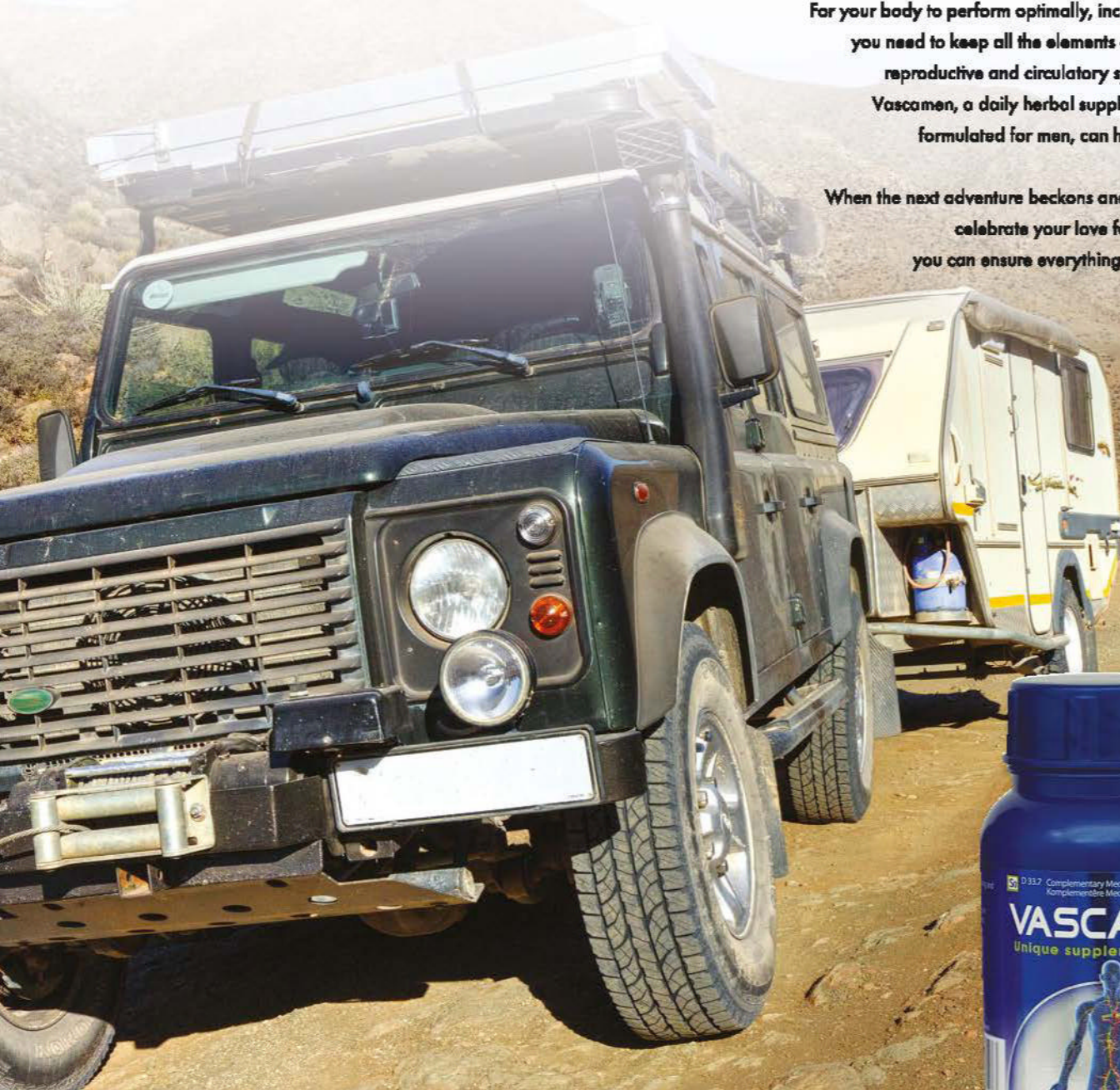
"We must find the time to humble ourselves. If you can calm down, bring yourself down, bring your soul down, then you can understand how you are part of nature."

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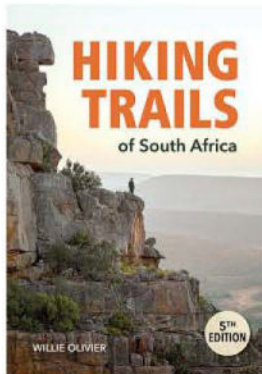
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Hiking Trails of South Africa

by Willie Olivier, Struik Nature
R340 in bookstores

Like everything else in life, we turn to the Internet for information about hiking trails. But some routes aren't available online and sometimes the websites aren't very user-friendly. That's what makes this guide so valuable: It's the most comprehensive collection of local hiking trails you can find.

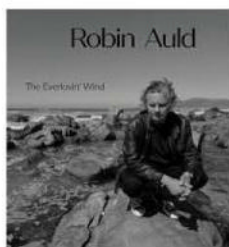
There are more than 500 day, weekend and multi-day hikes to choose from, including 60 new trails.

This is the fifth edition of the guide and the structure has remained largely unchanged, except for the index at the back, which has been removed. This is a pity because now you have to know which region a trail is in to find it. Previously you just had to run your finger down an alphabetical list. Aside from this one niggle, the guide works very well.

Olivier has divided South Africa into seven geographical regions and each section opens with a detailed map to show where the trails in that region are located. The numbered trail entries each have a short summary of the essentials: the closest town, the distance and how long it will take to hike, plus contact details for bookings, whether a trail map is available and which facilities to expect, like accommodation, bird hides and ablutions. There's also a short description of the landscape, bird and plant species, and interesting landmarks.

Welcome additions to the latest edition include new colour photos, a glossary to explain technical terms, and blank pages for personal notes. There are also handy tips about hiking food, first aid and gear – I learnt something new every time I turned the page!

– Sophia van Taak



ROAD MUSIC

The Everlovin' Wind

by Robin Auld

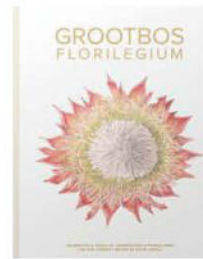
£7 from bandcamp.com

"Now's not the time to feel the doubt," sings Kalk Bay local Robin Auld on the cracking opening track ("Underground") of his first new album since 2014. Like all great pop songs, its lyrics could mean different things to different listeners. To me, when he sings "How many years behind a broken plough?" I can't help but think of the sometimes complicated relationship we have with our own country.

Next up is the gentle, soothing "Bays of Blue", sweet as a summer day over False Bay. Surfing is never far from the music of Robin Auld, and songs like "Lines of Fun" and "Weaverbird" carry on this tradition. The maskandi-flavoured "All about a boy" will go down in a dusty, bittersweet *skoffel* at any backyard braai ("they don't lie side by side and tan on the beach no more") while "Zambia" is a nostalgic journey into what family and heritage means on this continent we call home.

Strap that board to the roof and head for J-Bay...

– Toast Coetzer



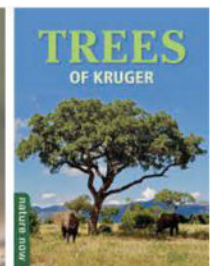
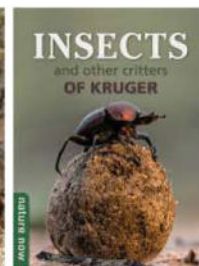
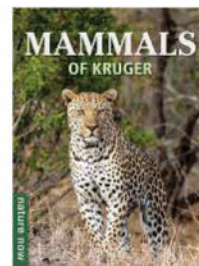
Grootbos Florilegium

by Sean Privett, Quivertree Publications
about R2 200 in bookstores

To celebrate its conservation of the Cape Floristic Region, Grootbos Private Nature Reserve, in the Overberg near Gansbaai, invited 44 botanical artists to spend time in the reserve and document what they experienced. The result is this beautiful collection of 120 fynbos illustrations.

A double-page spread is dedicated to each of the selected species. There's a painting or drawing of the plant on one page and special details highlighted with more illustrations on the facing page, like close-ups of the flowers or the insects responsible for the plant's pollination. The accompanying text sheds some light on interesting facts about each plant.

The price of this book might make your eyes water, but consider it a collector's item and remember that all proceeds go towards conservation and community art projects.



Nature Now: Kruger series

Struik Nature

R230 each in bookstores

Is your camping stand in Skukuza already booked for your next visit to South Africa's favourite game reserve? This nifty series of three compact guidebooks will unlock all the wonders of the veld. They're great for beginners and to keep the kids occupied on long drives.

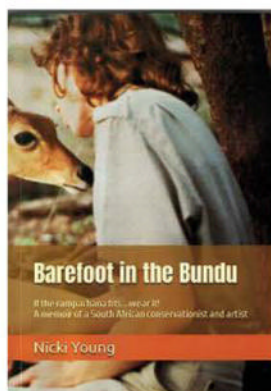
Mammals of Kruger by Joan Young covers more than 80 species, from the big old elephant to the smallest shrew. Colour photos illustrate each entry, which gives a short overview of the species' identifying characteristics and behaviour, plus game-viewing tips.

Insects and other critters of Kruger, also by Joan Young, will help you identify more than 200 species commonly encountered in the Kruger. See how many butterflies, beetles and spiders you notice while walking around a rest camp or a picnic area. Once you start looking for them, you'll see them everywhere! The guide also offers tips on how to photograph creepy-crawlies, so bring your macro lens along.

Trees of Kruger by Braam van Wyk and Piet van Wyk describes 80 common tree species in plain and concise language. A series of maps up front sets out the 35 different landscape types in the park, which helps you narrow down which tree you're looking at. Since you'll most likely be tree-spotting from your vehicle, the guide focusses on identifying aspects that you can see from a distance, like the tree's shape, flowers, leaves, fruit and bark.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Conservationist **Nicki Young** has worked with wildlife for decades. She's also a former pilot and a yachtie with a black belt in karate and a penchant for scuba-diving. Her life has been filled with so much adventure that her memoir *Barefoot in the Bundu* is the first of three volumes!



LINDA POULTNEY

What's the story behind the subtitle?

I've always enjoyed being barefoot – it's a theme that runs through my life. I enjoy the freedom of sticking my toes in the sand, getting mud on my feet and feeling soft grass under my soles.

Whenever I did need footwear, I opted for veldskoens or slip-slops. That is, until I encountered the home-made footwear, or rampachanas, that farm workers wear in the Thabazimbi bushveld. I was touched when the workers gifted me with a pair of my own.

Rampachanas are sandals made from old car tyres and wire. They're rugged and tough, and not very comfortable, but I cherished them and wore them nearly every day. They sometimes got me into trouble as they were not always suitable, and this resonated with the wrong choices I've made in my life. I owned those mistakes and take responsibility for them, hence the subtitle: *If the rampachana fits... wear it!*

Why did you want to write a memoir?

I didn't – it came about by chance. I thought that my life was pretty normal except for the fact that I married quite young and my husband Eddie Young was a famous, pioneering wildlife veterinarian. *He* was the interesting one, the energetic mover and shaker, who was also my mentor and the love of my life.

Eddie passed away in an aeroplane accident in 1990. Afterwards, friends and strangers alike implored me to write our life story. There were so many adventures, lessons and challenges, both before and after his death when I tried to hold it together by continuing our conservation

work... Any credit for interest in my story back then must go to him.

Gradually, I began thinking that it was a good idea to preserve my memories in writing for our children, who were very young at the time their father died. As my life continued, I started writing for myself, too. I was encouraged when other people showed an interest in reading what I'd written, but no one was more surprised than I was when I realised I had so much to say!

Your favourite anecdote?

There are so many! If I had to pick one, I guess it would be when I used a dart gun to recapture two blesbok that had escaped from our game farm in the days immediately following my husband's funeral. I felt so many things at the same time – satisfaction at a successful capture (my goal had been to make Eddie proud), as well as a deep sense of loss and connection to him. All of that was swirling through my mind, and then I looked over my shoulder and saw our secretary leopard-crawling behind me in her office clothes as we stalked the blesbok. She was puffing up red dust with every breath, a grimly determined look on her face, and behind her was a long line of perplexed cattle following right on her heels. I couldn't stop laughing.

You've worked with wildlife for decades.

How has the experience changed over the years? When I started in the early 1980s, I worked under the supervision of a vet doing things like chemical capture and treating injured or diseased animals. It was a male-dominated field, hands-on, hard, rough and sometimes dangerous, but also incredibly rewarding.

Later, I had to manage and run our game farm by myself. Techniques were refined and methods streamlined, which led to the game industry

growing ever larger and resulting in more people being exposed to wildlife work.

Women are often at the forefront of conservation today, as the traditional gender roles of wildlife work have changed significantly. These days I only occasionally work directly with wildlife, but I strive to create awareness for conservation through my art and social media.

Tell us about your art. I've been drawing all my life. In my twenties, I did a lot of pen, ink and graphite work to illustrate wildlife articles and books; now I pour my heart and soul into creating large, realistic oil paintings of wildlife – my favourite subject.

I live on the banks of the Olifants River, close to Hoedspruit, and I'm inspired by the natural beauty around me. Search for "Nicki Young Wildlife Art" on Facebook and @artofafrica on Instagram.

Will you write more books? Absolutely! I've had three significant periods in my life. I'm currently writing the next volume about my time in the Kruger Park, when I was married to a wilderness trails ranger. I'm hoping to publish that volume in June or July 2023.

The final volume will describe the nine years I spent on a charter yacht in the Indian Ocean, working as first mate and as a whale-watching guide. I loved the yachtie lifestyle but I've come full circle – back to the bush – where I'm truly at home.

This book is self-published. Order a copy from Nicki for R320 (excluding courier costs):
nickiyoung236@gmail.com

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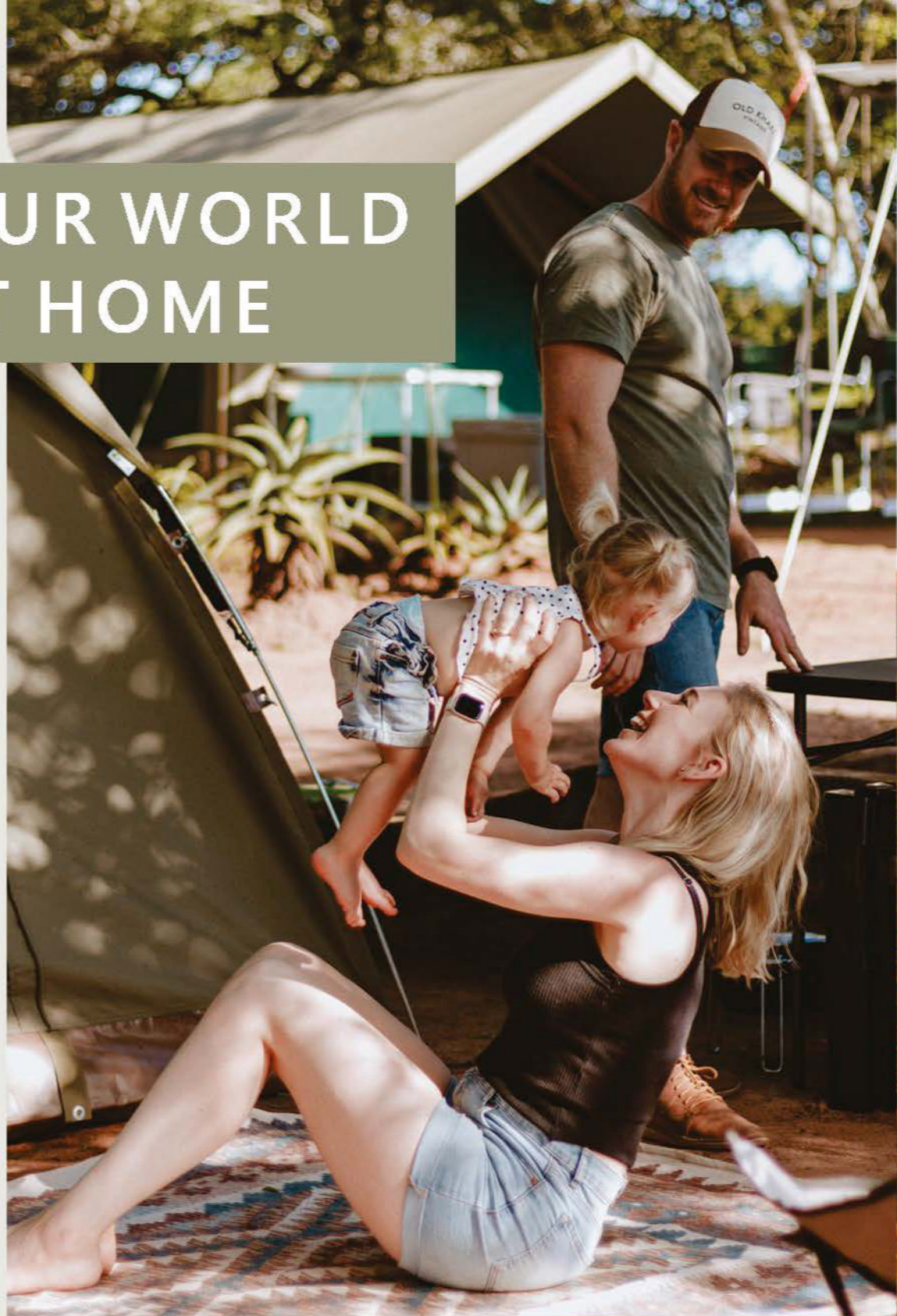
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Holiday for one

Going on holiday all by yourself is just what you need to reset like a champion, writes **Puno Selesho**.

ILLUSTRATION **NICOLENE LOUW**

The long-tailed widowbird, pitch black with a patch of red on the shoulder, races my white Kia Picanto and wins, his long tail flapping elegantly as he hurries ahead to announce my arrival. The widowbird was born for the farmland winds, my Picanto was made for the inner city.

Yet here I am plunging deeper into the belly of the Free State, dodging potholes while my entire body vibrates on the merciless gravel. It's been a nine-hour

drive from my home in Mtunzini, in northern KZN. A name drew me here: Rosendal. Previous visitors to the town describe it as a haven for artists to burrow away, pulling their fraying ends together after pouring themselves out on screens and stages. Some of my friends who've grown up in the Free State tell tales of endless nothingness, a monotony that has the town spellbound.

So enchanting is the slowness of each day that people continue to live, love and thrive in this town. With a population that could fit into a

university lecture hall, I surmised that this was the perfect town for my annual holiday for one: my *solo-cation*.

Every year since 2017, I've escaped my schedule to somewhere I've never been to before, all by myself.

"To go on holiday!" I respond to those who ask, "Why?" with concerned and puzzled eyes. And it's true: I travel to unwind, yes, but also to think – to think clearer than ever before. To investigate my thoughts and feelings without the limitation of responsibilities, or the need

to carry a conversation. I go so that I may see what version of me emerges in silence and solitude. I have a feeling I might like her!

The road to Rosendal from Senekal is a picture of the journey deep within yourself. There are plenty of reasons to turn around: potholes and perils threaten to deter you from pushing through. It's scary! At the risk of losing a tyre, or your mind, you continue on. And so, you must.

I kept my mind off the road hazards by getting clarity in my thoughts. To be loved is to be known – and that starts with yourself. We fear being alone for too long because we don't know what we'll discover. What if the thing you see repulses you? But also, what if you push through the dodgy ditches of doubt and stumble upon something utterly magnificent?

I see the sign to The Rosendal Country Retreat, suck in a breath of anticipation and exhale slowly. I'm here, finally. Six nights of solace await.

The beauty of a solo-cation is that you get to decide the rhythm of the coming days. Do you want a fast tempo, adrenaline-filled experiences like quad-biking over dunes or bungee jumping, which will unleash your inner adventurer? The soundtrack to this kind of solo-cation would be Katy Perry singing *"As you shoot across the sky..."* from "Firework". Or do you want a sweet Angus and Julia Stone melody, inviting you to *"sit still while everybody else runs"* in their song "Nothing Else"; a chance at slow living, in a cottage; each day a simple song reflecting your heart's secret utterances?

This time I chose the latter. The Rosendal Country Retreat was the perfect backdrop for my inward journey to unfold. My friendly host, Theresa, walked me through the retreat that has been designed for #slowliving.

White shasta daisies adorned garden beds lining the pathways that guided me to my cottage. Silver birch trees, together with the jasmine bushes, ensured privacy while meandering through the farmstead. The sweet smells of flora mixed with

the earthy tones of cow manure were enough to disarm my notions of city living. Even the mosquitoes were slow and lazy and easy to swat. They too had embraced a life of rest. When I was tempted to re-engage with hustle and bustle, the limited Wi-Fi kept me focused on my task at hand – to sit with self and enjoy her.

I don't mind roughing it in the wilderness from time to time, but there's something deeply restful about intentional spaces that have been designed to appeal to all five senses. I decided I would woo myself by indulging in things I love the most. I filled my journal and read two books without the distraction of Netflix. I did yoga every morning and drank wine every evening. I fell off a hammock and then dozed delightfully once I got the hang of it (no pun intended). I got lost on a walk looking for a stream and nearly got in the way of a determined herd of cows. I slept all the sleep I longed for and sat still for even longer, allowing my mind to go wherever it wished.

On one of the days, I ventured into the village, which is small enough to walk through from start to end in minutes. First stop was Ark Contemporary, a one-room art gallery filled with marvellous paintings and sculptures, mostly by local artists who are challenging social norms.

I sat on a giant red leather couch, which once stood in a room at Johannesburg General Hospital in a different era. Accompanied by the gallery manager's dog, I happily let my mind converse with the book I was reading, Gcina Mhlope's *Love Child*, which is a personal reflection on the history of South Africa in the form of poems and anecdotes.

I could not help but chuckle at this bizarre setting. Joy doesn't always bubble up all at once, it grows gently when we water the parched parts of ourselves. I had not sat in (or on) art in a long time. After many months of writing marketing material and performing poetry at corporate events, I'd had no time to refill my creative cup.

Before heading back to my nap

Even the
mosquitoes were
slow and lazy
and easy to swat.
They too had
embraced a life
of rest.

chamber, I had a condensed-milk coffee and an eggs benedict waffle at Benjamin's, a restaurant famous for its waffles. I wish I could bubble wrap and carry that moment with me. Sitting on the stoep of Benjamin's was a little delight in the middle of a slow town, in the middle of our crazy country. All that was missing was a sighting of the resident donkey.

There were other delights, too: I enjoyed a fine-dining experience at Glas Eatery, the Asian-inspired restaurant at the retreat. I relaxed in the retreat's wood-fired hot tub under the stars during load-shedding. In the communal living room, I helped build a puzzle of a pop-art collage.

Solo-cations require bravery. They deviate from the norm of going on holiday with family or friends. But if you embark on such a journey with curiosity of self and surroundings, it's not loneliness you'll find, but rather the realisation that the landscape of your soul is beautiful and worth exploring.

Go on, treat yourself – you might even meet yourself!

Puno Selesho is the author of According to Hope and other books. 🐾 punoselesho.com

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BY ESMA MARNEWICK





HIGHLIGHTS

NKUMBE VIEWPOINT
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POOR MAN'S SERENGETI (S50)
TSHANGA VIEWPOINT
CROOK'S CORNER VIEWPOINT
PAFURI PICNIC SITE
LUVUVHU BRIDGE

WHERE DO I STAY?

We've only listed the camping options. Almost all the rest camps offer other accommodation like safari tents, rondavels and self-catering cottages. Rates range from R540 per night for two people to R3 000 per night for four.

Our travel plan is just a guideline. Adjust it to suit your needs. The park is popular during school holidays and you should book at least a year in advance. The accommodation rates exclude the daily conservation fee of R115 per adult and R57 per child. The conservation fee is waived if you have a Wild card. It makes sense to get one if you'll be in the park for more than four days, or if you often visit other national parks and reserves.

Contact: 📞 012 428 9111; 🌐 sanparks.org



DAY 1-2

You only have one goal today: Get to Crocodile Bridge. It's about a five-hour drive if you live in Gauteng and 10 hours if you live in Durban. Capetonians... Well, you should have left already.

Get your permit at the office at the Crocodile Bridge gate and breathe in that heavenly thatched-roof smell. Claim a stand next to the fence, light a fire and wait for the first nightjar to call. Welcome to the Kruger National Park, one of the best places on earth!

The last thing you need to do before your head hits the pillow is to set your alarm. You want to be the first vehicle at the gate, which opens at 5.30 am in summer and 6 am in winter.

Brrring, brrring! It's still dark outside, but welcome to your new routine. A Kruger holiday is not for sleeping in, although there are lots of opportunities for afternoon naps. You'll be up early every day because that's the best time to see animals and birds.

Take the H4-2 tar road and turn left to the Gezanfombi Dam on the Vurhami River. Pour your coffee and listen to the hippos narking in the dam.

Return to the H4-2 and turn right onto the S28 dirt road. You'll enter open grassland with the Lebombo Mountains on your right. Nervous plains game like zebra, warthog, impala, blue wildebeest and giraffe are guaranteed sightings along this route, which means you might also see predators...

Stretch your legs at the Ntandanyathi hide further north. According to the guides at Crocodile Bridge, Ntandanyathi means "where the buffalo like to roam" in isiZulu. A big herd of buffalo – up to 150 animals – roams south of this hide next to the S28.

Go back towards the S137 turn-off and head to Duke waterhole. Cheetahs are often seen in this area.

After 8 km you'll reach a junction with the S130, also known as the Gomondwane Loop. It goes through dense thickets and leopards are frequently sighted here.

Turn right onto the H4-2 tar road and left onto the H5. For the next few kilometres, you'll drive through dense riverbeds and past tall jackal-berry and cluster fig trees. Turn left onto the S108 and pull over at the low-water bridge over the Bume River. Look out for terrapins on the rocks.

Drive back to the S108 and over another low-water bridge. If there are no other vehicles, spend some time on the bridge. Hamerkop, green-backed heron, grey heron and kingfishers like to hang out at the low-water bridges.

The bush is less dense along the S25 next to the Crocodile River, with knob-thorn and Delagoa thorn trees standing out in the grassland. Look for green wood-hoopoes on the tree trunks.

Back at Crocodile Bridge, pack up your tent, return to the H4-2 and drive to Lower Sabie. The tar road goes through grassland, thorn thickets and a section of the Sabie River. You'll probably see every member of the Big Five (including rhino) along this route.

When you spy the Sabie River, everyone in the car needs to keep their eyes open. Rivers are good for spotting leopards because many of their favourite prey animals like impala, bushbuck and baboon come down to drink.

Take a drive across the low-water bridge over the Sabie River and back. A heron might wade between the rocks, or a croc might be lounging on a sandbar.

When you arrive at Lower Sabie, treat yourself to a meal on the deck at Mugg & Bean. If you're lucky, a young hippo might get on the nerves of an older bull, causing a scuffle...

Have a snooze, take the kids to swim in the pool or sit on one of the benches on the riverbank. Later, drive to Sunset Dam, so named because visitors like to come here to watch the sunset before the camp gate closes – it's half a kilometre from the camp along the H4-1. You can drive up to the water's edge, unless there's a crocodile in your parking spot... It's also a great place to take photos early in the morning when the sun is at your back. In the late afternoon, you'll have to make do with silhouettes.



STAY HERE

Crocodile Bridge: 20 camping stands, all with power. There's no swimming pool or restaurant, but you can get something to eat at the shop.

The campsite has marked stands, many of them along the fence. The best three are the ones to the left of the safari tents. A power line and a dirt road to the staff quarters detract from the bush feel a bit.

Rates: Camping from R430 per night for two people; plus R104 per extra person (max six people per stand).
☎ 013 735 6012

Lower Sabie: A busy and somewhat crowded rest camp, but it's in a first-class game-viewing area surrounded by savannah grassland, woodland and thorn thickets, with a river nearby.

The small campsite is wedged among the other buildings and there are no stands next to the fence. The 34 stands are close together, but the trees and bushes allow for some privacy. Stands 21 and 28 are in the shade; stands 12 and 26 offer a good combo of shade and privacy.

Rates: Camping from R430 per night for two people; plus R104 per extra person (max six people per stand).
☎ 013 735 6056



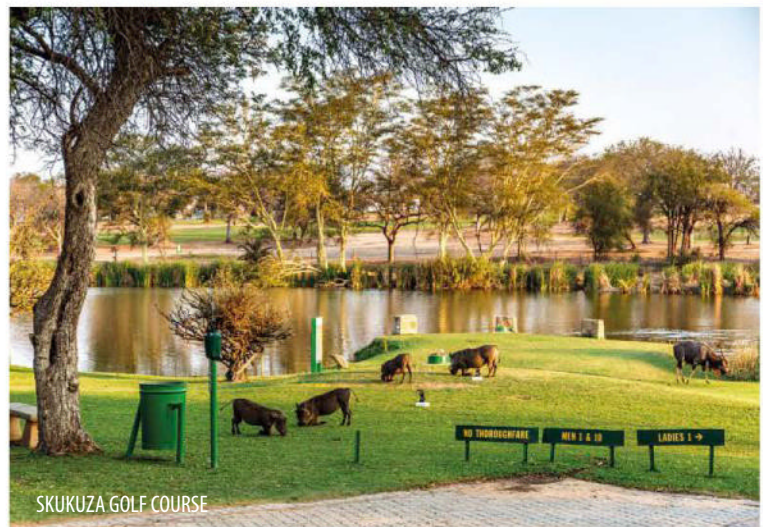
TIP!

If Crocodile Bridge is fully booked, try **Jackalberry Ridge** in Marloth Park, about 20 km from the park gate. It has a communal swimming pool and a playground for the kids. The camping stands have private bathrooms and share a communal kitchen. Rates from R800 per night for six people.

☎ 0861 010 347; 🌐 dreamresorts.co.za



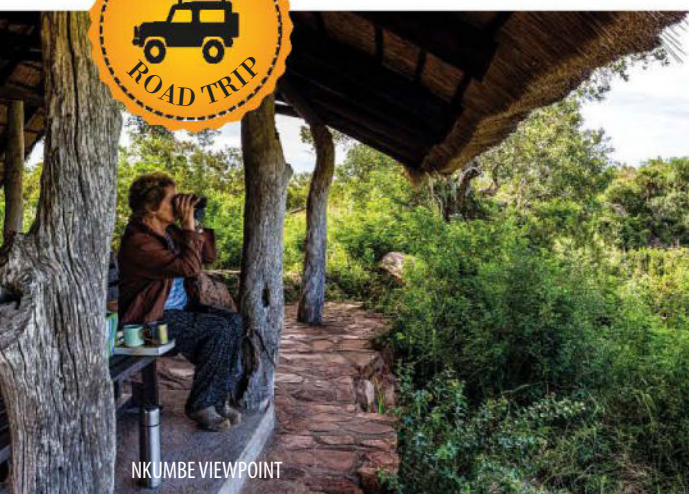
MIA LOUW



MIA LOUW

WHAT ABOUT SKUKUZA?

Skukuza is the Kruger's biggest and busiest camp. If your first priority is to experience peace and quiet, give Skukuza a miss. However, if restaurants, a cinema, library, nursery and nine-hole golf course are your vibe, take a turn past the rest camp. The nearby Lake Panic hide always delivers good sightings, and the Mathekenyane viewpoint is one of only a few places in the park where you can enjoy an elevated view of the surrounding landscape. ☎ 013 735 4196/4265



NKUMBE VIEWPOINT

MIA LOUW



MAROELA CAMPSITE



SPOTTED HYENA



TSHOKWANE PICNIC SITE

DAY 3

Be first in line at the gate and follow the H10 tar road north. Keep to the speed limit but try to get to the Nkumbe viewpoint as early as possible.

Those nature documentaries about Africa always have extended aerial shots of vast stretches of woodland – that's what you'll see at Nkumbe. Bring your binos because those dots in the distance might be elephants or giraffes.

From the viewpoint, drive to the Tshokwane picnic site for a quick coffee stop. If you want a longer break at a quieter spot, and you have your own breakfast goodies, continue to the remote Nhlangueni picnic site, which is quieter.

After you've stopped at Tshokwane or Nhlangueni, follow one of the dirt roads towards Talamati Bushveld Camp (S36, S145 and S140), all of which traverse open stretches of veld. There won't be many other vehicles and you'll get that deep-in-Africa feeling.

Stop at Orpen rest camp, buy firewood and ice and have a swim, then head to the Maroela satellite camp about 2 km away and pitch your tent.

The Orpen area has sweet grazing – the grassland next to the H7 before the turn-off to Maroela often has zebras, wildebeest, impala and warthogs.

Spend the afternoon in camp, which overlooks the dry bed of the Timbavati River. A hyena might saunter past, causing the local baboon sentry to bark a warning.



STAY HERE

Maroela has a small campsite with 24 stands. It's a great spot – some people camp here for three or four months at a time!

There are lots of stands next to the fence, in the shade of leadwood and bushwillow trees, and there's power. The ablution facilities were recently spruced up – there are more showers and toilets, and a wheelchair-friendly bathroom. Store your meat in the communal freezer.

Rates: Camping from R430 per night for two people; plus R104 per extra person (max six people per stand).

013 735 6355

**DAY
4**

Wake up and take a slow drive along the H7 tar road. The H7 is one of those legendary Kruger roads – it runs along the Timbavati River, which is lined with massive trees where predators lurk. A male leopard is often seen along this route and a pack of wild dogs roams the area.

Sip your morning coffee at the Bobbejaankrans viewpoint. About 5 km from Bobbejaankrans, the S39 dirt road splits from the H7 and continues along the sandy bed of the Timbavati. Kudu hide in the thickets and you might see lion or waterbuck in the riverbed.

Spend some time at the Timbavati picnic site next to the river. Bushbuck regularly walk through and arrow-marked babblers provide the background music.

After breakfast, visit the Ratel Pan hide next to Piet Grobler Dam – it's about 4 km north of the picnic site. Return to the H7 along the S40, destination Satara. But before you drive to camp, turn right on the H7 and sit next to the Nsemani Dam for a while. There's usually some action.

Set up camp at Satara and catch some zzzs. Get your sleep now because there are at least nine lion prides in the surrounding landscape and they'll be serenading you all night long!

The so-called S100 pride usually gathers at the waterhole in front of the restaurant, and the Mavumbye pride likes the waterhole in front of the Stanley guesthouse. There's also a leopard in the area that has brought down prey right next to the fence. Twice!

**STAY HERE**

You won't have to leave your chair to see animals if you camp next to the fence at **Satara**. Some of the stands have shrubs for privacy. Want to be away from prying eyes? Head to the north-western or north-eastern corners of the campsite. There are three ablution blocks – the one in the north-eastern corner has a family bathroom, a communal kitchen and a laundry. Satara also has special stands for guests with mobility challenges – these are close to the fence and the ablution block.

Rates: Camping from R380 per night for two people without power; R430 with power; plus R104 per extra person (max six people per stand).

☎ 013 735 6306/7





S90



TAWNY EAGLE

DAY 5

The S100 is the road in the Kruger best known for lion sightings. The lions in the area – the Shibotwana or S100 pride – are seen about five times a week.

The N'wanetsi River meanders through the landscape to the right of the S100; to the left is open grassland where plains game try to stay off the lions' menu.

Stop for breakfast at the N'wanetsi picnic site. Walk up to the small amphitheatre overlooking the Sweni River gorge. Also visit the Sweni hide about 2 km away, where red cliffs tower over the Sweni River.

Return to Satara along the H6. Keep your eyes peeled for the wild dogs that roam between the picnic site and the Shishangani waterhole...

Break camp and pack up. Before you go, pop into reception and sign in for your stay at Balule satellite camp,

where you'll be spending the night. This way you won't first have to drive to Olifants.

Follow the H1-4 tar road towards Olifants. Hang on, why drive a tar road when you can enjoy a scenic dirt road instead? Turn right onto the S90. This quiet road cuts through a vast grassland bordered by the Lebombo Mountains, with Mozambique on the other side. The landscape is so big even the elephants look small.

This road eventually leads you to Balule. Pitch your tent and rest. Late in the afternoon, drive to Olifants for a swim in the pool and a sundowner at the restaurant. Of all the main rest camps, Olifants has the best views. It's high on a koppie, with the Olifants River far down below. There are more views coming – the next two days are full of them.

Keep an eye on your watch and return to Balule before the gate closes. Drive slowly across the low-water bridge – you might startle a wood sandpiper or see wire-tailed swallows swirling in the dusk.



STAY HERE

Balule satellite camp has 15 camping stands and six original Kruger huts dating from 1930.

The campsite has communal ablution facilities, a scullery and freezers. There's no power but there is hot water, heated by a gas geyser. Almost every stand is next to the fence.

Rates: Camping from R410 per night for two people; plus R104 per extra person (max six people per stand).

☎ 013 735 6606/7

**DAY
6**

Pack up early and drive to the N'wamanzi viewpoint next to the H1-4. If there's an elephant near a bend in the river, you've got a classic Kruger shot in the bag!

Report to reception at Olifants for your guided walk along the river. The group departs at 9 am – you'll be collected in a game-viewing vehicle and taken to an area where Pel's fishing-owls nest. This spectacular bird is a lifer sighting for many people, and rare, even in the park. According to the guides, they see the owls four out of five times. (When you book beforehand, state clearly that you want to see a Pel's fishing-owl so the guides can tailor the walk accordingly.)

Once your adrenaline levels have returned to normal after your birding win, head to Letaba. About 7 km from Olifants along the S44, you'll cross a drift with a river pool on the left. Spend a little while here. The local terrapins are curious and will get out of the water to inspect your vehicle.

A few kilometres down the road, there's another viewpoint overlooking the Olifants River. Continue along the S44, the S93 and the S46 for dramatic landscapes you don't often see in the park: high cliffs towering over the Olifants and Letaba rivers.

The last stretch of the S46 skirts Engelhard Dam in the Letaba River and there are several turn-offs that take you closer to the water, where you might find waterbuck, crocodile and hippo – even a pink one! The pink hippo has leucism (a partial lack of melanin in the skin) and has been happily living here for years.

The restaurant at Letaba has a great view of the river. Enjoy some lunch and have a dip in the pool. If you want to take another drive, head to the confluence of the Makhadzi and Letaba rivers north-east of the rest camp on the S62 – there are beautiful fever trees on the riverbank and the nearby Matambeni hide is to the west.

Letaba is a great place to hang out. It's a forested ecosystem of its own, attracting lots of birds including some migratory species. Birders can tick white-browed robin-chat, kurrichane thrush, African grey hornbill and many others.

Walk the pathway along the river or sit on a bench with your binos. Take a turn past the day visitors' area – the in-camp entrance is behind the housekeeping building. It has lots of trees and even more birds.

**STAY HERE**

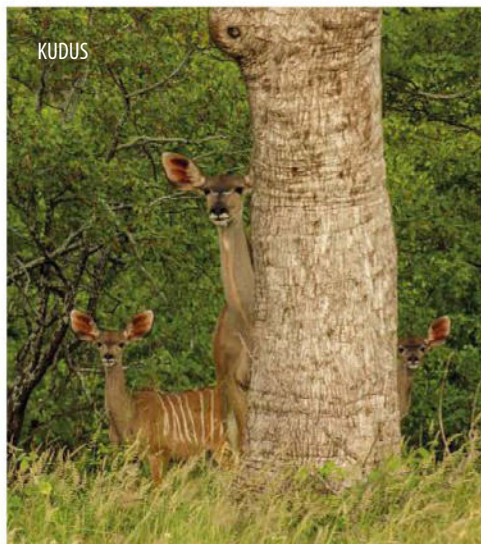
Letaba's campsite is a good option in summer because there are lots of trees. There are plenty of stands next to the fence. If you like peace and quiet, choose a stand in the south-eastern corner of the camp next to the Fish Eagle guesthouse (far from the swimming pool), or in the south-western corner next to the safari tents.

Rates: Camping from R410 per night for two people; plus R104 per extra person (max six people per stand).

☎ 013 735 6636/7



OLIFANTS RIVER



KUDUS

VISIT THE ELEPHANT HALL

The tusks of six of the Kruger's so-called Magnificent 7 can be seen here – some of the biggest bulls ever recorded in the park. (João's tusks broke off and couldn't be found...) Shawu's left tusk is the longest in the room, measuring a whopping 317 cm! Entrance is free.

☎ 013 735 6664



PIONEER DAM, MOPANI REST CAMP



TSENDZE LOW-WATER BRIDGE



TSENDZE CAMPSITE

DAY 7

There's that alarm clock again... Get going early along the H1-6. The route initially follows the course of the Letaba River – leopards like to hang out here. In fact, most of the leopard sightings in the Letaba area occur on the 6 km stretch between the four-way stop outside camp and the bridge over the river. Have a look for marabou storks scanning for the next impala kill from the treetops.

Turn right onto the H15 for a short section and check out the Malopenyana waterhole. Cheetahs are often spotted between this waterhole and the Middelvlei waterhole further north – look for dark dung on the route markers. In winter, when the veld is dry, both waterholes are magnets for game.

Are the cheetahs still asleep? Follow the H1-6 north. The Mooiplaas picnic site is a good place for brunch.

If you're lucky, one of the tables next to the Tsendze River will be available. Or turn off to the Shipandani hide. The low-water bridge near the hide is one of our favourite places in the park – you're often stranded here because a crocodile is sunning itself on the bridge.

You're camping at Tsendze tonight but you have to sign in at Mopani. If brunch didn't touch sides, grab something to eat at Mopani's restaurant overlooking Pioneer Dam, or buy a cooldrink at the shop and relax on the deck below the restaurant.

It's afternoon nap time again. Once you've had your snooze, drive to Mooiplaas waterhole at the junction of the S49 and S50 in the late afternoon. There are frequently big herds of zebra here and it's the best place in the area to see a kori bustard.

Travel further south on the S49 and turn north onto the S50. This road follows the course of the Nshawu River, which has several waterholes in quick succession and vast grasslands. Guides nickname this area the Serengeti. Elephant, buffalo and blue wildebeest like to graze next to this road and birders can expect to see dusky lark, Kittlitz's plover, red-crested korhaan and black-bellied bustard.

After about 14 km on the S50, turn left onto the S143, also known as the Tropic of Capricorn Loop (you cross the tropic twice). Look for animals on the plains around the Tihongonyeni waterhole – this is the best place to see rare antelope like roan (there used to be a breeding camp here), tsessebe, sable and even Lichtenstein's hartebeest.

Back at Tsendze, send one of the kids to look for caretakers Rodgers Hobyane or Elina Mona. Rodgers and Elina know where all the nests of the resident owls are, and they'll happily point them out to visitors.



STAY HERE

Tsendze might only be a few kilometres from Mopani, but it feels like you're deep in the bush. There are 34 big, level stands far apart from each other. Solar panels keep the lights and freezers on, and there are gas geysers for hot water. There are no other facilities – no generators, no Slush Puppie machines and no swimming pool. What you get in return is beautiful solitude.

Unlike other campsites in the Kruger, you're allocated a specific stand. If you want shade, ask for number 6. Big groups can book numbers 27 or 28. If it's privacy you're after, numbers 3, 4 and 26 are good.

Rates: Camping from R410 per night for two people; plus R104 per extra person (max six people per stand).
☎ 013 735 6535/6



RED ROCKS VIEWPOINT

DAY 8

Pack up and set out early along the H1-6. Turn left onto the S52 dirt road. Take the second turn-off on the right. This loop will take you to the Red Rocks viewpoint – the rocks are dreamy in the morning light.

About a kilometre from the viewpoint, turn right onto the Shingwedzi Loop. The road splits in two – turn right and pull over on the low-water bridge. This is the perfect habitat for leopards and a great place to watch the smaller creatures too, like malachite kingfishers, which often sit waiting for breakfast.

Return to the S52 and drive to the Tshanga viewpoint. The Kruger is mostly flat and there aren't many places where you can get a good idea of the size of the 20 000 km² park. At Tshanga, you can stand high on a boulder and see all the way to where a flat-earthier would drop off the planet.

Back on the S52, you'll cross the Shingwedzi River on a wide bend. Trees form a dense curtain along the course of the river. You wouldn't be that surprised if a dinosaur stepped out of the bush...

Roll down your windows and drive along the winding river. There are lots of places where you can get close to the riverbed. Look for all sorts of herons and egrets stalking the puddles.

Later that afternoon, after you've settled down in the campsite at Shingwedzi, take a drive to the Kanniedood hide. The hide is far from the water but the road to get there is beautiful – it goes through dense thickets where you'll almost certainly startle a bushbuck.

Or just relax at the day visitors' picnic site in camp while everyone else missions around. With the humans gone, your companions will be hippos and vervet monkeys.



TIP!

If you want to see the sunrise from the **Tshanga viewpoint**, book a night at **Bateleur Bushveld Camp** – it's about 3 km away.

SHINGWEDZI RIVER, S62



There are seven cottages at Bateleur. Rates from R2 950 per night for four people; plus R540 per extra person. (Some units sleep four, others sleep six).

☎ 013 735 6843



STAY HERE

The campsite at **Shingwedzi** is spacious and the stands are marked. The 26 stands next to the fence are more expensive. You can specify whether you want a stand next to the fence, but you can't book a specific stand.

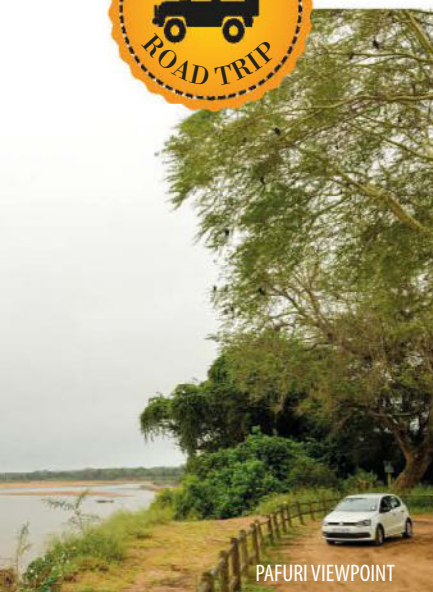
Before you pitch your tent, drive around and decide what your priorities are: Do you want to be close to the ablution block or the swimming pool? The pool is in the north-western corner of the campsite. The best stands are numbers 1 and 2 under the big umbrella thorn next to the fence near the main ablution block. Stands 17 and 18 are private, but they're close to the swimming pool. Splashing kids might interrupt your afternoon nap.

Rates: Camping from R390 per night for two people with power; R470 for a stand next to the fence; plus R100 per extra person (max six people per stand).

☎ 013 735 6806/7

SHINGWEDZI REST CAMP





PAFURI VIEWPOINT



PUNDA MARIA REST CAMP



CROWNED HORNBILL

DAY 9-10

Today you can take things easy. Get up early and follow the H1-7. Turn off onto the S56. The road runs along the banks of the Mphongolo River. According to the guides at Shingwedzi, this is the busiest game-viewing road near the rest camp, especially in the winter months. Animals gather around the river and notably at the confluence of the Mphongolo and Phugwane rivers. You'll have a good chance of finding leopards, lions and wild dogs.

Along the way, peer through the mopane, jackalberry, leadwood, common cluster fig and nyala trees and you might see elephants taking a bath, a lone buffalo, or marabou storks preening in the riverbed.

The Babalala picnic site is a shaded spot under trees. The open grassland around this picnic site is a cheetah hunting ground so keep your eyes open. Also look for rare antelope on the way back along the H1-7. Eland, roan antelope and sable antelope are sometimes seen around the Boyela waterhole.

Back at Shingwedzi, pack up camp and head north on the H1-7 again to Punda Maria, one of the oldest rest camps in the Kruger. The original clay-and-pole units were built in 1931 and they're still in use today.

Once you've set up camp again, drive the Mahonie Loop in the late afternoon. You probably won't see the Big Five, but there are trees and birds here that you won't see elsewhere in the park – bring your guidebooks. The route snakes around Dimbo Hill to the north of the camp, past statuesque pod mahogany, marula, baobab and large-fruited bushwillow trees. Feathery specials include grey-headed parrot and Dickinson's kestrel. This is also one of the few places in the Kruger where you'll see flowers like pride of De Kaap during the summer months.

After dinner back at Punda Maria, take a stroll to the hide. You might see ellies drinking under the floodlights.

Today you'll explore one of the prettiest parts of the Kruger. Turn left onto the S60 outside Punda Maria, then left again onto the S61, and make your way to the Klopfontein waterhole and dam. Pull over at the dam and the waterhole – the landscape here is more open than the mopane veld you just drove through. It's cheetah country, and eland are often seen. Birders can look for Arnot's chat.

This area has a rich history. Just beyond the dam, there's a loop that goes past an old drift built by Cecil "Bvekenya" Barnard, a big game hunter and ivory smuggler who worked in the area in the early 19th century. Hunters and smugglers would camp here and drive their ox wagons through the drift to reach the hunting fields in the north.

Now you're on the H1-8. The first section goes through mopane woodland to Baobab Hill near the road. This koppie was historically the first outspan spot for labourers brought from Mozambique to work on the mines of the Witwatersrand.



About 25 km later, you'll reach the bridge over the Luvuvhu River. If you didn't manage to see a Pel's fishing-owl at Olifants, now is your chance. The owls hide out in the canopies of big trees like Cape mahogany, which line the riverbank.

Turn back and head to the Pafuri picnic site, which is in a shady area next to the river. It's a birdwatching hotspot, considered one of the best in Africa, and you'll see visitors with their binos aimed at the canopy as soon as you arrive. Pafuri is in the southernmost point of the Afrotropical bioregion, which means you can observe birds here that you would normally only see much further north, in places like Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and the DRC. Specials include grey-headed parrot, black-throated wattle-eye and tropical boubou. Ask caretaker Mandla Ngomane to help you find them.

Have brunch and continue along the S63. After about 5 km, there's a hill on your right. Böhm's spinetail is another resident special, and it's often seen around the baobabs on the hill – they nest in the branches.

The road meanders along the Luvuvhu River to Crook's Corner. In summer, the different shades of green are an assault on the senses – the emerald canopy, the khaki grass, the almost neon trunks of the fever trees... Pops of complementary colour are



ELEPHANTS, MPHONGOLO RIVER

provided by the yellow legs of an African harrier-hawk, the red bill of a wood-hoopoe, the purple wing of a Meves's starling...

Get out of your car at Crook's Corner and look over the floodplain, where the Luvuvhu meets the mighty Limpopo. This is where South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique come together.

This is the furthest you can go in the Kruger. Soak it all up: the riverbed, the lazy river, the warm subtropical air... Remember this feeling so you can carry it with you all the way home.



STAY HERE

The small campsite at **Punda Maria** has stands next to the fence, shade trees and a swimming pool nearby. The most private stands are the two on the left as you enter the campsite. There are also two private stands on the western side. If you want to see animals from your chair, choose a stand to the right of the hide, with a view of the waterhole.

Rates: Camping from R340 for two people with no power; R100 per extra person; R390 with power.

013 735 6873



MUTALE RIVER

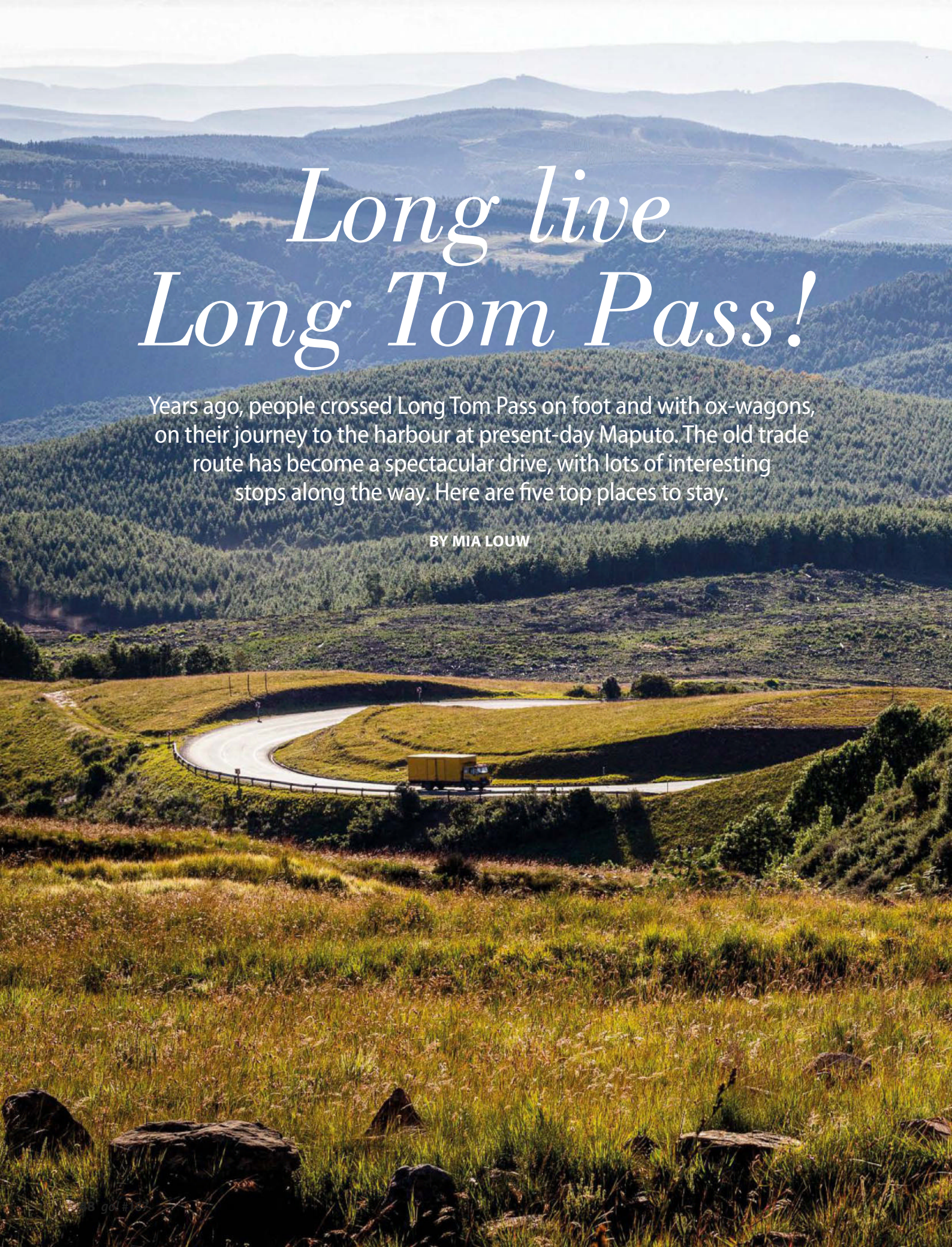


TIP!

If Punda Maria is fully booked, spend a night at **Nthakeni Bush & River Camp** on the banks of the Mutale River about 5 km from the Pafuri gate. Owners Kobus and Annelise Venter are lovely people who work closely with the local community. There are two private campsites with their own kitchens and ablution facilities, a tented camp with three safari tents, communal kitchen and bathroom, and two self-catering cottages.

Rates: Camping from R400 per night for two people; plus R125 per extra person (max eight people per stand). Tented camp R1 800 per night for six people. Self-catering cottages from R1 100 per night for two people.

078 854 9218; nthakeni.com



Long live Long Tom Pass!

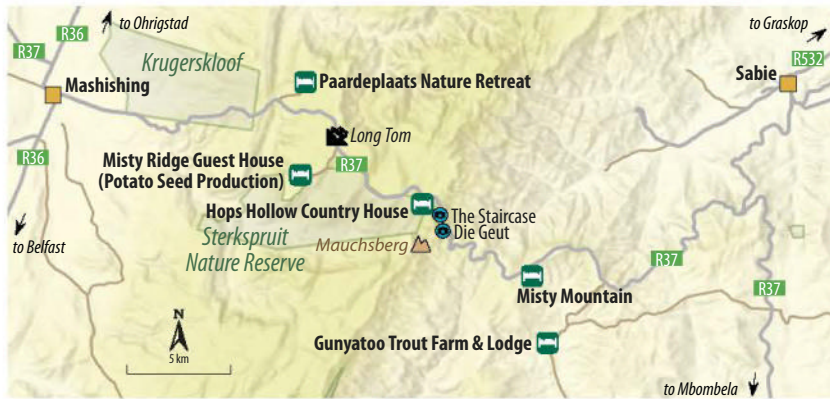
Years ago, people crossed Long Tom Pass on foot and with ox-wagons, on their journey to the harbour at present-day Maputo. The old trade route has become a spectacular drive, with lots of interesting stops along the way. Here are five top places to stay.

BY MIA LOUW



From the Old Harbour Road ox-wagon route, you can clearly see the S-curves of Long Tom Pass. Turn off at the The Staircase sign to access the ox-wagon route.

TAKE FIVE



Clockwise from above: You and your pooch can drive up to Mauchsberg, the highest peak next to the pass. Historian Gerrit Haarhoff looks at the replica of a Long Tom cannon on the pass. At the signboard for "Die Geut" you'll see deep furrows in the rock slope, made by ox-wagon wheels.

Long Tom Pass links Mashishing (Lydenburg) on the Mpumalanga escarpment with Sabie in the Lowveld. Your drive might start off sunny, with views of grassland and pine plantations, but there's a good chance you'll soon be enveloped in mist. Long Tom is 26 km long and its summit is at 2 150 m above sea level. From there, it loses 670 m in altitude as it snakes down the slopes of the northern Drakensberg.

Just think how inaccessible these mountains must have been in the 1840s, when transport riders drove their ox-wagons through the bush to Delagoa Bay (Maputo).

And long before then, between 1500

and 1820, the Bokoni people crossed these mountains on foot. They lived between present-day Carolina and Ohrigstad and farmed using terraces. On some of the farms in the area you can see the ruins of their stone kraals, like faded tattoos in the grass.

Remnants of the ox-wagon routes are also still visible next to the R37, as are marks left during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902).

I'm exploring the pass with historian Gerrit Haarhoff, author of the book, *Forgotten Tracks and Trails of the Escarpment and the Lowveld*. We've just departed from Mashishing. After 17 km we notice two signs close together: One indicates the highest point on the pass; the other reads, "Mauchsberg".

"The sign is wrong," says Gerrit, pointing in the direction of Sabie. "Mauchsberg is that one, with the tower. It's the highest peak on the pass, not the highest point on the road."

"So, what's this hill called then?" I ask.

"Bôggerol," he replies.

(Further down the pass, after Hops Hollow Country House, you can turn right onto a concrete road that leads to the tower on Mauchsberg, at 2 210 m above sea level.)

Incorrect signs bug Gerrit no end.

About 1,8 km further along the R37, there are more signs to irritate him. The sign to "The Staircase" is 500 m too far up the road, but the wrong lookout point still has a nice view.

"The Staircase is actually where the sign for Die Geut is," he says, pointing to deep furrows in the rock slope that were made by ox-wagon wheels.

Around the next bend is the Long Tom Shell Hole, a big hollow where the shell of a 155 mm-calibre Creusot cannon landed during the Anglo-Boer War. The Boer forces imported four of these French cannons and used two of them against the British during a battle fought in September 1900. The cannons could shoot far and the Brits called them Long Toms, hence the name of the pass.

"The cannon had a range of 9 km!" Gerrit says. He indicates the place where a replica of the cannon can be seen. "It was fired from down there, past Misty Mountain."

Shells no longer fly over Long Tom Pass, and instead of setting up camp next to your ox-wagon, you can turn off to a self-catering unit or guesthouse for a hot meal and a cold beer.

Here are five stops along the pass that will enhance any holiday.



Paardeplaats Nature Retreat

When you approach from the Mashishing side, you'll come across this nature reserve (4,5 km²) high up on the pass. Paardeplaats has accommodation units next to a river, built on the foundations of a mining settlement dating from the 1870s.

There's a mineshaft stretching 30 m into the mountain, but owners Gerda and Brian Whitehorn say you should rather avoid crawling inside. Leopards are often seen on the camera trap at the mine's entrance.

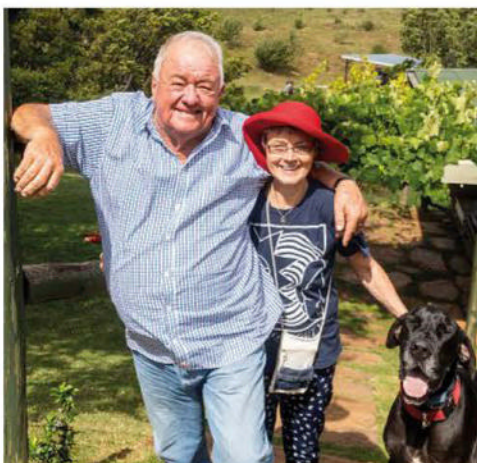
"We think they're hunting the porcupines that live inside," says Gerda.

The reserve is also home to oribi, grey rhebok, duiker, klipspringer, kudu, eland, caracal – even brown hyena.

The best way to explore the reserve is on foot or on your mountain bike. Bono, Shaka and Chopin – the three resident pooches – like to accompany guests.

The Nooitgedacht Trail (6 km) follows the escarpment above Masjienkloof to Nooitgedachtkloof and will take you past old mineshafts, stone ruins and trenches dating from the Anglo-Boer War. Look for Gurney's sugarbird in the sugarbushes. You'll see Bokoni stone kraals along the course of the Spekboom River in the valley.

Facilities: Four en suite rooms – some sleep two, others sleep four – each with a coffee station. You can prepare meals in the Miners' Canteen, a spacious communal kitchen. Solar power, gas and wood stoves supply light,



hot water and heat. There's no cellphone reception but there is Wi-Fi.

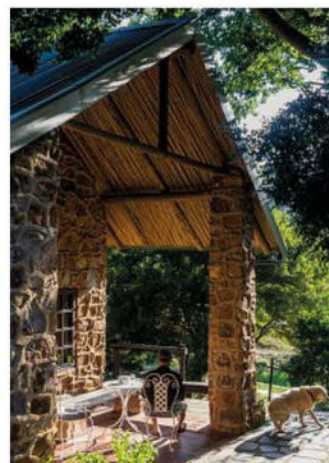
What else? Have dinner with Brian and Gerda on their stoep. They operated one of Dullstroom's first restaurants, Die Tonteldoos Bistro, for 14 years.

Rates: R450 per person sharing. Three-course dinner R250 per person; breakfast R100 per person. Minimum stay two nights.

Where? The turn-off is 8 km east of Mashishing. The dirt road to Paardeplaats (1,6 km) is traversable in any vehicle.

Contact: ☎ 082 416 1379;

📧 paardeplaatsnatureretreat.co.za



Clockwise from the top: Resident dogs Shaka, Chopin and Bono are looking for baboons in Masjienkloof on Paardeplaats. Bono the Labrador enjoys the afternoon sun on the Oribi room's patio. Owners Brian and Gerda Whitehorn with Shaka the Great Dane.



Misty Ridge Guest House has a view over the Sterkspruit Nature Reserve (top). Jam (the wire fox terrier) and Whiskey (the Rhodesian ridgeback) follow Jakkie Mellet everywhere on the farm – from the office to the stables and the lettuce tunnel. Other animals on the farm include horses, cattle, sheep, geese, donkeys, and an alpaca.

2 Misty Ridge Guest House

As soon as I drive through the gate, three Anatolian shepherd dogs stand to attention and keep a watchful eye on their sheep. Further down the road, a man is herding cattle.

Misty Ridge is on a 3 000 ha farm, a portion of which is used to grow potato seed, lettuce and kiwi fruit, and to farm with cattle and sheep. The rest is for you to explore – on foot or on horseback. They also have a friendly alpaca, plus geese, donkeys, goats and horses.

Owner Jakkie Mellet is a cowboy – the real deal. Last year, he won the heavyweight category of the Fauresmith Endurance Ride. In 2017, he came third at the Mongol Derby in Mongolia.

"I'm originally from Joburg but I moved to the family farm for the horses," he says. "I also lived in America for a year to learn from the cowboys. Everyone there had something to say: A cowboy wears this, not that. You need proper boots and the right hat. My employer gave me *his* hat. I'd been there for a few months when a girl walked past me in a Walmart store. She tugged on her mom's skirt and said: 'Look, a real cowboy!' That's when I knew I was ready to come home."

In September 2022, Jakkie held the first Track n Hoof race on the farm – a 30 km race for mountain bikers and horse riders.

"We laid out a route that would be equally challenging on a bicycle and on horseback. Everyone uses the same route and starts at the same time. During the test run, a horse rider won because the mountain biker got lost. During the actual race, the leading mountain biker fell and the horse won again!"

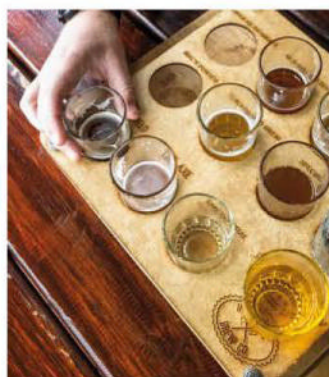
Facilities: The self-catering house has a spacious kitchen and living area. It sleeps eight people in three rooms, with views of the Sterkspruit Nature Reserve.

What else? Experienced riders can go on a horse ride with Jakkie. The Track n Hoof race takes place in September.

Rate: R500 per person.

Where? The turn-off to the farm is 13 km outside Mashishing.

Contact: 082 524 8391; info@potatoseed.co.za; search for "Potato Seed Production" on Facebook



3 Hops Hollow Country House

Long Tom can be spooky on a wet, misty day, but at Hops Hollow you'll always find a jolly atmosphere. They often host music festivals in their shed where people can dance, eat potjiekos and drink beer. The pub gets busy over weekends. The owners, the Botha family, want people to feel at home.

Hops Hollow brews a total of nine beers, from an ale to a warm beer that tastes like gluhwein. Willie Botha Jr started helping his parents with the business in 2019. He likes to experiment with vodka and has even added a mango and chilli flavour.

If you don't want to taste beer and vodka, explore the surrounding hills. I ask him about the eland I saw grazing early in the morning.

"There are about 130 in the area," he says. "They don't belong to anyone but the mountain."

"We've seen 50 of them in the garden before," adds his dad, Willie Sr.

During the dry months, the eland graze in the wetland in front of Hops Hollow, down where the Whiskey Spruit flows.

"The spruit was named after the delicious water from the mountain," says Willie Sr. "It can make even the worst whiskey taste better!"

Facilities: The hotel and pub sit snugly between two hills. The en suite rooms are cosy – the units above the bar and on the stoep are the best.

What else? Hops Hollow is dog-friendly.

Rates: R620 per person sharing, including breakfast. Beer and vodka tasting: R70 per person.

Where? 18,5 km south-east of Mashishing.

Contact: 076 151 1939; hopshollow.co.za



Clockwise from top left: Hops Hollow's shed is a popular venue for festivals, where guests dance, eat and drink to their heart's content. It will feel like you have the entire Long Tom Pass to yourself – there are no other people or houses for kilometres. A beer and vodka tasting at the brewery costs R70 – there are 12 options.



Clockwise from top left: Misty Mountain offers plenty of activities for the whole family. Take a walk along dams and streams, ride on the unique Long Tom Toboggan, or cool down in one of two swimming pools. You can also just relax and take in the views of Rhenosterhoek Valley from your room. Join a Scootour to get closer to those views.

4 Misty Mountain

Long before the resort was built, in the late 1840s, an Italian called João Albasini ran a trading post here. He was the first European to manage a trading post on the route to Delagoa Bay.

Misty Mountain has welcomed guests since 1974 and there's a slew of activities to keep them busy. Several walking routes go through the gardens and past dams. You can ride your mountain bike or do a quad-bike tour. You can even go on a 5 km Scootour – on monster mountain scooters – over grass plains and through plantation forests.

But the most interesting activity is surely the Long Tom Toboggan: a sled that rockets down a track for 1,7 km.

"We have a big property, but part of it is a natural heritage site because the endangered blue swallow breeds here," says owner Lisa Sheard. "We had to think of an activity that wouldn't have a serious impact on the environment."

Lisa and her husband tested a similar *sommerrodelbahn* ("alpine coaster") in Austria

before they met with engineers in South Africa.

"It took 20 months to build!" she says.

The toboggan harnesses gravity to catapult riders to speeds of up to 45 km/h, which feels much faster because you're so close to the ground. I go down in a blur of grass and pink cone bushes. On the sharpest bend, my camera's lens hood flies off as the sled yanks me in the opposite direction!

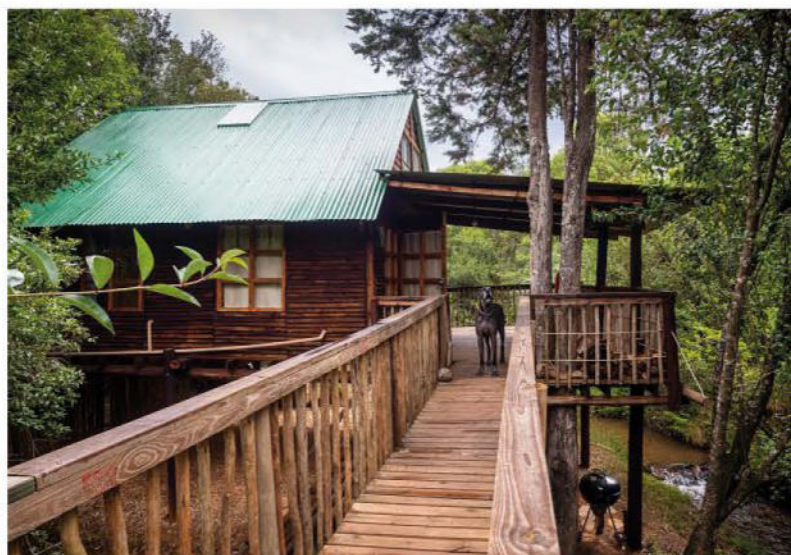
Facilities: There are lots of options. The smaller units for two, four or six people have small kitchens (microwave and fridge); the farmhouse is fully equipped and sleeps 10 people.

What else? There are two swimming pools. The infinity pool on the restaurant stoep is one of the coolest places in the Lowveld to take a photo for Instagram.

Rates: Farmhouse R445 per person sharing. Studio unit R925 per person sharing, including breakfast (sleeps two). Toboggan ride R295 per person.

Where? 28 km from Mashishing; 2 km from Sabie.

Contact: ☎ 013 764 3377; 🌐 mistymountain.co.za



5 Gunyatoo Trout Farm & Lodge
Just as Long Tom Pass starts to even out, a dirt road turns off to the right and descends 300 m into the Rhenosterhoek Valley to a patch of grassland sheltered by pine plantations.

Bob Connolly was a forester in the area when the property came up for sale in the 1980s. The valley was named after the rhinos that once roamed the area.

"They had a route through the valley – they'd trample the *hartbeeshuisies* of the trek farmers," Bob says.

Guests can fish in the Nels River or in one of two dams.

"This particular valley has a unique climate. Even though we're lower down the pass – at 1 360 m above sea level – it's still cool enough for trout here. There's a waterfall about 4 km downstream and the trout can't survive on the other side of it because the water is too warm," Bob says.

Bob and his wife Debbie sometimes see bushbuck, otters, servals and honey badgers. "I've even seen a black leopard here once..." Bob mentions.

Ask the Connollys for directions to the waterfall. You can park your vehicle at the top, but the climb down is difficult. It's steep and overgrown. On the way to the waterfall you'll see fields of white formosa lilies.

Facilities: Four self-catering units are spread out on the lawn. My favourite is the Eco Love Shack – a cabin on stilts built above the Nels River, with a wooden bridge across the water. There's also a lodge with a communal kitchen and braai area – 10 people can sleep in four luxury en suite rooms.

What else? Bob is a trained chef and likes to cook for lodge guests.

Rates: Self-catering from R780 per night for two people and one child. Guesthouse from R1 250 per night for a double room. Minimum stay two nights.

Where? The turn-off to Gunyatoo is 18 km south-west of Sabie.

Contact: 082 783 3164; gunyatoo.com



Clockwise from top left: Gunyatoo has a wide variety of accommodation, from a stone house like Swallows Nest to wooden cottages like the Eco Love Shack. The Nels River flows past Gunyatoo and there is a waterfall 4 km downstream.

SEE A STONE KRAAL

If you want to see a Bokoni stone kraal up close, pull over at the Lydenburg Museum on the outskirts of Mashishing. Curator JP Celliers likes to show people the kraal in the Gustav Klingbiel Nature Reserve, which is within walking distance of the museum.

You can also see replicas of the Lydenburg Heads in the museum – these terracotta masks date from 490 AD and were probably used during initiation rituals in the early Iron Age.

Cost: R35 per person.

Contact: 082 779 3748





That Delta groove

It's a long drive – with some donkeys to dodge – to the town of Shakawe in the far north of Botswana. To tourists, this area, called the Okavango Panhandle, offers an affordable, accessible introduction to the watery world of the Delta. Come along and meet some of the people who have made Shakawe their home.

BY TOAST COETZER



Sunlight oozes onto the blunt spikes of the knob-thorn trunk above me. Nearby, red-billed wood-hoopoes wriggle their long bills into the nooks and crannies of a jackal-berry tree in search of snacks. A crested barbet looks on silently, its ruffled feathers giving it the appearance of having had a rough night out. On the ground in the leaf litter, a handful of arrow-marked babblers are scratching around.

With coffee in hand, I walk a few steps away from my tent so that I can feel the sun against my face. It's early winter and one of the most pleasant times of the year to be in Botswana. The nights are cool enough to justify actually sleeping *inside* your sleeping bag, but the days are warm – shorts and T-shirt weather.

I've visited the Okavango Panhandle many times before and I've always loved its understated, laid-back pace. It is a very long way to travel from South Africa, but the Panhandle clicks easily into a wider itinerary that can include Maun, Chobe and the Zambezi Region in neighbouring Namibia.

This time, I've spent almost a week here, meeting everyone from strawberry farmers to a Bible translator. Let me introduce you...

Opposite page, from the top: Willemien le Roux stands at the handmade gate that forms the entrance to a Hambukushu farmer's field. She set up the Pabalelo Trust, which supports farmers in the area. Hettie and Dammann Kruger from Askiesbos with their kids, Lianke (9), Braam (11) and Wilmien (12). Wandipa Adzina and Mothare Mohembo, owners of Samatambi Gardens, in front of their home.

“On a Friday afternoon we can get the kids into the car, grab some camping chairs and we’ll be in the bush for sunset 15 minutes later.”

From D’Kar, with love

On a good map you might spot a place called D’Kar – somewhere in the Kalahari between Ghanzi and Sehithwa. Leaving behind a beautiful farm in the Bronkhorstspuit district, D’Kar is where Dirk and Pollie Jerling ended up in 1967.

I’m chatting to their daughter, Willemien le Roux, at Askiesbos, a small lodge and camp south of Shakawe.

“My father saw an advertisement in our church newspaper for the position of a farm manager at a missionary farm in Botswana,” Willemien says.

We’re having tea on a beautiful, shady lawn. A side channel of the Okavango glistens a few metres away. It’s a world away from the Kalahari landscape her parents moved to a lifetime ago.

“My father said that although his farm at Bronkhorstspuit was beautiful, it wasn’t actually that great for farming. The three thousand hectares of the mission farm would offer better prospects, he believed. But still, it was a shock when they arrived at D’Kar and saw how desolate it was. His payment would be free grazing for his cattle, but he was also responsible for about eighty San refugees who had congregated at D’Kar after the church promised them refuge. There was a Tswana missionary who left soon afterwards. But my father accepted the challenge even though he wasn’t a dominee.”

For school, Willemien and her four siblings were sent to Gobabis in what was then South West Africa. “It was a ten-hour drive from our nearest town, Ghanzi, to Gobabis, and the only lift was on the back of an open truck that transported cans of cream,” she recalls. “We’d be in the boarding house for three months at a time and we couldn’t even phone home, because there was no phone at D’Kar.”

Later, Willemien’s parents moved to Gobabis to work as teachers in order to supplement their income so the kids could go to university. Willemien went to Potchefstroom where she met Braam, a dominee, and they soon married. They settled in Vanderbijlpark but it wasn’t long before Braam accepted a job offer in Botswana... In D’Kar, to be precise!

By then, Willemien’s family had put down more roots in Botswana: One sister had married a De Graaff from Ghanzi and a brother worked in Gaborone.

What about Dirk and Pollie? They took on the task of taming a wild piece of

land adjoining the Central Kalahari Game Reserve.

“For ten years, they lived under an awning, under the only big thorn tree in the area,” Willemien says. “It was pure pioneer stuff. My mother cooked on an open fire every day. Her office was an old caravan.”

Willemien and Braam had taken over their responsibilities at D’Kar. The most significant was the ongoing upliftment of the San community – not only at D’Kar but also in the wider region. They moved to this site near Shakawe in 1998 and continued their outreach work from here. Dirk and Pollie had also moved to the banks of the Okavango to retire by the late 1990s.

The name Askiesbos dates from this time. To make room for a house, some trees had to be cut down. Willemien explains how her father always uttered an apologetic “Askies!” every time he had to fell one – asking the trees for forgiveness. After living in the Kalahari for so long, he felt sorry for every tree.

A white-browed robin-chat makes its jubilant, rising call as Willemien continues: “My husband Braam passed away in 2009. After he died, I started changing the focus of the outreach work to establishing conservation farming practices in the area.”

Willemien set up the Pabalelo Trust, which helps various small-scale farmers – mostly Hambukushu people – to concentrate their crop-growing in a single area that can then be adequately fenced (using solar power to electrify the fences) to avoid seasonal crop damage from elephants.

Willemien’s daughter, Hettie, also moved to Shakawe in December 2016 with her husband Dammann Kruger. The Krugers have transformed Askiesbos from a private hideaway into a great accommodation option for tourists. Thanks to some government funding, they put up two safari tents before the Covid pandemic, and although things stood still during lockdown they were boosted by a farmer from Pandamatenga who called them out of the blue later in 2020...

Hettie and Dammann join us in the garden and Hettie takes up the tale: “The farmer called and asked whether we could accommodate 25 guests. I told him that we couldn’t, so he offered to pay for all the accommodation upfront as long as we used the money to extend our facilities so that he and his family and other friends could come and stay here.”

Dammann, who owned a pizza restaurant

back in Centurion among other business ventures, had always enjoyed landscaping but now he really had to step up to the plate.

"Next thing, he was installing a septic tank!" says Hettie with a laugh.

"All good, I just googled it," Dammann says.

Although they often have friends who come and visit, Hettie does miss all the socialising of their former city life in South Africa.

"Cappuccinos and friends – those are the two things I miss the most," she says. "But life here is incredible. On a Friday afternoon we can get the kids into the car, grab some camping chairs and we'll be in the bush for sunset 15 minutes later."

Popular crops to plant along the Panhandle include mielies, sorghum, millet, pumpkin, watermelon, spinach and cabbage. But Wandipa Adzina and Mothare Mohembo realised they needed their produce to stand out at the market...

Their farm is between Shakawe River Lodge and Askiesbos. I park in the shade outside their yard, which is full of pretty flowering plants and saplings. They sell plants to the public and the farm is also a popular place for Shakawe locals to come have a picnic or celebrate a birthday.

I find Mothare at the back of their house where he's tending to their most prized crop: strawberries. We shake hands and he takes me to meet Wandipa, who appears from the garden.

This piece of land used to belong to Mothare's father – when he moved away, Mothare asked if he could take it over. At the time, Mothare and Wandipa lived in Francistown on the other side of Botswana: He was in the army and she sold pharmaceutical products.

"We had a small farm outside Francistown – we'd go farm there over weekends," Wandipa says.

When the opportunity arose, it was easy to answer the call of home.

"This land is thirteen hectares in size but it was just an old ploughing field when my father lived here," Mothare says. "We moved here in 2016 and Wandipa and I decided to transform it. We did some research into strawberry farms and saw how successful they were in places like Kenya. We thought it could work here too, since we have a similar climate."

Willemien le Roux from Askiesbos gifted



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Ansie Gildenhuis with one of her beloved donkeys, Klaas. Amos Kativa feeds an old croc called Sam at Krokavango crocodile farm. Kewabone Bontsibokae and his mother Ketlogelamang with their watermelon harvest – Ketlogelamang is one of the farmers supported by the Pabalelo Trust. The new bridge at Mohembo has pylons that look like elephant tusks. Johanna and Piet van Zyl from Robertson enjoy a mokoro ride with guide “Fish” Mokwasha. Lance Gildenhuis makes, among other things, ornamental axes in his workshop.

them 10 strawberry plants to start with, and these were propagated into hundreds and then thousands of plants.

“During Covid the farm was a wonderful place to be,” says Wandipa. “It never bothered us that we couldn’t go to the shops because we produce so much food on the farm. Besides the strawberries, we grow a range of vegetables and we have chickens and goats too.”

She laughs. “We bought some horses for the children. I still can’t believe we bought those horses just so they could have animals to play with, but it was wonderful to see the bond the kids developed with them. Even the goats... When one gives birth in the middle of the night, we go out to see. It’s amazing to know we can live from our own produce. It gives you a real feeling of freedom to know that your hard work is worthwhile. Mothare always says he just wishes we’d moved here earlier. Our lives are fuller here – we’re healthier and we have less stress.”

Old Green Eyes

Krokavango is a crocodile farm next door to Askiesbos. I have an appointment with Ansie Gildenhuis – she helps with farm admin (even crocs require the odd spreadsheet) and she also helps to raise the young crocs. But before she takes me to the crocodiles I meet her two donkey pals, Klaas and Klara.

“Klaas just loves people,” Ansie says as she gives him a head scratch. “Ag, *nee*, Klaas, look at all the grass seeds in your hair, you were nice and clean just now!”

Klaas and Klara are brother and sister, the offspring of rescues. “I end up doctoring a lot of animals from the village,” Ansie says. “We don’t have a local vet.”

Klara stands offishly to one side. “That one!” Ansie shakes her head. “One day she’s all lovey-dovey, and the next she’s stubborn. This morning she didn’t want me to brush her. They’ve got their winter coats now – when the hair gets all long and curly. In the summer it grows short and smooth again.”

Ansie and her husband Lance are both originally from Pilgrim’s Rest, but they’ve lived in Botswana for more than 20 years. They moved to Shakawe in 2010 where Ansie soon got a job at the croc farm. There are sometimes as many as 12 000 crocodiles on the farm, but there’s one in particular that the tourists pay to come and see... His name is Sam, after the local village Samochima. At nearly 5 m long, he terrorised the locals and their livestock, carrying

off the odd goat, and rumour has it, some people too. Identified as a problem animal, wildlife authorities granted permission for Sam to be captured and brought to the croc farm.

“The old man has come here to retire,” Ansie says. She clearly has a soft spot for him. “Hello, old Sam!”

We’ve reached his enclosure. Sam is lying outside the water, dead-still.

“You must look closely, he has the prettiest green eyes... Sammo, are you hungry today?”

Ansie has arranged for Sam to be fed so that I can take an action pic. I squint to try and see those “pretty green eyes” but Sam seems to be napping. His caretaker, Amos Kativa, enters the enclosure and approaches in a wide arc.

“Don’t worry, we’ve never had an incident,” Ansie says when she sees the worried look on my face. Amos is holding a long stick. Dangling at the end of it is a big chunk of meat. He carefully brings the meat closer to Sam’s head but Sam flatly ignores it.

“Ag, Sammo, come on!” Ansie encourages. “The other crocs usually eat chicken, but Sam prefers donkey – this is fresh meat from a donkey that died in the village.”

“Come, my friend, come eat,” Amos says gently, like he’s talking to an old friend on his sick bed, encouraging him to take a spoonful of soup.

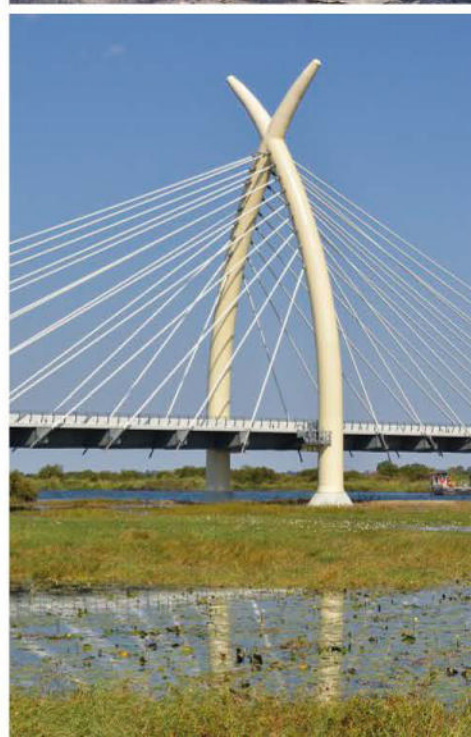
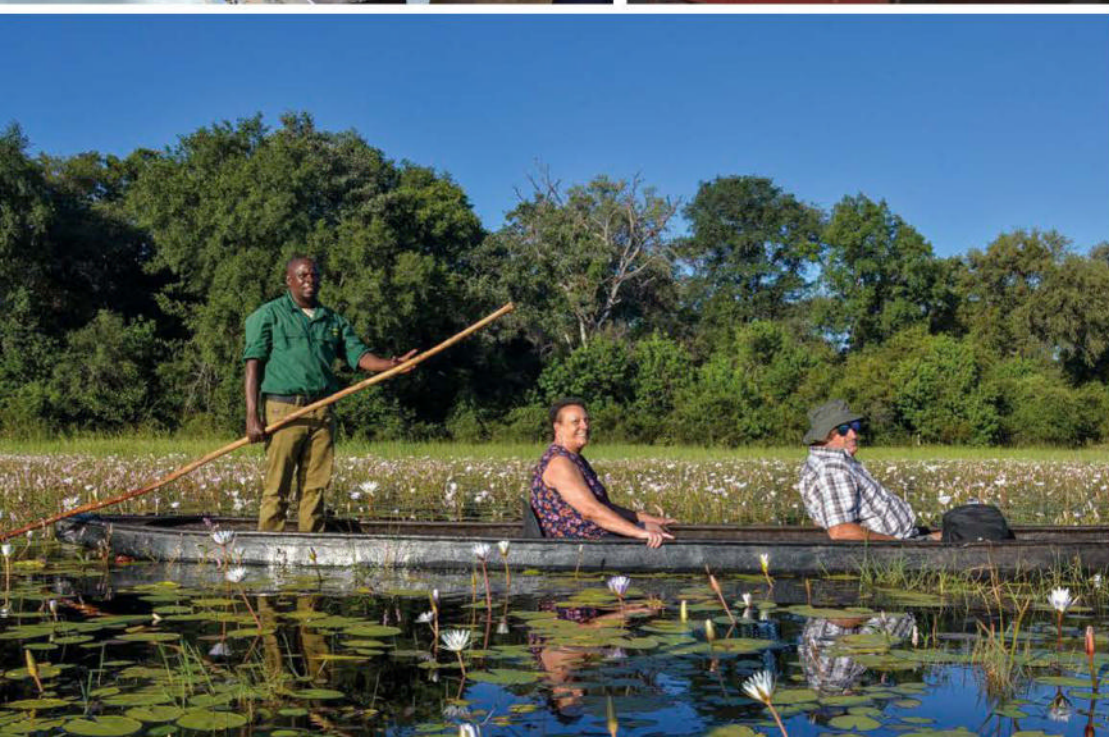
The next instant Sam jerks his head upwards and grabs the meat. He tosses it around in his jaws a few times and then starts swallowing.

After a brief tour of the rest of the farm, Ansie points me to her and Lance’s house, just down the road. Lance welcomes me into his large, airy workshop – home to many different projects. He’s a practical person who loves working with his hands. He shows me knives he’s made, furniture, ironware, clay products, even papyrus paper.

“I only really got this workshop together over the last couple of years,” he says once we’ve settled down around his desk. “People sometimes don’t have the cash to pay me for a job, so we end up doing an exchange. These conveyor belt strips that I’ve used for flooring... They were given to me by someone I worked for. Ditto that container over there.”

Lance studied mechanical engineering as a young man, but he never worked as an engineer as such. “I was always just hands-on wherever I went. I built tractors, sharpened saw blades at a sawmill and did welding. The only thing you wouldn’t see me doing was an office job!”

“The other crocs usually eat chicken, but Sam prefers donkey – this is fresh meat from a donkey that died in the village.”





Piet Scheepers
Manager, Drotsky's Cabins

I'm originally from the area around Tosca and Bray in North West, but I've lived and worked in Botswana since 2001 – mostly here at Drotsky's. When I first came to Shakawe there was no petrol station. You had to drive a 200 km round trip to fill up in Etsha 6, south of here. We only had a general dealer. For proper shopping we had to drive to Maun, which is a nearly 750 km round trip!



Otto Xanda
Campsite manager, Drotsky's Cabins

Fishermen know if you come to Drotsky's, you'll catch a lot of fish. We have good guides who know where to find tiger fish, but also bream, three-spotted tilapia and nembwe.

The big thing is of course the barbel run, from the end of August into October. The water is very shallow at that time so all the fish are in the main channel. As the schools of barbel move along the sides of the channel, they chase out small fish which draws the attention of the tiger fish. That's a great time to be fishing for a tiger.

We're also known for birdwatching, with very good sightings of Pel's fishing-owl. I can take you on a walk in the bush next to the campsite where we might see the tiny brown firefinch, or black-faced babblers.



Kethamile "Fish" Mokwasha
Freelance guide

After I finished school, I got a job at a fish farm near the village of Nxamaseri. The owner there struggled to pronounce my real name so he started calling me "Fish", and it stuck.

I used to work at Nxamaseri Island Lodge, but I do freelance guiding now. I can take you on a mokoro ride, or on a day trip to the rock art at Tsodilo Hills. When tourism is quiet, I work in my garden where I've planted trees like plum, mulberry, guava and avocado. Or I go work on our family's cattle farm for a week.

The river is the big attraction here. A mokoro ride is done in shallow water on the floodplain. It's great because you move quietly and get close to the birds. With motorboat trips you can explore the deeper water of the main channel where you'll see hippos and crocs.

Contact Fish on 000 267 73 943 068

He worked on the recently completed Mohembo Bridge just north of Shakawe, which links the western side of the Panhandle to the previously isolated eastern side. (*Read Toast's feature about the bridge and the eastern side of the Panhandle in the 2022 go! Botswana guide. – Ed.*)

One item on his desk catches my attention. It's a beautifully decorated hand axe, set in a wooden base.

"It's a ceremonial axe," Lance explains. "The Hambukushu chiefs used to have ceremonial axes that symbolised their authority. But it's a tradition that has slowly faded away, so I've made one for the chief of Mohembo and another for the chief of Shakawe. Eventually I'd like to make more for the tourist market."

Over the years Lance has dabbled in all manner of things to make a living. "It's one thing to come on holiday to the Panhandle, or to come and retire. The reality is that we're at the furthest end of Botswana, which means transport costs are high. I might order a part or a tool from Maun and when it gets couriered here there's been a misunderstanding and it's not the right thing. Then I must send it back and the transport cost doubles."

Lance drafts in local artisans to help him with projects.

"I try to show people how valuable the area's natural resources can be when utilised sustainably," he says. "For example, fires are lit in the bush during the dry season, which spread into the reed beds and papyrus along the river. This is unnecessarily damaging – we could be making papyrus paper."

"I enjoy creating things that last." He taps the chair he's sitting on. "This chair is more than 25 years old. Sure, you can buy a cheaper one at the shop but it won't last a year. My gift in life is to make things. I'm not a big talker; I'm a maker."

One person inspired by Lance is a friendly 14-year-old American boy called Andrew Beckendorf. Andrew, his older brother Aaron and their parents, Lisa and Tim, live nearby. The Beckendorfs have been in Botswana since 2005. Tim is a Bible translator and came here to tackle the huge undertaking of translating the Bible into Khwedam, the language of the Khwe, a San tribe.

I meet Andrew with his mom, Lisa. He's ready for my visit, wearing a crisp khaki shirt and cap with "Beckendorf Blades" proudly embroidered on both. He made his first knife when he was eight years old and has slowly perfected his craft. Nowadays he sells knives online, or at a craft market in Maun.

Like Hettie and Dammann's kids, the Beckendorf boys are home-schooled.

"After a bad day of school, it's good to hit some metal with a hammer," Andrew says wryly.

He takes out one knife after the other – a biltong knife, hunting knife, a dagger.

"I use wild olive wood for the handles, but also teak – or mukwa – as it's called here. I use what I can – I made one blade with steel that came from the springs of my dad's Hilux!"

"We run everything on solar power," Lisa adds. "If Andrew must grind, it has to happen during daylight hours."

Lisa grew up as the child of missionaries in Papua New Guinea and now she's raising her own kids in a faraway place.

"I didn't go back to the States until I was 18 years old. It was a culture shock for me and I know it will be the same for the boys when we eventually return. I'll miss the slow, relaxed pace of life here. You don't get that bombardment of everything. We're very independent here – we can do what we want, when we want. We can just enjoy where we are."

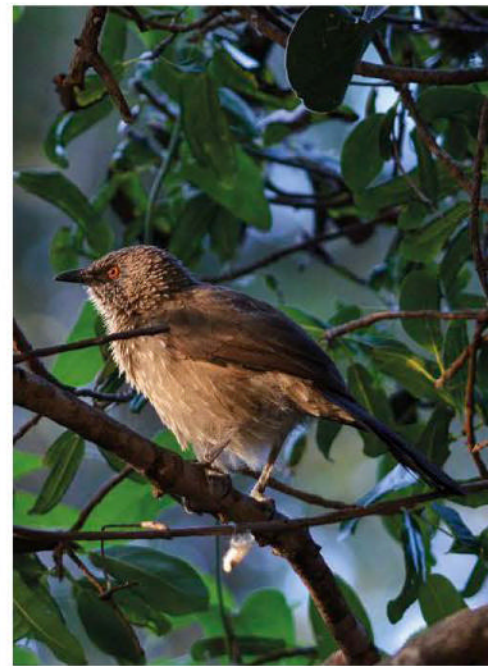
Tim arrives and tells me about his Bible translation project. It's not a complete translation, but a so-called Panoramic Bible, which provides an overview of the most instructive parts of the Old and New Testaments.

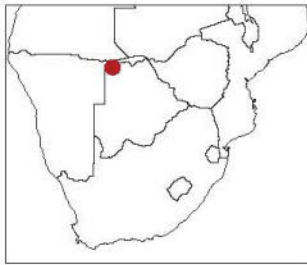
"I do what's called the exegetical work," he says. "Once I've done a first draft of a section, I check if it communicates the intended meaning of the original Greek and Hebrew source texts. Also, because I'm an outsider, I can see the language differently and I might spot a verb being in the wrong place, for example."

Although Tim doesn't speak Khwedam 100% fluently, he's become an expert at its written form, and its grammar.

"Khwedam was hard to learn because it has no history of being a written language," he says. "There are sounds that we don't get in Western languages, there are four different clicks and each can be modified in nine different ways. Hearing those differences was difficult at first, but now I can pick them up. What accelerated my language learning was going to villages and inviting all the elders to tell their stories. That really opened the door."

Clockwise from the top: Andrew Beckendorf shows some of the knives he has made. Check out his online shop at beckendorfbldes.com. An arrow-marked babbler, photographed in the campsite at Drotsky's Cabins. You'll meet friendly people in the streets of Shakawe, but also a bunch of goats and a few stately baobabs. Andrew Beckendorf (far right) with his older brother Aaron (left) and parents Tim and Lisa.





STAY HERE

Shakawe River Lodge

Close to Shakawe, this popular lodge and campsite were renovated in 2022. The campsite has 10 stands. Camping P265 (R366) per adult; P135 (R187) per child aged 5–11. There are 10 chalets in riverine forest. Chalet P950 (R1 312) per person sharing, B&B (VAT excluded). ☎00 267 6840403; ✉info@shakawelodge.com

Askiesbos Camp

This awesome place has a campsite, two forest tents on decks, and three river tents on decks. Camping costs P150 (R207) per person; tents from P1 000 (R1 382) for two people sharing. Meals available at an additional cost.

Book a stay on the houseboat *Delta Belle* through them. It costs P14 500 (R20 022) per day for the whole boat (up to 10 people) on a self-catering basis, although there's also a catered option available.

Askiesbos offers regular boat cruises, fishing, day trips to Tsodilo Hills and a variety of cultural experiences in the district, involving and supporting the local community. ☎00 267 73 505 193 (Hettie); ✉samochimabushcamp.com

Drotsky's Cabins

This classic spot is also near Shakawe and popular with birders and anglers alike. Chalet accommodation P1 985 (R2 750) per night for two people. Meals available at extra

cost. Camping P255 (R353) per adult; half-price for children under 12. They have three different boats for hire, for groups of various sizes – contact them for rates.

☎00 267 683 0226 (Piet); ✉drotskys.com

Xaro Lodge

This luxury tented lodge, just south of Shakawe, is a birder's dream. Rates start at US\$360 (R6 630) per twin-sleeper tent, with breakfast and dinner. You're transferred there by boat.

☎00 267 72 807 476; ✉xaro-lodge.com

Nxamaseri Island Lodge

This luxury lodge is close to Nxamaseri (Ncamasere). They're big on fishing, especially fly-fishing. Contact them for rates.

☎00 267 71 326 619; ✉nxamaseri.com

Swamp Stop

Situated further down the Panhandle, near Sepupa, they have six shaded riverfront campsites at P178 (R247) per adult; half-price for children under 12.

En suite, air-conditioned room P1 050 (R1 456) per night for two people. Riverfront en suite tent P750 (R1 040) per night for two. (These are 2022 rates.)

Swamp Stop also offers boat rides and fishing outings.

☎00 267 72 610 071; ✉swampstop.co.bw

Nguma Island Lodge

Nguma Island Lodge is north of the village Etsha 13 on the banks of Guma Lagoon. Camping P243,70 (R338) per adult – discount for children. Meru tents from P2 310 (R3 200) per person with breakfast and dinner, or P1 627 (R2 254) self-catering.

☎00 267 73 560 120; ✉ngumalodge.com

Guma Lagoon Camp

Also near Etsha 13. The access road is for 4x4 vehicles only. The camp has 16 safari tents with views of the water.

Unit for two: P1 402 (R1 942) per night. Family unit for four: P1 987,25 (R2 753) per night.

There are also six camping stands on grass with shade. Camping costs P180 (R250) per adult; half-price for children under 12.

☎00 267 77 570 658 (call or WhatsApp); ☎00 267 75 446 244; ✉guma-lagoon.com

Carmine Rivercamp

Carmine Rivercamp is on the eastern side of the Panhandle – you cross the Okavango River using the new bridge at Mohembo and drive about 44 km south, back down the river. They're not officially open yet but they might be by the time you read this. Contact them to check.

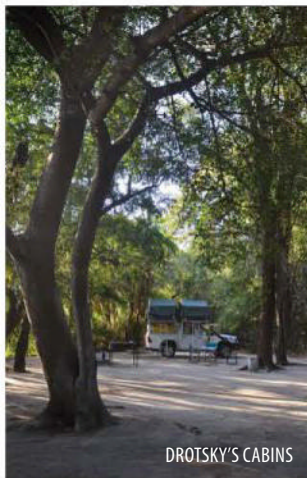
☎00 267 74 334 337 (Charlie); ✉info@carminerivercamp.com

Tsodilo Hills

A visit to Tsodilo's incredible rock art sites should be part of any itinerary to this part of Botswana. The hills are about 35 km west of the Panhandle and they tower over the Kalahari landscape like three stone temples.

Camping P130 (R174) per adult. Flush toilets and showers; no power. Entrance fee P50 (R67) per person, plus P120 (R161) for your guide (per group). If you go on a longer walk, the guide fee goes up. Kids under 15 get a discount.

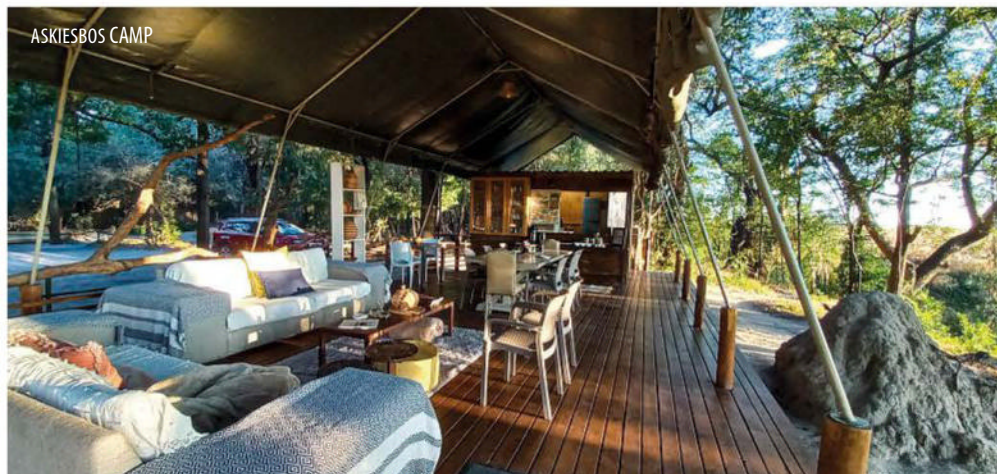
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**WINNING
PHOTO**

< NADINE LEONARD

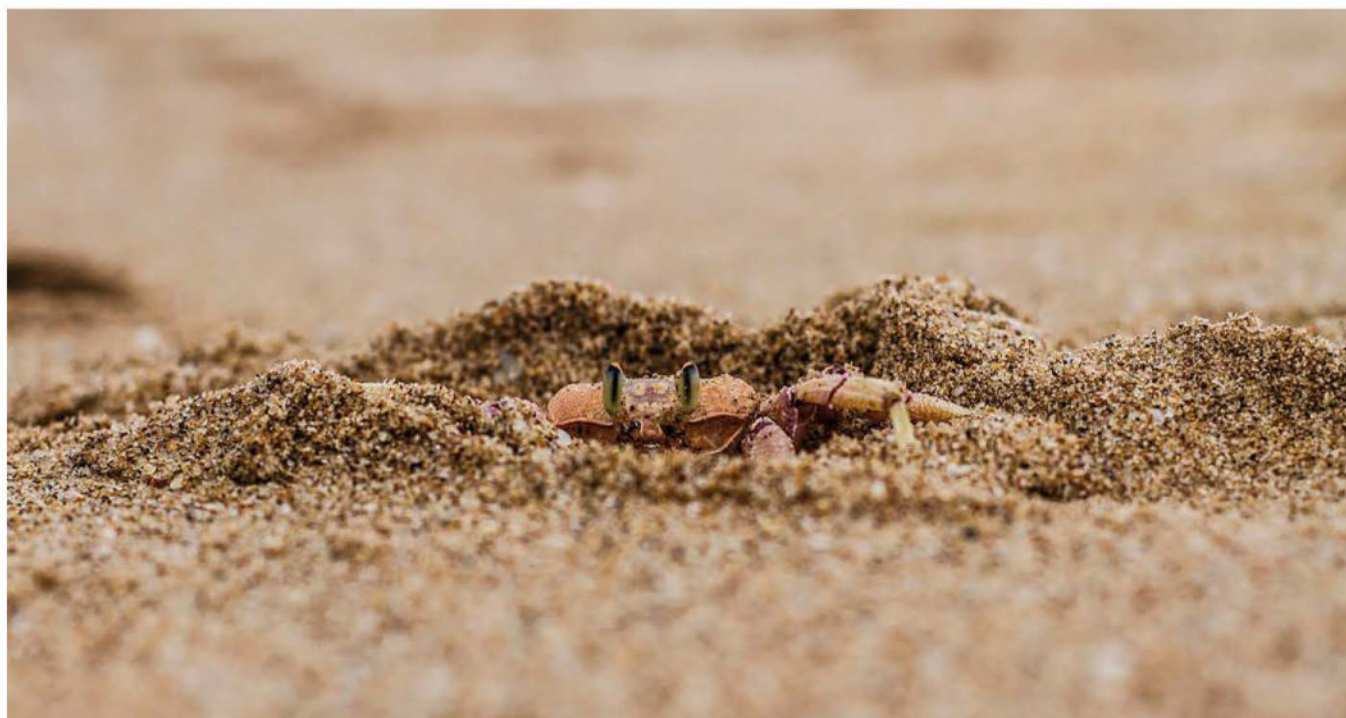
IG: [@nswildlife_photography](https://www.instagram.com/nswildlife_photography)
Canon EOS 800D
Canon EF 70–300mm lens

NADINE WRITES: I took this photo in the Kruger Park in June 2021. We arrived at the carcass in the tree around 1 pm – it was near the Afsaal picnic site. At first the leopard was absent, but other tourists told us they'd seen two leopards feeding earlier that morning, so we decided to hang around.

The other tourists eventually ran out of patience and left. We decided to stick it out. I have always wanted to photograph a leopard in a tree with its kill, and this might have been my chance!

We were rewarded about 40 minutes later. A female leopard arrived and started to eat. It was one of those unforgettable moments that keep you on the edge of your seat! There were only three vehicles at the sighting and we could enjoy it in peace.

My shutter speed was 1/200 second, aperture f6.3 and ISO 400.



TOAST SAYS: No one is as optimistic as a wildlife photographer... They expect every game drive to deliver only the best sightings, even if such sightings are incredibly rare.

You can spend many hours waiting at a scene like this. You'll drink all your coffee and eat all your sarmies and you'll start to wonder if you should open the packet of NikNaks... You'll massage your stiff muscles and ignore your full bladder. You'll check the map to see where the nearest picnic site is. But what if the leopard appears the second after you've driven away?

This was Nadine's lucky day, and her once-in-a-lifetime photo is the reward. It helps when there aren't too many other vehicles around because it's easier to move your own vehicle into position for a clean shot. If you're stuck at the back of a vehicle scrum, you might only see the twitch of a tail.

The eye contact is what makes Nadine's photo stand out: It feels like the leopard is staring right into your soul...

Congrats, Nadine, you win the camera bag!

MAUREEN VERMAAK

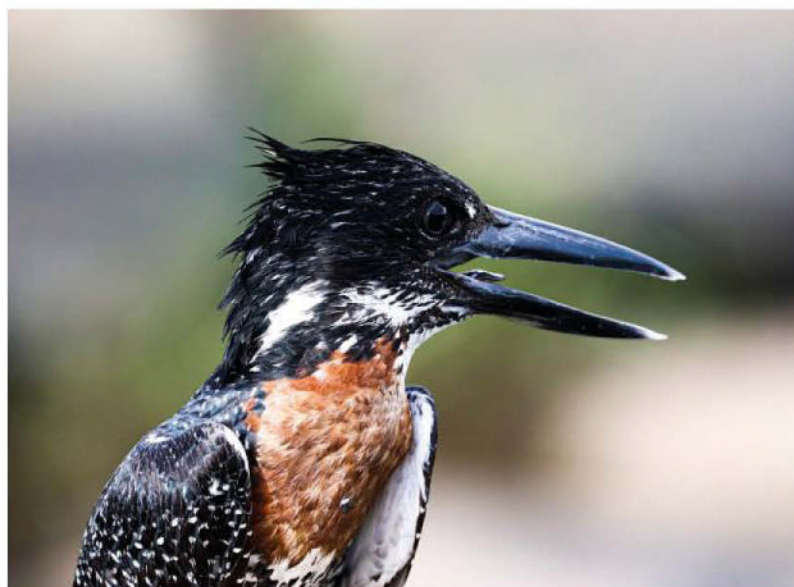
Canon EOS 7D
Canon 50 mm lens

TOAST SAYS: Maureen's shot illustrates how you can create a sense of intimacy when photographing something small like an insect, snail or crab. If you stand and shoot down towards the ground, you "flatten" the image – almost as if you're making a photocopy of the scene. You don't get any idea of the three-dimensionality of the creature.

By all means, take your first photo from a standing position because then you've got that shot in the bag. But if the subject is proving to be a willing model (not *skarrel*-ing off) and the ground allows for it (mind the *duwweltjies*), then lie down for your second attempt.

Maureen got eye-level with the crab on the beach and thanks to her effort, it feels as if we can see a little bit of its quirky, crabby character – it reminds me of a bespectacled off-spin bowler. The crab also stands out better against the background, which is mostly thrown out of focus.

Don't be lazy, get down low!



HANNAH SNAID

IG: @gowild_photography_
Canon EOS 800D
Canon 100–400 mm lens

TOAST SAYS: Hannah took this great shot of a male giant kingfisher in the Kruger. An easy way to tell the difference between male and female giant kingfishers is that the males have a rufous chest while the females have rufous colouring on their bellies.

It's a strong bird portrait with the side-on angle showing off his big,

powerful beak. The open beak and tongue make the shot a little more interesting than just another ID pic of a kingfisher. There's enough glint in the eye as well, although it would have been better if the bird had turned his head a fraction towards Hannah, as that would have shown off his eye more clearly.

These kingfishers often look like they've just had a shower at the gym – I love the tuft of feathers standing up at the back of his head. Good work, Hannah!



< JOHAN LENS

Canon EOS RP

Canon RF 24 – 105 mm lens

JOHAN WRITES: I visited the Durban Botanic Gardens to photograph herons hunting fish, but I wasn't happy with the results and turned my attention to the bees zooming around the water lilies instead.

My settings: shutter speed 1/1 000 second, aperture f6.3, ISO 500.

TOAST SAYS: I like Johan's photo because it shows more than one bee. The five bees almost form a circle in the composition, which naturally leads your eye from one insect to the next.

The bee in the top left will attract the most attention because it looks the best. It also gives the photo a logical start and end point: It's the first bee you look at, as well as the last.

All the bee action takes place against a colourful backdrop, which has a different texture and feel. The bees have rounded curves and are dark in colour, and the flower has sharp lines and beautiful hues of purple and yellow. This contrast complements the entire scene.

Good work, Johan. And how appropriate is your surname for a photographer: Lens!

> CHRISTA ROSSOUW

Canon EOS R10

Canon RF 100 – 400 mm lens

CHRISTA WRITES: We were on our way back to Cape Town after a holiday in the Kruger Park. Somewhere around Colesberg in the Karoo, we drove into a thunderstorm. We had to stop due to roadworks and I couldn't get out in the rain, so I took this photo from our Jimmy. It was a stroke of luck to capture the lightning bolt, and a lifelong dream come true!

My settings: shutter speed 1/400 second, aperture f5.6, ISO 800.

TOAST SAYS: A very lucky shot... If you want to capture a lightning strike shooting hand-held, you have to take as many photos as possible of the area where the strikes are occurring.

There's a better way to capture lightning, of course: Put your camera on a tripod somewhere sheltered, like on a stoep, and set a very slow shutter speed. That will give you the best chance of photographing a strike. But when you're at a stop-go in the Karoo; you just have to shoot and hope for the best!

The lightning was so well behaved that it followed the rule of thirds and struck roughly one third from the side of the frame. This gives the photo a natural sense of balance and a pleasing composition.

Lekker, Christa. It's rare to have a stop-go experience you *want* to remember!





▲ NATALIE NAIDOO

IG: @nataliee_naidoo
 Canon EOS M6 Mk II
 Sigma 150 – 600 mm lens

NATALIE WRITES: On a balmy morning, my husband and I set out early from Satara rest camp. We were heading back home to Hilton, KZN, after a great time in the Kruger. I had just missed a photo opportunity on the Tshokwane picnic site road – a lone lioness had strolled along the road but I couldn't get the shot. I thought, "Oh well, that's that."

But my disappointment only lasted a few minutes. Walking down the same road came these five fierce warriors! It was one of those moments that literally took my breath away.

I used a shutter speed of 1/500 second with an aperture of f5 at ISO 800.

TOAST SAYS: Breathtaking indeed! You never know when that special photo opportunity will come around. It might be five minutes

after driving into the park, or somewhere in the middle just after you've had a cheese-and-mince jaffle at the picnic spot, or in the final throes of your visit when your mind is already turning towards work and home again.

The key is to always be ready, just like Natalie was. Don't pack away your camera just because it feels like your holiday is over. And when you arrive, make sure your batteries are charged, your memory card is empty and your camera is on your lap – not packed away somewhere in the boot of the car.

The road makes for a good backdrop to this posse of lions. Although it's an "unnatural" feature, the reality is that lions often like to walk in the road. The neutral colour and even texture of the tar means they're clearly visible – had they been framed against bush, they would have disappeared a bit in the foliage.

What a moment – well done, Natalie!





A SUSAN PRETORIUS

Canon EOS 6D

Canon 24 – 70 mm lens

SUSAN WRITES: In November last year, I found this caterpillar on a vine leaf in my garden. I broke off the leaf and carefully carried it inside to take a photo.

I set up the scene in my dining room. I draped a piece of black fabric to form a background and put the leaf in a glass jar. The caterpillar continued to feed on the leaf as if nothing had changed. While I took photos I could hear it eating away.

I used my camera flash and took the photo using a shutter speed of 1/100 second, aperture f6.3 and ISO 100.

After the photo session, I returned the caterpillar to the vine. I know my method may have been a little unorthodox, but it worked!

TOAST SAYS: There's no harm in being a little unorthodox sometimes.

The main thing is not to disturb your subject. If you want to move it, make sure you don't hurt it. It's clear that Susan's caterpillar (the larva of a hawk moth) wasn't too bothered by the photo session.

It can be difficult to get your focus right with this kind of shot – you want the head to be the focal point, not those big false eyes on its back. At the same time, you don't want a dramatic depth of field. You want the whole body of the caterpillar to be sharp, not just its head.

At f6.3, zoomed in and standing as close as possible to her subject, Susan used an aperture just narrow enough for the entire caterpillar to be in focus, despite the fact that a part of it is closer to the camera and another part curls away. I also like the leaf because it contrasts with the softer, finer textures of the caterpillar.

A smart, unusual shot – well done!



✓ **RIAAN HAMMOND**

Canon EOS 5D Mk IV
Canon EF 24 – 105 mm lens

RIAAN WRITES: I photographed this sunset in December 2022 at Little Brak River on the Garden Route. It was one of those lovely summer evenings with lots of people on the beach.

My settings: shutter speed 1/250 second, aperture f9, ISO 100.

TOAST SAYS: Wonderful! A photo like this makes me long for a stroll on the beach – I can almost feel the loose, hot sand under my bare feet and the waves cooling my ankles.

The two groups of people help to create balance in the composition – there's a trio to the left of the frame and about eight people to the right. I would have framed the photo to exclude the empty space to the left of the trio. The light on the ocean is beautiful, but there's not much else to keep your attention in that part of the frame.

A big part of this photo's success is that the human figures are all standing separate from each other and are easy to "read". When one person stands in front of another, it creates a silhouetted blob that might be confusing to the viewer.

I also like the reflection of the trio on the wet sand, and the shadows cast by the other group on the dry sand in front of them.



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The greatest chase

It's nearly sardine run season on the Wild Coast. Join us in hot pursuit of the birds, dolphins, whales and sharks as they trail shoals of migrating fish.

BY CALLUM EVANS





Flying over the mangrove forests at the mouth of the Umgazana River, just down the coast from Port St Johns. The extensive riverine habitat provides shelter for specialist crab species, spawning fish and the beautiful mangrove kingfisher – a big tick for birders.

PHOTO ESSAY

The annual sardine run is unpredictable and it's impossible to know what to expect, but that's also what makes it so exciting. Each year in winter, Port St Johns and other towns along the Eastern Cape and KZN coast play host to visitors from all over the world: keen amateur photographers, adventure-seeking free divers, professional film crews looking to capture the magic for an international audience... The sense of excitement is palpable.

Over three magical days in July 2022, I got a taste of the sardine run from the air and from water level. I took off in a light aircraft from the landing strip at Port St Johns, which itself is in a magical location on top of Mount Thesiger. We spent an hour ogling the mangrove swamps, rivers and waterfalls, and looking for swirling schools of sardines in the deep blue Indian Ocean.

I also went out on boat trips, bombing through the swells through the mouth of the Mzimvubu River, with fish-eagles flying overhead. I lost count of the number of humpback whales we saw. Common dolphins were everywhere and we were lucky enough to have some special encounters with them underwater. We might not have found an active bait ball (the knot of sardines that forms when ocean predators corral the fish in order to feed), but we did see common dolphins attacking a small shoal, which got the adrenaline pumping.

Immersing yourself in the sardine run is a pricey exercise, but like the great wildebeest migration in East Africa, it's a once-in-a-lifetime trip that will make you fall in love with South Africa's unmatched coastline all over again.



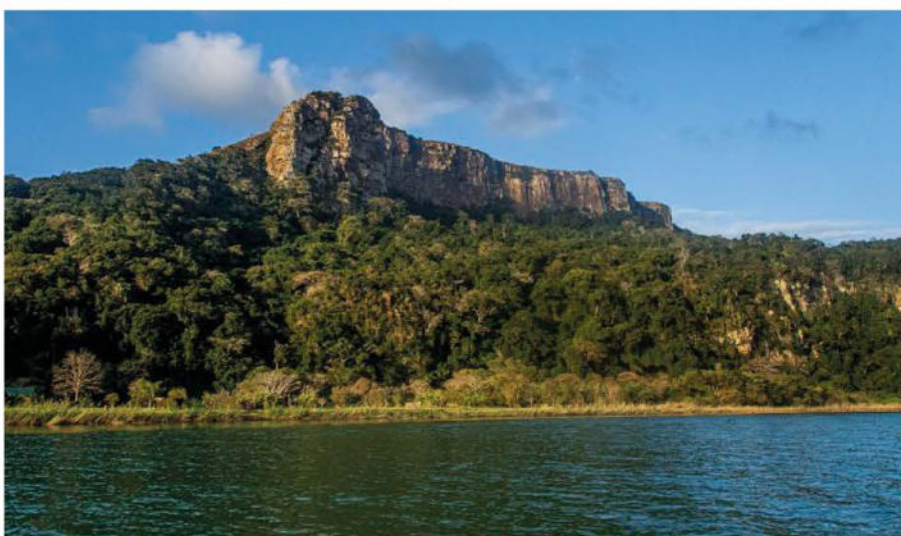
KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

There are lots of operators that offer various sardine run packages during winter, all the way from Port Edward in the north to East London in the south. Some involve scuba-diving, others involve free diving, and there are usually options to see the spectacle from the air. Do your research, read the online reviews and choose your package based on what *you* want to experience. Note that if you want to get into the water with a bait ball, you have to be an experienced diver.

Callum travelled with Offshore Africa, owned and managed by Rob Nettleton and Debbie Smith, who both have decades of experience in the industry. The base rate for a sardine run experience is R26 265 per person sharing for three nights, including all boat trips, plus accommodation, dinner and breakfast at Port St Johns River Lodge. Transfers to and from Mthatha Airport are not included, dive gear rentals must be organised ahead of your stay, and there are other optional extras like flights, hikes, and cultural tours.

Offshore Africa also offers other tours at different times of the year, including whale-watching trips, photographic tours along the coast, and scuba-diving with ragged-tooth sharks.

Contact: 📞 084 951 1325 (Rob); 📞 082 256 9414 (Debbie);
🌐 offshoreportstjohns.com





Clockwise: A super pod of common dolphins hunts sardines off the coast of Port St Johns.

Callum poses with the fixed-wing Sling aircraft that Offshore Africa uses to spot marine life.

Common dolphins check out the divers.

Two sandstone mountains mark the mouth of the Mzimvubu River at Port St Johns – this is Mount Sullivan, which rises to more than 300 m above sea level. (The other is Mount Thesiger, both named after British military officers.)



PHOTO ESSAY

Humpback whales pass close to the boat. During winter, they migrate from their feeding grounds in the Southern Ocean to the waters off Mozambique, where they breed.





An aerial photograph of a humpback whale calf in the ocean. The calf is positioned in the lower center of the frame, with its head and back visible. Above it, the mother whale is partially visible, supporting the calf. The water is dark and textured with small waves and ripples. The lighting is natural, creating highlights on the water's surface.

A humpback calf is supported by its mother, visible just below, as she holds it near the surface to make sure it can breathe.

Opposite page, from the top: An aerial view of Waterfall Bluff, where the Mlambomkulu River cascades into the ocean. A hike to the waterfall is a popular day outing from Port St Johns.

A pod of bottlenose dolphins, 600 to 700 strong, moves inshore with the houses of Port St Johns in the background.

Callum Evans is a free diver and conservation photographer based in Cape Town. See more of his work on Instagram @callumevans_photography





Pleasant with pumpkin

From savoury to sweet, pumpkin and butternut – in all their guises – are oh so versatile. These dishes are perfect for your autumn table.

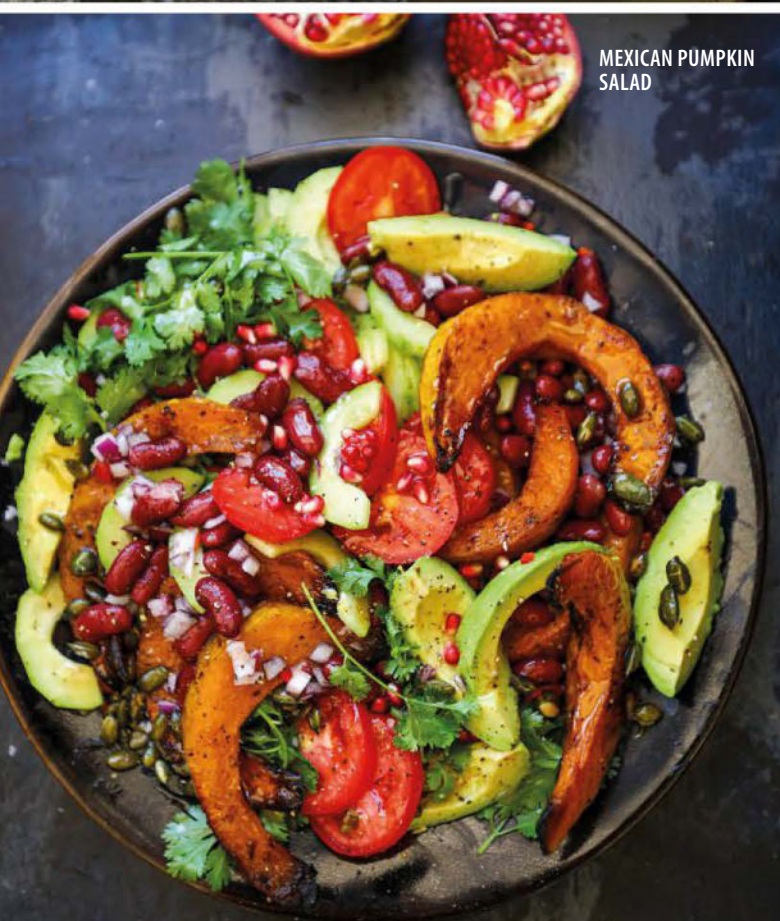
RECIPES & STYLING JOHANÉ NELSON
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CHICKEN AND MUSHROOM PIE
WITH PUMPKIN



PUMPKIN SOUP



MEXICAN PUMPKIN SALAD

Chicken and mushroom pie with pumpkin

Makes 1 pie

Preparation time 1 hour

Baking time 35 minutes

You need

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 cups sliced butternut
- 2 sprigs of thyme
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 8 mini chicken fillets
- 200 g button mushrooms, sliced
- 1 clove of garlic, chopped
- 100 g creamy feta
- ½ red onion, in thin slices

For the dough

- 1¾ cups flour
- a pinch of salt
- 125 g cold butter
- 1 egg yolk
- 1 tablespoon ice-cold water

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. Drizzle 1 tablespoon of olive oil over the butternut slices, and add the thyme, salt and pepper. Spread the slices out on a baking sheet and bake for 20 minutes or until caramelised and cooked.

2 Put the flour and salt in a big mixing bowl and use your fingertips to rub the butter into the flour until it resembles coarse breadcrumbs. Add the egg yolk and water and knead until a dough forms. Put the dough on a sheet of baking paper and mould it into a flat disc. Fold the baking paper over the dough and let it rest in the fridge for 15 minutes while you prepare the filling.

3 Heat a pan, add the rest of the oil and fry the chicken over a high heat until golden brown. Remove the meat and fry the mushrooms in the same oil until golden brown and cooked. Stir in the garlic during the last minute and then add the mushrooms to the chicken. Season to taste with salt and pepper and set aside to cool down a little.

4 Remove the dough from the fridge, fold open the baking paper and use a rolling pin to flatten the

disc into a circle of about 30 cm in diameter. (Dust the rolling pin with flour to prevent the dough from sticking to it.)

5 Spoon the filling over the dough in even layers – first the feta, then the chicken and mushrooms, followed by the butternut and onion. Leave a 4 cm-wide strip open along the outer edge of the dough. Use the baking paper to fold this strip of dough over the filling. Carefully move the pie – still on the baking paper – onto a baking sheet and bake for about 35 minutes or until golden brown and cooked. (If you have a pizza pan, even better – it will ensure a crisp crust.) The pie is delicious straight from the oven or later at room temperature.

TIP You can also cook the butternut slices in an air fryer for 15 minutes at 200°C.

Pumpkin soup

Serves 6

Preparation time 15 minutes

Cooking time 20 minutes

You need

- ¼ cup butter
- ¼ cup cake flour
- 2 cups milk, warm
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 2 cups cooked pumpkin or butternut, mashed
- about ⅓ cup cream
- a pinch of ground ginger and ground cinnamon
- freshly grated nutmeg
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 tablespoon chopped flat-leaf parsley

Here's how

1 Melt the butter in a medium-sized pot and mix in the flour using a balloon whisk. Fry for 30 seconds until foamy. Add the milk in a thin stream, whisking to prevent lumps from forming. Once you've added all the milk, stir in the stock and simmer for 5 minutes.

2 Add the mashed pumpkin, cream and spices, and season to

taste with salt and pepper. Pulse a few times with a stick blender if you prefer a smooth soup.

3 Scatter over the parsley and serve the soup hot. Change it up by adding cubes of cooked pumpkin, toasted pumpkin seeds, a dollop of cream or a few drops of olive oil.

TIP

Save time and buy precut pumpkin. Cut off the corner of the packet and steam the pumpkin in the microwave for 10 minutes or until cooked.

For a curried pumpkin soup, replace the listed spices with 1 teaspoon roasted masala, the cream with coconut milk, and the parsley with fresh coriander.

For a more filling dinner, add fried bacon or small pork meatballs and serve the soup with wholewheat bread.

Mexican pumpkin salad

Serves 4

Preparation time 40 minutes

Cooking time 30 minutes

You need

- 750 g pumpkin with a thick skin (we used crown pumpkin), peeled and in 1,5 cm wedges
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 teaspoons honey
- ½ teaspoon each ground cumin and coriander
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 tin (400 g) red kidney beans, drained
- ½ red onion, finely sliced
- 1 large red jalapeño, chopped
- 2 tablespoons vinaigrette
- 2 large ripe tomatoes, sliced
- ½ cucumber, peeled, seeds removed and thinly sliced
- 1 cup fresh coriander or salad herbs
- 2 ripe avocados, peeled and sliced in wedges (drizzle with lemon juice so the avocado doesn't brown)
- ¼ cup pumpkin seeds, toasted
- 2 tablespoons pomegranate arils



PUMPKIN MUFFINS

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. Mix the pumpkin wedges with the olive oil, honey and spices and spread them out on a baking sheet lined with baking paper. Bake the pumpkin for 15 minutes, then heat the grill element and roast the wedges for another 15 minutes. Turn them over regularly. Once the wedges are cooked and caramelised all over, remove them from the oven and let them cool down slightly.

2 Mix the kidney beans with the onion, jalapeño and vinaigrette. Arrange the cooked pumpkin, beans, tomatoes, cucumber, coriander and avocado on a salad platter. Season to taste with salt and pepper and scatter over the

pumpkin seeds and pomegranate arils. The salad is delicious on its own or as a side dish served with roast chicken.

Pumpkin muffins

Makes 12

Preparation time 15 minutes

Baking time 15 – 20 minutes

You need

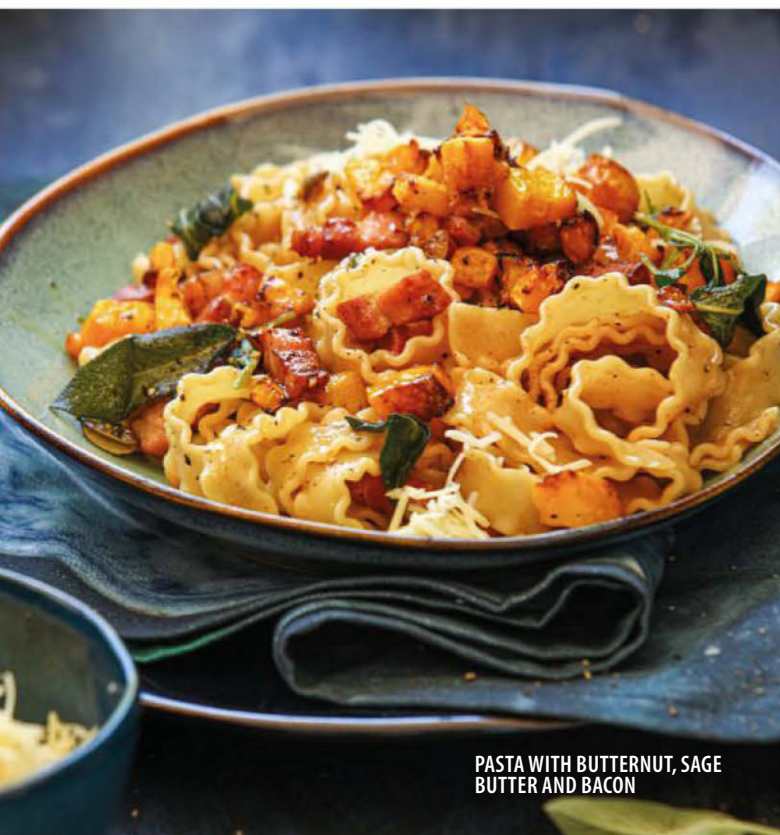
- 2½ cups cake flour
- ¾ cup light brown sugar
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
- a pinch of salt
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 1 cup cooked pumpkin purée

- 5 tablespoons buttermilk
- 2 extra-large eggs

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. Sieve the flour, sugar, baking powder, cinnamon, bicarbonate of soda and salt together. In a second bowl, combine the oil, pumpkin, buttermilk and eggs. Fold the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients.

2 Divide the batter between the cups of a greased muffin pan (paper baking cups are optional) and bake for 15 – 20 minutes or until cooked through. Let the muffins cool down in the pan for a few minutes before you unmould them onto a cooling rack. Serve the muffins with cream cheese and honey or butter and cheese.



PASTA WITH BUTTERNUT, SAGE BUTTER AND BACON

Pasta with butternut, sage butter and bacon

Serves 4

Preparation time 15 minutes

Cooking time 15 minutes

You need

- 2 cups butternut, in 1 cm cubes
- 400 g pasta ribbons (tagliatelle, linguini or spaghetti)
- ½ cup butter
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 200 g bacon, chopped
- 1 clove of garlic
- 12 sage leaves
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ½ cup grated parmesan or mature cheddar

Here's how

1 Cook the butternut in salted water for 5 minutes or until soft. Drain and set aside. (You can also cook the cubes in an air fryer for 8 minutes at 180°C.)

2 Cook the pasta in salted water until al dente according to the directions on the packet.

3 Heat 2 tablespoons butter in a pan with the olive oil and fry the bacon and the whole clove of garlic until the bacon is golden brown. Remove the clove of garlic and add the butternut, as well as the rest of the butter and the sage leaves. Fry the butternut until it changes colour, the butter starts to foam and the sage leaves become crisp.

4 Drain the cooked pasta, but keep a spoonful or two of the pasta water. Add the pasta ribbons and the pasta water to the butternut sauce. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve in deep pasta bowls and sprinkle over some cheese.

You need

- 3 small butternuts, no more than 20 cm in diameter
- olive oil
- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- a pinch of ground cumin

For the filling

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ cup salad pepper strips
- ½ red onion, chopped
- 1 tin (400 g) lentils, drained
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon honey
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- a pinch of salt
- ¼ cup shredded spinach
- 100 g creamy feta, crumbled
- 6 slices smoked ham (we used coppa ham)

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. Halve the butternuts lengthwise, remove the seeds and use a sharp knife to score the flesh without cutting through the skin. Drizzle over the olive oil and season with salt, black pepper and cumin. Put the butternut halves on a baking sheet with the cut sides facing up. Cover them with foil and bake for 40 minutes or until soft. (The size of the butternut will determine the cooking time.) When the butternut is cooked, remove the foil and roast under the grill element for about 5 minutes for extra colour and flavour.

2 Heat the olive oil in a pan and fry the sweet peppers and red onion until cooked and glossy. Mix the peppers with the lentils, vinegar, honey, mustard and salt. Stir through the spinach while the other ingredients are still warm.

3 Divide the ham and lentil salad between the butternut halves and add feta on top. You can serve this dish hot or cold.

TIP Instead of individual portions, roast slices of peeled butternut in the oven or air fryer and serve them with the lentil salad, ham and feta.



BAKED BUTTERNUT WITH LENTIL SALAD

Baked butternut with lentil salad

Serves 6

Preparation time 1 hour

Cooking time 45 minutes

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Three new off-road options

Given our outdoorsy lifestyle and the fact that potholes on our roads are procreating like rabbits on honeymoon, a robust SUV or a double-cab bakkie makes much more sense than a low-slung sedan. Here are three options for different budgets.

BY PIERRE STEYN

The days when people would sneer at vehicles from India and China are long gone. The latest cars from these countries offer excellent value, they're well built, carry extensive warranties, and they feature the same technological aids and toys as their US, European and Japanese counterparts. And, since many are manufactured for roads that are not well manicured or maintained, they're perfectly suited to driving in South Africa.

The new Mahindra Scorpio-N is

a good example. The most expensive model costs "only" R590 000 – it's a well-appointed 4x4 built on a ladder frame, equipped with a six-speed automatic transmission with low range and a mechanical diff lock. We drove the Klein Tafelberg 4x4 route near Redelinghuys on a blistering hot day. With the tyres deflated to one bar, the Scorpio-N mastered the technical route – a combination of sandy and rocky climbs and descents – without much hassle.

When the vehicle launched in India last year, it rewrote the record

books when more than 100 000 were ordered in the first 30 minutes of going on sale. That says as much about the size of the Indian market as it does of the popularity of Mahindra on the subcontinent. That kind of popularity is not something that will be replicated in South Africa, but with space for seven people, a strong 2.2-litre turbo-diesel engine, a modern and quite luxurious cabin, and a 5-year/150 000 km warranty and 5-year/100 000 km service plan, this Mahindra has certainly

thrown a firecracker into the SUV chicken coop.

While the new Scorpio has been making waves in India, the biggest talking point in our bakkie-mad country has been the launch of the all-new Ford Ranger. Not only is the Ranger built locally at Silverton, but Ford plans to launch a mind-boggling 24 models into our market. There *will* be a Ford Ranger in every colour and configuration to suit all needs and personal preferences.

We tested the current



JEEP GLADIATOR RUBICON

top-of-the-range double-cab – the Wildtrak V6 4x4 – which retails for an eye-watering R953 000. Even the most ardent Ford critic (yes, that's you Henry Hilux) must admit that it's a handsome bakkie. The muscular styling, featuring an aggressive grille and striking LED headlights, takes its cues from American pick-ups. In the cabin, the Ranger borrows extensively from the luxurious Ford Everest SUV, especially the large central display screen on the dashboard. There's no shortage of electronic aids, modern conveniences and connectivity options for your phone. And when it comes to the drive, it's as capable as ever off-road and way more comfortable on tar.

It's a big vehicle but it never feels that way on the open road. However, when you step out of the Ranger in the mall parking lot, the Suzuki Jimny and Toyota Tazz on either side look like Dinky Toys.

You might think it's a challenge parking the Ranger, but only until you do the milk-and-bread

run in a Jeep Gladiator Rubicon! This bodybuilder of a double-cab reminds me of a WWE wrestler: brash, flamboyant and heaps of fun. It's a pricey 4x4 (R1 330 000), built for the guy or gal who doesn't give a hoot if people point and stare as you come gurgling past.

It's a proper American V6 "truck" rather than a bakkie, with a thirst for petrol the size of Texas. We nursed this beast as best we could, but struggled to keep the consumption below 14 l/100 km. Still, it's a great 4x4, with diff locks on the front and back axles, 249 mm of ground clearance and more than enough power from the 3.2-litre V6 engine.

One of its unique selling points – if you really want to get close to the great outdoors – is to completely remove all the doors and the roof and drop the windscreen onto the bonnet. It's noisy on the open road with all the doors where they should be, plus it's expensive and thirsty, but it's one of the coolest 4x4s on our roads. Buy one and you'll get a 5-year/100 000 km warranty and a 3-year/100 000 service plan.



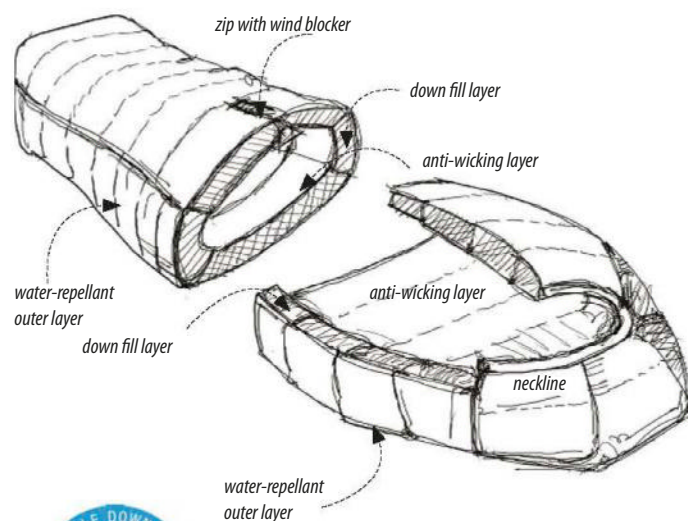
FORD RANGER WILDTRAK

Sleep snug

BY PIERRE STEYN

A person is seen from the back, sitting inside a tent. They are looking out through the tent's opening at a sunset over a rocky, mountainous landscape. The tent's interior is dimly lit, while the exterior is bathed in the warm, golden light of the setting sun. The person is wearing a dark jacket and is partially covered by a yellow sleeping bag.

That two-for-one Hypermarket special might have been good enough when Mom had to get everyone sleeping bags for school camp, but when you wake up freezing in the Drakensberg or in a pool of sweat in the Richtersveld, you quickly realise that a bargain sleeping bag ends up costing you dearly. Here are five bags that are fit for purpose.



DOWN STILL DOES THE TRICK

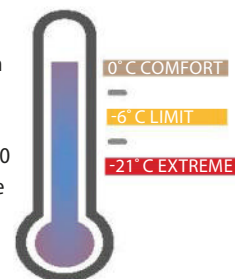
Despite all the technological marvels of our age, nothing beats a goose down sleeping bag. The soft plumage remains one of the

world's best insulators, plus it's lightweight and you can stuff a down bag smaller than one filled with synthetic material. You do pay a premium, however, and down doesn't like to get wet, so make sure the outer material is coated with DWR (durable water repellent).

There are also ethical considerations, since down is an animal product. If you want to be sure the down in your bag has been sourced using humane methods, look for logos for Downmark or the Responsible Down Standard (RDS).

CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS

The "loft" or "fill power" you see quoted on the bag refers to the volume of down per cubic inch, and its capacity to expand. It's usually denoted by a number between 300 and 900. The higher the number, the more down filling, and the warmer (and more expensive) the bag will be. If you intend to hike in late autumn or winter, don't go below a loft rating of 600.



Most manufacturers also indicate temperature ratings in degrees Celsius. Focus on the "comfort" rating and ignore the extreme rating. If your bag has a comfort rating of 5° C, then that's the temperature at which you'll have a good night's sleep without having to put on your puff jacket and two pairs of socks. The extreme rating might indicate -15° C, but at that temperature you'll be a barely breathing ice lolly the next morning.

In our temperate South African climate, a summer bag with a comfort rating of 5° C and a winter bag rated to 0° C should work well. Use the winter bag as a summer bag if you're heading into the high mountains, and if you're going up there in winter then you'll need a bag comfort-rated to at least -5° C.

✓ **FIRST ASCENT AMPLIFY DOWN 900**

Sleeping bags manufactured in South Africa can hold their own in our conditions, like this 1,7 kg beast from First Ascent. It's one of the most expensive, heaviest, and warmest bags we tested.

Make peace with the fact that a warm bag carries a weight penalty. Every design feature in the Amplify is there to retain heat, from the 650-loft goose down filling to its body-hugging mummy shape. You can only unzip two-thirds of the way down, there's a nifty pouch on the inside for your phone and headlamp, and elastic cords that will tighten the collar and cowl around your head – all done to preserve precious heat.

The comfort rating of -3°C makes it a great bag for colder outdoor adventures.

R5 299 📞 firstascent.co.za



> **VANGO MICROLITE 200**

We're fans of Vango's lightweight hiking tents, but this is the first time we've put one of their sleeping bags to the test. Just about the whole bag is made from water-repellent recycled materials, including the bag's synthetic filling.

Like the Naturehike CW400, it weighs less than 1 kg and can be stuffed down really small. It can also take a beating, including a dunk in the water. This makes it a great bag for a trip down the Orange River, for example, where keeping your gear dry is a major challenge.

Although the comfort rating is 5°C, we found that the snug mummy shape upped the heat retention. It's a good bag for cooler summer nights, but when the humidity starts climbing you'll want to unzip.

R2 499 📞 driftersshop.co.za



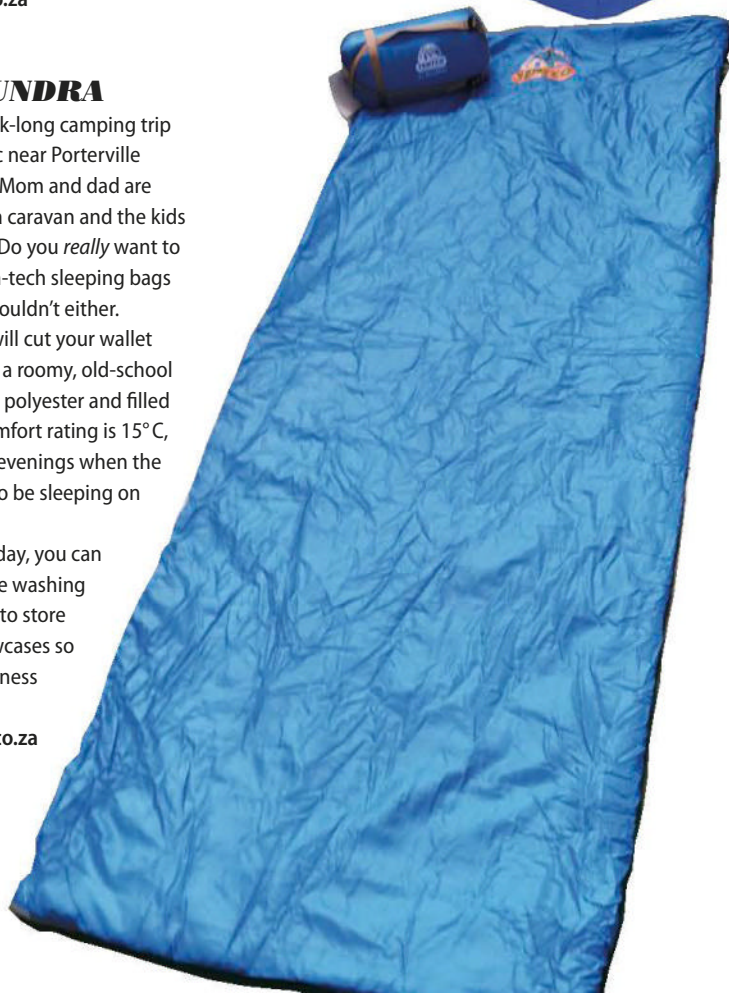
> **TENTCO TUNDRA**

So, you've planned a week-long camping trip with the kids to Beaverlac near Porterville in the height of summer. Mom and dad are sleeping in the Bush Lapa caravan and the kids on stretchers in the tent. Do you *really* want to spend thousands on high-tech sleeping bags for the youngsters? We wouldn't either.

This is where Tentco will cut your wallet some slack. The Tundra is a roomy, old-school envelope bag made from polyester and filled with hollow fibre. The comfort rating is 15°C, perfect for those muggy evenings when the kids are probably going to be sleeping on top of their bags anyway.

At the end of the holiday, you can pop the whole lot into the washing machine. It's a good idea to store them loosely in old pillowcases so they don't lose their puffiness over time.

R450 📞 campanclimb.co.za



➤ NATUREHIKE CW400

This is currently my favourite down sleeping bag if I go hiking or bike-packing in spring, summer or early autumn. It weighs a measly 915 g and the lightweight nylon construction can be compressed into a surprisingly small shape to save space. It also has a more traditional, roomy envelope shape, compared to the other mummy-shaped bags which can be a touch claustrophobic.

The shape, plus a 400-loft rating and a comfort rating of 5°C, makes it suitable for the warmer months. And if it gets too hot in your tent, you can unzip it completely and use it as a duvet.

R3 399 📞 naturehike.co.za



◀ K-WAY KILIMANJARO 3 THERMASHIFT

You're on the Bell Traverse in the Drakensberg in July, and you've just arrived at the Twins Cave. Now you're very glad you lugged the Kili along... It might weigh 1,75 kg, but with a loft rating of 700 and a comfort rating of -8°C, you're guaranteed to get some decent sleep.

You can shift the down along special channels if you need more heat around specific parts of your body. A polyester inner wicks moisture away from your body to keep you dry, and if you're cold (or just lonely) you can zip two Kili bags together. Just make sure you buy a right- and left-zip version so they're compatible.

R4 299 📞 capeunionmart.co.za

35 YEARS AND STILL GOING STRONG

South Africa's only local manufacturer of camping fridges, battery-management systems, and 12V lighting equipment turns 35 years old this year.

What started as a 12V lighting business in 1987 has evolved into one of the world's most recognisable camping brands. For more than 3 decades, National Luna's ability to adapt to an ever-changing camping market has seen their product range expand to more than 500 off-road and camping solutions!

Today, the South African manufacturer boasts the world's most comprehensive 12V fridge / freezer range. The broadest offering of dual-battery systems and portable-power packs. And arguably, the widest variety of 12V lighting solutions.

Here's a glimpse at their product offering and evolution through three decades.



« National Luna's entire range of **Legacy fridges** are now equipped with Bluetooth™ control. The wireless connectivity allows you to remotely control the fridge's temperature – and other settings and functions – from your mobile phone.



« With 14 models to choose from, you're guaranteed to find the right fridge size for your vehicle.

Camping Fridges

Priced from: R7 949

Although National Luna pioneered several "world firsts" in 12V refrigeration, the company is best known for its 2002 release of 'dual-control' technology. This novel feature allowed users to adjust both sides of their camping fridge individually.

It took the rest of the world 8 years to release a similar concept. But in the meantime, the South African brand expanded its fridge / freezer range to include a full assortment of single-compartment and dual-control camping fridges.

The result? Up to 14 fridge / freezer models to choose from, including small (35- to 50-litre), medium (55- to 80-litre) and large-sized (90- to 125-litre) camping fridges.



« Lockable latches with built-in bottle openers.



« Choose between a single-compartment fridge or a dual-control.

« Heavy duty handles with integrated tie-down points.

National Luna's wide range of **LED camping lights** is available in various sizes and colours. »

Choose between a touch-pad on/off button with three brightness settings or a toggle switch with two brightness modes. »

» **12VDC fluorescent lamps** are still produced by National Luna as a backup service for older model caravans and campers.



Camping Lights

Priced From: R185

Although 12VDC fluorescent lights have been replaced by brighter, more efficient LED technology, National Luna is one of the only manufacturers worldwide still producing 12V fluorescent lamps as a backup service for older caravan and camper models.

However, most of their production capacity goes into their class-leading LED range. Development of these lights first started in 2010, when it became clear that fluorescent technology couldn't keep up with the LED competition. After 5-years of research and development, National Luna launched a full range of LED camping lights.

These days, National Luna's advanced LED lights are fitted as OEM solutions by camper-, trailer- and caravan manufacturers worldwide.

Battery Management

Priced From: R1 300

With the exception of 12V camping fridges, few outdoor products have evolved as much as vehicle-based dual-battery power!

Although National Luna kick-started the automation of dual-battery isolation / recharging with their intelligent solenoid system, the company has swiftly adapted to the rapidly evolving technology of battery management.

What started as a bare-bones solenoid pack 25 years ago has since morphed into an array of battery-management options, including portable-power packs, distribution boxes, and advanced DC-DC chargers with built-in solar regulators.

National Luna produces several **battery box** options and **portable power packs**, all of which include a patented step-face design. »



» If you don't have enough load-bay space for a portable system – or your auxiliary battery is mounted in a unique location – you can still enjoy the features of the battery box's control panel by installing a National Luna **Distribution Box**. The unit is sold as a standalone product, and there are three model options.

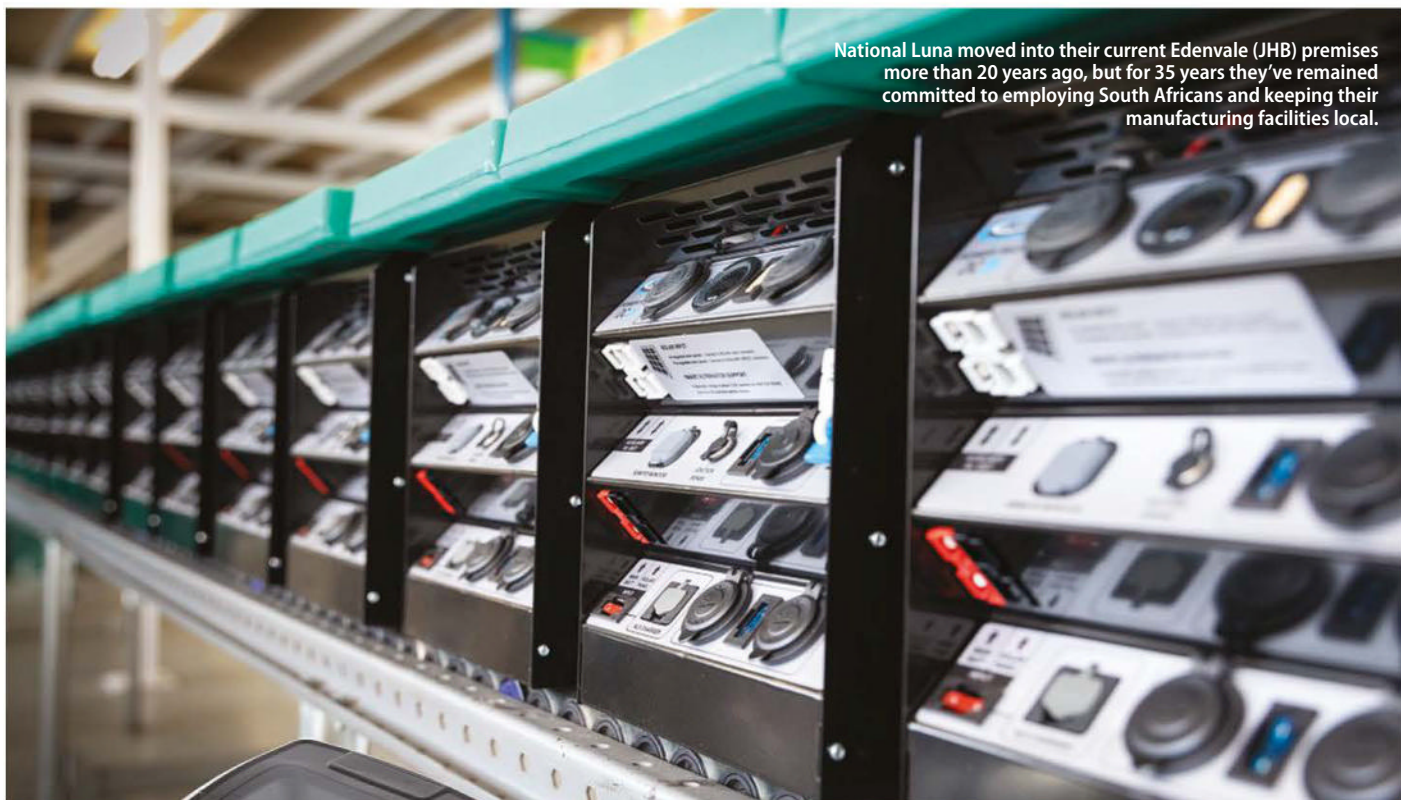
» The all-new National Luna **Portable Power Pack** now features Bluetooth™ control which allows you to monitor both battery's input charge, power draw and voltage levels.

» **DC to DC chargers** are available in both 25A and 40A configurations. Both units feature a plug-n-play MPPT solar regulator and lithium-battery compatibility. »

NEW!



PROMOTION NATIONAL LUNA



National Luna moved into their current Edenvale (JHB) premises more than 20 years ago, but for 35 years they've remained committed to employing South Africans and keeping their manufacturing facilities local.



Standalone Products

« The National Luna **Portable Ice Maker** sports a stainless-steel finish, removable bucket, and the ability to produce 12kg of ice per day in warm tropical conditions.
Priced from R2 995



« Choose between two **Intelligent Battery Chargers**: A 5A unit designed to restore and maintain deep-cycle batteries, or a 1A maintenance charger used to keep batteries in caravans, trailers, quad bikes, boats, and jet skis in good health.
Priced from R799



More than 200 **widgets, connectors, power points, battery monitors, and USB ports** are available nationwide at your nearest National Luna distributor. »

AS A GLOBALLY RECOGNISED BRAND, **NATIONAL LUNA** PRODUCTS ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH 200 TRUSTED DISTRIBUTERS WORLDWIDE.



National Luna products are available at leading outdoor stores nationwide.
Call (011) 452 5438 or visit www.nationalluna.com to find a distributor near you.



MOON RIVER BUSH CAMP, CEDERBERG

I had to think long and hard about whether I should share this special camp with our readers! These days, people want to get far away from everything: smartphones, kitchen appliances that can talk, even brick walls and power... People want to be in the veld and rediscover their roots. Moon River is rustic and it's in the middle of nowhere – and it's becoming increasingly popular.

You usually only find this kind of bush camp somewhere properly far away: in the Namaqua National Park, the Tankwa Karoo or the Botswana side of the Kgalagadi. Moon River is different – it's only a three-hour drive from Cape Town and you can easily visit for a weekend.

Owners Veronica and Adrian Boom like to camp and they often travelled through Africa in a Land Rover. They lived in Somerset West for years and were looking for a place to retire when they came across this 400 ha property on Gumtree. There was an old shepherd's cottage on the property and it had a lovely stretch of river – a tributary of the Groot River. They moved here in 2020 and built a house and two campsites. They named the place Moon River because the full moon illuminates the river from east to west.

Although close to the main Cederberg dirt road, you have to cross a ridge to reach the camps. And once you settle down in your camping chair, surrounded by those famous mountains of orange rock, civilisation is all but forgotten.

The two campsites are far apart from each other, both along the river. Sugarbush Camp (top left) is laid out around boulders; River Camp is closer to the kloof with a big green lawn. There are several hiking trails on the property, and a 4x4 trail, but the river is the big drawcard. You can walk along its course to the plateau and there are lots of shallow pools to swim in – the best one is about a 10-minute walk from River Camp. It's to the right among big rocks, with a small waterfall and a cave on one side.

Someone once said that you can tell how healthy an ecosystem is by the number of dragonflies and frogs you encounter. Well, they've taken over here. Dragonflies hover everywhere and when you walk next to the river, you can hear frogs plopping into the water as you approach. Veronica says klipspringers often graze near their house, and grey rhebok occasionally visit.

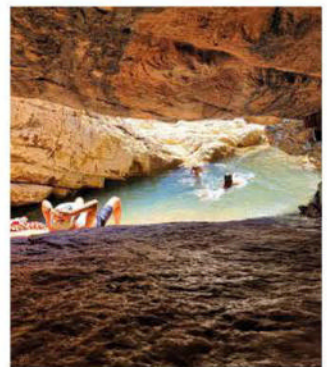
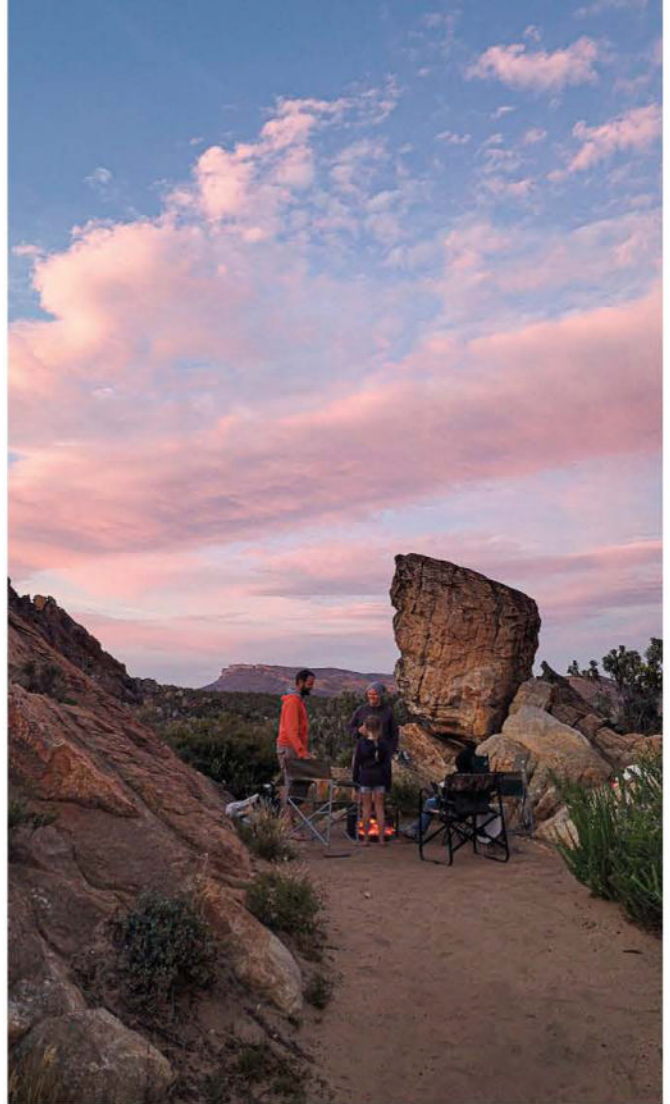
Facilities: The camps have braai facilities, running water (cold), sinks (with soap and cloths) and flush toilets. Sugarbush Camp also has a shower. Each camp also has a wood-fired bath. River Camp sleeps 16 people and Sugarbush sleeps 8 people.

Where? About 30 km from Op-die-Berg. Turn onto the Cederberg Road here. The turn-off to Moon River is another 15 km further and the access road is for high-clearance vehicles and 4x4s only.

Rates: R135 per adult; R70 per child.

Contact: 082 455 4947; moonriverbushcamp@gmail.com

– Esma Marnewick





TAKE A HIKE

De Mond delight!

BY ESMA MARNEWICK

The Sterna Trail in De Mond Nature Reserve is a circular route for the whole family. It's 5,5 km long, on mostly flat terrain, and the views will take your breath away.



On most hiking trails you have to work hard to reap the rewards: A steep hill might lead to a view, or a knee-grinding slope will take you down to a river at the bottom of a shaded valley... Not so on the Sterna Trail in De Mond Nature Reserve – you get all the rewards for free!

De Mond is on the coast between Arniston and Struisbaai. At only 9 km² in size it's one of CapeNature's smallest reserves, but it has a wild feel and it provides safe harbour for many species. For example, it's one of only two places in South Africa where Damara terns (*Sternula balaenarum*) breed within a conservation area. The trail was named after this rare and endangered bird – the old Latin name was *Sterna balaenarum*.

You start the hike at the bridge across the Heuningnes River. From the bridge, the river snakes through the dunes for about 2 km before it reaches the ocean. On the opposite bank, the trail splits into three. Take the wooden steps directly ahead and climb up to the lookout point. Inland of the river, grazing and wheat fields stretch out as far as the eye can see; in the reserve, the dunes are covered in Agulhas sand

fynbos and limestone fynbos. This is one of the furthest reaches of the Agulhas Plain.

The dunes, which rise on both sides of the estuary, are the reason the reserve was proclaimed. In 1937, two local farmers – Major P van der Byl and Mr M van Breda – approached the minister of agriculture and forestry. They were worried that if the river mouth closed up, 24 000 hectares of agricultural land would be flooded. The government acquired the land around the estuary and planted indigenous vegetation on the dunes in an effort to stabilise the sand and keep the mouth open. This initially proved successful and the estuary has only closed once, for a three-year period starting in 1973. In 1986, the area was declared a nature reserve. These days, with improved understanding of the estuarine system, the breaching of the estuary is managed by CapeNature in accordance with set criteria.

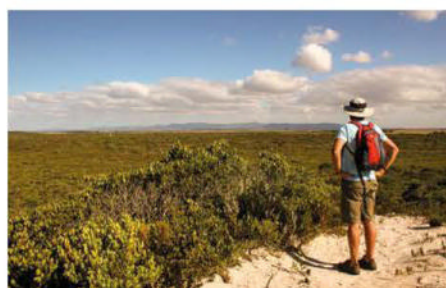
Back to the trail: Say goodbye to the viewpoint and walk down to the river. Take the left path, upstream, and keep your eyes peeled: Many palearctic migrants like curlew sandpipers, common greenshanks and ruffs spend their summer in the Heuningnes estuary. And it's not

unusual to see a blue crane or two on the sandbars.

After about 300 m, the trail turns away from the river along a sandy path in the fynbos. Look for black-winged kites and other raptors hunting for mice.

Later, you'll walk along the boundary fence of the reserve until the trail gains some height and you see the sea again. About 20 minutes later you'll be on a long, deserted beach – apparently one of the longest in the southern hemisphere. If you turned right on the beach and hiked for about 10 km, you'd reach the holiday town of Struisbaai. But you're going the other way, back to where you started. After about 2 km along the beach, the trail turns inland again and soon a boardwalk appears. It goes up a dune and gives you a view of the estuary from a different angle.

The end of the trail is in sight, but don't just jump into your car and disappear. Make the most of your time in De Mond: Relax on the sand next to the river, cast a line (you can catch grunter, garrick, steenbras and kabeljou) or have a picnic under the milkwood trees. Or continue walking, over the bridge and along another boardwalk, to where the Heuningnes River spills into the sea...



Where? De Mond Nature Reserve is about 22 km from Bredasdorp. Take the R316 towards Arniston and turn off onto the gravel road.

Distance: The Sterna Trail is 5,5 km long, but you can add another 2 km if you return via the estuary mouth.

Cost: Conservation fee R50 per adult; R30 per child; free with a Wild card. Remember to buy a recreational fishing permit from a post office before visiting.

Opening times: Weekdays from 7.30 am to 4 pm; until 5 pm on weekends and public holidays.

Contact: ☎ 087 087 3931

What else? There's no accommodation in the reserve. The closest option is De Mond Veld Cottage on the adjacent farm. This self-catering cottage is fully equipped and has a fireplace, braai and plunge pool. Rates from R1 570 per night in low season. There's a special discount during the winter months (May to August): Pay for two nights, get the third night for free.

☎ 082 440 2774; 🌐 demondveldcottage.co.za

Source: *Estuaries of the Cape* by Bickerton, 1984



In the valley of plenty

Riebeek-Kasteel might only be an hour and a half from Cape Town, but it feels like a different world. Those who call it home have rooted themselves in this valley's soil, sustained by the holy trinity of art, wine and community. Here's your guide.

BY KYRA TARR



In February, at the height of summer, the Swartland is stitched together in shades of hazel and beige. The harvest has come and gone and everything seems to gasp in the blistering sun. That is, until you crest Bothmanskloof Pass and look out over the vivid greens of the Riebeek Valley.

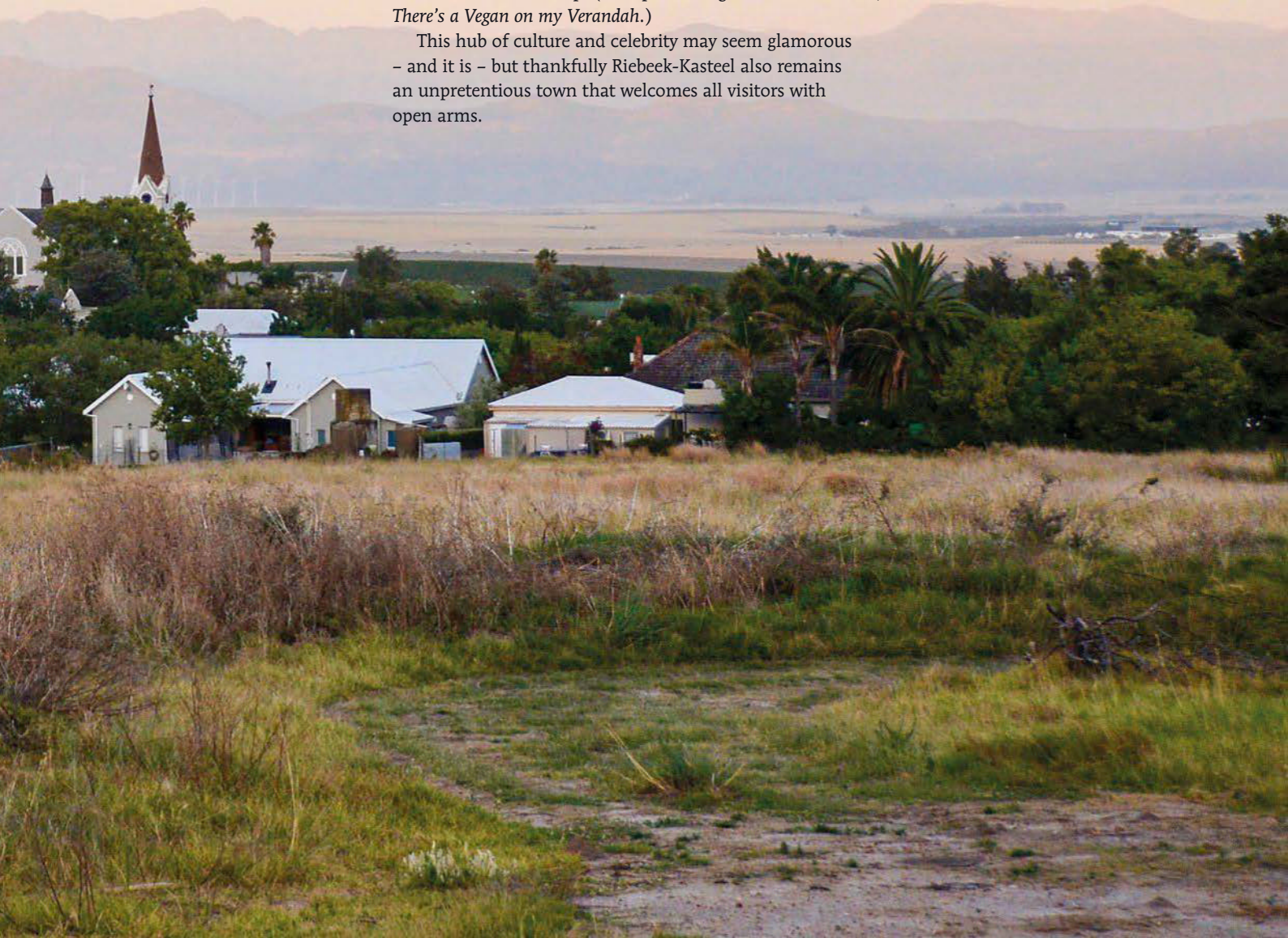
The apparent oasis beckons as strongly as it must have in 1661, when a discovery party of European settlers sent inland by Jan van Riebeeck to scout for fertile soil first saw it from the peak of what is today called Kasteelberg.

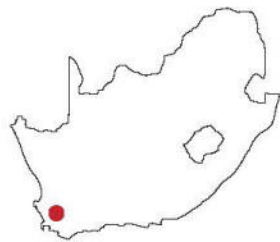
Although Riebeek-Kasteel is relatively close to Cape Town (about 90km), it feels a world away from the city's urgent pace and traffic-clogged roads. For this reason, the past decade has seen a wave of new residents. However, in spite of its growing popularity, you'll still hear the town described as, "How Franschhoek used to be," or "Similar in feel to Darling."

The valley has been home to famous South Africans like artist Hannetjie de Clercq, journalists Max du Preez and Jacques Pauw, the Du Toit rugby family and, if you venture a little further down the timeline, Jan Smuts. Not 10 minutes into my visit, I spot world-renowned artist Louis Jansen van Vuuren at a coffee shop. (He's promoting his new cookbook, *There's a Vegan on my Verandah*.)

This hub of culture and celebrity may seem glamorous – and it is – but thankfully Riebeek-Kasteel also remains an unpretentious town that welcomes all visitors with open arms.

The view over Riebeek-Kasteel from the R311 next to The Barn.





Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Main Street in the evening. Azurdee Smuts in Riebeeck Valley Radio's studio. Suzanne Smit, owner of The Country Chic, and her children on their farm. Local artist Emma Willemse describes her work. William and Mary Walker moved here from Pietermaritzburg and now own a gallery in town, called Pictorex.

My weekend is plotted out. I waste no time seeking out Pictorex, a photographic gallery and print studio owned by William Walker and his wife, Mary. The pair moved to Riebeeck-Kasteel from Pietermaritzburg eight years ago. After selling his business in KZN, William, a keen photographer, bought a high-end printer, thinking he and Mary might start a small business wherever they decided to settle.

Their hunt for a new home saw them touring all the small towns of the Western Cape, from McGregor to Langebaan, but when they descended into the Riebeeck Valley, they knew this was the place they wanted to call home.

"We pinch ourselves every day," says Mary, putting down a tray of tea.

"When we settled here, we didn't realise that our business idea would mesh so well with the artistic character of the town," says William. "I figured my main clientele would drive in from Cape Town, but there are more than 50 working artists in this valley alone."

Moving to a town in the countryside sounds romantic, but as William reminds me, there's still the business of making a living. "This isn't a place where you come to get rich," he says. "But if you have a solid business plan [or work remotely], it's a place where you can be very happy."

Most permanent residents are farmers (fruit, wine and olives) and artists, or they run the local businesses in town. Heavier industries are to be found in the neighbouring town of Riebeeck West, which has "the big" Pick n Pay, a pharmacy and a farming co-op.

Although the sister towns are barely 5 km apart, they remain two distinct places. The reason for this is contested, but most agree it had something to do with the church and a dispute about where to build it. Eventually, two Dutch Reformed churches were built, and two towns grew around them.

Although Riebeeck-Kasteel's official congregation was only formed in 1861, farmers had started settling the valley as early as the 1700s, with a large influx of new residents arriving in the 1730s and 1740s.

"The cannon on the village green used to sit on top of Kasteelberg and was fired when ships made port in Cape Town," explains Lourens Bosch, who works at the tourism office. "Each small settlement on the route to Cape Town had a cannon and they'd be fired in succession – town after town. When farmers heard the cannon, they knew they only had a few days to get their produce to

the city in time for the ship to transport their goods back to Europe."

Back then, a trip to Cape Town took a few days by ox-wagon. The Castle of Good Hope was the centre around which trade took place. Riebeeck-Kasteel's name is an ode to that castle and to Jan van Riebeeck, although the "c" was later dropped.

Time has marched on but Riebeeck-Kasteel continues to draw residents from afar. Azurdee Smuts comes from Kentucky in the United States and speaks with a strong southern twang. She hosts a music show on Riebeeck Valley Radio – the studio is next to the tourism office.

"I'm married to a South African, John," she says. "We met in America more than 20 years ago when he was apprenticing as a horse trainer."

After having their two kids in Texas, the Smuts family relocated to South Africa in 2008.

"I started a country rock band in Pretoria called Azurdee & The Blue River Band," she says. She discovered her love for radio doing an interview with her band on Koepel Stereo in Potchefstroom. One thing led to another, and by the time the family moved to Riebeeck-Kasteel, she was eager to get on board with the town's station, which operates as an offshoot of Kaapstad Radio.

Riebeeck-Kasteel is a satellite town for many others who work in Cape Town, Paarl and Malmesbury. It offers all the ease and tranquillity of small-town living, but your Takealot order might still arrive the next day.

"I started meeting people as soon as we got to town," says Azurdee. "A week later, I felt like I knew everybody."

To get a better idea of the valley's art scene, I set off to meet Emma Willemse, a conceptual artist, lecturer and curator. Emma wears flowing fabrics and carries herself with a serenity that seems untouched by everyday troubles.

Her studio is a barn-style building with plenty of windows and light. There's a big table in the centre displaying one of her installations, "101 ways to long for home". Made of 101 booklets bound with parquet floor blocks, it has travelled to Florence, Paris, Dakar and London – and now it's comfortably nestled in her gallery in Riebeeck-Kasteel.

Not wanting to sound like an artistic ignoramus, I ask what her what the piece is about.

THE COUNTRY CHIC

Drop in for a chat and to stock up on your chicken and farm-related produce. Everything in the shop comes from Suzanne and Jacobus's farm or is locally sourced from the valley.

Where? 2 Plein Street

Contact: 072 391 4814 or follow "The Country Chic" on Facebook

"In the nineties I was displaced from several homes. I salvaged the parquet floor blocks from one of the homes in which I used to live, mere hours before it was demolished. In my work, I use the wooden blocks as a reminder of the homes that I have lost."

Emma's husband, Rudolph, joins us. He's a lawyer, but also a poet and photographer.

Rudolph relates how their studio and exhibition space is often transformed into a space where intimate musical shows are held. They also facilitate various talks. This magazine's very own Toast Coetzer has exhibited photographs there. It's a small world...

Art is indeed everywhere in Riebeeck-Kasteel, from galleries with perfect white lighting to the village green, where a bright elephant mural by the street artist Falko One graces a wall beside the public netball court.

On the green, my eye is drawn to an equally bright shopfront painted with polka dots: The Country Chic, a deli that sells free-range chicken products and other farm goods.

"I opened this shop when I was six months pregnant," says owner Suzanne Smit. "People in town were concerned when they saw this crazy pregnant lady painting a shopfront with a big belly! My husband Jacobus is a wheat farmer and he keeps some cattle and sheep. When I arrived on the farm there were no chickens. It was a hassle because I had to drive to town every time we needed eggs. So, he surprised me with a hen and six chicks one day."

Suzanne soon had more eggs than she knew what to do with. Enquiries from townsfolk for other chicken products made Suzanne realise there was scope to grow.

"What began as a side project is now a successful business," she beams.

On my final day in Riebeeck-Kasteel, I take one last drive through town. Bougainvillea bursts over boundary fences and the farmland reaches down to the streets from the surrounding hills. Approaching the edge of town, a tractor emerges from a vineyard and trundles up the road.

It's a reminder that while city folk might see Riebeeck-Kasteel as a pretty weekend escape, we're far more reliant on the people who live here than they are on us.

Yes, there are artists and eateries aplenty, but it's the farmers who give life to this valley, just as it was in the 1700s.





THE ROYAL HOTEL

4 things to do



SHORT STREET

Sip a cocktail at The Royal Hotel

Established in 1862, The Royal Hotel harks back to a bygone era of travel. The best way to tap into this feeling is to sip a G&T on the impressive veranda, which spans the entire front of the building.

Where? 33 Main Street

Contact: ☎ 022 448 1378; 🌐 royalinriebeek.com

Explore Short Street

It might be one of the, er, shortest streets in the Riebeek Valley, but it's absolutely packed with unique stores to visit, its charm magnified by brick paving, bougainvillea and fairy lights that get switched on at night.

You'll find everything from natural body products and leather goods to wine and clothing. There's also a market on the first Saturday of every month.

Where? Short Street is opposite The Royal Hotel, just off Main Street.

Visit the Royal Arts Town Amphitheatre (RATA)

There's a beautiful outdoor amphitheatre behind The Royal Hotel which is home to RATA. This space opened in response to the pandemic as a place where artists could practice their craft safely. It has since become a town highlight.

They present a variety of exciting shows during their summer season, which generally runs from the beginning of November to the end of April each year.

Pop into the tourism office to see what's on during your visit or check out their Facebook page, "Arts Town Riebeek Valley".



GALLERY 7 ON PLEIN

Taste wine and olives

Kloovenburg (🌐 kloovenburg.com) is one of the biggest and oldest estates in the valley, well known for its wine and olives. But there are many others – so many, in fact, that there's an annual Olive Festival to celebrate the valley ("Riebeek Valley Olive Festival" on Facebook).

If you're looking for a place to start your sampling, begin at **The Wine Collective** (32 Main Street; ☎ 022 448 1008) where you can taste wines from dozens of farms in the Swartland. The owner, Anton Espost, is a fount of knowledge and can point you in a direction that best suits your interests.

Talking about olives, **Het Vlock Casteel** (Church Road; ☎ 022 448 1488) is an experience in itself. The castle-like building towers over the vineyards. No surprise it's a choice wedding venue. Inside, there's a shop that stocks just about every olive-related product you can think of and patrons are invited to sample them all, from oils to tapenade.

To get an idea of the greater olive industry, stop in at the **Olive Boutique** (49 Church Road; ☎ 022 448 1368) where the true magnitude of this crop in the Swartland becomes evident.



AU BOUCHON ROUGE BRASSERIE



BAY LEAF & THYME DELI



LA PARRILLA



HET VLOCK CASTEEL

EAT HERE

Au Bouchon Rouge Brasserie

Run by French chef Julien Debray, this charming restaurant makes it feel as if a small piece of Paris has been transplanted into the South African countryside, complete with tables on the pavement and French café music pouring out onto the street. You won't find milk tart on this menu!

Where? 33 Main Street;

☎ 071 009 2141

Bay Leaf & Thyme Deli

This hip deli wouldn't be out of place in Bree Street, Cape Town. Inside, they sell an array of locally produced goods – perfect for your pantry or as a gift. On hot days, the veranda is a blissful reprieve from the heat. Try their rock shandy (R39) for a delicious spin on a childhood favourite.

Where? 1 Plein Street;

☎ 062 566 2312

Beans About Coffee

Set under a leafy pergola, this is the perfect place to grab breakfast. The aroma of fresh coffee tempts patrons (and their pooches) inside from 7 am (8 am on weekends).

Where? 15 Fontein Street;

☎ 022 448 1653

Eight Feet Village

Eight Feet Village at Kloovenburg is a business belonging to the four rugby-mad Du Toit brothers who grew up on the farm – Springbok Pieter-Steph is the eldest, followed by Johan who plays for the Stormers, and Anton and Daniel who are both students. (Four brothers, eight feet – get it?)

There's a restaurant, bar, deli and various stalls to browse, and the view over the Riebeeck Valley is sublime.

Where? Bothmanskloof Pass (R46);

☎ 022 448 1635

La Parrilla

This Latin-inspired grill is a vibey place to spend your evening, especially when they switch on the fairy lights outside.

Where? 1 Royal Street;

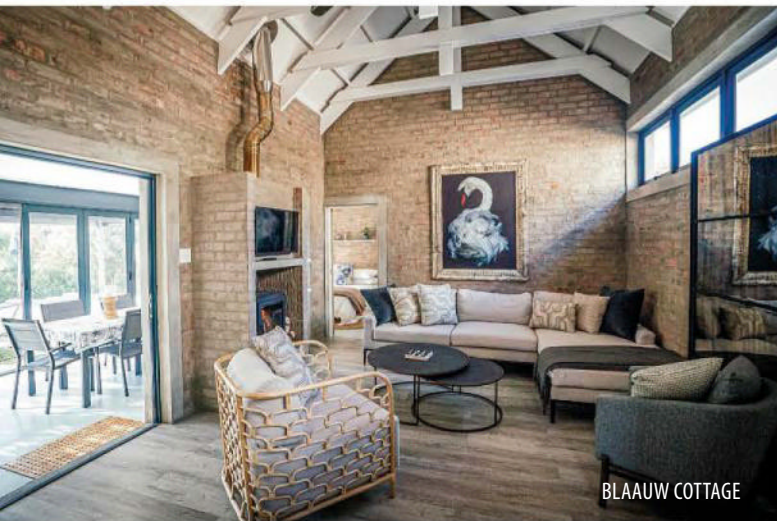
☎ 022 448 1088

The Barn

Foodies simply must work this restaurant into their itinerary. With dishes like Mediterranean fish stew, wood-fired lamb neck and glazed pork chops, it's a firm local favourite. There's a beautiful view over the town, and a jungle gym for the kids to play on.

Where? 34 Church Road;

☎ 071 844 2726



BLAAUW COTTAGE



BLOU PORSELEIN GUEST FARM

IN OTHER WORDS



MAGRIETA MARKUS
PheMia

I'm a big art lover. Gallery 7 on Plein is a community gallery in the tourism office that showcases work by students, up-and-coming artists and semi-professional artists – all of whom live in the Riebeek Valley.



LOURENS BOSCH
Riebeek Valley Tourism

I moved here from Rustenburg about a year ago. From the very beginning, I was welcomed in town and asked to join a 'newbies' group to get to know other new residents.

STAY HERE

FARM STAY

Blou Porselein Guest Farm

This working farm is a great place to stay if you have children. Kids are invited to collect their own eggs for breakfast, and activities include birding, mountain-biking, hiking and fishing. If you're itching to get some mud on your bakkie, there are also 4x4 trails on the farm.

There are two units that sleep three and six people respectively. There's also a campsite on a grassy expanse next to the Berg River.

Where? Porseleinberg Road, Botmansdrif

Rates: Cottages from R350 per person; camping R120 per night.

Contact: 082 378 7595 (Theresa); blouporselein.com

IN TOWN

Blaauw Cottage

This self-catering cottage sleeps four and has the added bonus of a swimming pool. (You'll thank us later!) There's an annex that sleeps two extra people. The kitchen is fully equipped and there's a veranda with

a braai area. The cottage has free Wi-Fi and a smart TV.

Where? 17 Van Riebeeck Street

Rates: From R1 300 per night.

Contact: 083 268 1073 (Ester); blaauw-riebeek.co.za

COUPLE'S RETREAT

Gabriella's Accommodation

Leafy pergolas, ivy-clad walls and beautiful garden terraces: This is what awaits you at this guesthouse.

This quaint escape comprises four rooms and one self-catering cottage. All options sleep two people and offer ample privacy. The rooms are equipped with a bar fridge and coffee-making facilities while the self-catering cottage has a lounge, kitchen and large outside braai area. There is air conditioning and free Wi-Fi.

Where? 24 Main Street

Rates: Rooms from R980 per night; cottage from R1 300 per night.

Contact: 074 207 1328; riebeekguesthouse.co.za

WHAT ELSE?

During **Solo Studios**, 18 selected Riebeek Valley artists open up their working spaces to visitors. Passes also include access to other events like wine tasting, film talks and long-table feasts. This year's Solo Studios takes place from 18 to 20 August. Weekend visitors need to book accommodation early as it tends to run out quickly. solostudios.co.za

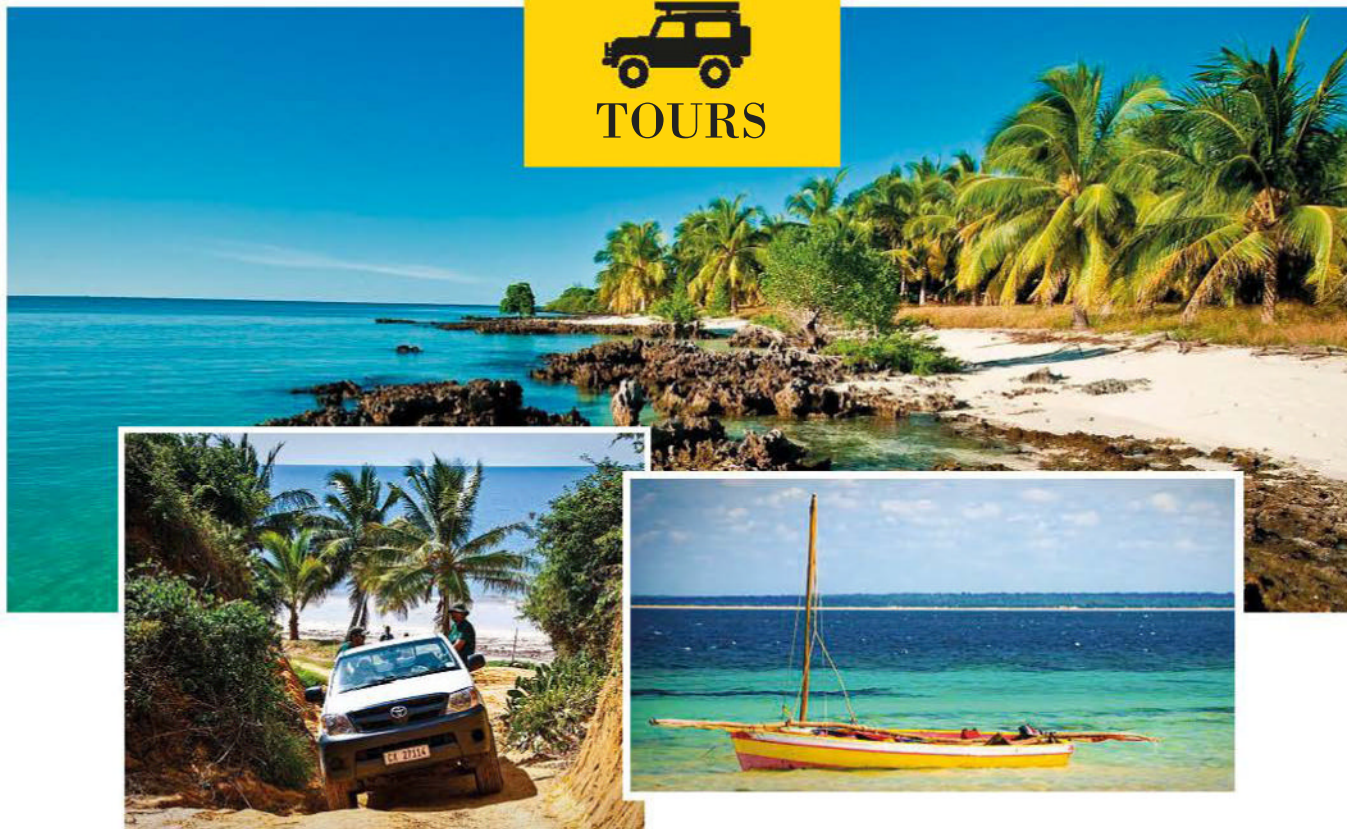
If you prefer beer to wine, head to **Flagship Brew** (082 376 8597) on Church Road. This family-owned microbrewery allows visitors to view the brewing process from start to finish, before sampling the final result.

If you're a country music fan, check out **Azurdee & The Blue River Band's** album, *Kentucky Fried*, on Apple Music or Spotify. You can also watch her live at the **Tin Roof Taverna** (23 Hermon Street; 082 535 6050) in town every Sunday from 1 pm to 3 pm.

Tin Roof belongs to the journalist and author Jacques Pauw and his wife, Sam Rogers. Bring your swimming costume. On hot days, patrons are invited to have a dip.

Riebeek Valley Tourism (022 487 1133; riebeekvalleytourism.co.za) is at 11 Plein Street. Lourens Bosch is the man you'll most likely meet behind the counter. He'll clue you in on the town's art and events scene.

Sources: royalinriebeek.com; riebeek-valley.com



DATES AND RATES

24 June – 3 July 2023

5 – 14 July 2023

18 – 27 September 2023

29 September – 8 October 2023

Duration: 10 days, 9 nights

Cost: R17 545 (chalet and tented accommodation) per person sharing; half-price for children under 10.

THE RATE INCLUDES

- Camp fees and park entrance fees
- Advertised activities
- Tents, cutlery and crockery
- Three meals a day, plus coffee and tea all day while in camp

NOT INCLUDED

- Drinks and snacks
- Out-of-country medical emergency and evacuation insurance
- Border crossing fees and road taxes

WHAT SHOULD I BRING?

- This is a self-drive tour – you are responsible for your vehicle and fuel
- Your own mattress and/or stretcher, plus sleeping bags and pillow
- Camping chairs

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Our accommodation is in en suite chalets at the Star of Mozambique lodge. We'll laze on the beach, snorkel in the clear, warm water and do a day trip to the islands. Bazaruto boasts various endemic butterflies, as well as samango monkeys and suni antelope. The protected reefs are home to dolphins, endangered dugong, game fish, sea turtles and the whale shark – the largest fish in the world. Birdwatchers can look for Madagascar squacco heron, narina trogon, Nyasa seedcracker, green coucal and lesser flamingo.

We will make four overnight stops en route. At each

bush camp, the logistics crew will pitch your tent for you, and take it down again. You will be safe at all times and the team will spare no effort to make sure you're comfortable and – most importantly – that you have a good time.

The tour will be led by an experienced nature conservationist and adventure guide, who will be in constant radio contact with you, imparting a wealth of biological, cultural, historic and off-road driving knowledge. This is not a technical 4x4 trip, but should you experience any difficulty, the Bhejane crew have the know-how and the necessary recovery equipment to assist with off-road problems.

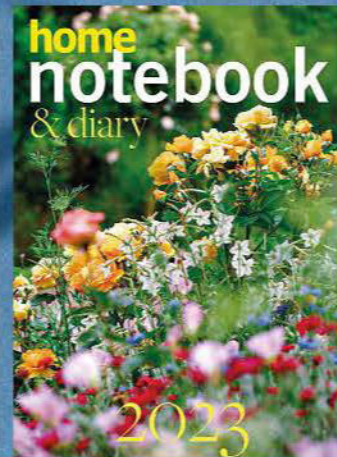
Our bush chef will prepare three meals a day in his mobile kitchen. You can look forward to fresh salads, potjiekos, braai and many other surprises on the menu. The coffee pot will be on the fire from 6 am until late.

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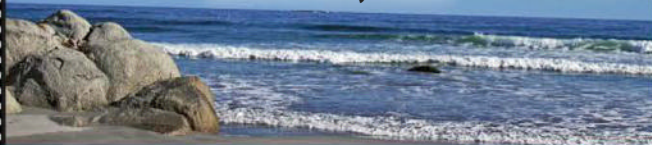
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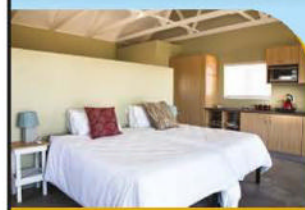
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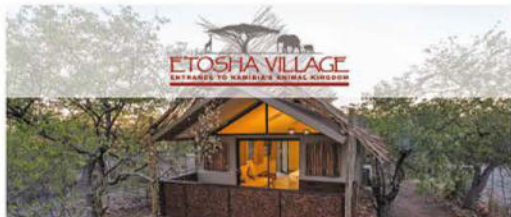
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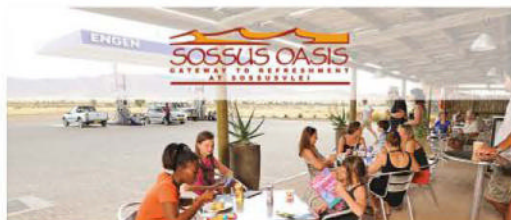
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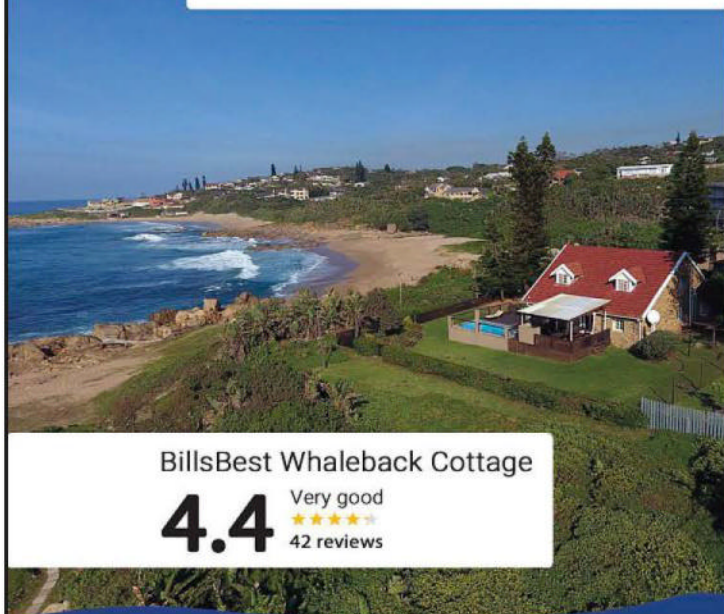
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BIRDS

BY FAANSIE PEACOCK

WHERE IN THE WORLD?

For a birder, nothing is as exciting as seeing a bird you don't know. But many of us make the same mistake: We grab a bird guide and furiously start paging through the illustrations. You should actually ignore those illustrations and rather study the distribution maps. Experienced birders pore over those miniature maps because they're the key to unlocking the identification of the confusing bird.

How do we know a species occurs in one place and not another? Distribution maps are based on data gathered over many years by keen birders like you and me. Initiatives like the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) have built a large distribution database (sabap2.birdmap.africa) with the help of volunteers. Every time you head out on a dirt road, you can compile a list of the birds you see – along with the co-ordinates of their locations – and send it in. You can also update the database in real time by using a smartphone app like BirdLasser (birdlasser.com) – if you have cellphone reception, that is.

Since the start of the SABAP2 project in 2007, more than 17 million entries have been recorded. The international version of this project is known as eBird – hundreds of thousands of birders collect 100 million records annually. Algorithms and (more) experts help to make sure no mistakes creep in.

The species with the most predictable distribution maps are the specialists. Over millennia, they've adapted to a very specific and often limited set of variables. Maybe they need a specific tree, an uncommon sand colour, a certain temperature, or a certain altitude. That's why the location that you encounter a particular species is so important when identifying it: The African reed warbler lives in reed beds, for example, while the identical marsh warbler lives in shrubs, despite its name.

Forests are interesting. There are lots of birds that have a similar distribution map: They live in a band that stretches from the Grootvadersbosch area near Swellendam along the mountains of the southern coast and up the Drakensberg escarpment to Magoebaskloof. There's also usually a small spot in



DRAKENSBURG SISKIN

the highlands of eastern Zimbabwe. But some forest species have an even more restricted range: The green barbet lives in a single forest in KZN – Ngoye Forest north of Mtunzini.

It takes some insight to figure out all these ecological requirements. A long-tailed widowbird occurs in any patch of grassland from Port Alfred to Polokwane, but other species are pickier. Sweet veld grows in regions with a lower rainfall and plants here retain nutrients in their leaves during winter. This is where you'll find South African cliff-swallow and melodious lark. Sour veld grows in regions with a high rainfall and nutrients are stored in the roots during winter. This is the playground of the southern bald ibis, red-winged francolin and pale-crowned cisticola. And some species refuse to set foot (wing?) below 1 850 m, only occurring in high-altitude mountain grasslands – the Drakensberg siskin, for example, and the Drakensberg rock-jumper.

Of course, us humans are continually changing the landscape, mostly to the detriment of the natural world but sometimes to the benefit of certain birds. Many species once limited to cliffs now breed on bridges and high buildings, for example, like rock

martin, peregrine falcon and red-winged starling. Several raptors have expanded their range as people planted more trees, and they're now abundant in areas where they previously didn't occur, including the suburbs.

Another example is waterbirds. These species were previously restricted to natural lakes, pans and rivers – on a map, you can clearly see how their distribution follows the courses of the Vaal and Orange rivers. But these days, dams and waterholes are found everywhere and even sewage works are popular with the birds.

The most difficult distribution maps to draw are those of migrant species, especially those that aren't habitat specialists. Species like Alpine swift, European golden oriole, Montagu's harrier and European nightjar can pop up almost anywhere and are widely spread in low densities. These migrants also seldom stay in one place for more than a few days.

Most of the data for bird atlas projects is collected around cities. Far-flung areas are less studied. Records of the Skeleton Coast, Sperrgebiet and most of Mozambique are still patchy... *There's your excuse to explore!*

ANTON KRUGER/FIREFINCH APP

You can help fight climate change

The earth is warming up and the weather is becoming more unpredictable. In celebration of Earth Day on 22 April, here's how small things you can do at home will make a big difference.

COMPILED BY SOPHIA VAN TAAK

WHAT IS CLIMATE CHANGE?

The earth's weather patterns are becoming more extreme. Floods are more common, and so are long droughts, which lead to devastating fires. The ice shelves around the poles are melting, which is causing the water levels of the oceans to rise. Seawater is getting warmer.

Climate change is also affecting farms where our food is produced – it's either raining too much or not enough. It's a mess!

The **atmosphere** is an important layer of gasses around the earth. One of these gasses is oxygen, which all living things need to stay alive. A gas called ozone protects us from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays, like a shield.

The rays of the sun heat the earth.

What causes climate change?

IN THE PAST

There was less pollution in the atmosphere, which meant that much of the sun's heat was allowed back out into space. This kept the earth cool.

NOW

There are more harmful gasses in the atmosphere. They wrap around the earth like a thick blanket and keep the heat in, like a greenhouse where you grow plants. This is why we call these harmful gasses greenhouse gasses.

For most of humankind's living memory, it was the right temperature for our species to live, and for all the animals and plants that we're used to seeing.

The earth's temperature was nearly 1°C higher in 2022 than it was a century ago. Does that really make such a big difference? Yes! Remember that when you're healthy, your body temperature is usually around 37°C. If it rises by just a degree, you have a fever and it will make you feel ill. Our planet has a permanent fever now.

As the earth's surface and its oceans heat up, global weather patterns will change.

What's the plan? Green energy!

Green energy also uses the earth's resources, like sun, wind and water. These resources are not like coal or oil – they can't run out and the energy they produce doesn't emit greenhouse gasses.

SOLAR POWER

In South Africa, the sun produces lots of energy in the form of heat. This energy dries our clothes on the clothes line, for example. Solar panels absorb this energy from the sun and convert it into electricity.

WIND POWER

When the wind blows, it turns the propeller of a wind turbine. Each propeller is connected to a generator, which produces electricity.

HYDROPOWER

The water in a river or waterfall is used to turn a propeller or waterwheel. The waterwheel is connected to a generator.

BIOFUEL

There are many natural forms of waste in the world – dung from farm animals, sewerage from our homes, wood chips from a lumber mill or paper factory, all the leaves, stems and stubble left on an agricultural field after a harvest... Scientists can use these things to make fuel for our cars and power stations.

Plants like sugarcane, mielies, soy beans, and sunflowers can also be turned into fuel.



GETTY/GALLOIMAGES.COM



How can I help?



WHERE DO GREENHOUSE GASSES COME FROM?

Factories, power stations, vehicles and aeroplanes all use fuels like coal, gas and crude oil. These are called fossil fuels and almost all of them come from mining or oil drilling. Fossil fuels burn well and give off lots of energy, but they also emit greenhouse gasses. There are many kinds of greenhouse gasses, but carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄) cause the most problems. Unless you have an electric car, every time you drive somewhere your car's engine releases these gasses into the atmosphere.

- Save electricity. Turn off lights, televisions and computers when you're not using them.
- Use less hot water by taking shorter showers. Don't let the tap run while you're washing your hands or brushing your teeth.
- Ask your parents to buy you a tree for your next birthday and plant it together. Trees help to remove carbon dioxide from the air.
- Walk or cycle to school if it's safe and close to your home.
- Get as much use out of your things as possible. Every new thing you buy has to be made in a factory somewhere. If your T-shirt is torn, have it fixed – you don't need a new one.
- Food production requires energy, transport and packaging, which usually needs to be recycled when you throw it away. Don't waste food. Start a compost heap in your garden for peels, leaves and food scraps.



Freddie and Antoinette van Rensburg from Pretoria have been married for 51 years. They are retired and travel regularly, but nothing could have prepared them for this encounter in Sabi Sand...

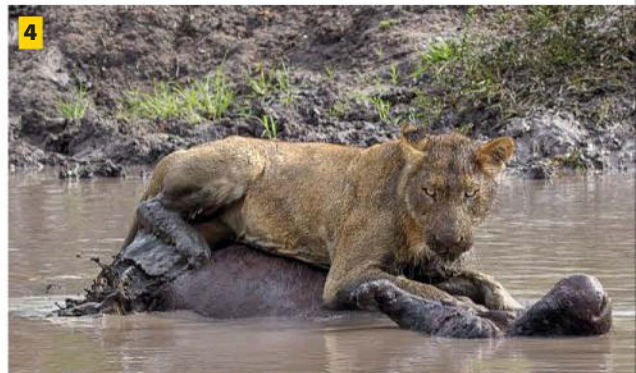
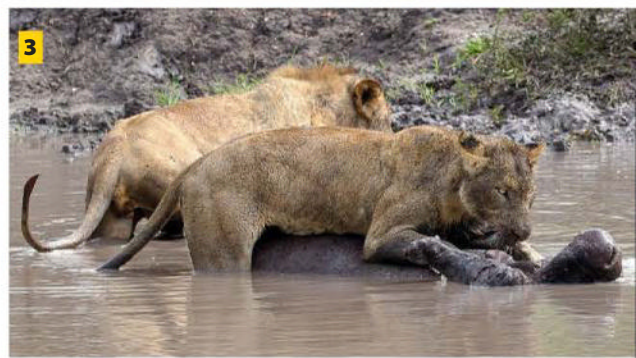
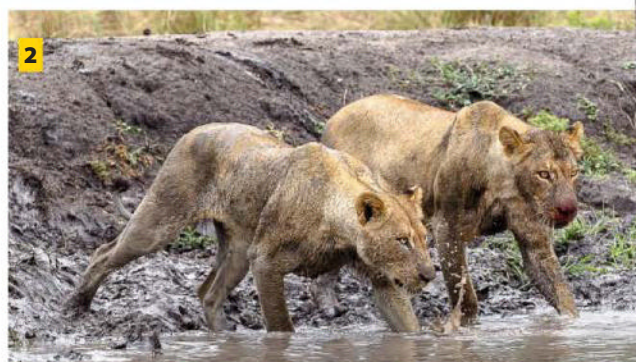
Antoinette and I are both keen photographers. Recently, she has shifted her focus from stills to video. After one of our tours, we go through our photos and videos and select the best to make a 30-minute highlight reel with a great soundtrack. When you combine video and photographs, you have a better appreciation of the landscape you were in.

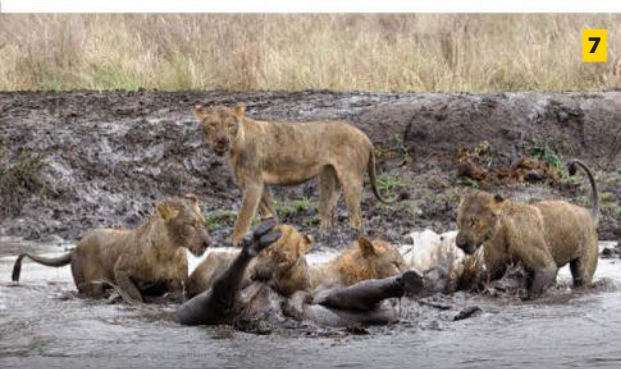
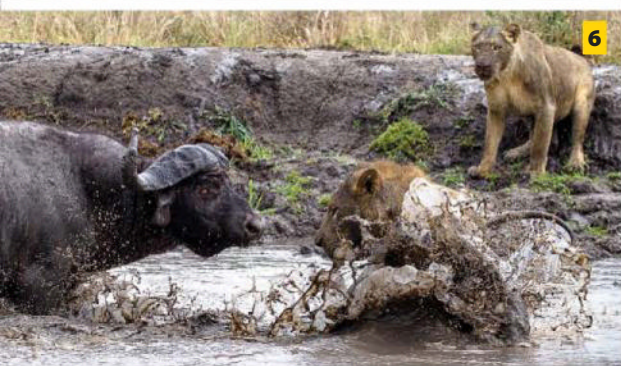
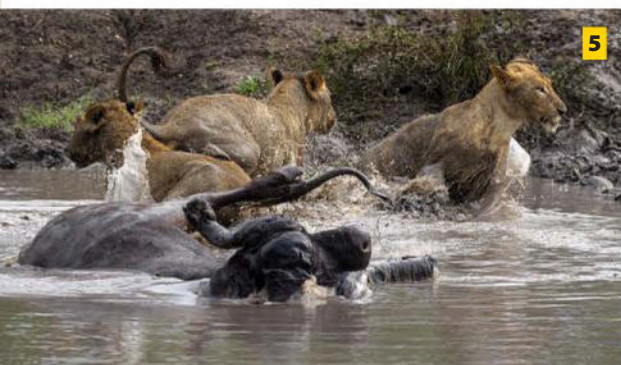
We usually travel on our own, but occasionally we join a group. Almost every year since 2008, we've done a photography tour with Tusk Photo at Elephant Plains Lodge in Sabi Sand, next to the Kruger Park.

During our visit in October 2022, we were out on a game drive at about 5.30 am. We were 11 guests in two game-viewing vehicles, accompanied by our Tusk photography guides Dawie Jacobs and Clint Ralph.

The vehicle we were in followed leopard tracks while the other vehicle drove in the direction of a pride of lions that were stalking a herd of buffalo. We found the leopard and took photos until around 7.30 am, when the other group informed us that the lions were moving in on the buffalo.

When we arrived at 8.10 am, the pride of eight lions had already attacked a buffalo bull





next to an earth dam. As is often the case, a lioness had leapt onto the buffalo's back. The buffalo's best chance at survival was to enter the dam in the hope that the lions would be less agile in the water. **1**

Two of the other lions joined the lioness in her attack. **2** Together they managed to bring the buffalo down in the water **3**, but he still had some fight left and kept his nose in the air **4** while gathering his strength.

The lions couldn't reach the buffalo's throat – each time they tried, the bull fended them off with his horns and by standing up. **5**

Two lions tried to launch an attack from behind, but the buffalo whipped his head around and the cats had to retreat. **6** It was remarkable to see how strong the lionesses were. When the buffalo was brought down, one of them tried to drag him to shore by his tail. She managed to drag him for about a metre or two before the bull got up yet again...

Around 8.45 am the lions started to gain the upper hand, but the buffalo was still alive when I took this photo. **7** It was a privilege to see these gladiators of the Lowveld locked in battle – the dam was the Colosseum where they demonstrated their power.

We returned to the kill later that evening to take photos with a spotlight **8**, which allowed us to enjoy the next episode in this saga: the interaction between the lions and hyenas. What an experience!

WIN!

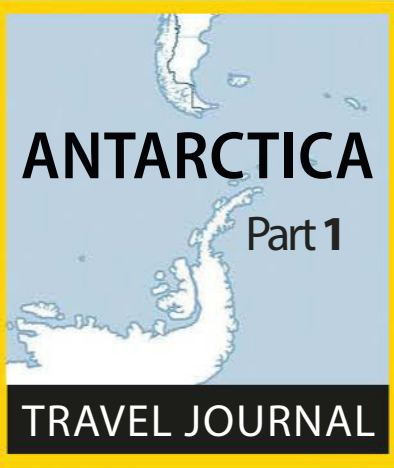
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At a height of 1 326 m, Monte Olivia is almost 300 m taller than Table Mountain. This is one of the prominent peaks just north of the Argentinian port city of Ushuaia where Toast's voyage began.

Set sail for Antarctica!

At the bottom of the world lies a once-in-a-lifetime destination . . .
But first, on his way to the Great White Continent, **Toast Coetzer**
detoured to the Falkland Islands and ticked off a handful of lifers.





Guts Swanepoel from Pangolin Photo Safaris was wearing shorts when he landed in Ushuaia, even though it's still pretty cold there in early summer. Besides Antarctica tourists, who depart from the port, Ushuaia also attracts tourists who enjoy skiing in the mountains or hiking in nearby Tierra del Fuego National Park.

The clouds parted as the plane descended, revealing snow-capped mountains, forests in ravines and water glinting in the sun: the Tierra del Fuego archipelago in Argentina, at the southern end of South America.

A new world.

Guts Swanepoel and I looked at each other. It felt unreal to be travelling to Antarctica. Guts was still dressed in shorts and vellies. Two days before, he'd woken up in Kasane, Botswana, and I had brushed my teeth in Cape Town. We'd met up in Joburg and flew to Doha in the Middle East, then to São Paulo in Brazil, and on to Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. We slept there last night – jetlagged but not so tired that we couldn't try their world-famous steak – and this morning we caught the last flight to Ushuaia, the city where our nearly three-week Antarctica voyage would begin.

The plane dipped lower and started to line up with the runway. Now the mountains were above us and the water was suddenly very close...

The strait below was the Beagle Channel, named after the *HMS Beagle*, the ship that carried Charles Darwin through here in 1833. In two days, we'd navigate the same channel into the open ocean and embark on our own journey.

The plane landed with a firm nod. The airport was attractive, with wooden beams and big glass windows. A short taxi ride took us to the Albatros Hotel in midtown, just across the road from the harbour. It was no longer shorts weather and Guts changed into something warmer.

Guts is the co-owner of Pangolin Photo Safaris, known for their wildlife photography tours in Botswana. Occasionally he also leads specialist tours to other in-demand destinations, like the Maasai Mara, Galápagos Islands and Antarctica. Guts is actually an Antarctica veteran with more than 30 tours to the coldest continent under his belt.

In 2018, *go!* and Pangolin joined forces to offer a photography tour to Antarctica. The plan was to do the tour in 2019, but the Russian ship we would have used was unexpectedly recalled and the tour had to be postponed. This setback was followed by two years of limited travel during the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, in November 2022, the tour could finally take place. I had to pinch myself because I had started to think that my dream of going to Antarctica was never going to materialise.

Guts and I had about 20 guests who would be joining us. Some were from South Africa, others from the USA, Switzerland and Australia. Our Pangolin group would link up with a bigger American contingent of photographers travelling with Muench Workshops – in total we would be about 80 people.

Although the Antarctic Peninsula was our main destination, we were also going to visit the Falkland Islands and the mythical South Georgia Island (see the map on page 127).

Guts and some of the guests had travelled together before and were old friends. As the guests arrived at the Albatros Hotel they dropped by our room, which doubled as our office. Each guest received a Pangolin expedition jacket and beanie, a *go!* T-shirt and a Leatherpress notebook.

In-between all the tour admin, we made time to dine at Ushuaia's restaurants – they serve everything from mutton spit roast to seafood pizza and crab meat. (Yes, those enormous sea crabs that look like something from *Star Wars*.)

Then, finally, the day came...

Our home at sea, the MV Ushuaia

Although it had snowed the previous day, we departed on a beautifully clear spring day. These tours are only offered in the warmer months, from October to March, because the winter weather can be rough.

Early in the afternoon, we crossed the street and passed through the security gate at the harbour. The white-and-blue *MV Ushuaia* wasn't a big ship – about 85 m long and 15 m wide. Most of our bags had already been brought to the dock by bus so a sniffer dog could do its job. The air was filled with excitement as we queued to go on board. Guts moved up and down the line to talk to the guests. They included the Van Zyl family from Gauteng, Ida and Gustav Bester from Stellenbosch, Diana and Peter Franklin from Simon's Town, Josie Norfolk from Melkbosstrand, Gisela Bieri from Switzerland, Kristyn Taylor from Australia, and the McMillans and the Drakes from the USA.

Our passports were collected – we'd get them back at the end of the tour. There wouldn't be any immigration officials where we were going.

The other important documents in my hand were a Covid-19 vaccination certificate and the negative Covid-19 test I'd done earlier in the day. We couldn't go on board without them.

Late afternoon, the *MV Ushuaia* slid away and made a slow-motion turn until the bow pointed towards the open sea. Then the engines deep inside the hull roared to life and thrust us forward. Everyone was on deck to take photos of the mountains around Ushuaia.

Soon we were called inside for the necessary training in emergency procedures. We got to know each other better as we struggled to pull on our life jackets and waddled through narrow halls to where the lifeboats were located.

I'm not built for life at sea. I have to take seasickness medication before I can even set foot on a ship. Guts and I shared a cabin – he slept on the top bunk and I was on the bottom. The sea was stormy during the night and Guts showed me a handy trick: Put your life jacket under your side so you don't roll around as much. The beds also had a rail on the open side (similar to a hospital bed) so you don't fall out like a sack of potatoes.

The first morning was off to a bad start – I'd barely made it to the living area of the ship for a cup of coffee when I had to return to the cabin to lie down. I was green around the gills until 11 am and then dared to go up again when I felt the pills kick in.

The sea eventually calmed down and we had a chance to take photos of seabirds, like the omnipresent southern giant petrels that followed the ship like egrets trailing a buffalo through tall grass, and black-and-white Cape petrels that sometimes swept low over the waves in small groups. We even saw our first wandering albatross!



From top to bottom: The so-called Post Office at the End of the World is in Tierra del Fuego National Park and can be visited during a day trip from Ushuaia. The *MV Ushuaia* was built in 1970 and apparently did duty as an American spy ship back in the day. Guts and Toast in their cabin on board the ship.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The tour group arrives at West Point Island. Zimbabwean Irven Mutuna found work in Stanley as a mechanic. The *MV Ushuaia* moored off Carcass Island. A kelp goose rootles around on the beach at Carcass Island. A black-browed albatross nesting on West Point Island. A southern rockhopper penguin preens itself at Saunders Island. Thies Matzen and Kicki Ericson are the temporary caretakers of West Point Island.



Richard van Zyl, Pretoria

While in Ushuaia, we hired a car and drove through nearby Tierra del Fuego National Park. We visited the Post Office at the End of the World, but I would've loved to have stayed longer and done some of the hikes.

In town we visited the Old Prison and Maritime Museum, which depicts the history of this notorious Argentine prison which was used from 1902 to 1947. But my favourite museum in town was the Historia Fueguina Thematic Gallery, which has an interactive format displaying the history of the region as well as some Antarctic expeditions.

Albatrosses and penguins

By sunrise on the third day, we'd reached the westernmost tip of the Falkland Islands – West Point Island – where a colony of black-browed albatrosses breed. It was our first outing and we weren't yet familiar with how things worked.

Fortunately, the members of the Antarpplly Expeditions team were always on hand to explain the next step. The team consisted of mostly younger Argentinians with the experienced Monika Schillat as expedition leader. All decisions were made by Monika, in consultation with the ship's captain Sergio Osiroff (also Argentinian – most of the officers were from Argentina and Uruguay, while the kitchen staff hailed from Chile). The weather played a role in every decision and passenger safety was the number one priority. We had to wait for the wind to die down before we could go ashore in inflatable boats known as Zodiacs; the waves had to be small enough to safely disembark in the shallows.

Monika and some of her team members went to the landing place first to check the conditions. We gathered in the rec room in the meantime. We were all dressed in water boots, water-repellent trousers and rain jackets. Even on a clear day, you can get wet on the boat. Your camera gear also has to be stored in a waterproof bag.

We headed down to a lower deck as soon as we received the message that the conditions were favourable. There, we climbed down to water level and were helped into a boat. We'd washed and disinfected our boots beforehand: Precautions are taken to ensure you don't take any alien species from the ship to the island and vice versa. You'd hate to be the one to accidentally plant a khaki bush where it doesn't belong!

Finally, it was my turn. With the drone of the outboard engine in my ears and the sea spray and wind against my cheeks, it felt like my adventure had begun at last!

Like most of the small islands that make up the Falklands, West Point is someone's farm. (They usually farm with sheep, sometimes cattle.) We entered the bay and I noticed two houses, a storehouse and other smaller buildings. The trees around the houses all grew away from the wind.

Guts introduced me to Thies Matzen, the current caretaker of West Point. He knew Thies from a previous visit. Then we walked a few kilometres to the breeding colony of black-browed albatrosses. This is the other reason why tours to this region occur in summer: It's mating and breeding season for everything that moves.

The ground was covered in short grass – it felt like

we were on a golf course. Thies passed us in a Land Rover a few times, transporting some of the guests for whom the walk would be too strenuous.

I put my camera to work. Every single bird I saw was a lifer, although some were locally as common as Egyptian geese. I took photos of a beautiful white upland goose, and also of another species, a ruddy-headed goose.

The albatrosses breed among tufts of grass at a place called Devil's Nose. The sea and the wind were roaring in unison and it was quite a sight to see the big birds sweep in at speed, dive and turn, then hit the brakes and land on a nest, which is basically a tower of mud. Southern rockhopper penguins also breed among the albatrosses – they all looked a little grimy, as if they'd wiped their hands on their aprons. These poor penguins have to walk all the way up a steep slope from the sea – the ocean was about 100 m below us.

By lunchtime we were back on the ship and we travelled the short distance to Carcass Island – apparently the name dates from the whaling period. We went ashore again and received a warm welcome from the local residents: We were served tea and biscuits; a whole table full. The people here are mostly of Chilean descent, but there was also an older British man.

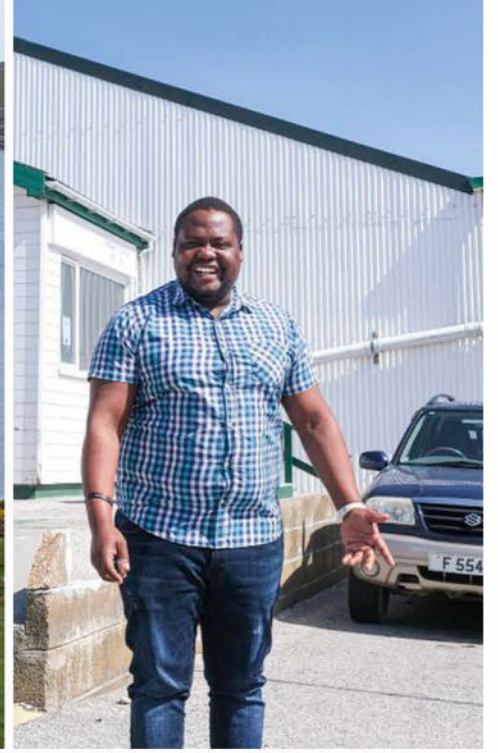
On the beach in front of the house, we took photos of Magellanic oystercatcher and striated caracara – the latter is one of only a few raptors found on the Falkland Islands. It looks like a cross between a kite and a smallish eagle.

We were back on the *MV Ushuaia* at sunset. It had been a special day and the weather played ball.

We sailed during the night and reached Saunders Island the next morning. Owner David Pole-Evans and his sister Biffo Tuson made up our welcoming committee.

The group of photographers crossed a low sandy neck. Gentoo penguins had built their nests on a windswept, narrowed section of a peninsula. More penguins walked out of the water and onto the white beach – gentoos, but also Magellanic penguins (which look almost identical to African penguins), southern rockhoppers and even the odd king penguin.

On a rocky slope, southern rockhopper penguins nested among imperial shags, a type of cormorant that looks like a white-breasted cormorant but is slightly more flamboyant in the make-up department. The wind blew but it was sunny and the sea was a surprising turquoise colour.



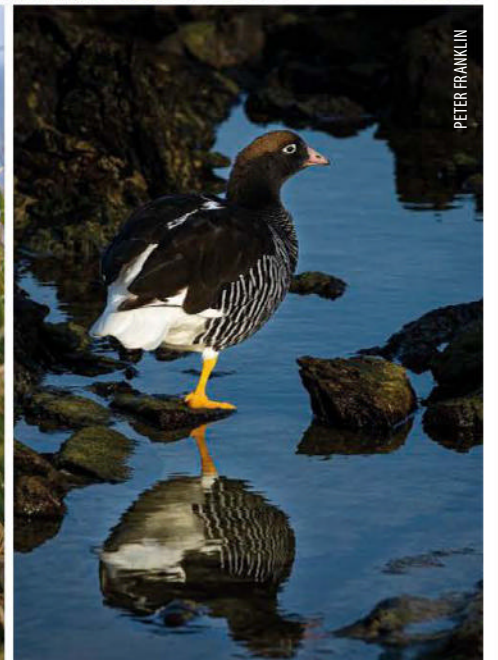
DIANA FRANKLIN



RICHARD VAN ZYL



IDA BESTER



PETER FRANKLIN



Rachael and her mother, Judy van Zyl, Kempton Park

Rachael: I enjoyed that we were on a more rustic ship – although not in the same league as the ships the old explorers used. The MV Ushuaia had an authenticity about it. The cabin was comfortable and I thought the bathroom was well designed. The food was really good and I was impressed by the variety, particularly the desserts.

Getting off on the islands for excursions was a relief because the days on open water were hard for me – I battled with seasickness. I took tablets and also wore pressure bracelets, which helped. On rough sea days I lived on green apples and Coke to counter the nausea.

Judy: During our visit to Stanley, Rachael and I went to the Christ Church Cathedral. The curator showed us the needlepoint cushions made for the church centenary (it was built in 1892), which have never been used because they were considered too beautiful, so they are on display in the church instead.

At the Historic Dockyard Museum, I found the displays about the 1982 Falklands War interesting because I can clearly remember the news around it at the time. Walking around Stanley felt so very British – the supermarket might as well have been a Tesco! We joined many of our fellow passengers at the Victory Bar for lunch. Games of darts and pool were on the go while we enjoyed a cider. I had fun browsing in the curio shops – there were lots of local Falklands wool products, but sadly my suitcase space was limited!



About town in Stanley

Most of the roughly 3 500 people who live in the Falklands call the capital Stanley home. Very few want to brave life on one of the outposts. We explored Stanley on our last day in the Falklands. We could choose to walk the streets, visit the museum, shop for souvenirs or order fish and chips in one of the pubs.

The Falklands are a British territory and Stanley felt like a village somewhere in Scotland. Argentina also has a claim to the islands – they call them Islas Malvinas – and they invaded in 1982 in the hopes of driving the Brits out. They lost that war, which is still a touchy subject for most Argentinians.

The excellent Historic Dockyard Museum depicts the war with photos, video and exhibitions of uniforms and arms. A large section of the museum is also dedicated to polar explorers. I spent more than an hour inside.

Later I walked up the coastal road on my own. The wind battered my side. Every second vehicle that passed was a Land Rover – this must be the place with the most Landies per capita in the world!

I ran into Guts on my way back. He was smiling from ear to ear, holding up a numberplate. He collects numberplates and had convinced someone at a local garage to give him an old one from the Falklands. It would travel back to Botswana with him.

Before we returned to the ship late in the afternoon, we headed to the supermarket. The

coffee machine on the ship made a horrible brew, as we discovered to our dismay on our first morning on board. I'm not fussy, but you need to start the day with a good cup of coffee! So, Guts and I bought a French press and about six bags of coffee. Walking into the dining hall with a pot of fresh filter coffee is a surefire way to make new friends...

Not everyone enjoyed the day in town. Some guests were only on the tour to photograph wildlife and they weren't interested in the town. But to me it was important to get a feel for the people who live there. The brief encounters with farmers like David and his sister Biffo on Saunders Island enhanced the experience. I've met many a Karoo and Bushveld farmer in my time, now I also know what you look like when you farm on an island among penguins. You can't even drive off in your bakkie because you'll end up in the sea!

The ship cruised into darkness and the land faded to the west. The MV Ushuaia was now headed east, south-east, to South Georgia Island. The penguins, albatrosses and other birds I'd seen up to then had already made this a once-in-a-lifetime excursion. Yet Guts said this was only a taste of what was to come. Because on South Georgia... Don't worry, he said, you'll see...

Read about Toast's visit to South Georgia Island in the next issue.



Opposite page, clockwise from left: The Christ Church Cathedral is a landmark in Stanley. Eileen Davies works in the Historic Dockyard Museum in Stanley. Siblings Biffo Tuson and David Pole-Evans are the owners of Saunders Island.

Above: Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How to get there? There are currently no direct flights between South Africa and Argentina. Toast flew to Doha with Qatar Airways, and on to Buenos Aires via Brazil. In Argentina, he used the local airline, Aerolíneas, to fly to Ushuaia. Return flights from Johannesburg 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 or Chile



(from Punta Arenas) and only visit the Antarctic Peninsula. Our tour was a longer expedition of close to three weeks.

Cost: Burn through some of your inheritance! 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're based in Kasane and you can cruise on the Chobe River or visit Moremi and the Okavango Delta with them. They also have photography tours elsewhere in the world. Visit pangolinphoto.com for more information.



TOAST'S GEAR

Fujifilm X-S10 with a Fujifilm 18–55 mm lens

What do we have here?

The Fujifilm X-S10 is a mirrorless, interchangeable-lens camera. The 26.1-megapixel sensor ensures you can capture great detail and the photos are processed at a high speed so you never have to wait before you can take the next shot.

If you like shooting in manual mode, the X-S10 makes it simple – every button or setting is within easy reach of your thumb or forefinger. The ISO ranges from 160 to 12 800, which makes photography possible in almost all light conditions.

What's it suitable for? It's an excellent camera for general travel photography – it will even work as a hiking camera because it's so light. On this tour, I used it to take behind-the-scenes photos on the ship and for street photography in Stanley in the Falkland Islands.

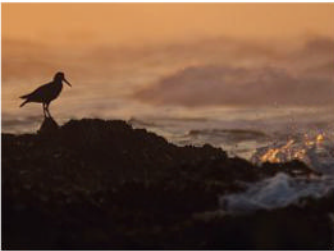
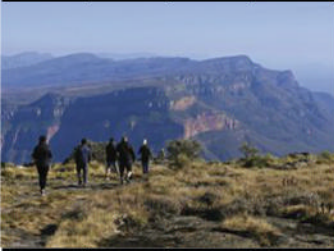
I took many of the portraits of my fellow travellers with it, especially on the 55 mm side of the lens spectrum. However, it's also a good landscape camera when you use the wider end of the lens range (18 mm).

Cost: R18 000 for the camera body, R8 600 for the lens at ormsdirect.co.za. You can also buy the camera and lens together for R23 900 at outdoorphoto.co.za. For more info, visit fujifilm-x.co.za

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

BY GERDA ENGELBRECHT

SOLUTION ON PAGE 108

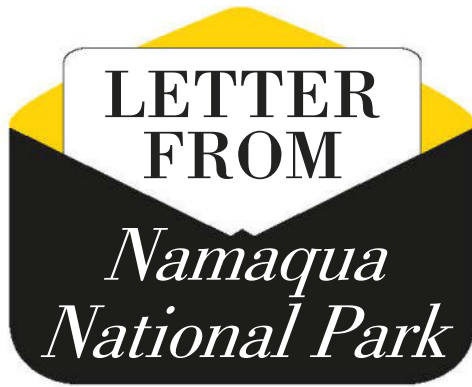
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When you camp on the Namaqualand coast, you can forget about ice-cream kiosks and crowds. The water is cold and the beaches are empty. So why does **Esma Marnewick** return year after year?

What do you *do* all day? people ask when they hear we're off for a week of wild camping on the West Coast. I'm not talking about the "tame" West Coast around Langebaan, Velddrif and Dwarskersbos, but further north in Namaqualand between the Groen and Spoeg rivers in the national park.

The only "facility" is a (well-maintained) pit toilet. You have to bring everything else you'll need: food, firewood, lights, water... A holiday here isn't like other seaside visits. The closest you'll get to a soft serve is a seagull dropping. And the sea is icy cold. We've had four holidays here and I can't remember swimming once.

So, what makes us return? I ponder this question under our camping gazebo, looking at the sun shimmer on the sea.

The days don't start off sunny. Mornings are often misty. The sea is a choppy cacophony of grey and white. Watch the waves and you'll see shiny black bodies in the water – there's a seal colony further north. The seals are always present, sometimes hunting, other times at play.

The mist usually burns off around 10am and we head out to explore the nearby coves along well-trodden paths behind the beach, occasionally scrambling over rocks. The douvygies are still asleep at this time, but they'll open their eyes when the sun shines brighter. Pink vygies lend some colour to the brown scrubland, intermittently broken by splashes of orange lichen. The sea is blue, blue, blue.

Three sandwich terns and a few crowned cormorants are basking in the sun on the big boulder at the edge of the third cove from our campsite. In the calm bay, a Hartlaub's gull bobs on the water. As we approach, a whimbrel takes off. (Or is it a Eurasian curlew?) A flock of sanderlings swoops past and a family of yellow canaries rises inland.

By now I know that the same birds will be here tomorrow, so I can make sure about that whimbrel.

"Dolphins!" one of the kids calls out. We sit and watch them in the waves for half an hour.

Afterwards, we follow the jeep track back to our campsite. Now is the time to keep a keen eye on the veld. Jackal buzzards often perch on raised outcrops to scan the landscape for prey. I spot something fuzzy and upright... another one... and another one. Meerkats! How strange this scene must look to a jackal buzzard in the sky: The four of us and the eight meerkats checking each other out.

I whistle and more heads pop out. Nice to meet you!

After lunch and a nap, it's low tide and time to inspect the rock pools. We walk along the rocks close to shore. The pools are alive. Klipfish dart; limpets, starfish, sea urchins and seaweed show off their varied hues; anemones wave from narrow crevices and kelp gulls squawk overhead.

On the way back to camp, I see a figure on the rocks. I struggle to make out what it is. Like the first Neanderthals who realised they were not alone on earth, it dawns on me that the figure is human.

I give a friendly nod and settle under the gazebo again. It's time to prepare for the highlight of the day: sunset. Cormorants, gulls and sandpipers flap home to their coves, as do the seals to their colony and the meerkats to their burrows.

Rays of sun pierce the clouds like spotlights sweeping over the dark sea. A flock of big birds flies in. Are they more cormorants? No, they seem too clumsy and awkward, with a few birds breaking away from the group like a loose curl from a tight bun. Flamingos! Where are they going? The mouth of the Orange River, Walvis Bay, the Bitter River marsh nearby?

Maybe it's clear to you now, but *this* is why we're already making plans to return next year. Scenes like these. Days of exploration. The roar of the ocean that drowns out all the other noise in your head.

And even though there aren't any of the usual holiday activities on offer here, at the end of each day I can't help but think of that famous Calvin and Hobbes collection: *The days are just packed.*

*After lunch and a nap, it's low tide
and time to inspect the rock pools.
We walk along the rocks close
to shore. The pools are alive.*

In Addo Elephant National Park in the Eastern Cape, the spekboom thickets are so dense that you can sometimes hear the elephants moving near your vehicle without ever catching a glimpse of them.

A waterhole is your best bet if you want to photograph them from up close. The Marion Barea waterhole pictured here is in the central part of the park, in a clearing where several game paths intersect.

PICTURE SOPHIA VAN TAAK

Read more about Addo in the new *go! Wild Places*
– the 2023 edition will be on shelf by 21 April.





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