

go! Karoo

2024

ROAD TRIPPING

- Farm stalls of Route 62
- Gravel mountain passes
- Take the dogs... to Loxton!

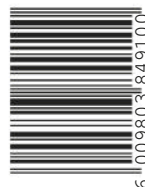
43 great
places
to stay
*from Graaff-Reinet
to the Tankwa*

Get that goodness!

+

Hardemans Karoo Go back to a simpler time in a corbelled house
Ladismith Author Sally Andrew's magical mountain hideaway
Baviaanskloof Hike the Leopard Trail and vanish from the world
Calvinia Meet Frans Hugo, 91-year-old newspaper editor

RSA R135
N\$135 (Namibia)





MTN Art Collection

— CONVERSATION EXCHANGE

The arts are essential for fostering creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. In response to these multifaceted benefits, the **MTN Foundation** has collaborated with **Modern Art Projects South Africa (MAPSA)** to prioritise the arts sector as one of MTN South Africa's focal areas for national priorities under corporate social investment.

The **CONVERSATION EXCHANGE** is a series of collaborations with **MAPSA** through which selected works from the **MTN Art Collection** are brought to the small town of Richmond to engage with the **MAPSA Contemporary Art Collection** and involve the community.

Currently, the **IMAGES OF HUMAN RIGHTS PORTFOLIO** is on display at the **Ruach Elohim Church**, and a selection from **Willem Boshoff's** influential ***Blind Alphabet (Babery to Bigeminate)*** is installed at **MAPSA** to engage in a new multi-disciplinary, digital dialogue.

MAPSA is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting contemporary art in South Africa and uplifting the small community of Richmond.



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QUESTION

The beautiful corbelled house next to Carnarvon's museum was demolished on a farm in the area and then rebuilt brick by brick.

Who was the builder?

(The answer is in this Go! Karoo)

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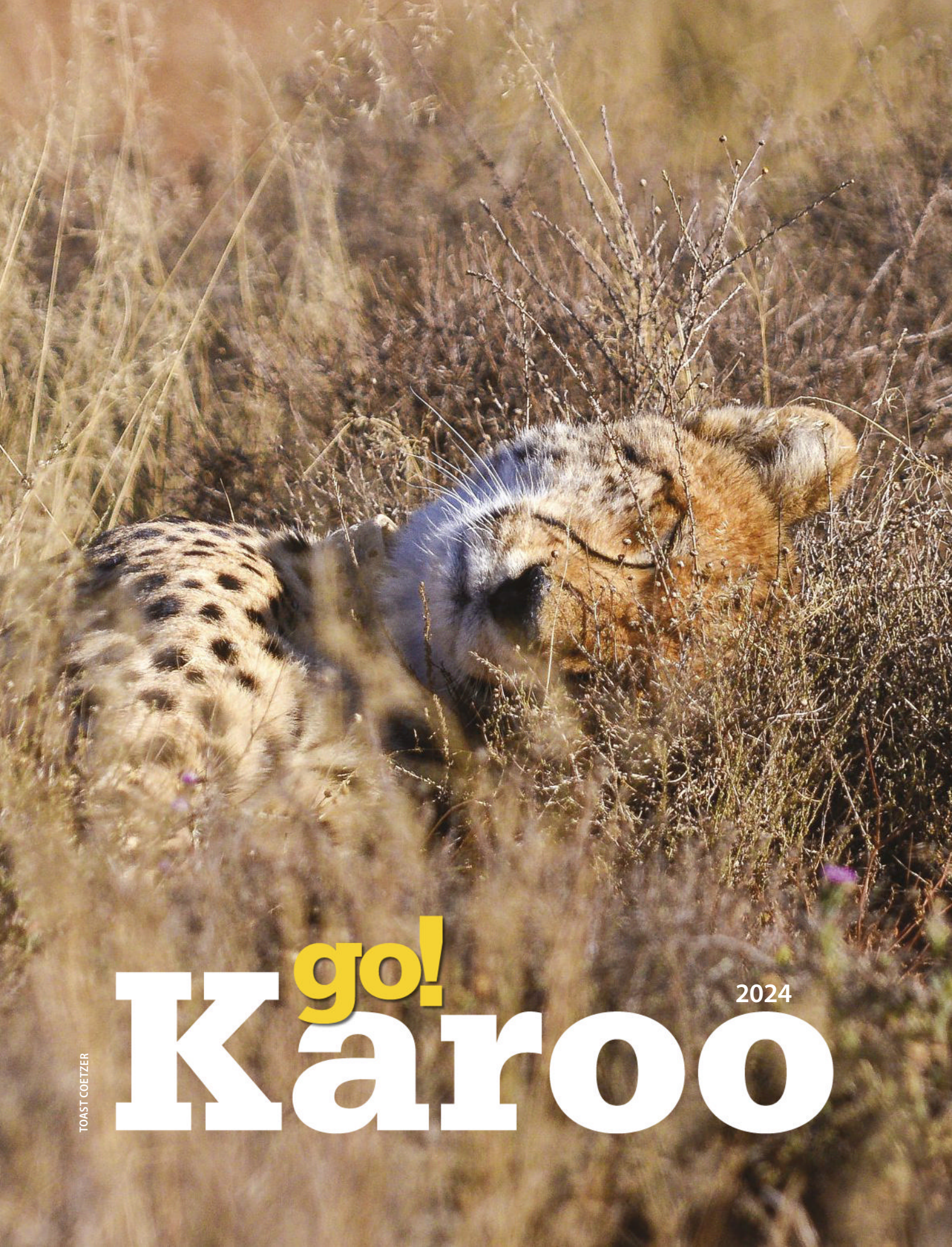
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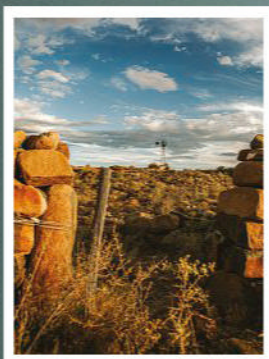


TOAST COETZER

go! **Karoo**

2024

CONTENTS



COVER PICTURE
WILLEM VAN DER BERG
Instagram: @veldstories

A stone-wall kraal and a windmill on the farm Osfontein, Carnarvon district.

8 ED'S LETTER

12 CHECK THIS!

Jan-Hendrik Swiegers was there when the Nqweba Dam near Graaff-Reinet overflowed for the first time in more than a decade.

14 COLUMN

You don't really know a windmill until you've repaired one, says Willem van der Berg.

16 PASSES & POORTS

The rugged escarpments of the Nuweveld and Roggeveld mountains stretch across the Karoo like the wall of a stone kraal. Willem van der Berg drove as many dirt road passes and poorts in the region as possible.

26 SALLY ANDREW & BOWEN BOSHIER

Julienne du Toit and Chris Marais visited author Sally Andrew and her partner, the artist Bowen Boshier, near Ladismith – and got tuned!

32 FARM STALLS OF THE LITTLE KAROO

Route 62 is one of the most popular tourism routes in the country. Next time you're travelling in the area, stop at one of these nine farm stalls and restaurants, as chosen by Jac Kritzinger.

44 FRANS HUGO, NEWSPAPERMAN

Every Thursday, Frans Hugo (91) drives about 1 200 km from his home in Calvinia to deliver newspapers as far afield as Prieska. Toast Coetzer joined him.

52 CORBELLED HOUSES

When you farm in a landscape where no trees grow, you have no choice but to build your house out of stone. Willem van der Berg went in search of the soul of the corbelled building.

This page: Driving from Sutherland towards Ouberg Pass.

Previous page: Cheetah, Samara Karoo Reserve (📞 samara.co.za)

60 ROAD TRIP

Have you ever heard of the sculptures of dancers on a farm outside Loxton, made by the artist Marcella de Boom? Iselle Combrink and her three dogs went looking...

70 LEOPARD TRAIL

Karoo meets fynbos on this spectacular slackpacking trail in the Baviaanskloof. Willem van der Berg recommends you make your booking for next year now.

78 PORTFOLIO

Prince Albert's Samantha Reinders shares a selection from her long-term photography project, *The Land of Begin Again*.

88 MAP OF THE KAROO

Orientate yourself using our map of the entire region covered by this guide, from the Tankwa in the west to the Camdeboo in the east.

90 STAY HERE

Our writers hit the road to find great places to stay in the Karoo.

92 Heritage farms in the Eastern

Cape: Julienne du Toit and Chris Marais highlight 10 stately old guest farms.

104 Sam Reinders's Karoo

favourites: Looking for something stylish in the middle of nowhere? These are for you...

112 Ceres and Tankwa Karoo:

Toast Coetzer stays at a selection of self-catering places and gets a flat tyre, of course.

127 LETTER FROM BEAUFORT WEST

The Karoo National Park is the perfect place to teach your kids about perspective, says Esma Marnewick.

130 KAROO AT ITS BEST

Meet Luthando Ndabeni, the man who makes Cradock more colourful every day.

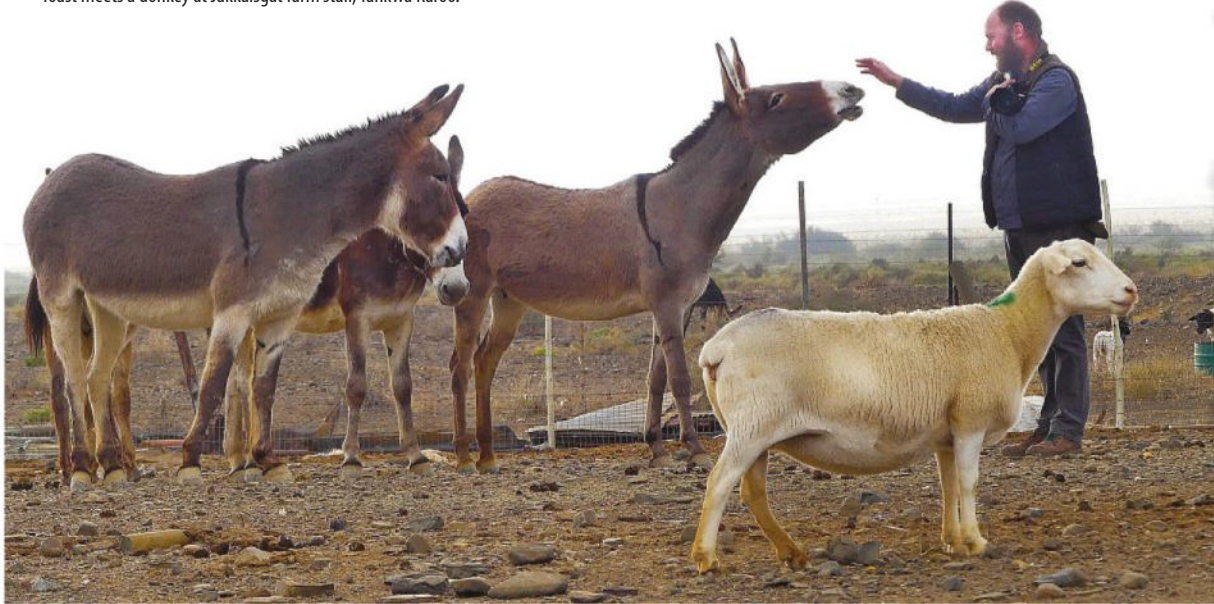
In the house, I follow the soft flicker of candles. There are no light bulbs here to blind you to the perks of a slow-paced life. When I go to bed, the corbelled house folds a protective hand around my dreams.

– Willem van der Berg, p 52



EDITOR'S LETTER

Toast meets a donkey at Jakkalsgat farm stall, Tankwa Karoo.



CAROL BRAMMAGE

There's something special about Stuurmansfontein. In his article on page 52, Willem van der Berg writes that Stuurmansfontein is at the heart of the Karoo's corbelled house story. In a way, it represents the story of the Karoo's pioneers, which is also a tale of hardship. Those early trekboers had no choice but to build stone houses with strange domed roofs in this inhospitable landscape because there were no trees to use for roof beams.

But to me, Stuurmansfontein tells another story: one of silence. Spend a night and you'll be stripped of the luxuries that electricity brings and immersed in a deep stillness. You're in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in the Carnarvon district. There are no other vehicles. When you switch off your engine you'll hear absolutely nothing for a moment, and that moment will stretch on until you start your car again and continue with your journey.

Silence is expensive. You can't buy it at a boutique store, or online. No courier will drop it off at your front door. You have to go looking for it – at places like Stuurmansfontein.

When it's quiet, you see yourself better. Not in a mirror, not on a selfie camera. No, you put the palm of your hand on a sun-baked rock and wait for the earth to send you a pulse. You put your ear to the bark of an old karee tree and listen until you can hear your own heartbeat. That's how silence walks, how it runs, how it sings: It reminds you who you are.

In this issue of *go! Karoo* we want to introduce you to silence. Visit a guest farm far from home. (There are more

than 40 great places to stay listed in this guide.) Get dust on those fancy vellies you bought. Put your cellphone on airplane mode. Swim in a farm dam with the *platannas*.

Silence is an old thing, more familiar to people who grew up in a time when they still rode horses to school. Which is why we tell the story of 91-year-old newspaperman Frans Hugo (p 44), who remembers all of that, and more.

Reading is a friend of silence. Disappear into several stories by Willem van der Berg: about windmills (p 14), the passes of the Roggeveld and Nuweveld mountains (p 16), and the Leopard Trail (p 70).

A road trip is also a great way to find silence, especially if your only companions are your three dogs. Read Iselle Combrink's article (p 60) about her pilgrimage to various farms and towns to honour the outsider artists who lived and worked in the Karoo.

People dream in quiet corners, like the author of the popular Tannie Maria Mystery series, Sally Andrew. She and her partner, the artist Bowen Boshier, make a living from their creativity near Ladismith (p 26).

Then there's the photo portfolio of Samantha Reinders (p 78), which is a quiet celebration of the Karoo in all its dusty, triumphant glory.

Enjoy this magazine and may you also have the privilege to experience the silence of the Karoo.

TOAST

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go! Karoo

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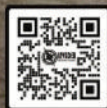
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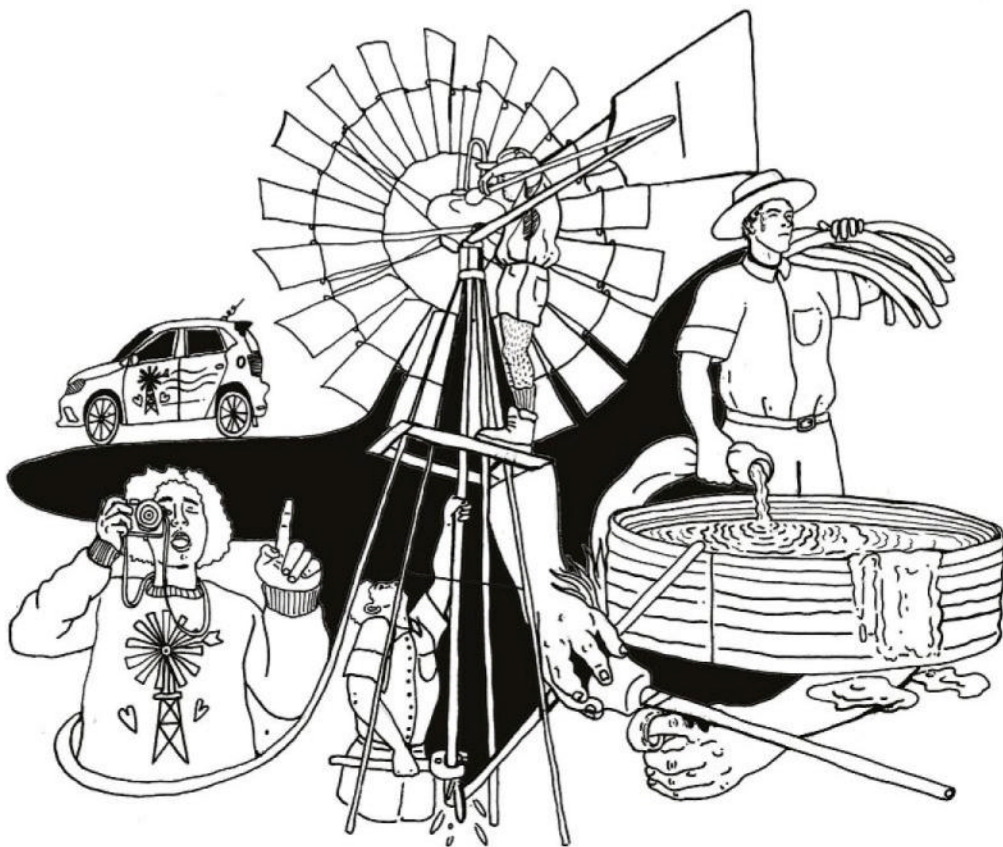
After good rain, Graaff-Reinet's Nqweba Dam overflowed in June 2024, for the first time in more than a decade. (It overflowed in 2012, and before that in 2008, which was the first time in 22 years...)

The dam was completed in 1925 and first known as the Van Ryneveld's Pass Dam. Its main feeder river is the Sundays River, but water from the Gats, Pienaars and Broederstroom rivers also drain into the dam, which lies within the borders of the Camdeboo National Park.

PICTURE **JAN-HENDRIK SWIEGERS**







Life, love and windmills

No matter how many windmills you've seen, touched or climbed, if you haven't repaired one, they'll always just be whirring metal things, says **Willem van der Berg**.

ILLUSTRATION **AIMEE LINDEQUE**

If there's one piece of farm equipment with the power to make you dream of a Karoo farm of your own, it's the windmill. Every second Ford Ranger in the city has a windmill sticker on the tailgate. Many homes have a little windmill statue in the front garden. Have you ever seen a farm stall without a windmill somewhere? Not even on a tablecloth or scatter cushion? Do you know a South African who hasn't posted a windmill photo on Instagram or Facebook?

I have no problem with any of

these things. But there's another side to windmills that few people know about. And once you've been introduced to *this* side, you'll look at windmills differently...

After I finished my matric, my dad and I farmed deep in the Kalahari between Van Zylsrus and Askham. At the time, I was dating a girl from the Upper Karoo and there were lots of dirt roads and stretches of poor cellphone reception between the two of us. Kisses and conversation were as rare as rain.

So, I called the girl's father and asked him for a job. Oom Tienie had many farms but only two

daughters, so he liked my idea.

My dad was furious, but I was too in love to listen. I packed my Isuzu and set off to the Carnarvon district.

Oom Tienie had long ago figured out the benefits of having daughters. When I arrived on the farm, his other daughter's boyfriend was already hard at work. And so Christoff and I became the windmill team. Christoff wasn't much older than I was, but he was a tall and brawny guy. Built like a Ford F100, as we'd say in the Kalahari. Compared to him, I was a Datsun.

I knew nothing about windmills, but Christoff had grown up in the

Carnarvon area and knew *everything*.

Every day we found something to do among the roughly 300 windmills under our care. The work never stopped. Early in the morning, Christoff and I would load a big metal trunk full of tools into the bakkie. It was heavy and our stomachs were still empty. There were also big pulleys with ropes as thick as cobras, and large and extra-large *bobbejaan* spanners. (Oom Tienie called them Stillsons, after the American company that originally made these wrenches.) There was a welding machine, which weighed as much as a baby elephant, and pipes, rods, chains and bales of wire.

We'd be drenched in sweat by the time we departed, and then we still had to drive many kilometres to farms with names like Aasvoëlvlei, Gileamskuile, Slingsfontein, Patryfontein, Eendfontein, Koppiesfontein, Bitterwater, Dikpunt and Vastrap.

I learnt everywhere, all the time: the anatomy of a windmill; its quirks and ailments; its language.

There is the wheel. A series of curved blades makes the wheel turn in the wind. And without a tail, a windmill is aimless. A tail keeps it on course and in the wind. But a windmill doesn't want too much wind.

"It's not built to pump fast. A windmill should rather pump continuously over a long period, do you understand?" Christoff explained – he became like a father figure to me in the world of windmills. The brake of a windmill is one of its most important parts. It pulls the tail in, slows the wheel and turns it slightly out of the wind to reduce its speed.

The wheel is attached to the windmill's head, which is basically

the engine room. The gears here are powered by the wheel and move the rods up and down in the borehole, where the cylinder draws water in and pushes it up the pipes.

"Only love. That's all a windmill needs. This is romantic work we're doing," Christoff would say when we pulled on our grease-stained overalls to sort out a problem.

After a while, Christoff and I could diagnose a windmill after only a few turns of the wheel. Sometimes we could spot the problem from a distance. If the wheel whirled when there was only a light breeze, the top rod was broken or one of the other rods had come loose. This meant that the parts needed to draw water from the depths weren't engaged, and the wheel wasn't carrying any weight.

When everything looked fine above ground, we had to drag the pulleys closer to remove the pipes from the borehole. I always said a quick prayer to ask for the water in the borehole to be near the surface. The deeper it was, the more pipes were required and the more difficult it was to pull them out. One pipe full of water could easily weigh 15 kg. And there were seldom fewer than 10 pipes...

The rods and cylinder weren't light either. They weighed down the pulley with their iron kilograms. If your prayers were answered, there was a problem with the foot valve at the bottom of the cylinder and all the water had emptied out of the pipes.

Windmills don't believe in gods or luck. They're long-suffering – and friendly. They're not envious. They never boast because they know they'd be nothing without the wind. If you look after them and oil them occasionally, they'll treat you well. They don't prioritise their own interests, they just want to give life to all around them.

You might think a windmill will show you mercy because you're trying to help. I also once had this childish belief, but now I know better. After Christoff and the Karoo made a windmill man out of me, I understood that windmills are hard work. Always hard and always dirty.

Your hands are forever changed once you've repaired a windmill. Mine washed clean and healed again after many years, but they remained big and strong. Working with a laptop and camera has made them soft, but they remember the grip required to use two wrenches at the same time to tighten or loosen pipes and rods. They recall the scrape of rough pulley rope against the skin, and the bite when a windmill is covered in frost in the morning and the steel is at its steeliest. My hands still know where to find purchase to climb to the top of a windmill to check the oil.

They remember the feel of rusty pipes and shiny new pipes, fresh leather washers for a Jooste cylinder, the grease and grime of a force head (used when the windmill has to pump water uphill or across great distances), the weight of an unhitched windmill tail in a westerly wind, and the coolness of life-giving water when a windmill starts to work again.

I left Oom Tienie's employ after a year. His daughter didn't want to date a windmill mechanic and I didn't want to be one forever, either.

Sometimes I miss a workday with Christoff. When I drive past people fixing the iron giants of the Karoo, I feel grateful. For those stalwart mechanics, for Christoff, and for the windmill itself. For what this machine taught me about the Karoo, life and love. And especially about patience.

High under a blue sky

This 650 km route meanders from Loxton to Middelpos and takes you back and forth over the Nuweveld and Roggeveld mountains. Roll down the window, take your foot off the gas. This is one for the gravel connoisseurs...

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**





Ouberg Pass, with the Tankwa below.



HIGHLIGHTS

- Bokpoort (1 487 m)
- De Jagers Pass (1 444 m)
- Molteno Pass (1 574 m)
- Blounek (1 655 m)
- Bastards Poort (1 707 m)
- Oukloof Pass (1 536 m)
- Rammelkop Pass (1 308 m)
- Komsberg Pass (1 654 m)
- Ouberg Pass (1 402 m)
- Gannaga Pass (1 226 m)

The Nuweveld and Roggeveld mountains stretch from Beaufort West to Calvinia like the wall of a stone kraal. The mountains

separate the Lower Karoo from the Upper Karoo. At the bottom you'll find the Tankwa, Moordenaars Karoo, the Koup and Die Vlak (see map on page 88). On the plateau is the Hantam, Roggeveld, Hardemans Karoo and Nuweveld. These are proper mountains – sometimes almost a kilometre up into the blue sky – and you get some of the best passes in quick succession.

My route starts in Loxton. I take the R381 out of town and almost immediately turn left onto the Bokpoort road. The first major pass in my sights is De Jagers, on an anonymous farm road somewhere between here and Beaufort West.

The Bokpoort road is not a road you ever *have* to drive – there are faster routes between Loxton and Beaufort West – but you don't drive dirt roads because you want to get somewhere quickly. You do it for your health.

After a steep descent and a short poort – Bokpoort – I arrive at a T-junction. I turn south (right) to Beaufort West and follow the road, turning at a few more junctions, always trying to roughly keep parallel with the R381 further west. The landscape becomes even more beautiful and hilly as I pass Taaiboskop and Aasvoëlberg.

At the base of the Nuweveld, De Jagers Pass snakes dustily down to a red plain below. The sheer cliffs of the Nuweveld are on my right as the road follows the lay of the land. I inch down to the plain

and cut along the bottom of the cliffs. The road joins up with the N1 outside Beaufort West, but a few hundred metres further I turn right onto the R381 and head north again, back towards Loxton, sidestepping civilisation.

The first section of the R381 is tarred, but it turns to dirt where Molteno Pass enters the kloof. Like De Jagers, Molteno Pass is the work of master road builder Thomas Bain. When Bain laid out the route through these rugged mountains in 1881, his equipment looked very different from what I encounter on the pass today. Big yellow machines are moving earth and a man calls out over the din: “*Ons maak hom weer mooi, meneer!*”

Not that Molteno Pass has ever been ugly. For 15 km, it climbs past dramatic rock formations and cliffs. You're accompanied by the border of the Karoo National Park for most of the way – keep your eyes peeled for wildlife. Look out for kudus at night, especially, and drive the sharp hairpins with care – many memorial crosses are planted along this pass.

There's another stretch of tar at the top and you'll pass through Blounek without even realising it.

Up on the plateau, I turn left towards Fraserburg. This dirt road is a strong contender in the category: Best Back Road in the Country. Bastards Poort takes you through a mountainous section, but then you drive over a wide, quiet plain for what feels like forever. Your eyes will find nothing taller than a kriedoring to look at.

It's February and it's hot, but I can't find a tree where I can pull over to make lunch. Then I spot greenery afloat on a mirage in the distance.

After four songs on the radio, I reach it – two willow trees, but they're behind a locked gate! Seems like shade is so scarce in this region that you can't leave it unattended...

If it's good enough for Sylvester...

About 20 km before Fraserburg, another dirt road heads off to the south. I turn left to go over Oukloof Pass. The landscape changes quickly as you enter the ribcage of the Nuweveld. I feel isolated from worldly things. Maybe Sylvester the lion felt that way too when he escaped from the Karoo National Park in 2015. After three weeks of hiding in these mountains, he was finally caught.

If you want to know why Sylvester and I love this area so much, you can spend the night at one of three guest farms: Welgemoed, Kalkfontein or Rooiheuvel (see page 24). I stop at Rooiheuvel because I want to see owner Marge Vivier again.

Just before Christmas 2019, my wife Daleen and I stayed in the Grootdroom mountain chalet on Rooiheuvel. A severe drought was devastating the area. Marge had also lost her husband Flip during this time. But their dream of a guest farm in this remote corner of the Karoo survived.

“If it wasn't for our dream, I would have had to lock the gates and pack up,” Marge told us.

In the shed I find Willem and Deswin Maans, and Gert Montzinger. They're at the sorting table, busy classing mohair.

Willem looks like he was born ready for anything. He's tough as barbed wire. “Kyk, rain doesn't like to climb mountains,” he says. “It



It's so quiet among the red and black rocks of Oukloof Pass, the only sound you're likely to hear is the blood rushing in your ears. But keep a sharp eye out for kudu, klipspringer and rhebuck – they're well camouflaged.

PASSES & POORTS

stays on top or down below. It has to get lost to reach us here.”

In the late afternoon, I pitch my tent under thorn trees in the Boplaas campsite. This is the start and end point of the Karoo Erdvark Trail – you can complete the hike in five or seven days. I have time to explore a few kilometres of the trail – a short stint that makes me realise I have to come back and do them all.

The dirt road to Merweville is open and straight. All around, the Moordenaars Karoo is silent. Merweville is a quiet and neat town. I buy mutton chops and boerewors at the Mōredou butchery then I head north-west to where the Nuweveld and Roggeveld mountains take each other's hands. And where the next pass awaits...

Rammelkop is a short and wild farm pass, but its steepest section is tarred. There are gates to open (and close) and no traffic. It's the type of route that makes you want to open your window and slow down. By the time I reach the R354 tar road between Sutherland and Matjiesfontein, I want more, so I turn onto another dirt road further south – back towards Merweville – to go and see Komsberg Pass.

This area is called the Klein-Roggeveld. There are a few places near the pass where you can look down deep valleys and see how high up you are. Below, in Merweville, I was 700m above sea level. Now I'm at 1660m.

The toughest job you can do in these parts is building fences. At the bottom of Komsberg, Nieklaas Jors is doing just that. “This isn't easy work,” he says. “You see what this earth looks like? Uneven and rocky.

Dit kos moed hou,” he says while he and Gershwin Moos, Stuurman Vernooi and Jaco Klein use a hammer and spike to make a hole in a rock to plant an iron pole – one of many.

Nieklaas tells me how he had five brothers. With their father, Willem, the Jors clan quickly gained a reputation as the best fencers in the Sutherland district. “We *sommer* started working with my father as children. Some of my brothers only have a Standard 2. I made it to Standard 5. That's all. But I know a little.”

Few people know more about fencing than Nieklaas. To become a master fencer like him and his brothers, you have to be able to draw straight lines and understand corner posts, jackal-proof fencing and not giving up.

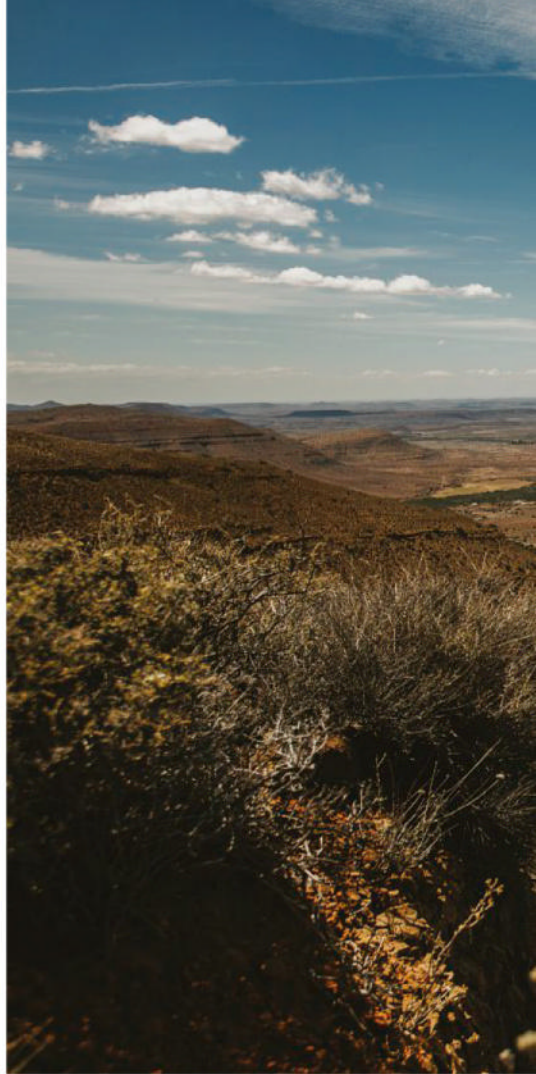
I drive up Komsberg Pass again, back to Sutherland for the night. Die Heks se Huis (The Witch's House) might sound like a creepy place, but managers Amanda du Preez and Marita Britz are friendly. And the cottage I'm staying in has a fantastic braai place where I can cook the chops I bought in Merweville.

To see more than Middelpos

A cold front moved in during the night. Sutherland is in the way of every front that hits the country and even now, on a summer's morning, it's cold and misty as I drive along the edge of the plateau to Ouberg Pass.

Ouberg was hewn into the landscape in the early 1800s when the first trekboers moved through the area, and it hasn't really been refined since then. Although moving

Clockwise from top left: Rammelkop Pass was probably named for the thunder that sometimes rumbles here. Nieklaas Jors knows all there is to know about building fences. “I can do other work, but this is my trade,” he says. Traffic won't get much worse than this on these back roads. Gert Montzinger (left) has an expensive surname, quips Willem Maans (far right). “It was brought here from far away,” he says while they and his son, Deswin Maans, sort mohair.





your sheep between summer and winter grazing on foot is now a rare occurrence (most farmers transport their flocks by truck – and there are fewer farmers), you'll still sometimes see a flock of sheep on the pass, on their way to the Tankwa in the winter or back to the Roggeveld Plateau in summer.

The pass is narrow and without many frills. After rain, you might run into trouble without a 4x4, especially if you want to drive in the other direction, up the pass.

Arrive early and drive slowly – this will give you the best opportunity to enjoy the pass while not missing out on the wonderful views. About halfway down, there's a place to pull over to have coffee. The Tankwa plains wash up against the Cederberg in the west. Around you, the shadows slink back to the kloofs.

You'll want to take off your jacket at the bottom of Ouberg – it's a drop of 700m and it's often about 10° C warmer down here than at the top. I drive through the Tankwa Karoo National Park to reach Gannaga Pass. I see jackal, gemsbok, springbok, steenbok, ostrich, Namaqua sandgrouse, pale chanting goshawk, jackal buzzard and kori bustard.

Gannaga Pass is Ouberg's flashy cousin – it's yet another pass on Thomas Bain's résumé. Gannaga has exactly 45 bends and the gradient is tame enough to tackle in any vehicle with high ground clearance. (Heavy rain can change conditions, so call Gannaga Lodge before you head out in your Polo.) From the top it's about 30 km to Middelpos – a place too small to call a town.

"It's just a farm," says young Ronaldo Galant. He's seated under a pepper tree opposite the fuel pumps. (The service station has been out of

order and for sale for the last few years.) Ronaldo's school friends are with him: Jowayn Gonsie and Jowayden Mathys. Middelpos is tiny but there's a primary school that all three attend. There's also a police station, a hotel and a shop called Die Winkel.

The three kids take me on a tour of the dusty streets, showing me the sights. The tour is over in minutes. We go see Jowayn's black dog, Blitsie. Outside his house, a tired ball lies in the dust. It might have once been a rugby ball. He throws it to Ronaldo. "Balls don't last long on these rocks," he says.

They tell me they're excited to go to high school in a few years' time. "It's in Calvinia and if you're good at sport, you sometimes get to go to other places," says Jowayden, dreaming of seeing more than Middelpos one day.

It's good to remember this.

Travellers dream of seeing faraway places like Middelpos, while the *laaities* who actually live in those places dream of diving over the try line in Paarl.

If you live in the Karoo, getting out and seeing the world is not that easy. Keep this in mind next time you go exploring, as the dust kicked up by your tyres settles on the tired villages and deflated rugby balls.

You're privileged to enjoy the best of the Karoo. For others, the road is harder.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: "He's the fastest dog in Middelpos," says Jowayn Gonsie about Blitsie. It can be chilly in the early morning on Ouberg Pass, but it's a different story below in the Tankwa. Karoo farmers might disagree, but the colours of a jackal and the Roggeveld Mountains complement each other nicely. Jowayn Gonsie, Jowayden Mathys and Ronaldo Galant dream of high school and seeing the world. Gannaga Pass is one of the most photogenic roads in the Karoo.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Do I need a 4x4? No, a 4x2 with high ground clearance will be able to handle all these dirt roads – the only challenge would be driving Ouberg Pass from the bottom to the top. Rain can change things, so keep an eye on the weather and find out what the road conditions are like before you depart.

Fuel? The co-op in **Loxton** has fuel, but the pumps are only open between 8 am and 5 pm on weekdays. They close at noon on Saturdays. (*On Sundays, only the church is open... – Ed.*)

At Victor's Garage in **Merweville** you can refuel on weekdays between 8 am and 5 pm. The fuel pumps in **Sutherland** are open daily from 7 am to 7 pm.

The fuel station and tyre shop in **Middelpos** have both closed down.



PASSES & POORTS



STAY HERE

Soutpoort

Two scenic campsites, each with an awning for shade, a private bathroom and splash pool. There are also two wild camping stands where you only have a splash pool and a tap.

Where? About 15 km north of Loxton, next to the R63.

Rates: Campsite with private bathroom R400 per night for up to four people; R90 per extra person; R200 per extra caravan or off-road trailer. Wild camping R200 per stand.

Contact: 072 623 7926

✉ thirionm@gmail.com

Instagram: @soutpoort

Klein Riviertjie

This beautiful cottage is on the road to Fraserburg after you've turned left off the R381 at the

top of Molteno Pass coming from Beaufort West. It has everything you need to self-cater and sleeps four people in two bedrooms – one with a double bed and one with two single beds.

Where? About 70 km south-west of Loxton and 85 km north-west of Beaufort West. You'll receive detailed directions when you book.

Rate: R2 300 per night for the unit.

What else? There is another unit owned by the same people on the adjacent farm. Blaauwhoek Cottage also sleeps four people and also costs R2 300 per night.

Contact: 083 629 2338

✉ higherkaroo.com

✉ info@higherkaroo.com

Instagram: @higherkaroo

Welgemoed Farm Cottage

Two self-catering houses and three camping options, including bush camps and campsites.

There are 4x4 routes to drive and you can walk and cycle on the farm roads.

Where? About 68 km south of Fraserburg. Turn east off the R353 towards Beaufort West and follow this dirt road for 13 km before turning left to Rooiheuvel (also featured). Carry on for another 19 km to Welgemoed.

Rates: Self-catering houses from R450 per person. Camping from R80 per person.

Contact: 083 229 7508

✉ welgemoedkaroo.com

Kalkfontein Guest Farm

There are two self-catering units. Mountain House, high up in the Nuweveld, is only accessible in a vehicle with high ground clearance. You can hike six different trails, ranging from 4,5 km to 11 km.

Where? About 57 km south of Fraserburg: Turn east off the R353 and drive 10 km along a dirt road.

Rate: From R300 per person sharing.

Contact: 083 566 5887

✉ kalkfonteingasteplaas.co.za

Rooiheuvel Guest Farm

This farm has six units and a campsite with a communal kitchen, living area and ablution facilities. Rooiheuvel also has a five-day hiking trail called the Karoo Erdvark (67 km). You can add two days to the trail to hike even further, or do one of the day hikes if you stay here.

Where? About 68 km south of Fraserburg. Turn east off the R353

towards Beaufort West. Follow this dirt road for about 16 km to the Rooiheuvel farmstead.

Rates: Units from R300 per person. Camping R200 per stand, plus R100 per person. The Karoo Erdvark Trail costs R280 per person per day; the slackpacking option is R3 000 per group, plus the per-person rate.

Contact: 083 387 6699

✉ rooiheuvel.com

✉ flip.marge.vivier@gmail.com

Die Heks se Huis

The main house sleeps six people. There are also eight cottages that each sleep two. Everything is self-catering and well equipped. The cottages have a cosy fireplace inside.

Where? 28 Northumberland Street, Sutherland

Rates: From R350 per person in the main house; R950 per night for a cottage (two people sharing).

Contact: 064 657 0693

✉ visitsutherland.co.za

Gannaga Lodge

This lodge is right at the top of Gannaga Pass. They offer great accommodation and meals. You can stay in The Farmhouse (five en suite rooms), The Stalls (six en suite rooms), or the Kliphuis self-catering unit (double bed and sleeper couch).

Where? About 30 km south-west of Middelpos.

Rate: From R400 per person.

Contact: 087 150 4645

✉ gannagalodge.co.za

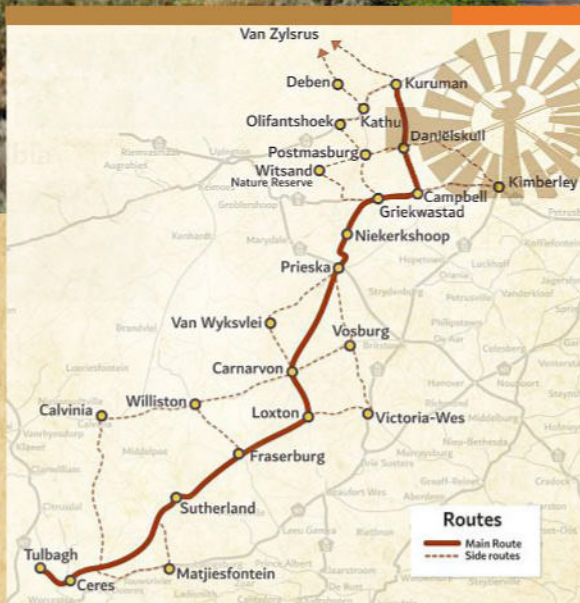
✉ gannaga@hantam.co.za

Turn to page 112 for more accommodation options in the Tankwa and Ceres Karoo.



Karoo Development
Foundation

ABOUT THE FORGOTTEN HIGHWAY ROUTE...



THE TOWNS ON THE ROUTE

Western Cape: Tulbagh, Ceres and Matjiesfontein

Northern Cape: Sutherland, Fraserburg, Loxton, Carnarvon, Williston, Prieska, Victoria West, Vosburg, Niekershoop, Griquatown, Danielskuil, Postmasburg, Olifantshoek, Kathu, Deben, Kuruman.

TRAVELLING WITH A MISSION:

Discover South Africa's Ancestral Journeys!

Between roughly 1790 and 1860, this route was the heyday of north-south travel, from the Cape to Kuruman and into Africa.

Many early travellers recorded their experiences in journals and diaries, and many sketched what they saw.

On this route, several cultural groups met and intermingled, learning from each other, trading, and even intermarrying.

This Route explores and celebrates the encounters between the trekboers, missionaries, Khoi, San ("bushman" or !Xam), Korana, Griqua, Tswana, and even Xhosa outposts.

FRONTIERS, OLD AND NEW

Today, South Africa has new frontiers to explore. Like the era of the Forgotten Highway Route, communities encounter each other in new ways, celebrating and exploring the opportunities of the post-apartheid era.

We continue with research and community support, while we develop the Route.

Join us for your own ancestral journey!



Karoo Development Foundation

doreenkaroo@gmail.com | WhatsApp 071 401 2583

www.karoofoundation.co.za | www.karooforgottenhighway.com

**Special route tours can
be booked at Zatrax
Tours, www.zatrax.com**



Sally's corner of the Karoo

Sally Andrew, author of the Tannie Maria Mystery series, finds much of her inspiration around Ladismith, where she and her partner, the artist **Bowen Boshier**, live at the foot of the Touwsberg.

WORDS **JULIENNE DU TOIT** PICTURES **CHRIS MARAIS**

When I first encountered Sally Andrew, author of the Tannie Maria Mystery books, she was dressed in a ball gown. It was during the 2022 Schreiner Karoo Writers Festival in Cradock, and her book, *The Milk Tart Murders*, had just been launched.

It was a mid-afternoon gig and the Victoria Manor dining room was packed. Everyone's eyes darted between the lovely Sally (56) and the equally lovely trays of tarts and fairy cakes made by the hotel's Cherie Antrobus and her kitchen team.

Sitting in the crowd was an impossibly lanky, hawk-faced man. This was Sally's long-time partner, the artist Bowen Boshier (59).

Sally was a treat, and so was the high tea. Later that night, my husband Chris and I felt a rapport with her and Bowen. At some stage, probably after too much wine, Sally invited us to visit them at their home in a nature reserve somewhere outside Ladismith. She added: "There

aren't any windows at the moment, so you'd basically be camping indoors. But you're very welcome."

Two years later, having finally accepted her invitation, Sally sent us a long WhatsApp message with directions. Google Maps, incidentally, had no idea where it was. In any case, there was no signal once we turned off the R62 west of Ladismith. The directions sounded more like clues on a treasure map. Mile markers were mentioned. Small road signs, easy to miss. Padlocks with combination codes. At least three crossings of a spruit. A T-junction where we would turn right at the base of a mountain.

Then we had to look out for a certain tall tree. We had our doubts we would ever get there, but an hour before nightfall, we found their modest thatched house with a more mysterious building 50 metres away, half hidden by vegetation. This was where we would be sleeping.

The design was astonishing – Gaudí meets the mud mosque of Djenné in Mali. This was Bowen's work. He'd designed and created the cottage with Riversdale builder

Hasie Magiel and Hasie's team. After Hasie's death, building had been suspended. But we were happy to note our digs had windows, a door and a nearby loo.

Part of the building includes the beautiful workspace where Sally writes her books, featuring the food-loving Tannie Maria, who is "fifty-something, short and soft (perhaps a bit too soft in the wrong places) with brown curls and untidy Afrikaans".

Sally's desk has a view of graceful gwarrie and boerboon trees, with Touwsberg behind – a marooned little mountain range south of the Swartberg, which inspired the building's curves. The soundtrack is birdsong. On her desk was a field guide to snakes, along with a *Tweetalige Woordeboek*.

The next morning, Chris and I strolled over to their house for coffee and a chat.

Who is her protagonist, this Tannie Maria?

Sally explained: "She's an amateur sleuth but she writes these Agony Aunt letters for the *Klein Karoo Gazette* and gives people a bit of



Sally Andrew and Bowen Boshier,
photographed near their home in
the Ladismith district.

PROFILE

common-sense advice on problems in their lives. She also gives each person a recipe which is going to help solve their problems.”

Over four books, Tannie Maria has solved murders and mysteries and has slowly become romantically involved with the tall, moustachioed Detective Henk Kannemeyer. Through her adventures, readers have encountered the lofty peak of Towerkop that lords over Ladismith, a junk shop, the Spar supermarket, and other real-life places like restaurants Diesel & Crème in Barrydale and Giovanni’s in Calitzdorp.

Her books carry the true flavour of the region. Literally. While reading them, you may well develop cravings for muesli rusks, milk tart, chocolate mousse cake and Tannie Maria’s *tamatiebredie*.

Recipes to live for

Sally’s books have been turned into a television series, *Recipes for Love and Murder*, starring Maria Doyle Kennedy as the food-loving sleuth. At the time of writing, the second season was being filmed on location in Prince Albert.

Chris and I happened to visit days before the launch of Sally’s latest creation, *Recipes to Live for: A Tannie Maria Cookbook*. And here was the problem. We’d agreed to split the catering. We’d do one night, they’d do the other. What does one make for a published foodie?

But Sally shrugged off any attempts to define her as a chef or even a cook. “I’m not saying I *can’t* cook. But it’s not really part of my identity. I don’t have that natural skill.”

By the end of supper, we begged to differ. Sally had casually baked the most delicious olive and rosemary sourdough in a Cobb cooker, to accompany harissa-flavoured mince with pasta. We had seconds

and thirds! There was only just enough space for her lemony, chewy spekboom ice cream.

That night, we could hear the reed frogs clicking away like Spanish dancers with castanets. Agitated baboons barked on the lower slopes of Touwsberg. The distant cough of a leopard explained their concern.

In the morning, we headed off for a walk with Sally. She needed to get to reception, she said. It turned out that “reception” was not a building but a certain flattish rock between two bushes at the side of the road, where there was cellphone signal. As we drew level with the rock, all our phones pinged and twittered.

Because there’s basically no signal of any kind at her house, Sally doesn’t spend her days Google-researching the information she needs for her Tannie Maria books. Instead, she asks friends and experts for help – which is why there’s such a long and lively acknowledgments section at the end of every book.

“Once a friend caught her husband Googling ‘poisons that kill but leave no trace’,” Sally said with a grin. “She was a bit unnerved until I explained it was in the interests of book research...”

Apart from reception, Sally had another mission: immersion in a mountain pool.

“I’m a compulsive swimmer,” she confessed. “Most of my underwear can double up as a cozzie, just in case.”

Walking along, eating ripe gwarrie berries, we encountered a small stream that one could easily step over. Where on earth could there be a pool big enough to swim in?

Sally veered off the track, the sandy riverbed became rocky, and suddenly there was a tiny waterfall into a natural pool, double the size of a Sandton jacuzzi. Sally shrugged off her pants and shirt, and voilà,

there she was in a bikini. Like a Karoo mermaid, she slipped into the pool with the ease of long practice. It was surprisingly deep. Dragonflies and damselflies whizzed overhead.

“A bit chilly, but it’s great. Don’t you want to join me?” With her shiny hair and glowing skin, Sally exudes good health, so it came as a shock to find that she’d been chronically ill for 20 years of her life.

Sally, who was born and raised in Cape Town, had become an activist against apartheid and gender-based violence at a very young age. When she was only eight years old, she wore a black armband to school to mourn the children killed in the 1976 Soweto uprising.

“Sometimes we’d be late for school because my mother was lying in front of bulldozers. She was active in the Black Sash. Both my parents were driven by social justice, fighting against apartheid. And I was, too. I was going to be a lawyer in a trade union when I grew up. That was my plan.”

Sally joined the United Democratic Front and the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). Police caught her while she was spray-painting an ECC logo: “Stop for Peace”. She hadn’t quite finished and her protestations that she was going to spray-paint “Stop for Peach Pips Crossing” didn’t wash with the magistrate.

Another time, she got herself arrested on purpose to be with the only other woman detained after a protest. By the time she went to university, it was a constant round of detentions, funerals, drama and suffering.

As an empath, she took the weight of all the injustice on herself, and her body could no longer cope. By 1994, she was very sick. She was eventually diagnosed with chronic fatigue and immune dysfunction syndrome. The most common symptom is utter exhaustion.

"Some days, I couldn't even brush my hair," she says. "I couldn't cope with a 15-minute visit from someone. Walking was nearly impossible."

Over the years she tried everything to heal herself. In the end, her recovery was helped by meeting Bowen, many trips into the wilderness with him, a 17-day fast in a clinic and finally, something called biofield tuning.

Son of a lightning bird

Bowen Boshier, whom Sally met in 1999, comes from a long lineage of extraordinary people. His father was the subject of Lyall Watson's book *Lightning Bird* (1982). The foreword reads:

This is the true story of Adrian Boshier, a young Englishman who arrived in Africa at the age of sixteen and ventured into the bush alone, on foot, equipped with nothing more than a pocketknife and a bag of salt... Sleeping in caves, living on bats and lizards, collecting and selling the venom from scorpions and snakes, he put himself through a punishing African apprenticeship... Few... could match his stamina and bushcraft.

Bowen's mother is Joan van Gogh, an acclaimed botanical artist and distantly related to Vincent van Gogh – her grandfather was a cousin of his. Bowen was her and Adrian's eldest son, born in Johannesburg but raised under a mashatu tree near the Shashe River in the Tuli Block, Botswana, where Adrian Boshier had been appointed the first ranger.

When he was 12, Bowen's godfather, wildlife vet Walter Eschenberg, took him into the Waterberg and left him to spend his first camping trip alone – for a week. He still remembers a fresh leopard pugmark slowly filling with water at a stream.

But by then he was a camping veteran. His grandparents on his



Clockwise from the top: Sally Andrew, at home in the Little Karoo. Bowen Boshier in front of the Gaudi-inspired cottage on the farm and an example of his pencil-drawn art.

mother's side had taken him on a three-month trip into the wilds of Namibia. During his early years, Bowen learnt how to strip and rebuild every part of a Land Rover.

Although he studied art at school (matriculating at King Edward VII School in Johannesburg), he never pursued it. One day, after a short stint guiding in the Caprivi, he sent his mother a pencil drawing he'd done of an elephant. She took it to the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg and that was when Bowen's artistic career took off.

For three months every year, he and Sally head off into the wilderness somewhere in southern Africa to sketch, take photographs and work on his art, which is all done in pencil.

"The elephants come around you, birds build nests in nearby trees, lechwe come to you," he told us later, back at the house. "The seasons change, and the animals get used to you."

"It's difficult to say which places I love the most. Makgadikgadi is exquisite. Kubu Island in the Makgadikgadi is one of my favourite places. I also love the Kalahari, the grass, the umbrella trees. And Brandberg in Namibia. It's just off the charts. And the Richtersveld. You walk in the mountains and see so much life."

During these extended trips with Bowen, Sally develops her book ideas. In fact, it was under a camel thorn tree where she "heard" Tannie Maria for the first time. What she said became the first lines in her first mystery book, *Recipes for Love and Murder*:

Isn't life funny? You know, how one thing leads to another in a way you just don't expect. That Sunday morning, I was in my kitchen stirring my apricot jam in the cast-iron pot. It was another dry summer's day in the Klein Karoo, and I was glad for the breeze coming in the window.

Sally kept writing, and once her book was done, she started on the next, and also started hunting for overseas agents. Eventually, she came across Isobel Dixon, head of books and managing director of Blake Friedmann Literary Agency in London. Isobel, also a Karoo girl (raised in Graaff-Reinet), read her book and called.

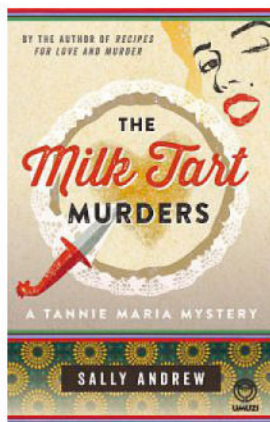
"The reception then was even worse than it is now, but she got through and said 'I love it. Do you want me to be your agent?' I was just running up and down. That evening there was a full moon, and a fiery-necked nightjar sang all night long. Whenever I hear it, I still feel that same joy."

Then Sally made us a strange offer: "Would you like me to tune you?" Part of her healing has come from a technique called biofield tuning. She's one of only two qualified practitioners in the country. It's a treatment using tuning forks and promised to be grounding, calming and energising.

Well, why not? Chris and I are not really into alternative treatments, but it seemed quite harmless. I lay on a bed in the beautiful room with the vaulted ceiling where Sally does her writing (also known as Sall se Hoek). She applied vibrating tuning forks to my body and also around me, in my "biofield", to clear any "stuck bits in my electric flow". Afterwards, I have to admit, I felt lighter and also more grounded.

Another offer. "Should I dress up? Bowen can put on his mechanic's overalls and we can go and have sundowners on the hill."

It turns out that Sally, the bushbaby, has a cupboard full of evening dresses because, as she says: "Life is too short not to wear ball gowns."



WIN!

One lucky reader can win a copy of Sally's novel, *The Milk Tart Murders* (Umuzi, 2024).

Answer the following question:

Where was Sally Andrew born?

E-mail your answer to

📧 toast@gomag.co.za

Capture the Karoo

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

go!
PHOTO TOUR



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

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

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

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

From there, we'll drive a back road

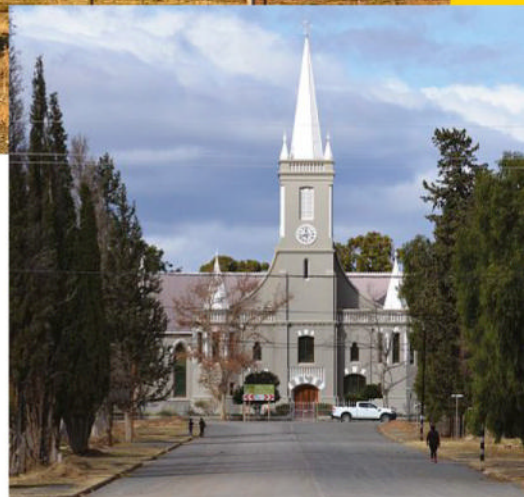
(via a vintage car collection in the middle of nowhere!) to beautiful Murraysburg, and then continue to Doornberg Guest Farm, at the foot of Compassberg near Nieu-Bethesda.

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

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

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

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



NEED TO KNOW

Dates: 19 – 24 March 2025

Cost: R14 800 per person sharing (Single: plus 30%)

Duration: Six days, five nights

Start: Travalia farm stall, N1 (near Three Sisters)

End: Waterval Farmstay, Graaff-Reinet

Total distance: 450 km (estimate)

Maximum number of guests: 14

WHAT WE SUPPLY

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

WHAT YOU NEED TO BRING

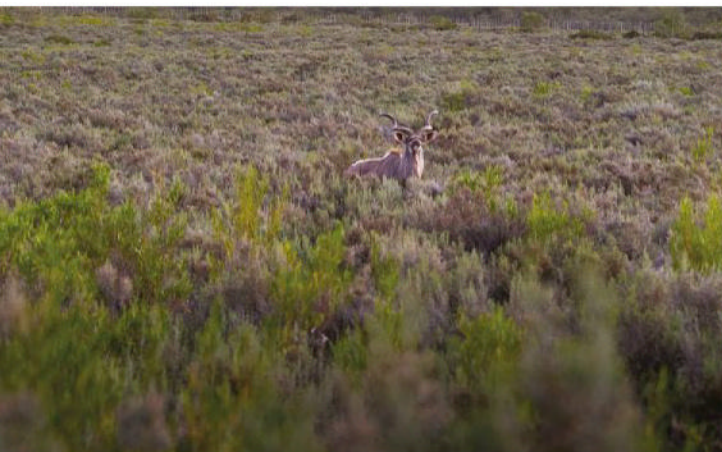
- Your own vehicle (4x4 or SUV with good ground clearance)
- Travel insurance
- Drinks, snacks, etc.
- Camera, tripod and other photo gear
- A camping chair each

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

Eat, drink and be merry!

The R62 through the Little Karoo is one of South Africa's most beloved routes. It has mountain passes, quaint towns and views upon views. But all the driving makes you hungry... Here's your guide to the best farm stalls and restaurants along the way.

WORDS & PICTURES **JAC KRITZINGER**





DIE KLOOF

When you pass through Cogmanskloof from the Ashton side and drive into Montagu, Die Kloof greets you on the left, as it has done since 1980.

The highlight is the back garden: Walk past the mouthwatering smells coming from the kitchen to the lawn and tables under trees. The Keisie River flows on the other side of the fence and Bloupuntberg rises behind. There's a playground where the kids can burn off their energy on jungle gyms and slides.

Max, the resident Staffie cross (pictured below, far right), loves people and dogs alike. Bring your pooch along on a leash.

The cosy restaurant has an extensive menu: bobotie, lamb curry, pancakes, burgers, sandwiches, pies, fish and chips. ... There's carrot cake and apple tart, and wine available too.

In the shop, you can buy biscuits, scatter cushions, boer soap, hats, women's leather shoes, handmade brooms, preserves of all kinds...

And remember to give James the "butler" (pictured above, right) a tip before you leave – it's a local tradition.

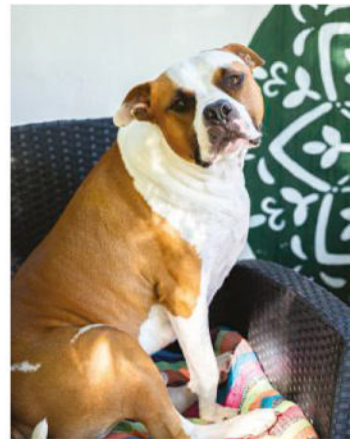


Speciality: Lamb curry and rice with sambals (R175).

Where? 1 Long Street, Montagu

Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 4 pm; from 8 am to 5 pm during school holidays.

Contact: ☎ 023 614 2209; 🌐 diekloofpadstal.co.za



IN OTHER WORDS

Sherry Tanton, manager

"I'm very happy here – every day feels different because there are always new faces coming through the door."



Haydene Visser, waitress

"I'm a people person. I enjoy meeting visitors from all over."



LITTLE KAROO



IN OTHER WORDS

Angela Phiri, waitress

"I've been here for ten years – I fell in love with the place and the area. It's quiet and scenic – and very cool!"



Abie Classen, barista

"I like my job, but what I enjoy most is the people who come here. Especially the bikers – they're a strange bunch! It can get very busy, so I try to make the most of the quiet times."

DIESEL & CRÈME

This unmissable spot is on the left as soon as you enter Barrydale from the Montagu side. It opened in 2013 and has become a favourite stop on Route 62.

The nostalgic décor makes the place stand out: old fuel pumps, Lexington ads, a hot-rod car from way back when... There are paintings by local artists, T-shirts and even old arcade games.

It might seem like a retro hangout for petrolheads, but the menu will surprise you. There are the usual burgers and milkshakes you'd expect from a roadhouse, but you can also order a full English breakfast, various sandwiches, waffles and cheesecake. Beer and wine is available and the strong coffee will give you the kick you need for the road ahead.



Speciality: Diesel beef burger with local cheese and home-made mayonnaise, served with chips (R110).

Where? 2 Tennant Street, Barrydale

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 5 pm.

What else? If you want to linger longer, there's accommodation at Karoo Moon Motel in the backyard. The Studio sleeps two people and the Suite sleeps three. They have basic self-catering facilities like a fridge, microwave, kettle and cutlery. Studio from R500 per person sharing; Suite from R400 per person if you're three people.

Contact: ☎ 028 572 1008; 🌐 dieselandcreme.co.za

KAROO DAISY

Just down the main road from Diesel & Crème in Barrydale, there's a colourful building on the left that looks like a church. Welcome to Karoo Daisy, opened by Haley McLellan and Thomas Straub in 2021. It's the kind of place where locals like to hang out on the stoep while a pony mows the lawn.

Thomas is a professional chef who worked in Switzerland for nearly 30 years. His square pizzas are a big attraction, with names like Die Windpompie, Tradouw, Khoi-Khoi and Fynbos (a vegetarian option). There are also lamb burgers on the menu, sandwiches and roosterkoek, all made from local ingredients.

There's beer and wine if you want something stronger than a milkshake. Karoo Daisy is one of only a few places along Route 62 that's also open for dinner.

The shop on the same premises is filled with artwork, clothing, handbags, soaps and preserved fruit from the area.

And if you run out of cash, don't worry: They accept Bitcoin!



Speciality: Lamb burger with tzatziki sauce (R160) – it's made from organic Karoo lamb and you can order it on a burger bun or a roosterkoek. Served with salad, vegetables or chips.

Where? 6 Bain Street, Barrydale

Opening times: Daily except Wednesday from 9.30 am to 8 pm; daily including Wednesday from 8 am during school holidays and over long weekends.

What else? There's a popular market on the premises every Saturday.

Contact: 📞 084 556 9700; 📞 076 915 7765; 🌐 karoodaisy.co.za



IN OTHER WORDS

Thomas Straub, co-owner

"Few things can beat being a 'kos-mopolitan' chef in the Karoo! It's a privilege to offer people a place to relax and have fun."

Haley McLellan, co-owner

"We really love our town – there are so many details that make it special. Take your time and have a look around."





RONNIE'S SEX SHOP

This is a bar, not a farm stall by any stretch of the imagination! But it has become one of the quirkier attractions on Route 62 over the years. Travellers and tour groups stop for selfies in front of the white wall with the bar's mischievous name. Despite the name, you won't find anything naughtier here than underwear hanging from the ceiling and the odd double brandy...

What's the story behind the name? The proprietor Ronnie Price bought a dilapidated building in 1987 to open a farm stall. During construction, he painted "Ronnie's Shop" on the wall, but one night someone added "sex" as a joke. When curious motorists started to pull over, he realised he had to make the most of the interest. A bar was a better option for the jovial Ronnie, and the rest is history.

The bar isn't very big. If it feels too cramped inside, get a table on the stoep. The Roadkill Café serves breakfast, burgers, sandwiches, milkshakes, coffee and even a salad – called "Rabbit Food" on the menu.

The prices are aimed at foreign tourists, but this strange but inviting place deserves more than just a quick selfie. Take your foot off the accelerator, hang out for a while and ponder a life less ordinary.



Speciality: The locals say the burgers are great (R65 – R90) – chips cost R40 extra.

Where? About 26 km from Barrydale and 50 km from Ladismith, on the R62.

Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 11 pm.

Contact: 028 572 1153



IN OTHER WORDS

Ronnie Price, owner

"I'm getting older and I can no longer join in the fun like I used to, but this place has been a blessing. It grew from a joke into a business and we do quite well!"



FRIKKIE SE GAT

This laid-back farm stall and *kuierplek* is halfway between Ladismith and Calitzdorp and has been in business since 2021. It's especially popular with motorcyclists. Owner Frikkie van Niekerk is a two-wheel enthusiast; he and his wife Cisca created this haven for travellers.

Die Blikkantien is a big corrugated-iron shed where you can buy flour-bag clothing, furniture, DVDs and preserved beans and chillies, all from Cisca's kitchen. Frikkie buys most of the antiques – including tin mugs and plates – at auctions or from farmers in the area.

At the back, you'll find the bar – and likely a crowd of thirsty bikers. There's also a boma overlooking the Rooiberg.

The Boep Spens kitchen serves boerewors rolls, schnitzel, breakfast roosterkoek, pork ribs and Cremora tart, plus coffee, cooldrinks and milkshakes.

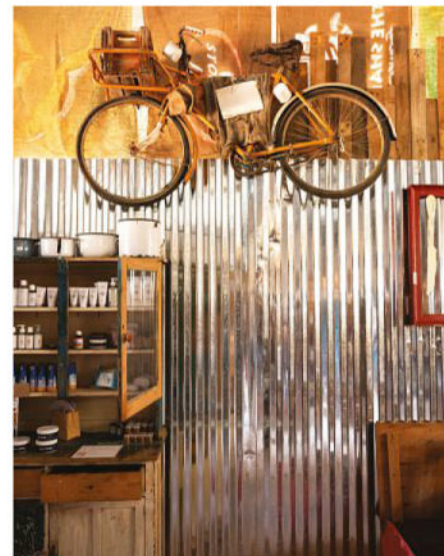
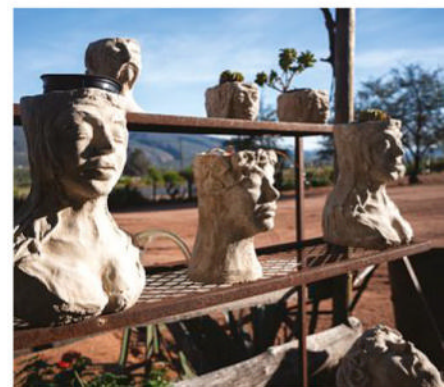
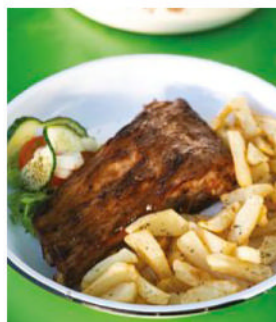


Speciality: Pork ribs and chips with a side salad (from R95 for 300 g). The basting is delicious.

Where? About 25 km outside Ladismith on the R62 towards Calitzdorp.

Opening times: Monday to Saturday from 8.30 am to 5 pm. Open from 7.30 am and on Sundays during school holidays and over long weekends.

Contact: 060 636 3818



IN OTHER WORDS

Frikkie van Niekerk, owner
"I worked in the Overberg for years and I always thought that it was so beautiful there. But the Karoo has its own charm. I've found my place next to this road."



IN OTHER WORDS

Natasja van Heerden, manager

"I've worked here for about five years and I still can't believe my luck. I love people and here I get to make small talk all day long!"

Klaus Triebe, owner

"I was blessed in my previous life; this project is my new life. It's not always easy but I'm grateful that I can give something back to the community."

ELNATAN

This farm stall west of Calitzdorp does one thing, and it does it well: dried fruit. You can get dried anything here: peaches, apples, bananas, apricots, even kiwi fruit. In season, they sell fresh naartjies, quinces, grapes and watermelon. They also offer a range of sugar-free dried fruit, sweetened with grape juice. Most of the products are dried, processed and packaged in a factory on the premises.

Your sweet tooth supports a good cause. Owners Klaus and Ursula Triebe, originally from Germany and Switzerland respectively, started Elnatan in 2004 with a passion for community upliftment.

Like elsewhere in the Karoo, unemployment here is a problem. They opened the farm stall to try and make a difference. They also built a nursery school for underprivileged children, with a BMX track and a sports field, next to the farm stall. They employ nearly 50 people at the school and fruit factory, many of whom attended Elnatan when they themselves were kids.

There are plans to open a small restaurant in the back garden, but for now you can get a takeaway coffee and chat to Natasja van Heerden behind the counter. Forget about NikNaks and Bar-Ones for the road; rather buy healthy, homegrown treats. It's good for everyone!



Speciality: You haven't tasted dried peaches as good as these.

They're dried using a special method to retain the fibre and the taste. R86 for a 500 g packet.

Where? On the western outskirts of Calitzdorp, next to the R62.

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 5 pm.

Contact: 083 382 2035





KAROOBOOM

You'll feel right at home when you walk into Karooboom, between Calitzdorp and Oudtshoorn. Spokie the sheepdog (pictured top, middle) will circle your feet and owner Irene Saayman will smile from behind the counter.

The Saaymans opened Karooboom in 2013 on their farm Rietfontein, where they have sheep, cattle and onions. There are always vehicles parked outside, enticed by the *boerekos* on offer. It's a braai restaurant – everything on the menu is prepared over the coals or on a gas burner. You can see the big fire in the kitchen and can almost hear your steak sizzling in the pan. . . . They also cook sosaties, boerewors, beef ribs, lamb neck, chicken and ostrich.

The stone oven outside is stoked every morning – to slow-cook sheep's head, lamb neck, and to bake bread.

They also make a delicious chicken pie and you'd be wrong not to finish your meal with milk tart.

Irene's monthly curried offal nights are popular in the district, and on Sundays they serve a buffet – people drive out for it.

In the shop next to the restaurant you can buy wine from Calitzdorp Cellar at reasonable prices; you can also browse the selection of handbags, books, preserved figs, jams and biscuits.

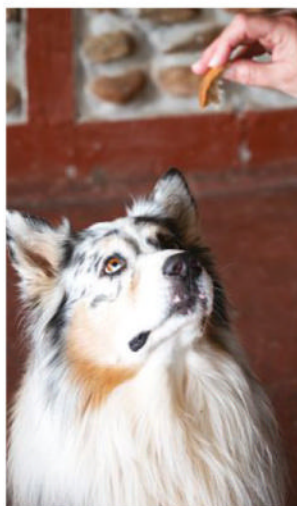


Speciality: Have you ever heard of Pap en Lap? This dish is made from *lieslap*, or mutton flaps, an inexpensive cut of meat that is often overlooked. But cooked properly, it's amazing, especially when served with pap, an egg and a slice of farm bread with jam of your choice. R65 for a single portion; R120 for a double.

Where? Next to the R62; 20 km from Calitzdorp, 30 km from Oudtshoorn.

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 5 pm.

Contact: 079 620 1441



IN OTHER WORDS

Irene Saayman, owner

"The farm stall is a nice change from working on the farm – it makes me happy. I love cooking and chatting to people."

here, I was shy and knew nothing about cooking, but now I enjoy being around people and in the kitchen."

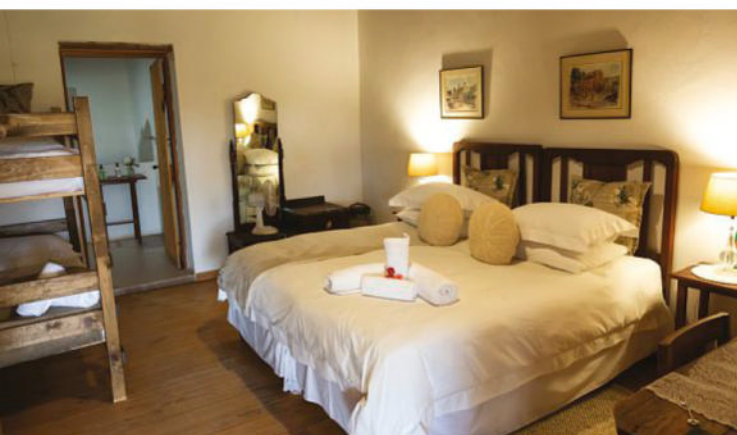
Gwendoline Ceasar, cook and waitress

"I've learnt so much at Karooboom. When I started

Fransiena Willemse, cook and waitress

"I have a talent for cooking and I also like playing pranks on the others in the kitchen!"





BELLA DE KAROO

Bella de Karoo is a jackal buzzard swoop east of Karooboom. It's on a farm called Andrieskraal and has been open since 2016, although back then it was known as Smitswinkel.

The farm stall restaurant serves hearty breakfasts, pizzas, burgers, roosterkoek, curry and rice, pancakes, pap and wors, and malva pudding. There are shaded tables in the garden that overlook a lawn where chickens peck around a fountain.

Inside, you can browse the goodies in the shop while the wooden floors creak beneath your feet. Fill your basket with local nectarine jam, biscuits, marmalade, honey and Calitzdorp wines. Also keep an eye out for the clothes, cushions and scarves made by a local community project called Sebenza Arts & Crafts.



Speciality: Roosterkoek with butter and jam (R30). Eat it while hot!

Where? Next to the R62; 21 km from Calitzdorp and 29 km from Oudtshoorn.

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 2 pm; until 4 pm during school holidays.

What else? Too full to drive? Good news: Bella de Karoo has six rooms, each with a double bed and a bunk bed, sleeping four in total. Rates from R990 per night for two people sharing; plus R175 per extra child under 12.

Or stay in the Manor House, which can sleep up to six people. Rates from R2 100 per night. There's a farm dam to swim in.

Contact: ☎ 044 213 3801; ☎ 062 694 2727; 📧 belladekaroo.co.za

IN OTHER WORDS

Karlien Rabie, waitress

"It's lekker here – I meet new people every day and I enjoy my work."

Elmarie Goosen, manager

"We're very privileged. There are few things I enjoy more than seeing people from the city rediscover themselves here and enjoy the tranquillity of the farm."





DOMEIN DOORNKRAAL

"Spaar water, drink wyn!" So says the sun-bleached sign at Domein Doornkraal on the N12 between Oudtshoorn and De Rust. People have been hanging out at this wine estate since 1986. The farm is run by Swepie le Roux and has been in the family for five generations. They're especially renowned for the dessert wine they produce: You can buy hanepoot, pinta and jerepigo at farm prices; and if you enjoy good white wine, you should definitely add a bottle of Doornkraal Kannaland chenin blanc to your basket.

The menu has pies, soup and roosterkoek. For dessert, you can have carrot cake, ice cream and muffins with coffee, or home-made ginger beer. They also sell organic fruit like pomegranates, and veggies like aubergines and squash grown on the farm. Cook them at home, sprinkled with Doornkraal Karoobossie salt.

They have a great wine collection, jams, quince cheese, biscuits, dried fruit and sour figs.

And keep an eye out for the "Koktyls" calendar by local photographer Maryna Cotton – men from the De Rust district posed in the nude to raise funds for community projects. . .



Speciality: Roosterkoek with free-range lamb and pesto mayonnaise (R45) – it pairs very well with a glass of red wine.

Where? Next to the N12; 24 km from Oudtshoorn and 10 km from De Rust.

Opening times: Monday to Thursday from 8.30 am to 4 pm; Friday from 8.30 am to 5 pm; Saturday from 8.30 am to 3 pm; Sunday from 9 am to 2 pm.

Contact: ☎ 082 763 5296; 🌐 doornkraal.co.za

IN OTHER WORDS

Landie Harmse, waitress and master roosterkoek baker

"I enjoy it here, especially when it gets busy in season. I like working under pressure!"

Tracy Watson, manager

"We're part of an amazing community; the farm stall enables us to showcase this to people from all over."

Celesté Müller, marketing manager

"I really do feel privileged to be part of the Doornkraal family. I like to share this passion with visitors."



LITTLE KAROO



WE STAYED HERE

Klein Karoo Valley Guest Farm Cottage

This cottage can sleep up to three adults and two children. The bedroom has a double bed and the living area has a single bed and a sleeper couch (better suited to children). It's fairly spartan (no TV or Wi-Fi), but there's a farm dam to swim in, braai facilities, and a fireplace. Pets are welcome.

Where? Next to the R62, on the farm Opsoek, about 23 km from Calitzdorp and 27 km from Ladismith.

Rates: From R950 per night for two people sharing; R200 per extra adult; free for children under 10.

Contact: 📞 061 118 5120



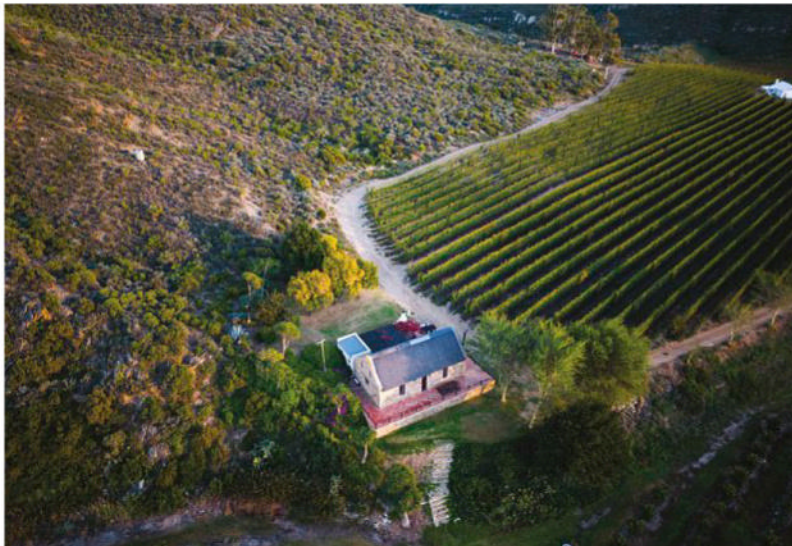
Wildevondeloof

This resort is in a private game reserve. The luxury suites can sleep two adults and the self-catering unit sleeps four adults and two children. Activities include game drives (you can see zebra, kudu and gemsbok), stargazing and guided hikes.

Where? About 60 km north-west of Oudtshoorn.

Rates: Suites from R5 430 per person sharing, all meals and activities included. There are sometimes discounts available when you stay for two or three nights. Self-catering from R3 000 per unit, which sleeps up to six people.

Contact: 📞 082 551 3019; 🌐 whkloof.co.za



Appelhuis

This well-equipped stone cottage is in an apple orchard and can sleep up to seven people. There are braai facilities and a fireplace, but no Wi-Fi (bring your own smart card for the DStv decoder). Pets are welcome.

Where? On the farm Doornrivier, about 3 km east of Barrydale next to the R62.

Rates: R450 per person sharing; R200 per child under 12.

Contact: 📞 084 597 1281; 🌐 barrydale.org.za

With thanks to Suzuki South Africa for the use of the new five-door Suzuki Jimny for this trip, and also to Wildevondeloof for the complimentary accommodation.

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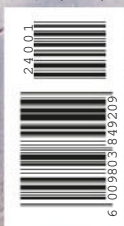
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Frans Hugo, newspaperman

In Calvinia, every week for 49 weeks of the year, **Frans Hugo** (91) and his team publish a community newspaper. And every Thursday, Frans does an almighty 1 200 km delivery run to Prieska and back all by himself. . .

WORDS & PICTURES **TOAST COETZER**

We hit the steenbok just east of Vosburg. The poor thing stepped out of the tall grass from the left, directly into our headlights. A fraction of a second later, it was dead. Frans Hugo keeps control of the steering wheel and brings the metallic orange Fiat Multipla to a stop. Dawn is still an hour or more away.

I get out and walk around to inspect the damage to the car. It looks like we got off lightly – only the plastic bumper is torn; nothing is leaking from the engine. I walk into the darkness behind the car, panning my dim cellphone torch from side to side. The steenbok is nowhere to be seen; it must have been flung from the road.

Once Frans has also checked out the car, we continue driving. Usually, he does this 1 200 km delivery run in his Fiat Doblo 1300 panel van, but for my sake – Frans says – the seats are far more comfortable in the Multipla.

At 1.28 this morning, Frans stopped in front of my guesthouse in Water Street, Calvinia. From there,

we drove east along the R27 and then the R63. Cresting Jan Swartsberg, the lights of Williston sparkled like silver in the moonlit distance. “During load-shedding, the power is usually off at this time of the morning,” Frans tells me. “Then you can’t see Williston at all. Nor Carnarvon.”

Different landmarks trigger different memories for Frans. I learn that Jan Swartsberg was named after a sheep thief who used it as his hideout. Likewise, every passing kilometre is part of a rite. Beads on a rosary, counted off one by one. Every place name, tree and koppie means something. A little further, at a road cutting, Frans tells me that a family of porcupines used to live here. Close to Williston, as we cross the Sak River, he says: “This is where I usually take out a R5 coin.”

2.48 am. The R5 coin is a small tip for petrol attendant Trompie Metala at the Atlantic Oil filling station in town, which is our first delivery point. Frans jokes with Trompie about their local rugby team, Young Blues, who recently gave the Calvinia team, Young Tigers, a proper hiding. Of the 30 newspapers we drop off with Trompie, a handful will find their way to Fraserburg later, when Williston’s

resident GP, Koos Louw, drives there for his weekly rounds.

2.53 am. We’re off again, from Williston to Carnarvon. Frans tells me about a ghostly light he’s seen here a couple of times. It appears in the rear-view mirror like an approaching car, but never overtakes. He stopped and waited for the light once, but there was nothing.

At Droogeputs, site of a small station when the trains still ran, Frans points to a tiny dot of light in the veld. “That’s a new light, it wasn’t there before,” he says. Frans would know, because no person alive could have driven this stretch of road, at this hour, more often than he has.

For the first decade after he took over the *Noordwester en Oewernuus*, distribution was mostly done by train. But by 1994 Frans had expanded his operations further eastwards to Prieska – and the trains stopped running, which forced him to deliver the papers himself.

A rough estimate would be that, in the 30 years he has done this longer route, he has driven about 1,5 million kilometres, which is almost twice the distance to the moon and back! He’s driven in flurries of snow and on freezing nights when frost settles on

Frans Hugo, Thursday 27 June 2024.



PROFILE

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The *Noordwester*, hot off the press. Donlin Bailey has worked at the newspaper for 23 years. ("After the first 10 years he left, following the bright lights of Cape Town," Frans says. "But he came back.") A close-up of one of the printing presses still in use. Martha van Wyk expertly collates the different pages – she has about 38 years of experience. The hand of Jonathin Priegaardt knows every part of the printing press. Janetta Saulse (service years: 30) runs the stationery shop. Maxie Hugo (80) was born and bred in Calvinia and was curator of the local museum until she retired in 2009. Celeste Kamies (service years: 18) handles phone calls and other administration. Jonathin Priegaardt has worked here for 13 years.

Frans's almost unbelievable Thursday odyssey across the Karoo distributes barely 300 newspapers over an area the size of Portugal.

the ground. There have been kudus and flat tyres and breakdowns.

3.53 am. Tonight is one of those freezing nights. The Fiat makes a loud *tieeeet* sound when the temperature gauge drops to 3°C, warning about potential ice on the road. In Calvinia earlier, it was a comparatively balmy 9°C.

"Look, there's a corbelled house," Frans says. The moon is almost full and I can easily make out the stone building in the veld.

In Carnarvon, our first stop is the Quest filling station in the centre of town. Frans needs a walking stick to get out of the car; I help him get the parcels out of the back. Under his direction, I place the newspapers and another small box in front of the shut door of the filling station, where the attendant inside is just beginning to stir. The box contains someone's prescription spectacles. The optometrist in Vredendal – three towns further west from Calvinia – entrusts Frans with deliveries from the Hantam to the Orange River. Sometimes Frans even transports puppies. They might have been advertised for sale in his newspaper and then, by default, Frans becomes the courier. Once he drove a parrot to Prieska. ("No, it didn't talk, it sat in the back," Frans says dryly.)

The sleepy petrol attendant opens the door. Wordlessly, he picks up the parcel, looks at me, then at Frans with his walking stick next to the orange car in the glow of the neon forecourt lights. Ah, yes, his eyes seem to say: It's the old man who comes every Thursday with newspapers and optometrist's parcels.

At some stops, Frans delivers a single newspaper. These are for subscribers, all of whom Frans knows by name. I fold and tuck the paper into a security gate. Frans watches from the driver's seat to see that I do it properly – he can't risk a Karoo wind dislodging the paper and blowing it down the street.

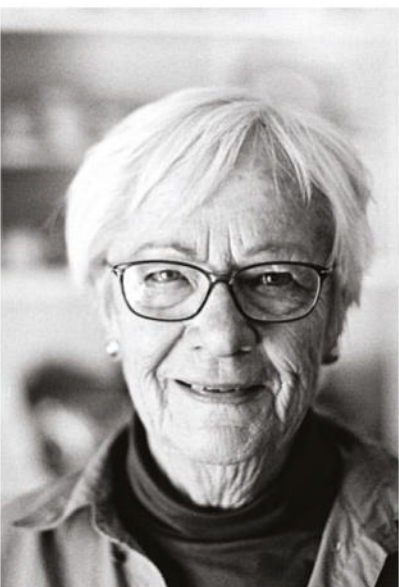
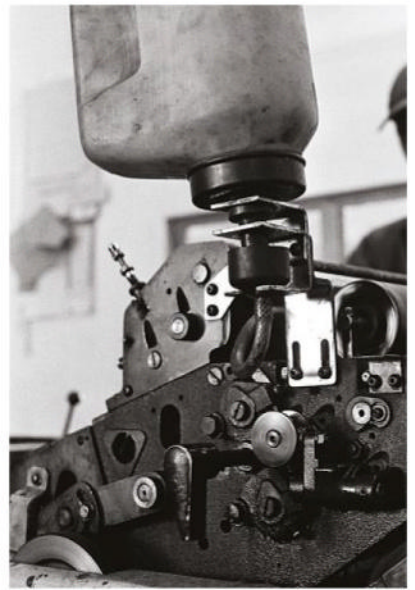
We stop at the Kareeberg Municipality, CSB Trading, Karoo Vleisboere, a law firm called Van Niekerk Coetzee, and finally at the Danie van Huyssteen retirement home. Then we leave for Vosburg. Time is not our friend: It's 4.40 am and 4°C.

Frans's almost unbelievable Thursday odyssey across the Karoo distributes barely 300 newspapers over an area the size of Portugal. The *Noordwester en Oewernuus* (price: R8) comes in three different editions. Seven of the eight pages in each edition are identical, but the front pages and mastheads differ. The Calvinia edition has *Noordwester* big and *en Oewernuus* small underneath. For the pleasure of the handful of readers in Prieska, the masthead says *Oewernuus* in big letters and *Noordwester en* small above it. In Victoria West, the paper is called the *Messenger*.

The *Noordwester* was founded in 1917 by Calvinia lawyer Cyril Hall. The current edition, dated Friday 28 June 2024, is issue number 5576. Yesterday afternoon – Wednesday – I watched as the paper was printed in a large room filled with bulky, old machines. Some of them click-clacked industriously but most stood silent, waiting for a broken part to be replaced – in vain, because neither Germany nor Japan still manufactures such things. The oldest working tool was a guillotine dating from 1880, supplied by John Dickinson Co. Ltd., London.

There are five employees: Donlin Bailey, Jonathin Priegaardt, Martha van Wyk, Celeste Kamies and Janetta Saulse. "Without them, you wouldn't see a single page of this newspaper," Frans assures me.

There's also Maxie, Frans's wife, who helps with office work and the collection and writing of stories. "She and Celeste also help me and the other old-timers to understand things like WhatsApp," Frans says.



The sun comes up as we leave Britstown. We shake off the dark cloak of night we've carried from the Hantam and exchange it for the vivid finery of an Upper Karoo morning.

Our day on the road feels like a dream. It's as if we exist in a different time and place; the real world only intruding when we stop somewhere and open the doors.

It's 4.50 am when we hit the steenbok. By 5.46 am we're in Vosburg, where we drop newspapers at Rick's Karoo Winkel. I also slide a copy under Anna Fourie's front door. Anna is a *Noordwester* correspondent. "And highly professional," Frans tells me. At 5.51 am, the Fiat exits Vosburg like a phantom.

6.30 am, Britstown. In the glow of another Quest filling station, we eat the cheese sandwiches Maxie packed for us, and drink coffee. I made myself a flask of plunger coffee earlier; Frans prefers instant, with milk and sugar.

The sun comes up as we leave Britstown. We shake off the dark cloak of night we've carried from the Hantam and exchange it for the vivid finery of an Upper Karoo morning. The landscape changes subtly from region to region. It's playing the long game. If this was Europe, we'd have passed through three countries already. But we're still in the Northern Cape.

8.07 am, Prieska. In the recent past, when *Volksblad* – the Free State's Afrikaans daily – still existed in print, Frans would buy a copy in Prieska when he passed through. He's a voracious reader of newspapers and still buys *Die Burger* in Calvinia every day. "And that R40 *Rapport* on a Sunday," he grumbles.

We pull in at Prieska Internet-dienste for a drop-off. And at a tyre shop called Point-S. I do the drop-off and Rina Ungerer, who works there, follows me to the car to greet "Oom Frans". He gets a big hug and smiles from ear to ear.

Back on the N10, we stop for a break. I'm always intrigued by the graffiti you see at picnic spots. On 10 September 2016, Mark from Durban wrote: "Thanks

very much for this resting place".

"Humanity is inherently interesting," Frans says. (He's a master of the understatement.) In his long career, he's met Desmond Tutu and FW de Klerk, Danie Craven, provincial premiers and other important people. Despite his age, his interest in the here and now is as keen as ever; so too his interest in the communities his newspapers serve. He understands the basic thrill a person feels when they see a photo of themselves in print. Seemingly insignificant regional news is not just about knowing what's going on; it reminds you who you are and where you fit in.

For years, the former Jewish owner of the hotel in Williston asked Frans to post two copies of the paper to Israel where his children had emigrated to, so they could stay in touch with what was happening in the Karoo.

That's why one of the *Noordwester's* front-page stories this week is an obituary of Davina Jordaan, a well-loved inhabitant of the region. "Not only was she a *boervrou*, but also a businesswoman who started a popular shop called 'Karlentjie', which she ran with great success."

It's why one of the *Messenger's* cover stories is about rugby because it's a sport that brings communities together. The Victoria West team, Western Force, won an away game against the Boegoeberg Peruvians: "The Force had a slightly slow start to the game and had to defend for all their worth when the Peruvians almost scored from the kick-off."

On the *Oewernuus* front page: "Local GP Charles Schoeman and his wife Retha bid farewell to Prieska after 34 years. They're off to the seaside for retirement."

From here on, Frans and I take turns behind the wheel of the Multipla. Wildebeeskuil. Ongers River. Sodium. Omdraaislei. Soon we're back in Britstown at the same Quest. The café is open now and Frans spends

a few minutes catching up with the manager, Yofilda Jansen. She's also one of his correspondents – a “stringer” in newspaper jargon; someone who keeps an ear out for news.

Now we aim for Victoria West. After crossing the Ongers River again, we see a half-albino ostrich strutting his stuff in a camp next to the road. “It doesn't matter how many times I drive here,” Frans says. “I always see something new.”

We never drive very fast. At one point, a bakkie towing a trailer struggles past. On the trailer is a gyrocopter. Frans's interest is piqued and he drives faster so we can stay 50m behind. He asks me to take a photo – maybe he can use it in the paper. In this world, everything can be news, and Frans knows it.

At a farm called Wolwedans, a memory stirs: “I always think of my mother when I see that sign,” Frans says. “She was one of twelve children – six girls and six boys. As an adult, she taught at a farm school outside Elliot in the Eastern Cape. The school was called Wolwedans.”

A gravel road snaking into the hills to the right unlocks another memory: “I once took a shortcut through there, driving my yellow Volkswagen bakkie. But it started pouring – I just made it through a flooded drift. Then I had to stop and change a flat tyre in the rain.”

Grasberg. Rietpoort. Windsor.

Frans tells me a story from his childhood. They lived on a farm called Kaaimansgat near Touws River for a while. In the mornings, he had to catch a horse in the veld and ride it to school. “Except during harvest season because then the horses were used to pull the harvester. Then we had to walk.”

He was born in 1932 in Cape Town – his father had left the country to find work in the city during the Great Depression. But it's the Fraserburg district that

Frans considers his true *heimat*. That's where he spent his high school years. By then, his parents were farming merino sheep on the farm Dwaalfontein. Those years in Fraserburg made him a Karoo romantic forever.

11.26 am, Victoria West. A stack of *Messenger* papers hits the desk at De Oude Pastorie Guesthouse, owned by Elize Perrin, who handles the paper's business in this area.

The temperature has risen to 15° C. Just down the dirt roads lives another correspondent, the flamboyant Wilma Schutz. “They broke the mould when she was made,” Frans says as Wilma appears behind her garden gate, wearing a red nightgown and beanie. When she hears that I want to take a photo, she shrieks in mock horror and disappears inside to change in something more flattering.

I'm beginning to suspect that Frans drives 1200 km every Thursday to shoot the breeze with his correspondents because they're his friends.

“This drive is a necessity for me,” he admitted earlier. “Delivering the papers isn't the main reason why I do it.”

Frans gets back into the Fiat but Wilma stands in the way so he can't close the door. She's keen for a *kuier*. “Frans,” she says mischievously. “I want to paint a picture of you on your 100th birthday – *en dit moet 'n dansparty wees!*”

Frans grins sheepishly and his eyes sparkle – as much as I can see of them behind his glasses, which automatically darken in bright light.

We slip away from Victoria West, destination home. Soon after the R63 has left town, it wriggles through a poortjie and then the town dam appears on the left. “Back in 1955, I swam across the whole dam,” Frans recalls. “But I almost didn't make it – I had to swim doggy paddle!”

Victoria West is another of several Karoo towns in the life story of Frans Hugo. To get there, he first had to go back to Cape Town, where he moved after school in 1949 to work at the Nasionale Pers printing press. In 1955, he heard about a position at the Victoria West *Messenger* and immediately applied. The job was multi-disciplinary: He worked as a letter setter, writer, photographer – everything. He loved it. Back then, the so-called Makadas train still ran from Hutchinson to Victoria West, onward to Carnarvon, Williston and all the way to Calvinia. Some days, Frans would board the train with his bicycle, get off in the next town and cycle around looking for interesting stories.

It only lasted a year, and in 1956 he returned to Cape Town and married Annette van Langelaar. (Annette passed away in 1994; Frans and Maxie – who had lost her husband years before – were married in 1995.) Again, Frans worked for a subsidiary of Nasionale Pers, printing well-known titles like *Die Burger* and *Huisgenoot*. His next big career move came in 1967, when he, Annette and their children moved to Windhoek: Frans became the manager of the printing press that produced *Die Suidwester* newspaper.

But the Karoo always called him back. “We had two girls in Windhoek but I was working all the time and realised I wasn't seeing them enough; I'd just drop them at school in the morning,” he tells me. “When the two boys came, I thought: Enough of this, it can't continue.”

In 1977, Frans's close friend Fanie van der Merwe found him a job as deputy manager at the farmer's co-op in Fraserburg. Frans was back where he'd spent his happiest childhood years and he was among farmers again – his people.

For a while, he and Fanie farmed sheep together on a farm called Droogvoets. “I had a 90 cc Honda

PROFILE

motorbike,” Frans says, his eyes moist at the pleasure of this particular memory. “I’d have both boys on the bike with me and we’d ride 20km from town to the farm to go see the sheep.”

Two years later, he got a manager post at the co-op in Williston. In 1980, he bought Noordwester Uitgewers from Carel Anthonissen and the family moved to Calvinia.

Frans actually bought the business for his daughter Alice and her husband Gerhard to run, but it wasn’t a good match. “So, there I was stuck with the printing business,” he says, although for someone with his vast experience in the industry, running a regional newspaper must have been a dream. “Yes, I love putting a newspaper together. How many people get to create something new, from scratch, week after week? It’s in my blood. I enjoy the mechanical aspect of the printing press, the smell of the ink and paper. But I also enjoy writing stories...”

In the past, their circulation was around 2 500 copies per week, now they hardly print a thousand. About 700 are distributed in Calvinia and the remaining 300 on this run. Frans is under no illusions as to the state of the industry. Shortly before my visit, it was announced that the print versions of big papers like *Rapport*, *Beeld*, *City Press* and *Daily Sun* would be shut down.

How does he keep the *Noordwester* going? “The actual newspaper sales – that’s for the birds,” he says. “It’s all about the advertisements. I’m lucky that we get regular advertising from municipalities and mining companies operating in the Northern Cape. Our big advertiser is the SPAR group – their full-page ad pays my staff salaries every week.”

At a pepper tree, we pull over for coffee and a banana. Frans remembers how he once picked up someone’s cellphone under the

same tree, and how happy and dumbstruck the owner was when his phone was returned.

His favourite tree along this stretch is a few kilometres further along. “Now that’s a helluva nice tree!” he says, as if he’s talking about a good friend. “Great shade. There aren’t many like that in the Karoo.”

On some Thursday afternoons, Frans will pull over for a quick nap under his favourite tree, but not today, because the co-op in Loxton closes for lunch between 1pm and 2pm and Frans wants to make his delivery before that.

Gemsbokfontein. Vrede. Bitterwater. Melton Wold. Arizona. Taaiboschfontein.

1.10pm, Loxton. We’re late, so I leave the newspapers and three white boxes, each containing a pair of prescription glasses, in front of the locked door. They won’t be stolen.

2.09pm, Carnarvon. We fill up at the co-op, which has the cheapest fuel in town. The Multipla is a 2005 model, with 434 663 km on the clock. It already had 150 000 km on the odometer when Frans bought the car in Bloemfontein – he recalls the return journey clearly, since it started snowing near De Aar that day.

We drive to the retirement home again, where Frans spends a few minutes with an old friend (and yes, another correspondent) Ellen Riley. We sit in wire chairs on the sunny side of the building. Ellen’s husband Roy passed away recently and Frans is here to find out how she’s doing.

“I’m going to Upington for a while,” Ellen says. “To let things sink in a bit.”

3.45pm. Frans’s one daughter, Minette Mans, meets us at a picnic spot next to the R63 east of Williston. She and her husband have a farm called Nooitgedacht about 10km away. Because Frans drives past her “front door” every week, they sometimes arrange for a catch-up.

She brings him a bag of home-grown pecan nuts.

Frans gets into Minette’s car with her to be out of the wind, and I walk away to give them privacy, taking photos of nothing. Two people meeting in the middle of nowhere to have a conversation. Beats a digital voice note, that’s for sure.

When I ask Frans later about what makes him happy, we end up talking about the glory of the Karoo: its peace and quiet, the space, the night skies. “But there’s another thing,” he says. “You only really find peace in your life when you’re past that stage when making money is your main driving force.”

5.18pm. As golden light settles on the dusty veld, we stop at a car wreck, which has settled mysteriously on the other side of a fence. The wreck has bothered Frans for the past couple of weeks. What happened here? He’s curious about everything. He asks me to take a photo. Just in case.

5.36pm. The sun dips behind the Hantamberg.

5.49pm. “This stretch is called the Jaagvlakte because in the old days the farmers would race each other in their horse carts.”

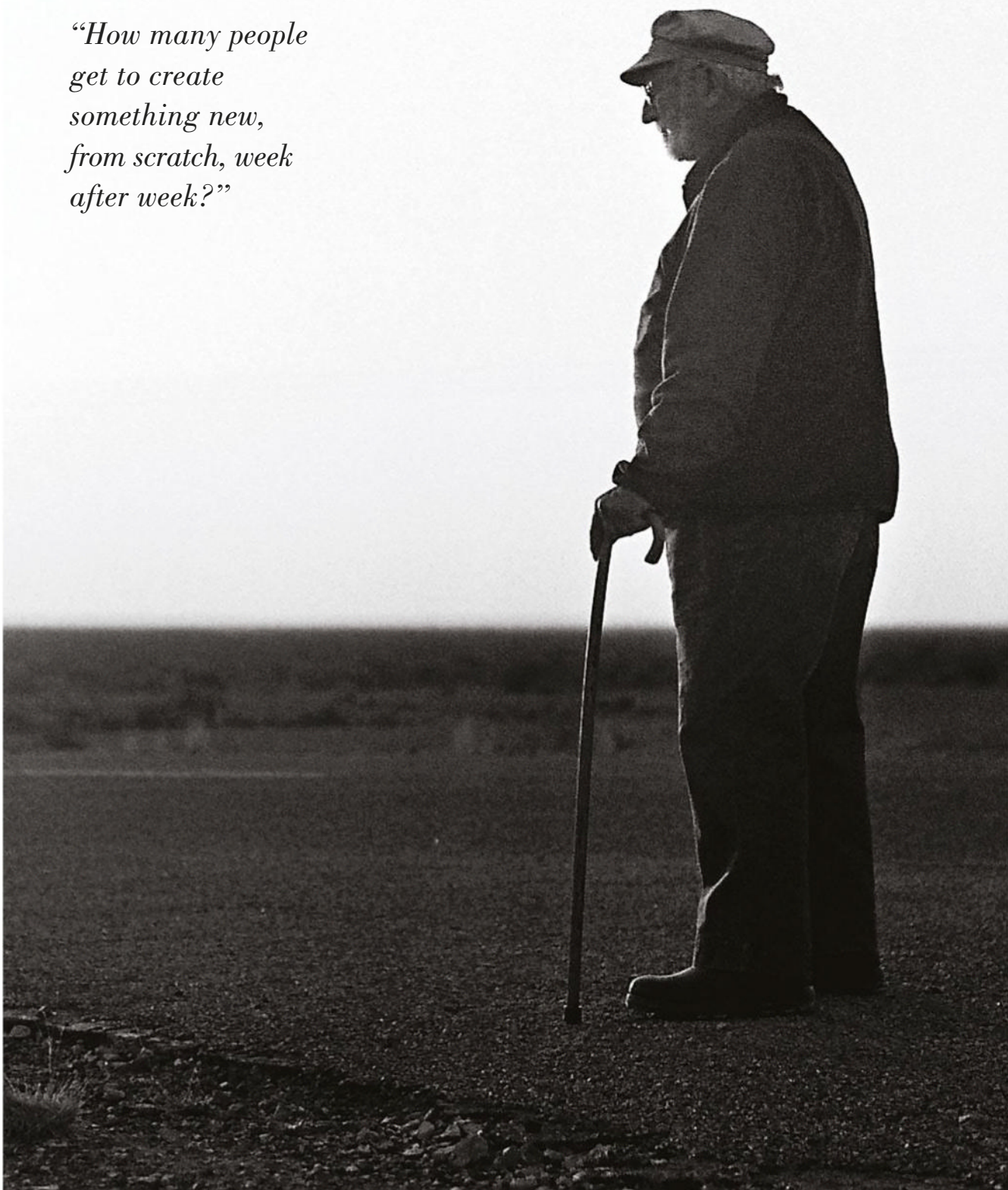
Through the windscreen, Calvinia rushes towards us like a promised land. A bold silhouette on a telephone pole draws my attention: a martial eagle.

5.54pm. Calvinia. Frans will go to bed early tonight, after he’s enjoyed a well-earned *knertsie*. Work on issue 5577 starts in the morning.

Without the *Noordwester en Oewernuus*, everywhere from here to Prieska would be poorer. There would be fewer words to describe its people, fewer stories to illuminate their lives.

And the day Frans Hugo goes, the people of the Karoo will lose something valuable, too. More valuable, even, than a helluva good shade tree.

*“How many people
get to create
something new,
from scratch, week
after week?”*





A bright sun with rays shining over a Karoo landscape. In the foreground, there is a large, circular, corbelled structure, likely a house, with a flat roof. The landscape is flat and covered in low-lying vegetation. In the background, there are more hills and a small building with a corrugated metal roof.

Stories in stone

The story of the Karoo's famous corbelled houses is humble and simple, like the part of the country in which they're found.

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**

The plains around Slingersfontein's corbelled house are still almost as quiet as when it was built.

CORBELLED HOUSES

The area around Fraserburg, Williston, Carnarvon and Loxton is known as the Hardemans Karoo, but you might as well call it the Corbelled Karoo. These unique stone houses built by the first trekboers between the 1820s and 1870s are only found in this part of South Africa. Before the farmers moved into the region, it was unexplored wilderness, known only as the “Country of the Bushmen”.

In 1811, the English naturalist William Burchell came to explore this part of the Cape colony. At the Sak River, near modern-day Fraserburg, Burchell stood on its border. Two years previously, in 1809, the border had been further south, at the Riet River between Sutherland and Fraserburg. Burchell predicted the arrival of the farmers in the region: “If the occupation of new territory were permitted in the same unrestricted and extreme manner as formerly, it would not be long before the colonists had reached the Gariep.”

The building style of these interesting stone huts – likened to igloos, beehive huts or rondavels – isn’t unique to South Africa. Corbelled ruins older than 6000 years have been found on the island of Malta in the Mediterranean Sea. And there are similar structures in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

But is there a corbelled house more famous than the one at Stuurmansfontein? I doubt it. So that’s where I head first because in a way, Stuurmansfontein is at the heart of the Karoo’s corbelled house story.

From Carnarvon, I follow the R63 for 30 km towards Williston (see map on page 88) and turn right onto a dirt road that leads me 20 km away from cellphone reception and other evil spirits.

Charmaine and Piet Botha wait for me in the beautiful garden on their farm Bethlehem. This is where Piet grew up and where he still farms, and it’s also where Stuurmansfontein can be found.

“My father and grandfather would have hated this garden!” says Piet. “The older generation believed that every cent had to go back into farming; they never spent money on anything frivolous or fun. You had to suffer just as much as the sheep or it was basically a sin.”

But during the severe drought years between 2012 and 2021, this garden kept Piet and Charmaine going.

“Our lives revolved around the small flock of sheep we had left, and how to feed them,” Charmaine says. “A drought changes you – everything beautiful in your mind also seems to wither away. When Piet and I sat in the garden, it reassured us that something was still alive. We looked at the birds and tried to identify them. In those moments, we were excited and could laugh and talk about something other than the drought.”

The district isn’t called the Hardemans Karoo for nothing. To give the sheep enough to eat, you need as much of the arid veld as you can get. That’s why the first farmers in the area didn’t plant gardens and did everything they could to buy more land. Competition was fierce, but Piet’s family tale is one of kindness.

He says: “My grandfather was

a man called Jack Vorster. He and another man, Abe Cloete, were best friends. When the farms between theirs came on the market, Abe sent a letter by horse the day before the auction to let my grandfather know that he wouldn’t buy the farm right next to ours. That was Bethlehem. In the letter, he promised to rather buy Witfontein. The postscript to the letter read: *‘Slaap rustig, my vriend.’*”

Charmaine sends me off to Stuurmansfontein with a basket of mutton chops, *braai broodjies*, a potato dish and brownies.

From their farmstead, it’s 7 km through the veld to where the white house stands among the black ridges. Hidden away by ancient rocks, it feels as if you’re the first person to step through its door.

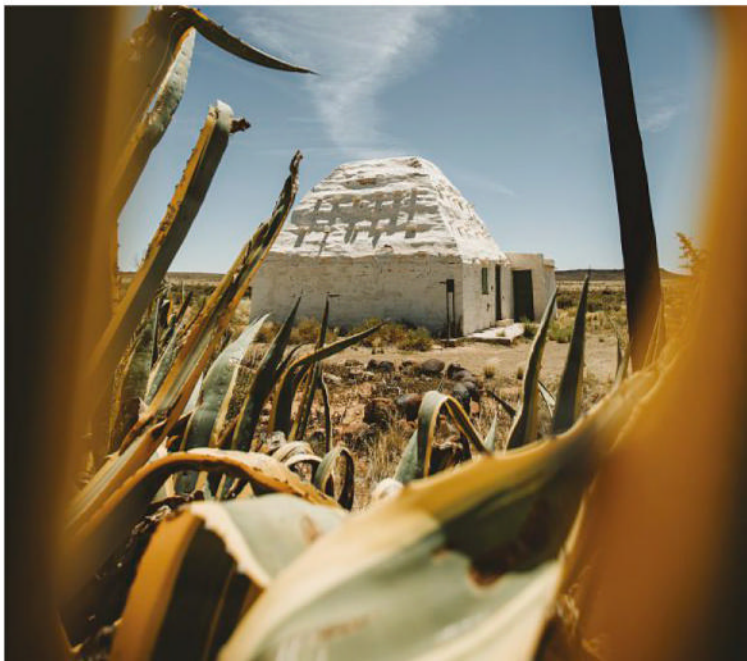
Stuurmansfontein is actually two corbelled houses close together, with an extra tin-roof building on either side. These structures became the farmhouse over the years. The four buildings are connected, but to reach one of the rooms and a bathroom you have to go outside and enter through another door.

No one knows exactly when these corbelled houses were built, but there’s another house on the farm T’kokoboos next door, dated 1851. It’s probably a good indication.

The first houses in the area had to be built with what the earth could offer – and there were only rocks here. There were no trees from which to cut beams, so the domed roofs were also built with stone. Each successive row of stones was moved slightly inward so that the dome would narrow until there was only a hole left in the centre, which they could close with a big, flat stone.

Over the years, some of the corbelled houses were plastered

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Spend a night or two in a corbelled house like Stuurmansfontein and you’ll realise you don’t need much more than a place to make a fire and a roof over your head. Many corbelled buildings, like the chaff barn at Stuurmansfontein, were used for storage. Depending on availability, you might get olives, tomatoes and eggs at Stuurmansfontein. On Arbeidersfontein and Klipkolk you can see examples of square corbelled buildings, which were later extended. One of the bedrooms at Stuurmansfontein.



CORBELLED HOUSES

and limewashed and some were extended, like at Stuurmansfontein. But in many cases, the new farmhouse was built away from the old corbelled structures.

Fortunately the people of Stuurmansfontein maintained their corbelled house and incorporated it into farm activities. Now guests can experience a taste of the old Karoo, from a time when there were no satellites in the Milky Way.

I light a fire in the *asbos* cooking shelter and watch as Venus burns as brightly as the sparks. A sickle moon hangs in the smoke. Only the sizzling fat on the fire makes a sound. In the house, I follow the soft flicker of candles. There are no light bulbs here to blind you to the perks of a slow-paced life. When I go to bed, the corbelled house folds a protective hand around my dreams.

The next morning, I climb the hill behind the house and wait for the sun. It creeps over the horizon and the earth glows like last night's coals. A sheep bleats. There's water below, among the karee trees and reeds. In the Karoo, a spring like this is a miracle. Every farm, every farmstead, every human and every animal exists here only because pools of holy water bubble up from the desert soil. Often, the springs are strong enough to irrigate agricultural fields.

There's another, smaller corbelled house nearby that was once used as a chaff barn. A stone wall arches around the part that was used as a threshing floor. The wheat the farmers sowed and harvested themselves was separated from the chaff right there, and the grain became their bread. Yup, in the time of corbelled houses, everything a farmer needed fitted in and

around a few stone igloos.

"Ja," says Piet when I say goodbye to him at Bethlehem. "People often arrive here in a hurry, or feeling annoyed. But when they leave, their windows are open and they're so relaxed we have a hard time getting them on the road again!"

There are many corbelled houses in this part of the Karoo. In Patricia Kramer's book, *Corbelled Buildings of the Great Karoo*, published in 2019, she writes about nearly 200 buildings, mostly found on private farms.

Next to the R63, about 41 km outside Carnarvon towards Williston, you can see a square stone building on Klipkolk farm right next to the road. Another 41 km further, you can also see a corbelled house on Schuinshoogte, in a depression in the landscape. And 10 km further – 35 km from Williston – you can turn right onto the Banksfontein dirt road to see the Arbeidersfontein corbelled house a kilometre further. It's a national monument, like the one at Stuurmansfontein.

I turn around at Arbeidersfontein, drive back to the tar road and follow the R63 for 18 km towards Carnarvon before I turn right on the Fraserburg dirt road to look for more corbelled buildings.

A fence runs next to the road, but instead of wooden poles or metal droppers, the wire is strung between slabs of stone. They peek out from the grass like gravestones – a reminder of a time when wooden poles and co-ops were rare. These stones of the Karoo have seen and survived everything.

Some distance further, the dirt road splits in two – both routes take you to Fraserburg. I go left, into silence. Burchell wrote about this region: "Not a green herb enticed

the eye; not a bird winged through the air: the creation here, was nought but earth and sky."

At the farm Koppiesfontein (about 54 km north of Fraserburg), a corbelled chaff barn still stands proud among the kriedoring trees. It's not too far from the road, but it blends into the veld. On the inside, the stone roof swirls upwards like the scales of a pangolin. Nearby, a dilapidated corbelled house rests in the shade of blue gum trees. The modern farmhouse in a poplar grove is also empty.

Maybe Burchell was right and we should have been more cautious when we moved into the Karoo. Maybe we should have been slower to build. Or maybe we shouldn't begrudge each other things; be more like Abe and Jack.

As I drive away from Koppiesfontein, I pass many other empty farmhouses – the land now belongs to one man. I turn onto the Tiervlei road to Carnarvon and follow unnamed roads towards Loxton.

Keep your eyes open and you'll see corbelled houses next to the road at Modderfontein, De Puts and Krabfontein. Late in the afternoon, a structure juts from the plain like an anthill and catches my eye. It's the impressive corbelled house on Slingersfontein, also close enough to the road to see. It's tall and was obviously plastered with mud and clay at one stage. A western barn owl has moved in. I want to move in too, so I pitch my tent next to the road on a pan. There's no traffic and no fences.

I become smaller and smaller in the silence and darkness. The Karoo feels incredibly vast when your shelter has no foundation and nothing around you is brighter than the Southern Cross.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Book a stay at Schuinshoogte's main farmhouse (☎ 082 920 6883) if you want to look at their corbelled house. A fence constructed with stones instead of wooden poles is a very old fence indeed. Contrary to popular belief, the flat stone covering the roof opening didn't have anything to do with making fires inside. Fires were made outside; the stone merely sealed the opening, especially during rain. The windmill at Slingersfontein is an indication there was once a spring or well here. Camping on the endless Karoo plains will make you feel insignificant. Koppiesfontein's neat chaff barn is pure igloo.



CORBELLED HOUSES

The only other corbelled house where you can overnight like at Stuurmansfontein is on the farm Osfontein between Loxton and Carnarvon. Stegmann and Natasha Lubbe farm here and they've retained some of the old way of doing things in their farming operations.

We walk together to the corbelled house as Stegmann points out what they've made and built on the farm: a beautiful tree house in the poplar forest; copper basins and chandeliers in the stone house...

"We sometimes sleep in the corbelled house ourselves," says Natasha. "If you only have fire and candlelight, the world feels better and more wholesome, even if it's just for a night."

Are there still people who can build a corbelled house, I ask.

"Not as far as I know," says Stegmann. "But I've repaired some of the houses and it's not that difficult. It just takes forever to find suitable stones and arrange them in a way to keep the structure sturdy. The most important thing is patience. And that's in short supply everywhere."

The last patient man was Natasha's father, Roy Riley. He broke down a corbelled house in the area, marked every stone, and rebuilt it next to the museum in Carnarvon.

"My dad is still alive," says Natasha. "But he's 94 years old and he's not well, so it would be difficult to get a first-hand account."



Four months later, I watch Roy's memorial service on YouTube. He passed away in June 2024. He was an absolute gentleman, according to the people gathered in the Dutch Reformed church in Carnarvon. A man who always opened the bakkie door for his wife when they stopped at Spar. The only man trusted to do a proper welding job in the district. A man who sometimes worked so late into the night that his hair was covered in frost.

When you asked Roy how it was going, he always said: "*Arm, maar vol liefde.*"

Sounds to me like the soul of the corbelled house lived inside Roy Riley. But only he would know. After all, he was the last man to build one.



Clockwise from top left: If these stones could talk, they'd tell so many stories. Early morning at Stuurmansfontein: space, fresh air and peace. Natasha and Stegmann Lubbe on their farm Osfontein in the Carnarvon district.



STAY IN A CORBELLED HOUSE

Stuurmansfontein

The two original corbelled houses on the farm are now a bedroom and a living area. Two other bedrooms, as well as a bathroom and kitchen, were added on. The unit sleeps six people. Charmaine Botha has decorated it beautifully without diminishing the character of the pioneer houses. There's no electricity; only candles and lanterns. The kitchen is equipped for a self-catering stay and there's a gas fridge and a gas geyser for hot water in the bathroom.

Stuurmansfontein has an outdoor shower and a dam you can swim in. The shed has also been converted into self-catering accommodation and sleeps two people. It can only be booked with the corbelled house for bigger groups, not separately.

Where? About 53 km west of Carnarvon. A good dirt road will lead you to the Botha farmstead. The corbelled house is 7 km further along a jeep track that's traversable in any vehicle with high ground clearance.

Rate: From R750 per person sharing.

What else? Make arrangements with Charmaine for a braai basket (R250 per person) with meat, boerewors, *braaibroodjies* and a potato dish – the best! There's even pudding. She'll also leave a fresh sourdough loaf in the kitchen for you.

Contact: ☎ 087 802 0819; ✉ stuurmansfontein@gmail.com; “Stuurmansfontein” on Facebook and Instagram

Osfontein

This is as close to the true corbelled-house lifestyle you can get. The raw stone on the inside whispers stories of a Karoo where lions still roared at night. And when you sit bathed in candlelight, you'll wonder if you didn't just hear one...

The two bedrooms sleep five people in total. The bathroom has a shower with hot water, and the kitchen has a two-plate stove, fridge and cutlery. There's a braai place inside and outside. No electric lights – only candles.

Where? Between Carnarvon (40 km) and Loxton (37 km), turn east off the R63 and follow a good dirt road for about 7 km.

Rate: From R300 per person sharing.

What else? You can also stay in a tree house (sleeps two; R1 200 per night) or a stone house (sleeps five; from R300 per person). Both units are self-catering.

Contact: ☎ 072 310 7979; ✉ osfontein@webmail.com; “Osfontein Gasteplaas” on Facebook

Dancing in light



Many so-called “outsider artists” found creative freedom in the Karoo. Helen Martins from Nieu-Bethesda and Outa Lappies from Prince Albert are two examples. Marcella de Boom is another. **Iselle Combrink** and her three dogs went looking for De Boom’s mythical dancers on a farm near Loxton.

PICTURES **ISELLE COMBRINK**





One morning, I left home in search of a troupe of dancers in the Karoo. Whiskey, Jack and Charlie looked at me with bright eyes – my dogs were coming too.

Months before, I read the *Karoo Roads* book series by Julianne du Toit and Chris Marais and one story in particular ignited my wanderlust. Around 1998, artist Marcella de Boom created a group of dancing sculptures on a farm near Loxton, which at the time belonged to family friends. She's since passed away, but her dancers are still dancing. Chris and Julie had seen the sculptures, but there was little current information about how I could see them, too.

I contacted Julie and she referred me to the Loxton tourism office, where I was referred onward to the owner of the farm. We eventually agreed that I could visit the dancers on 9 August 2023.

With this appointment inked in my diary, I locked up my house in Alberton, loaded the Venter with dog paraphernalia and turned the nose of my Mitsubishi ASX south.

DAYS 1–2 Bethulie

Bethulie was bitterly cold, but the Farmer's Cottage at Karoo Pandok was snug. Die Ou Kar seemed to be the only restaurant open in town. While I ate, I read the tourist information on the back of the menu and decided where I wanted to be with the dogs at sunrise the next morning.

When we were young, my father taught my sister and I to appreciate a sunrise. He even woke us early during school holidays to experience "the best part of the day". Over the years, I've learnt that it's easier to share these moments with my dogs than to convince other people to get up so early!

On 30 July, exactly two years since my dad's unexpected passing, we went for a pre-dawn run over the longest bridge in South Africa: the Hennie Steyn Bridge across the Orange River, which is 1,15 km long and connects the Free State to the Eastern Cape. When the sun finally

peeked out, we were almost back in the Free State, with four steaming breaths, three wagging tails, and one human heart beating warm and content.

My plan for the day was to drive the so-called Gariep Dam Route, which is about 150 km long. From Bethulie, the dogs and I headed to the Eastern Cape side of the dam, through Venterstad, and we stopped for coffee and roosterkoek at Willem se Kampie – a busy oasis where you can buy anything from sheep-skin slippers to koeksisters.

Further along, we stretched our legs at a viewpoint next to the Gariep Dam wall. A sign said the dogs were less welcome than I was, but they were greeted warmly by all the other travellers we encountered.

We followed the R701 on the Free State side back to Bethulie, via the cemetery for people who died in the Bethulie concentration camp during the Anglo-Boer War.

BETHULIE & VENTERSTAD



Karoo Pandok The Farmer's Cottage
from R450 per person sharing.

📞 063 731 0018; 🏠 [airbnb.co.za](https://www.airbnb.co.za) (search "Farmers Cottage Bethulie")



Die Ou Kar Restaurant & Pub
📞 071 385 1148



Willem se Kampie 📞 082 578 7466

DAYS 3–6 Nieu-Bethesda

Nieu-Bethesda was love at first sight. We stayed at Playwright's House, where Athol Fugard wrote many of his plays between 1990 and 2017, including *The Road to Mecca*.

Charles King is now the owner of the house and Irene Walters is the manager. They gave me great information about local attractions and welcomed the dogs as if they were family. When I travel with my dogs, I always bring some throws to cover the soft furniture and guard against paw marks. But my three didn't want to laze around inside, they immediately set off to explore the big yard.

There were pencils and an A3 map of the town on the desk in the study. I coloured in as I explored the town; over the next few days, the monochrome map turned into a rainbow of stories.

I met Barbara Weitz, the chef and owner at Stirlings @ The Ibis. Her vegetarian dishes were fantastic: I feasted on home-made bread, agave flowers, quince jam and dandelion pasta. Coffee was served with koeksisters. (Why do we only get a biscuit in Gauteng?) Walking home in the dark, I watched the moon rise over the church.

Nieu-Bethesda's dirt streets are a dog's dream. We ran every morning, along the old irrigation ditches in town, across the suspension bridge and exploring the hiking trails around town. The dogs wore their harnesses but seldom needed their leashes.

Nieu-Bethesda is synonymous with Helen Martins and the Owl House, where more than 300 cement sculptures are admired by visitors every day. It's a disconcerting experience to see art that



Clockwise from the top: Dogs Whiskey, Jack and Charlie at the Gariiep Dam. The Hennie Steyn Bridge spans the inflow of the dam near Bethulie. Order local beer and a cheese platter at The Brewery and Two Goats Deli in Nieu-Bethesda. The Camel Yard at the Owl House, home of the late artist Helen Martins.



Whiskey gives a statue at the Stone Folk of Ongeluksloot in Nieu-Bethesda a sniff of approval.

NIEU-BETHESDA & GRAAFF-REINET



Playwright's House R1 500 per night for the house – it sleeps up to five people. Book via [airbnb.co.za](https://www.airbnb.co.za) (search "Playwright's House, Nieu-Bethesda").



Stirlings @ The Ibis ☎ 072 110 6254
The Brewery and Two Goats Deli
 ☎ 081 015 7996
Drosty Hotel [drostyd.co.za](https://www.drosty.co.za)
Bruno's [thebethesda.co.za](https://www.thebethesda.co.za)



The Owl House
[theowlhouse.co.za](https://www.theowlhouse.co.za)
Stone Folk of Ongeluksloot Facebook:
 "Stone Folk of Ongeluksloot"
Camdeboo National Park [sanparks.org](https://www.sanparks.org)

was created from a place of so much despair and loneliness. I spent an afternoon among the sculptures and left with more questions than answers. (The dogs stayed behind at the guesthouse.)

Martins committed suicide in 1976, but it was only 20 years later, in 1996, that the Owl House Foundation took over management and operation of the premises. Koos Malgas, Martins's friend and assistant, helped to repair the sculptures from 1991 to 1996.

It's hard to understand why it took so long to realise that the Owl House and its contents should be preserved as a national monument. The whole experience is an excellent example of "outsider art" – art created by people outside the traditional establishment.

Before I left, I bought a souvenir cement owl and a star from Joyce Malgas, daughter of Koos and an artist in her own right. Then I returned to the guesthouse and took the dogs for a walk to the town cemetery to look for the grave of Helen Martins. Fittingly, her headstone is an owl, surrounded by seashells, glass, stones and other tributes. I left a clay stone from Ethiopia that my friend Ernst had given me. He also loves the Owl House and the Karoo and I knew it would make him smile.

It was time to eat something. The Brewery and Two Goats Deli serves the most delicious cheese platters. The draught beer is also great. While I was there, I ordered six bottles of Sneeuwberg Lager (bottled just for me) to collect before I departed Nieu-Bethesda.

Late that afternoon, the dogs got their own taste of outsider art when we went to see the Stone

Folk of Ongeluksloot, about 7 km outside town on the same road as Doornberg Guest Farm. This permanent installation by Ryno Greeff consists of a kilometre-long hiking trail with sculptures made of stone and wire along the way. The dogs gave each sculpture a sniff. It was so much fun, we did the trail three times!

The next morning, Whiskey, Jack and Charlie were happy to stay behind at the guesthouse again while I drove to Graaff-Reinet, about 50 km away. I visited the Valley of Desolation in the Camdeboo National Park and had lunch at the historical Drosty Hotel.

Dinner back in Nieu-Bethesda was at Bruno's, which has a little door that opens onto a spiral staircase going down to the cellar. Over lovely food and wine, I met Nicol and Jaco from Cape Town. Soon we were chatting like old friends, sharing stories from our travels.

There were wooden angels for sale in the gift shop at the Owl House and I decided to track down the artist. Daleen Kruger lives in a house full of angels and dogs – one is named after Frida Kahlo. She invited me in and told me how she ended up in Nieu-Bethesda after travelling far and wide.

There was a half-finished angel in her workshop that I wanted to buy, but I was leaving the next day. Daleen assured me there would be time. Sure enough, when I went around the next morning my angel was ready, with a hand-painted star around each wrist and the words: "Somewhere between the morning star and the evening star, you'll find your destination."

DAYS 7–10 Prince Albert

The landscape changed dramatically in the 400 km from Nieu-Bethesda to Prince Albert. Wildflowers took over the scenery – was I really in the Karoo?

Prince Albert was summery and my new friends, Nicol and Jaco whom I'd met at Bruno's in Nieu-Bethesda, were also there. Just as I was pondering why the main road was so busy, I got a message from Nicol saying that the town's annual Plaaskombuisfees was on the go.

Part of the fun was a mountain-bike and trail-running event called Zwartberg Trapsuutjies – entries were still open at the church. Nicol had his bike and I never leave home without my running shoes, so we decided to meet up at the start line early the next morning. The trails were fun, and the beer and pancakes at the bazaar afterwards hit the spot.

The dogs and I were staying in a beautiful house called Laslap on the southern side of town. We could walk out into the veld on a network of hiking trails nearby, so we didn't miss a single sunrise or sunset. We ate more than one meal at Yellow House, opposite Laslap. Petro Lotz is the chef and her creativity in the kitchen knows no bounds.

Prince Albert's local outsider artist was a man called Jan Schoeman, known as Outa Lappies. He was also an activist and lay preacher who lived in poverty in Prince Albert Road, about 45 km from Prince Albert next to the N1. He was a familiar sight in the district, with his patchwork coat and the colourful art he made from discarded items.

He sometimes pulled his wagon like an ox and went on long



Clockwise from top left: Joyce Malgas (middle, pictured with her family) creates cement owls, like the one placed at the grave of Helen Martins. Writer Iselle Combrink with Nicol (left) and Sylvanus (right) at the Zwartberg Trapsuutjies trail-running and MTB event in Prince Albert. Whiskey, Jack and Charlie greet the sunrise in Prince Albert. Nieu-Bethesda artist Daleen Kruger with one of her Karoo angels.

ROAD TRIP



An example of the Bin Project in Prince Albert.

journeys through the interior, tracing his life story on strips of linen. He had these “chapters” of his life embroidered by women in the community. Patchman, as he often called himself, died from serious burn wounds on 7 July 2011 after his coat caught alight.

I tracked down Outa Lappies’s earthly possessions in the Fransie Pienaar Museum in Prince Albert. His “chapters” are exhibited in glass cases, along with some of his clothing and a teddy bear. A sign next to the bear’s foot reads: “Welcome to the Patchman’s place, you may be seated!”

Jan Schoeman might have been named Tourism Person of the Year in 2001, but for him it was just a label. He lived with a philosophy that can be summed up in three words: “*Iets uit Niets*”.

I found some other unusual artwork in town, including the

painted rubbish bins that are part of Kevin de Klerk’s Bin Project, which help to draw attention to non-profit organisations working in the community. Then there were the colourful elephants decorating the entrance to the Prince Albert Gallery and a wall of a house in the main road, done by Falko One, one of the best-known graffiti artists in the country.

I waited for a windless day to head up the Swartberg Pass. It opened in 1888 and was master road engineer Thomas Bain’s final project. From Prince Albert, you climb about 800m in 13 km to reach the summit. Every time I pulled over to take photos, I had to remind myself to breathe. I couldn’t face the dizzying bends back into Prince Albert again, so I detoured over the pass down to the Oudtshoorn side and back to Prince Albert via De Rust and Meiringspoort.

On our last morning walk, I carried Joyce Malgas’s cement star to my favourite viewpoint in town. It was my way of showing gratitude for the last few days, and a tribute to my dog Whiskey. He was the oldest of the three and this would be his last road trip.

I had adopted him from the Uitenhage SPCA in 2013. After almost 11 years by my side, and many road trips, I could see by his cloudy eyes and stiff legs that his time was running out. I knew I’d have to make a difficult decision when I got home to Gauteng, but for now we made the most of every remaining sunrise.

PRINCE ALBERT

 **Laslap** From R500 per person sharing, self-catering. ☎ 082 821 2100 (Dina)

 **Yellow House** 📍 yellowhouse.co.za

 **Fransie Pienaar Museum** 📍 princealbert.org.za

DAYS 11 – 12 Loxton

Before I left on this trip, I told a friend about Marcella de Boom's dancers. He's just as obsessed with outsider art as I am, and he took it upon himself to contact De Boom's daughter Ilse, who lives in Australia. Ilse answered as many of our questions as she could and sent photos of her mother taken in the late 1990s, during the creative process that culminated in the dancers. Her generosity in sharing this information, and her excitement about my adventure, is something I'll always treasure.

After months of anticipation, the dogs and I finally travelled to Loxton, driving east to Klaarstroom then north on the N12 to Beaufort West and the N1. The Silwerkaro Farm Stall was a treat. A pink bus, à la *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, was surrounded by a stand of prickly pears in a yard filled with more eccentric artwork. I only had time for a quick look around, but apparently Ben Arnoldi and Henco Heyns are the creative duo behind the place. There's also a guesthouse on site – well worth a stopover.

In Loxton, we stayed in Karoonag, the house where author Deon Meyer lived and wrote many of his books. It's now part of the Jakhalsdans Karoo Guesthouse, Farmstay & Safaris portfolio.

The next morning, it was time to see the dancers. Creating them was quite a process – it took about two years from conception to completion. Marcella de Boom was supported by Matthys Strydom from the Strydom Gallery in George, who sponsored the materials.



From the top: Teeberg viewpoint on the Swartberg Pass. The Silwerkaro Farm Stall on the N12 between Klaarstroom and Beaufort West. The Jan Schoeman, aka Ouba Lappies, exhibition at the Fransie Pienaar Museum in Prince Albert.

ROAD TRIP



Kasteel Boerdery is home to probably the only “Bavarian” castle outside Bavaria. Other attractions in Loxton include this old wagon.



Hidden away on a farm in the Karoo, there was a good chance that nobody would ever see the dancers, but that was the intention: The art wasn’t created for approval or acceptance, but rather from a personal place of light and joy, independent of the world out there.

Marcella and her daughter Ilse visited the dancers in 2003 and spent a few nights under the stars while they did necessary repairs. But six years later, back at home in Cullinan near Pretoria, Marcella passed away unexpectedly from a heart attack after taking her dogs for a walk.

John Sinclair was the owner of the farm at the time. He passed away too, and the land was sold. The dancers were left to the mercy of wind and time. In 2017, a group of Marcella’s friends spent a week on the farm celebrating her life and doing what they could to bring the dancers back from the brink.

I drove the 12 km to the farm, and then a further 20 km in the new landowner’s bakkie. The road was in a poor state and there were countless gates to open and close. After about an hour and a half, a strange miracle appeared in the

veld. The sculptures were life-sized and they were all still on their feet, dancing.

In 2003, Marcella wrote in her dairy: “The Karoo envelops me with its vastness, silence and beauty. It’s very good to be here. Decided to listen more in life.”

Suddenly it made sense. Not in a way I can put into words, but rather a moment you keep in your heart forever. It was Women’s Day 2023 and Marcella’s light was still burning bright on the Karoo plains. My heart was full.

I also made time to check out some unusual architecture. At Kasteel Boerdery, about 22 km north-west of Loxton, owner Dries Wiese told me the story of the farm’s castle. Dries’s father bought the farm from a man called Jan Hugo, who was yet another dreamer. During a journey through Europe, Jan drew a picture of his favourite castle in Bavaria on the back of a cigarette packet, with the intention to replicate it back home.

Sure enough, after he returned to South Africa to farm, he made bricks, hired some labourers and built his castle.

LOXTON & KLAARSTROOM



Karoonag Fill the house with six people and you’ll pay R590 per person sharing.

📞 jakhalsdans.co.za



Silwerkaro Farm Stall Facebook: “Silwerkaro Gastehuis & Padstal”



Marcella’s dancers It’s not easy to arrange access. Contact Ingrid Schöfmann (📧 ingrid.loxton@gmail.com) at the Loxton tourism office and take it from there.

DAYS 13 – 14

Richmond and Bloemfontein

At the Richmond Café and Rooms, Klaradyn and Nicol Grobler offered me a family room so I'd have enough space for the dogs. They also treated me to home-made vegetarian curry for dinner. The Groblers' daughter Daisy Jo is a fashion designer – her Daisy Jo label is taking off. On my way to the dining room, I saw a bright pink Daisy Jo dress in a window, with cow skulls arranged around it. The Karoo is always full of surprises.

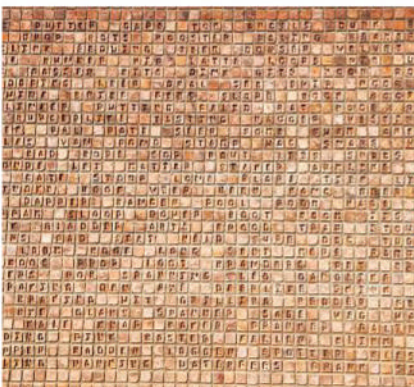
There was more outsider art to see in Richmond. Artist Willem Boshoff built a wall at MAPSA (Modern Art Projects South Africa), at 62 Loop Street, using handmade clay bricks. Each brick has a letter of the alphabet on it. The wall is titled "Word Woes" and consists of 390 words that can be read in both English and Afrikaans. I bought four souvenir bricks: one letter for each member of my world – Whiskey, Jack, Charlie and I.

It was time to head home, with a stopover in Bloemfontein. At Habitat Place, Kelsey du Pisanie put out three packets of dog biscuits and water. There was also a trunk full of toys with a note: "Whether you be pet or child, please help yourself and go wild".

It was the perfect ending to 14 days and 4 000 km on the road.

What did I learn? Just go. Put your dogs in the car and hit the road. Admire the sunrise, find your dancers and embroider your own life chapters.

We're only on this earth for a little while.



RICHMOND & BLOEMFONTEIN



Richmond Café and Rooms Self-catering room from R1 650 per night for two people sharing. ☎079 755 8285

Habitat Place From R1 000 per night for the unit (sleeps six). ☎076 775 0991



Vetmuis Plaaskombuis (Richmond) ☎079 755 8285

Clockwise from top left: The Richmond Museum. Hide behind a book in the cosy lounge of the Richmond Café and Rooms and browse the locally made clothing in Daisy Jo's studio here. Charlie looks out over Richmond. Willem Boshoff's artwork titled "Word Woes" at MAPSA. (Also visit the MTN Foundation's Conversation Exchange exhibition, and the Images of Human Rights portfolio at the Ruach Elohim church next door.)

*This article is dedicated to Whiskey
(4 February 2013 – 7 November 2023).*

Follow sacred paw prints

The Leopard Trail is a four-day slackpacking hike in a corner of the Baviaanskloof where Karoo meets fynbos. Walking from one beautifully situated hut to the next, you might even have the rare privilege of putting your boot print next to a leopard's spoor. . .

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**





This section of the Leopard Trail traverses the Kouga Mountains – the Baviaans Mountains are in the background. The Baviaanskloof cuts through the two ranges.

BAVIAANSKLOOF

There's nothing like a slow walk in the Karoo. It gives the landscape time to speak to you and show you the small things. The Baviaanskloof is home to one of the most scenic hikes in the country – the Leopard Trail – and it's where my wife Daleen and I are joined by our friends Japie Kruger, Dawid de Wet and Rupert Koopman early in June 2024.

Dawid's wife Karlien and two of their friends had to cancel at the last minute. It's a shame, especially for Daleen, who is now the only woman and will have to put up with us men moaning about sore knees and the tribulations of the national cricket team on her own.

When you approach the Baviaanskloof from Patensie in the east, you start off in wooded mountains and citrus orchards. On the Willowmore side in the west, you'll find Karoo plains where nothing grows taller than a wild rosemary bush. The two regions come together in the kloof, resulting in seven of the eight biomes found in South Africa. As far as vegetation is concerned, the Baviaanskloof has a bit of everything, including the Karoo.

Heavy rain fell a week earlier. When we arrive at Cedar Falls Private Nature Reserve, about 55 km south-east of Willowmore, every ditch and drift is a roaring river. Thank goodness we'll be sleeping in huts on this trail. And we'll only have to carry daypacks; our food and sleeping gear will be transported to the next camp.

DAY 1

9,7 km, elevation gain 328 m

Trail manager Willem Maganie welcomes us in the reception area and explains everything. He also gives us a map – always useful! Daleen and I hang back when the group sets off because I have to deal with a deadline for this magazine before I leave the Wi-Fi behind.

Our late start is a bit

nerve-racking, especially since the first 2 km of the trail is a climb up an old 4x4 pass. It's tough going and I start to feel anxious – about the rushed article I just submitted (*Hmm... – Ed.*) and about the difficulty of the Leopard Trail. What have we signed up for?

The article anxiety remains on the plateau, but my fear about the trail quickly dissipates. A water-logged footpath cuts through the rhinoceros bush and across a plain. We hop some pools of water and enjoy the cool breeze under grey clouds. The air is so thick with freshness it feels like I can chew it.

At a stream, around the day's halfway mark, there's a sign to Gabriel's Pool. This is where we find Japie and Dawid. They say the pool – under a waterfall – is further upstream. Apparently it's freezing, but the photos on their phones make me green with envy.

"But it's very, very cold," Japie says again.

They both refuse to jump in with me and I don't even bother asking Daleen. I've exposed her to some freezing temperatures in the Karoo and Namib in the past and she no longer trusts me with any decisions made below 27°C.

I stride out into the water. *Blik-ammer!* My feet ache and it feels like a blade is slicing into my legs. With my camera held above my head, I swim to Gabriel's Pool. The location is spectacular, under a silver waterfall and surrounded by orange cliffs. When there's less rain, the waterfall dries up so we're lucky to see it.

After I've towelled off and warmed up a bit, we follow the trail along the same stream where it gallops down a kloof. We often have to leap over the water and when it gets too wide and deep, we pull off our boots and wade through. Well, we should, but Japie and I don't want the hassle so we try to find a detour. Our mission soon turns to crawling through dense

vegetation. Along the way, we lose sight of Daleen and Dawid. In the end, we have no choice but to walk through the knee-deep stream.

When we arrive at camp, Rupert and Dawid are already drinking beer.

"Where's Daleen?" I ask Dawid.

"No idea. I was going to ask you the same thing..."

We quickly retrace our steps and find Daleen shuffling her way through the last drift. She's safe, but she's definitely not fine.

"I waited for you and Japie. I whistled and shouted!"

I'm very grateful she can have a hot shower, dry her takkies in front of the fireplace and sleep under the down duvet she packed. Otherwise Daleen would definitely add "hiking" to the list of things she no longer trusts me with...

DAY 2

18 km, elevation gain 681 m

It's cold the next morning. I wouldn't mind spending the whole day at this camp hidden in the mountains. But off we go: We start the hike barefoot because the first few kilometres are along the river section of the previous day. I stick closely to Daleen's side...

The trail eventually turns away from the river and up Rheeboek Valley, but it's not much drier. We remain barefoot. Moving through the veld like this is actually exhilarating and we continue for as long as we can.

I live in the Free State, where winter is a muted season. Here, the veld is alive with colourful pelargoniums and ericas. Rupert is one of South Africa's best known botanists and it's a privilege to hike with him.

He points to some flat leaves on the ground. "That's a bulb," he says. "Can you believe it? Chinchinerchee. Beautiful flower."

Rupert also shows us firecracker vine (*Microloma sagittatum*) and a plant with a long ostrich-like neck,



Clockwise from top left: There's not always this much water in Gabriel's Pool. We hiked shortly after heavy rains – the waterfall at Gabriel's Pool was roaring and every small stream on the route was flowing. The hiking hut kitchens are great spots to hang out in – especially on a cold night. The route offers fantastic views of the valleys and kloofs. Late afternoon is a special time in the mountains, so don't rush.

BAVIAANSKLOOF

which he calls *Struthiola striata*.

My eyes are drawn to the animal tracks all around. We step over porcupine and armadillo spoor, and over a print in the mud made by a leopard – probably this morning. It's wild to think that the same mud on the soles of my boots is also clinging to the leopard's footpads; the leaves I rub between my fingers might have brushed its rosettes; its nose and whiskers sniffed the same air...

It's special to move through a place where leopards still roam. There simply aren't many of them left in the world. The Leopard Trail has a fitting name – it's not just marketing.

A mountain waits at the head of the valley. Time to climb. The trail follows the contours so it's not too steep. Water flows from stone; the mountains are saturated and overflowing after the rain.

Pink everlasting bloom all around. The sky is a deep, deep blue. The sun is hot but friendly – it's a breathtaking winter's day.

The halfway mark on the map is marked as "Reflection Pool". This spot is just above the waterfall at Gabriel's Pool – you can see the pool from up here but it's too dangerous to climb down.

It's cool under the high cliffs but in summer you'll be glad for the shade. We have lunch and then burn the calories up Dragons Ridge. We gradually descend into a kloof with a stream at the bottom. The late light amplifies the colours of the mountains and clouds. It turns into some of the most blissful kilometres I've ever walked, despite two steep climbs to the overnight huts.

Tonight, we braai. Tomorrow will be a long day.

DAY 3

22 km, elevation gain 730 m

The day's hike kicks off with a 3 km slog up Honeybush Hill. It's loong, and according to the map, it's

only the first of three such hills. They're also close together. When you crest the first, you see the next one looming.

I gasp for air on the way up and my legs shake on the way down. Three times. Conversation dries up. Rupert shows us proteas and pincushions but our interest wanes with our energy levels.

On the second hill, called Inconvenient Truth, we wolf down leftover *braaibroodjies* meant for lunch. This is where I discover that a mouse crawled into my backpack last night and sampled all my snacks. And it pooped on a packet of corn kernels meant for making popcorn, which it also gnawed open. I'm from the Free State, so when you mess with my mielies, you mess with my mood.

"Aggenie man!" Japie shouts holding a bag of nuts. "It got to my stuff, too."

Word of advice: When in camp, keep your food crate sealed tightly and hang your backpack from one of the hooks on the wall where mice can't reach it.

After the climb up Ain't So Bad, we're rewarded with a downhill run to the overnight huts, along a river course though Kasey's Kloof. There won't always be water here, but we have to leap over the river about a hundred times.

Based on the information we received at the start of the hike, Kasey's Kloof is home to a female leopard called Numah. There's probably a one-percent chance of ever seeing her, though, because the kloof is overgrown and gnarly, full of wild olive and wild fig trees.

The stream blocks our way for the umpteenth time. There are stepping stones to make the crossing easier. They're quite far apart and I have to take big leaps to get to the other side. Daleen hesitates in the middle and I jump back to help her. During my rescue mission, my foot slips and I fall flat on my back in the water.

I make a living as a photographer so my camera is always more important than I am. Somehow, I manage to keep it out of the river. It's a little wet but it still works. Daleen and Japie, who watched the whole messy scene play out, struggle not to giggle. I strike out for camp in a huff. Thanks to all the river crossings, the day's hike is taking much longer than planned and it's already getting dark.

Daleen and Japie are still sniggering behind me and I'm sure I'll find this all very funny one day, but right now the cold is seeping through my soaked clothes. The last section of the trail is muddy. I've never been more thankful for the prospect of a hot shower at the end.

DAY 4

13 km, elevation gain 648 m

The final camp on the Leopard Trail is lovely. The mountains fold around us; only Numah knows we're here.

The day's hike kicks off in Birdsong Valley and I'm in a much better mood. If only every day could start like this! The calls of black-headed orioles, African paradise-flycatchers, orange-breasted sunbirds and bokmakieries fill the air. They echo off the cliffs and seemingly never end.

The valley becomes a narrow kloof and the trail now leaves it – zig-zagging up the slope to the right. We climb and climb. And climb a little bit more.

When I take a breather and look back towards where we came from, I appreciate the slog. Below, Birdsong Valley is carved into the earth. The Baviaans Mountains stretch across the horizon, hazy blue, keeping all the ominous affairs of Real Life far, far away.

As my feet walk easy kilometres on the plateau, my mind is making plans to return. I go down the last long descent and know I'll be back. Once you leave a footprint next to a leopard's, it's a done deal. That's sacred stuff.



Clockwise from top left: In Kasey's Kloof you're more likely to see a Verreaux's eagle than Numah the leopard, but you might get lucky... Firewood is supplied at each camp. If you need more, arrange to have it delivered (R50 a bag). The Baviaanskloof is home to a wide variety of plants, like these pink everlastings. Rupert Koopman is about halfway up a steep climb on the last day. The camps are tucked in among the mountains and each one has a plunge pool.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How does it work? You have to be at least six people per group; maximum 12. You have to report to the reception office by 10 am on the first day to pack your crates. (Most hikers overnight at Cedar Falls before the hike for this reason.) Each person gets a 110-litre crate (465 mm wide x 736 mm long x 350 mm deep) for food supplies, clothes and sleeping gear.

The group also shares a camping fridge, which is plugged in at each hut, and a cooler box to transport your meat, ice and drinks.

After you've packed your crate, there's an information session and each group will receive a satellite phone for use in emergencies. (There's cellphone reception at one or two high points.) Vehicles are left at reception – it's safe there. The trail starts and ends at the reception office.

Overnight huts. Each camp has three wooden huts with big windows – each hut sleeps four people. The bunk beds have mattresses (covered in canvas) but no bedding. There's no electricity in the huts.

The communal kitchen and dining area has a long table and a fireplace. You can hang out here. There are two two-plate gas cookers (one team can make coffee while the other prepares dinner), plus cutlery, pots, pans and a coffee plunger. There's a washing-up basin with hot water, solar-powered lights and you can recharge your phone.

The six outdoor showers (adjacent to the kitchen) have hot water and there's a separate building with two flush toilets and basins. Each camp has a braai area (firewood is supplied) and a splash pool.

Stay longer. There are lots of accommodation options at the Cedar Falls reception area – it's a good idea to stay over the night before and after your hike. The Backpackers has three rooms (four single beds each; R600 per room). There are also two bigger farmhouses (one sleeps 12; the other nine) at R320 per person. The Hikers House sleeps 12 and costs R170 per person.

Where? The trail is in Cedar Falls Private Nature Reserve, which is within the borders of the Baviaanskloof Mega Reserve. Cedar Falls is about 55 km south-east of Willowmore. For 45 km you follow a good dirt road. The final 7 km farm road isn't 4x4-only, but a vehicle with high ground clearance is recommended.

Bookings: The trail is very popular. A hiking group departs basically every day. Bookings open for three-month periods for the next year. For example, by the end of July 2024 you could book for July, August and September 2025.

You have to be quick on the day the bookings open – the spots sometimes sell out within hours. By the time you read this, 2025 might already be fully booked, but there are sometimes cancellations. Keep an eye on these Facebook pages: "The Leopard Trail" and "The Leopard Trail Hikers Group".

Best time to go? To avoid the too-high and too-low temperatures of summer and winter, most people hike in autumn or spring – this is also when it's most difficult to find a spot on the trail. Summer or winter rain is possible, but it's not a high rainfall region.

Cost: R2 700 per person.

Contact: 074 939 4395; reservations@gobaviaans.co.za

gobaviaans.co.za



**Dawid de Wet,
Graaff-Reinet**

"The quality of the trail was surprising. It's so well maintained – you can even walk sections barefoot. The variety of vegetation keeps things interesting. The full streams made it extra exciting."



**Daleen van der Berg,
Bloemfontein**

"This was my first real multi-day hike. When the trail started with a long climb, I was a little worried... But it was great to spend four days away from everything. I look forward to my next hike!"



**Rupert Koopman,
Cape Town**

"I won't lie: Those slopes did me in! Some of the climbs were so steep... But then you get into such scenic areas again and you forget all about your sore knees."



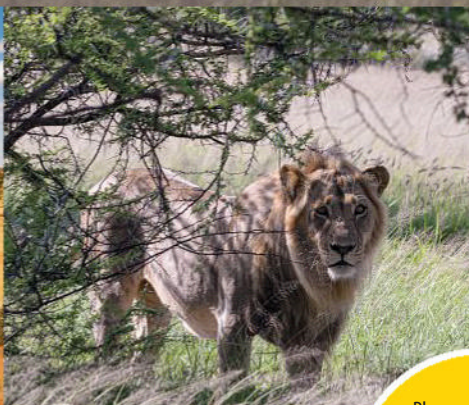
Japie Kruger, Bloemfontein

"It's a proper hike in proper mountains, but it has everything you could want at the end of the day: cold beer, a bottle of wine, a steak for the fire... It makes the Leopard Trail more accessible, for sure."



See both sides of the Kgalagadi

Join us and Bhejane 4x4 Adventures on a guided tour of the South African and Botswanan sides of one of the most iconic transfrontier parks on earth – the Kgalagadi!



THE ADVENTURE

DAY 1: TWEERIVIEREN

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

DAYS 2 – 4: NOSSOB

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

You can go on game drives from the rest camp at your leisure, or visit the camp waterhole, which is lit up until 10 pm. The Bhejane team will take care of

all your meals, freeing you up to experience everything the Kalahari has to offer: the camel thorn trees, blazing sunsets, birdlife and animal sightings. The swimming pool will be very welcome on a hot day!

DAYS 5 – 7: MABUASEHUBE

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

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

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

which are regular visitors to Mabu's campsites.

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

DAY 8: HOME

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

2025 DATES & RATES

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

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

Duration: Eight days, seven nights (tented accommodation)

WHAT'S INCLUDED?

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

WHAT YOU NEED TO BRING

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

Contact bookings@bhejane.com or call 082 724 0442 for a complete itinerary and a list of tour dates.







The Land of Begin Again

For almost 20 years photographer **Samantha Reinders** has been working on a long-term project about landscape and awakening. In 2018, she moved to Prince Albert. Here's how the Karoo has changed her.

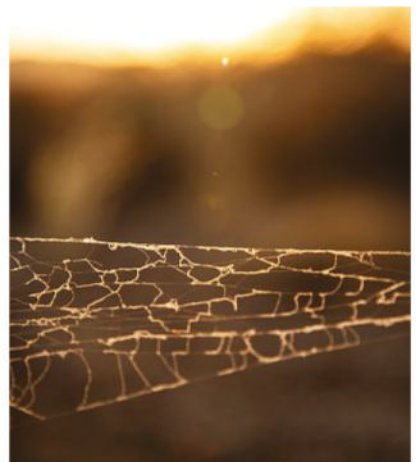
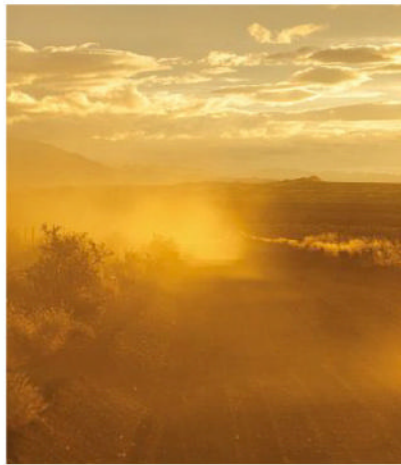
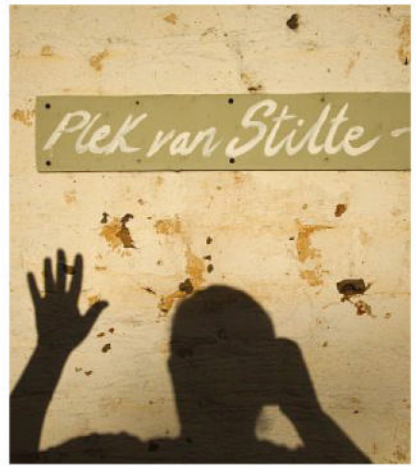
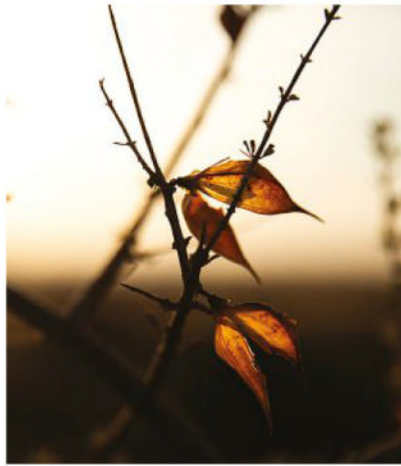
For me, the Karoo is both geography and destiny. It's there on the map of South Africa, plain as the eye can see, somewhere beyond the orchards of the Boland, south of the muddy ribbon of the Orange River, north of the greener Garden Route.

It's destiny that brought me here. My grandparents all spent a part of their lives in the Karoo, in towns like Matjiesfontein, Noupoort and Prince Albert. But it took me nearly 40 years on this planet to realise that the Karoo is also the place that makes me, me. It has a contagious magic, and I've learnt to recognise how the Karoo defines how I look at the world beyond its borders when I'm on assignments in far-flung places.

The Land of Begin Again is a series of photographs that I've slowly but steadily been working on for some years (Instagram: @thelandofbeginagain). A road trip here, a weekend away there, and a full-time move to Prince Albert in 2018 to join my parents who moved from Cape Town in 2004.

Among the thousands of photographs, I think what I'm trying to figure out is what happens between the heart, the mind and a piece of dusty land.

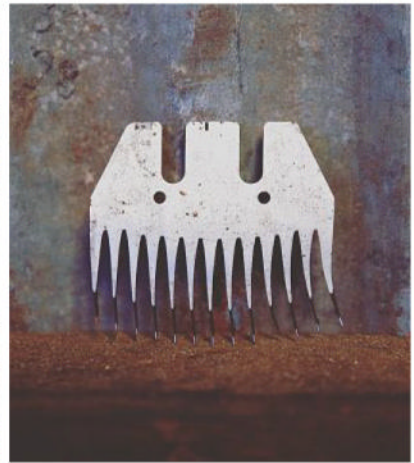
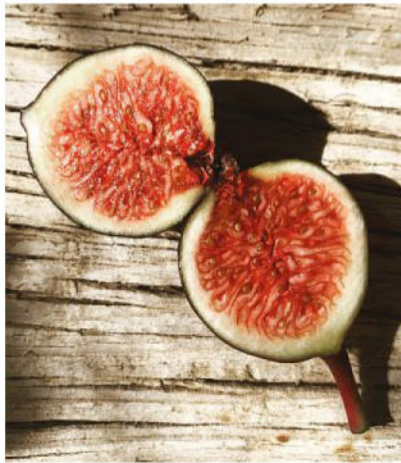
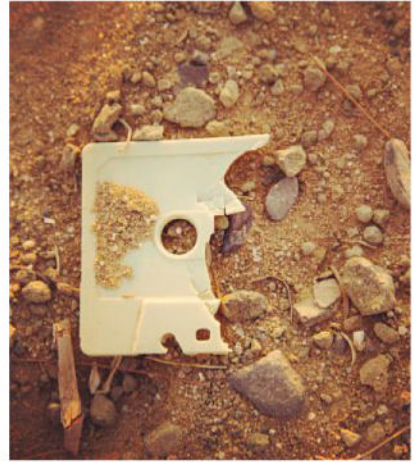
PORTFOLIO



It's often said that the Karoo is "silent", but I couldn't disagree more. A Karoo town is always alive with sound. There's the *doef-doef* as a car cruises down the main road on a Friday afternoon; the single clang of the NG church bell every half hour, in between the longer tolls; the lightest of rain showers, amplified under the shelter of a tin roof.

On a farm, you'll hear creaky windmills, a breeze ruffling dried seed pods, lambs bleating, the pop of a *klapperbos* seed... If you're lucky, you'll hear the lonely call of a jackal at night.

Oh, and you can hear yourself think.

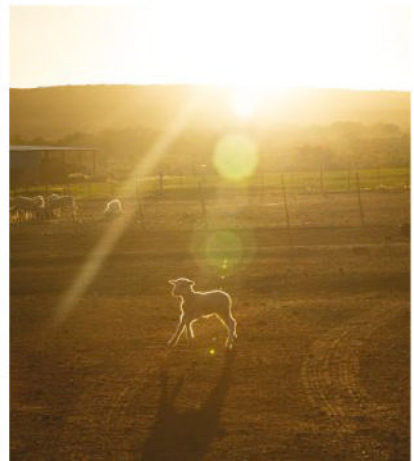
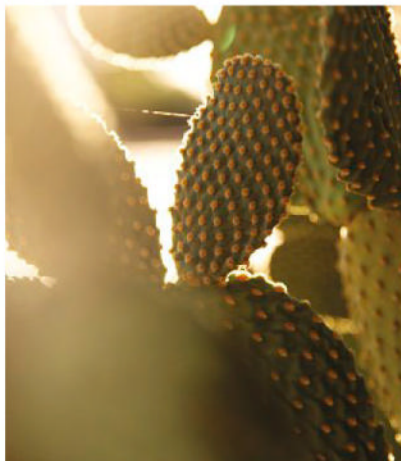


In his famous novel, *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, wrote:

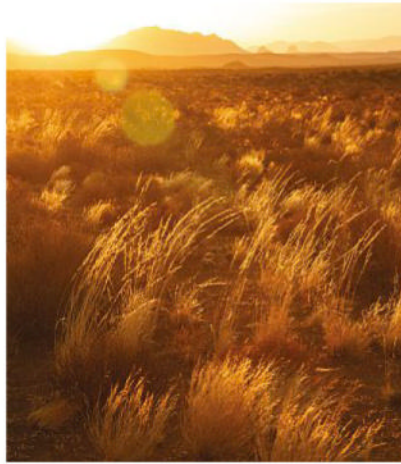
"What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well."

This is true of the Karoo. People often speed past, convinced that it's barren and boring. But if you spend time here, get out of the car, walk, explore and *stoepsit* a while, you'll find a treasure – a well – soon enough. These treasures come in various forms: trusted friends; spider webs glinting; the expectation of rain in summer; bits of pottery with stories to tell; the delicate wing of an antlion, which only graced us with its presence for 48 hours of life; and the warmth of a campfire against the backdrop of the setting sun.

The Karoo gradually unfolds and overpowers with tenderness.



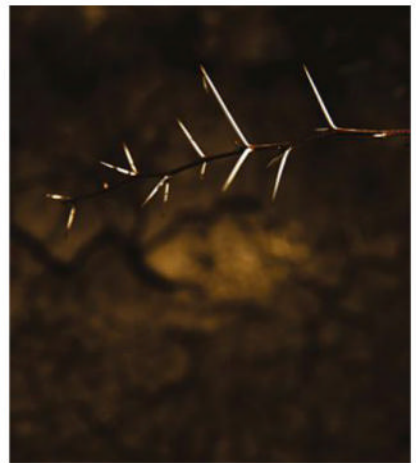
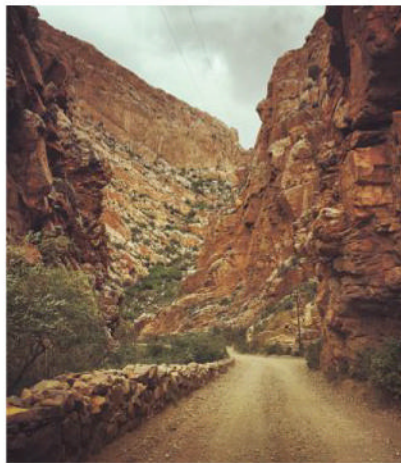
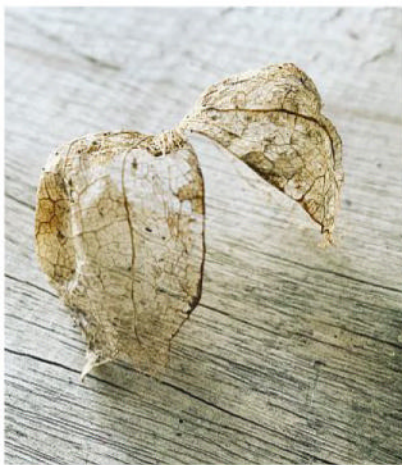
PORTFOLIO

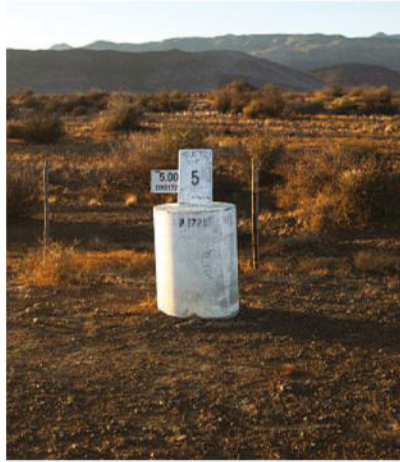


The vastness of the Karoo, with the ubiquitous windmill on the horizon to keep scale, is any photographer's dream. Mine included. But it's the special light that blows poetry into the language of the Karoo.

There's a clarity that's not easily found elsewhere. It's like someone took the glasses off your face, cleaned them and put them back on for you.

With this light, the atmospheric play of dust is often all you need for a great photograph. Shards of light dance in tandem with the dust. They shimmer, flicker like glitter, ebb, flow – and shine.

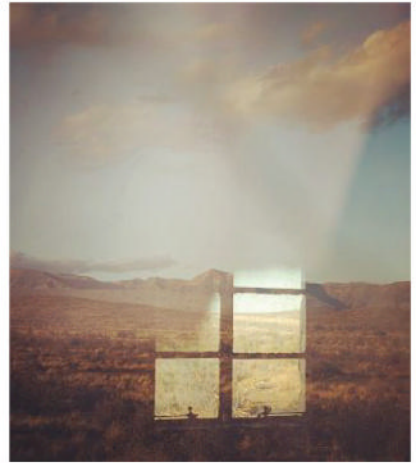
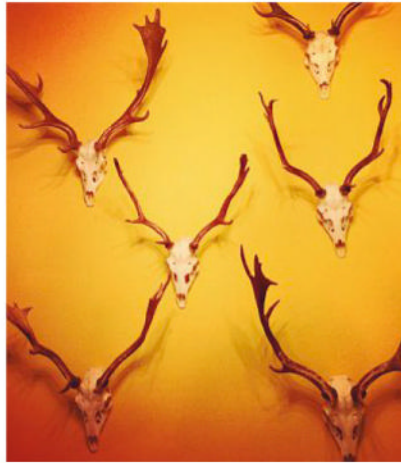
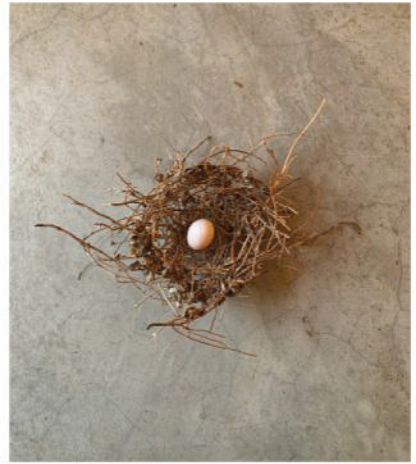




I want to make photographs that trigger the memories of others, to help them learn to recognise the subtle and beautiful language of the Karoo. I'd like them to step with me into my archive and delve beneath its surface, into a place where visuals meet smell, taste and sound. To be transported somewhere else, even for a second in today's world, is a rare and precious thing.

Some of these photos are taken with my Canon 5D camera, others simply with my iPhone. The camera is not the consideration, I simply use the camera that I have with me, which is mostly my phone. It's all about the moment.

PORTFOLIO



The Japanese poet Jiro Harada wrote: *"The essence of real beauty may be gathered from the commonplace, from what lies close around us in life. By learning to appreciate this truth, our lives will doubtless be enriched and ennobled."*

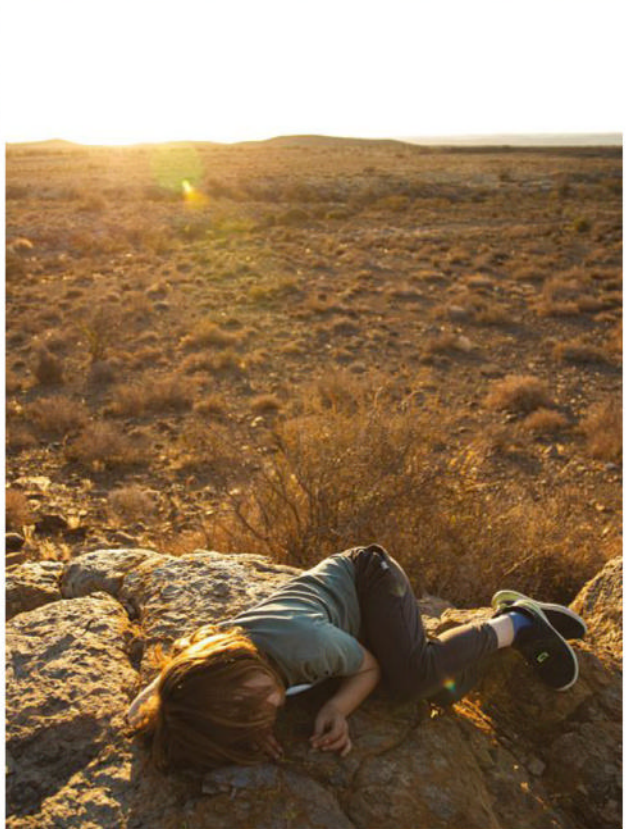
These words embody some of my feelings towards the Karoo. There are no fancy trappings here. No Gucci store, just a co-op selling vellies; no Intercontinental Hotel, but plenty of fantastic farmstays.

A VIP will struggle to find the usual fuss made about them.

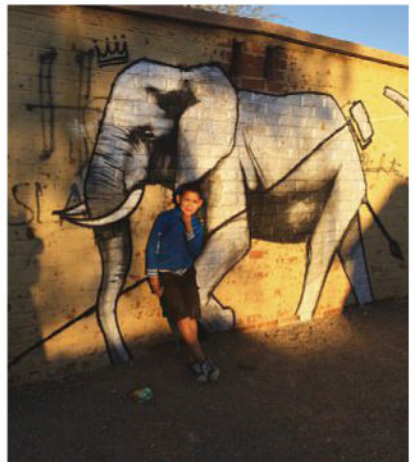
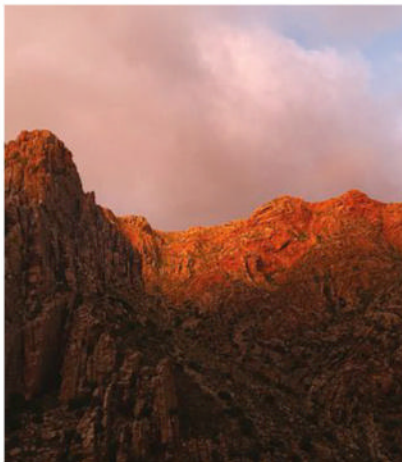
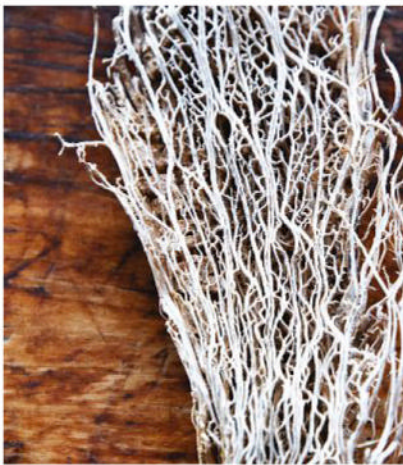
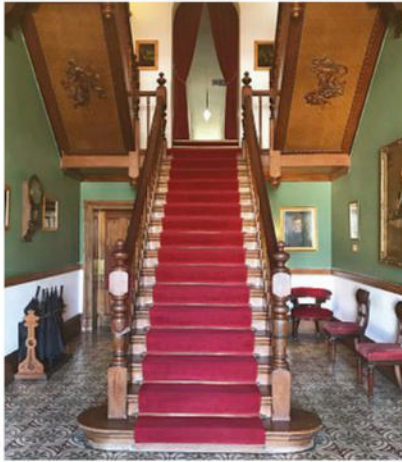
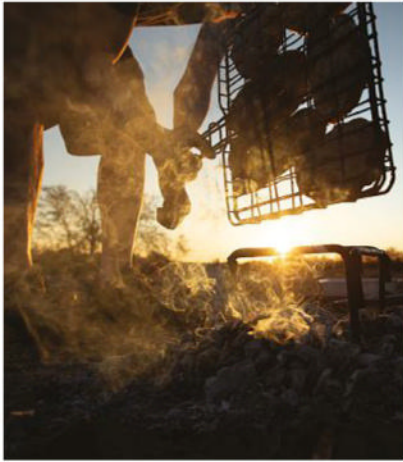
Karoo time allows opportunity and space for spontaneity. Embrace it! See a couple of bakkies towing trailers of goats? Follow them. There's bound to be a show or auction down the road, with all the fanfare that comes with it. See the clouds building up into fluffy marshmallows that look like they'll explode?

Pull over and wait for the action. Watch as things instantly change when the rain does come.

Invite time in for coffee and rusks. Get the recipe.





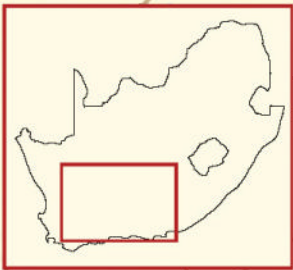


Entire micro-universes of plants and animals cling tenaciously to the surfaces of the Karoo – to a rock, an anthill, a blade of grass. Succulents the size of a pea live alongside stones not dissimilar in appearance to themselves.

A plump, juicy prickly pear will raise itself from an otherwise dead-looking landscape.

In your peripheral vision, a rabbit might dart from its den and hip-hop over a milk bush. Cobras and scorpions lurk above and below warm rocks. What you think is a stick is in fact a praying mantis out for a stroll. Spoor in the sand reminds you that the local leopard isn't as elusive as you might think. You can walk past the same place every day and see some miniscule change each time. You just need to slow down and take notice.

THE KAROO



Northern Cape

UPPER KAROO

HARDEMANS KAROO

HANTAM KAROO

ROGGEVELD

TANKWA KAROO

CERES KAROO

MOORDENAARS KAROO

KOUP

LITTLE KAROO

Western Cape

"Hantam" is possibly derived from the Nama word *heyntema*, which refers to the pelargonium plant, or geranium, which grows in the Hantam mountains. It could also originate from !han=ami which means "mountain where red, edible bulbs grow".

In 1774, the Swedish botanist Carl Peter Thunberg named the Roggeveld Plateau after a species of wild rye (*Secale africanum*) – or *wilderog* – that grows there. Due to climate change and overgrazing, the species is critically endangered today.

You guessed it; it's not easy to make a living here. It's only for *harde manne!*

In older writings Koup is often spelled "Goup" or "Ghoup". It's a Khoekhoe word that refers to the specific fat around an animal's organs. Perhaps when you look out over the plains after good rainfall, the lush Bushman grass surrounding the dark dolerite rocks looks like caul fat around an organ.

Locals say the name Moordenaars Karoo has to do with the "murderous" weather conditions – from boiling hot to freezing cold.





Free State

Eastern Cape

Indian Ocean

The Noorsveld gets its name from *Euphorbia coerulescens*, or *noorsdoring*. The British called this cactus "gorse" after a similar, spiny plant back home. Somewhere along the way, "gorse" became "noors".

Research of the Karoo regional names by Adri Smit of Ons Karoo en Kontrei - onsknk.co.za

Stay here

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION SECTION

Facilities • Rates • Activities Contact details

A visit to the Karoo is a proper road trip, often with multiple stay-overs in different districts. For us journalists, the best way to find accommodation that we're confident recommending to readers is to actually go out there and search. We slept on those beds, cooked a meal on the hob in the kitchen and spent time on the stoep just to see what the world brought to our eyes. (Is that an ostrich over there?)

Yup, it's a tough job, but someone has to do it! The result is this selection of places, each of which was hand-picked by one of our journalists on a recent trip through the Karoo. Most are on farms, because a farmstay is one of the Karoo's special offerings. It is where you get closest to its raw-cut magic: the joys of a walk in the veld; the spectacular display of stars at night; a step back into a slower, kinder passage of time.

Of course, this list is not nearly definitive, and it doesn't cover *all* the Karoo regions and towns. (We'd need at least another hundred pages!) But rest assured that each place offers something unique. Whether you're looking for a self-catering spot with a decent braai, or a candlelit dinner in a guesthouse – there are options for everyone. Some are perfect for active families, others are great for a couple.

Along the way you'll meet the inhabitants of the Karoo, famous for their hospitality. Jump in and enjoy!

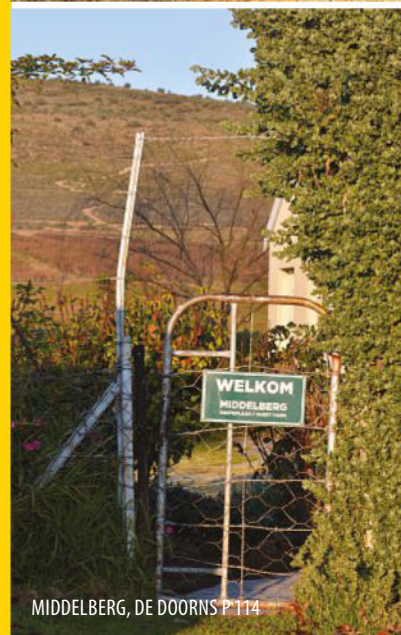


Cellphone signal is patchy in the Karoo, and people don't sit at their laptops all day waiting for your e-mail. Send a WhatsApp message instead of calling. And be patient – you might only get a reply after the sheep have been sheared. Always check rates and road conditions when booking, since these are subject to change.

Contributors: Julianne du Toit, Chris Marais, Samantha Reinders, Toast Coetzer



PINK HILL, COLESBERG P 106



MIDDELBERG, DE DOORNS P 114

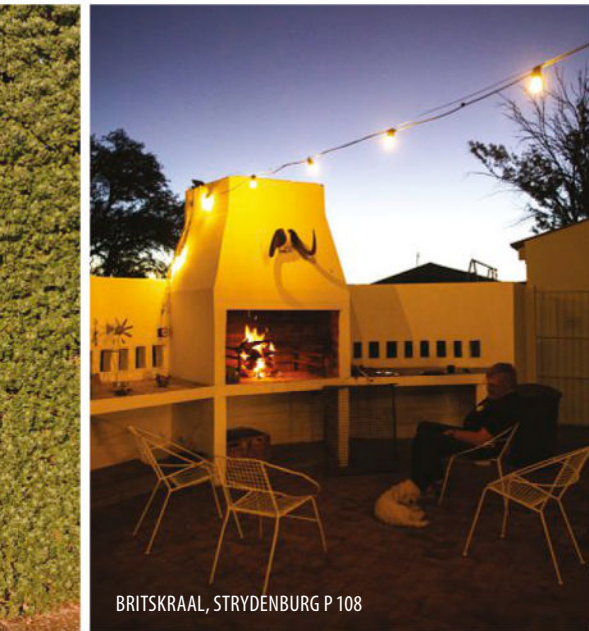


GELYKFORTEIN, VENTERSTAD P 96



RICHMOND ROOMS P 110

BLANCO, TARKASTAD P 95



BRITSKRAAL, STRYDENBURG P 108

TWEEFONTEIN, NIEU-BETHESDA P 99



ECO KAROO LODGE, LUCKHOFF P 107



YMANDSAM, TANKWA P 118

Time travel... with breakfast!

The Eastern Cape Karoo is famous for its country hospitality. Book a stay at one of these 10 historic farmsteads, which are full of stories and friendly faces.

BY **CHRIS MARAIS & JULIENNE DU TOIT**





IN THIS ARTICLE

- Somerset East
- Tarkastad
- Venterstad
- Middelburg
- Nieu-Bethesda
- Graaff-Reinet
- Pearston



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chris Marais and Julianne du Toit live in Cradock and have written and published several books about the Karoo. One of those is *Road Tripper: Eastern Cape Karoo*, which would be an excellent cubbyhole guide for your farmstay ramble around the province. Order from julie@karoospace.co.za or visit karoospace.co.za (R310 including courier fees; R150 for the e-book).

Ditch the laptop, load the mountain bikes and pack some walking boots that don't mind a bit of farmyard on their soles – you're heading to the Eastern Cape Karoo!

Chances are you're going to hike in the Sneeuberg, feel the energy of the sheep-shearing shed in action, go on fossil tours that will take you back 250 million years, fish for trout in distant dams, see rock paintings and sniff the *bossies* that make a Karoo lamb chop so tasty. There will be sundowners in magic landscapes, long *stoepsit* sessions or rainy afternoons behind a good book in a cosy place. If you're lucky, you might find yourselves in the heat of a ram auction (don't lift a finger!) or sampling the delights of an annual wool festival.

Along the way, you'll meet some of the friendliest people in South Africa, who will often speak to you in a special language called *Graaffrikaans*, in sentences that begin in English, swerve into Afrikaans and end with something interesting from Xhosa.

Let's go!



SOMERSET EAST

Glen Avon Farm

Glen Avon is tucked into the Boschberg range, which looms over Somerset East. Upon arrival, the setting evokes a Victorian-era snapshot of rural England. But look closer and the ancient wild olive and sneezewood fence posts that line the paddocks of this angora goat and Döhne merino sheep farm are gnarled and twisted by centuries of harsh Karoo weather.

Features of Glen Avon include the oak and pecan tree-lined avenues leading to the Brown family farmhouses and guest cottages; a spectacular waterfall on the upper reaches of the farm; a number of dams filled with trout and bass; a shearing shed that once did duty as a British officers' mess; and the recently restored three-storey mill built in 1821 (pictured on the previous spread).

The birding is incredible. Farmer Greg Brown has recorded 270 species including specials like Knysna woodpecker, buff-streaked chat and scops-owl, plus breeding pairs of Verreaux's and martial eagles.

Glen Avon was granted to soldier and farmer Robert Hart in 1821, in recognition of services to the Crown, and for successfully managing Somerset Farm. Since then, his descendants (the Harts and later, the Browns) have been able custodians of this remarkable property. Fiona and Greg (pictured top, with their daughters) – the seventh generation on the land – took over from Greg's parents, Alison and Bill Brown.

Facilities: There are four cottages on Glen Avon. The thatched Hart Cottage (sleeps five), thought to have been built in 1817, has a fully equipped kitchen, bathroom and outside braai.

Pecan Cottage (sleeps six) has three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, lounge and lovely stoep. There are two smaller cottages – Garden View and Garden Close (each sleeps two) – that have a kettle, toaster, microwave and fridge.

What else? There are three hiking trails: a 3 km trail past the family graveyard, through riverine bush; a 5 km walk to the weir; and an adventurous 8 km walk through Afromontane forest. You can fish in several dams for trout or bass, or join a tour of the old mill.

Where? Glen Avon is about 8 km east of Somerset East (KwaNojoli), but access is generally off the R63 tar road. Once you turn off the latter, you'll follow a 6 km gravel road in fair condition.

Rates: From R950 per night for a couple; from R1 800 per night if you're booking either Hart Cottage or Pecan Cottage (sleep five and six). A stay of at least two nights is recommended.

There's a minimum charge of R500 per group for a mill tour, thereafter R100 per person; discounts for larger groups. Rod fee R250 per angler per day for trout fishing. Bass fishing is free for guests; day visitors pay R50 each.

Contact: 074 474 3623 (WhatsApp); glenavonfarm.co.za
fionabrown@r63.co.za

TARKASTAD**Blanco Guest Farm**

Set in the foothills of the Winterberg, Blanco is one of those wholesome family resorts that has been going for generations.

Twice a day, there are complimentary horse rides with steady, patient steeds that are happy to amble along with thrilled tots on board, always led by staff. Every day, children can enjoy a tractor-trailer ride pattering along country lanes. There are cows, horses, pigs and sheep scattered about the farm.

In short, it's perfect for young families, with a separate kiddies' dining room, childminders and old-fashioned comfort food. The accommodation strikes just the right note – it's like staying on a family farm with eccentric, higgledy-piggledy buildings that are unusual yet comfy.

Many of the parents you'll meet in the library, lounge or on the stoep came here as children themselves.

Facilities: There are 25 cottages of different sizes, almost all with a queen-sized bed, a varying number of children's beds, a private bathroom, plus heaters and fans. The Manor House has four spacious suites with a communal lounge and kitchen area. The Country House has a similar setup and is the only self-catering accommodation at Blanco.

What else? Blanco is just the place for an active holiday: There are tennis courts, a 9-hole golf course, a squash court, bowling greens, putt-putt and a swimming pool. Hiking trails and 4x4 trails wind through the veld. One of the most popular trails is the 8 km loop around the base of a mountain.

Where? About 14 km south of Tarkastad along a decent dirt road leading off the R344 into the Winterberg. (For a scenic drive you can follow the R344 all the way to Adelaide.)

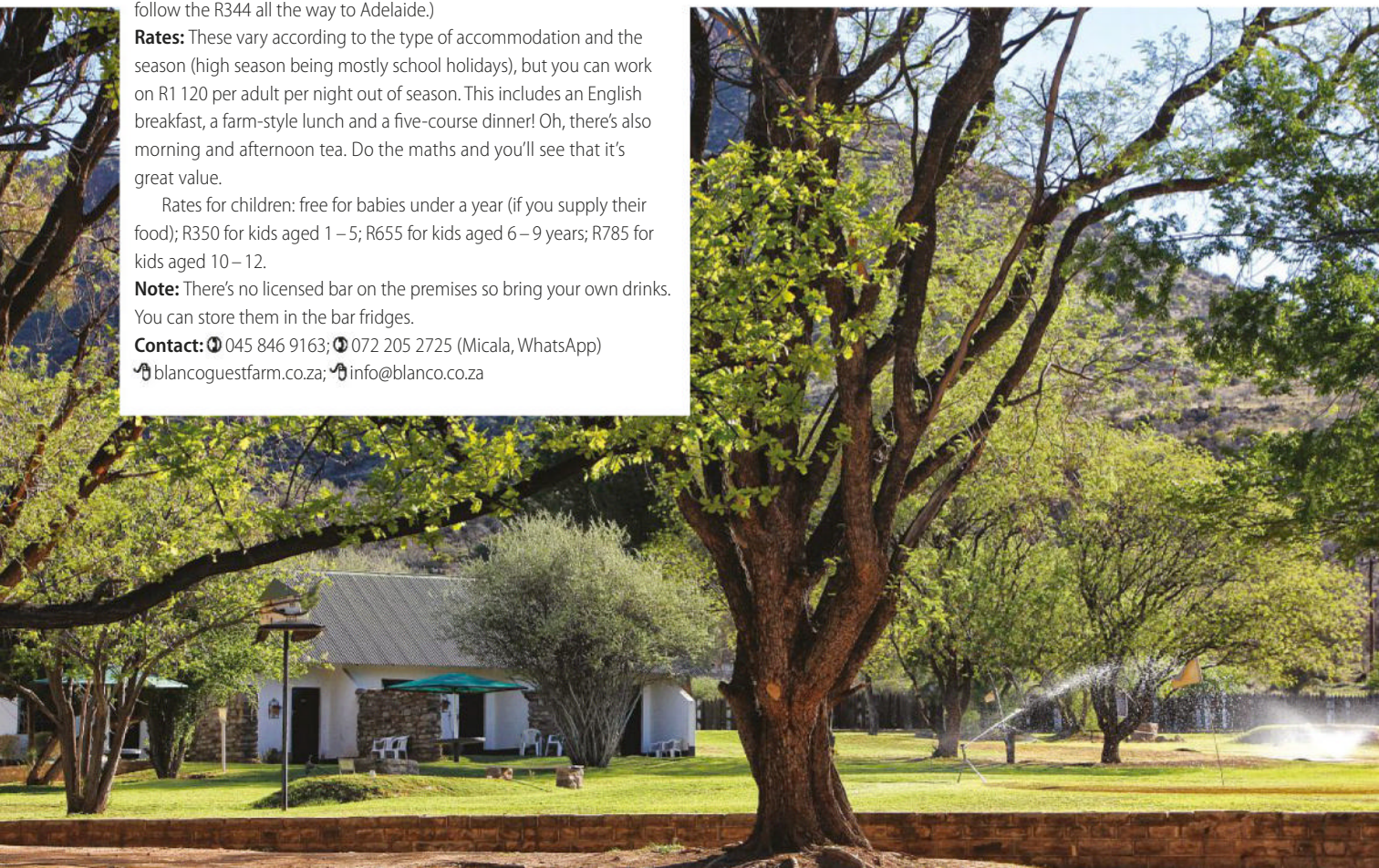
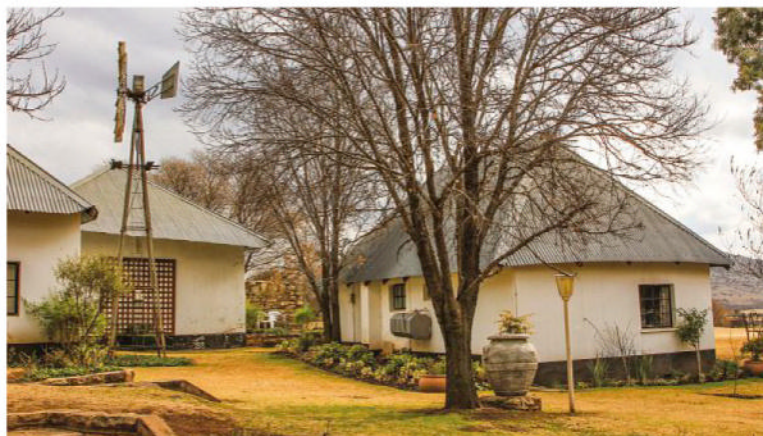
Rates: These vary according to the type of accommodation and the season (high season being mostly school holidays), but you can work on R1 120 per adult per night out of season. This includes an English breakfast, a farm-style lunch and a five-course dinner! Oh, there's also morning and afternoon tea. Do the maths and you'll see that it's great value.

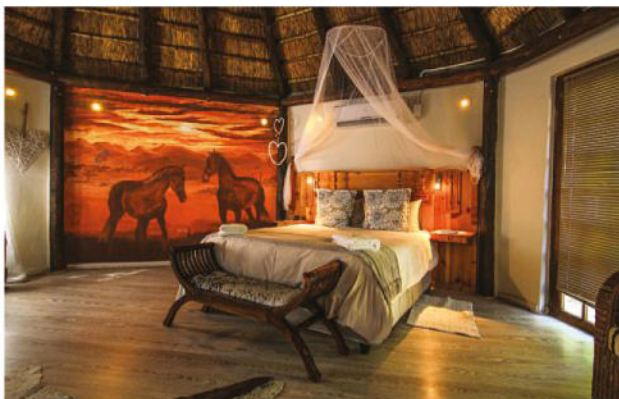
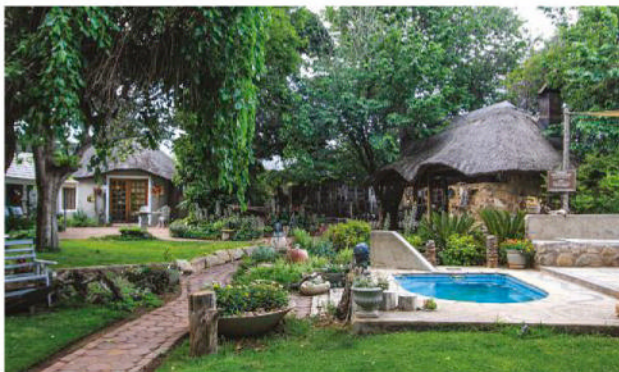
Rates for children: free for babies under a year (if you supply their food); R350 for kids aged 1–5; R655 for kids aged 6–9 years; R785 for kids aged 10–12.

Note: There's no licensed bar on the premises so bring your own drinks. You can store them in the bar fridges.

Contact: ☎ 045 846 9163; ☎ 072 205 2725 (Micala, WhatsApp)

🌐 blancoguestfarm.co.za; ✉ info@blanco.co.za





VENTERSTAD

Morning Glory Cottages

In the 1950s, around 70% of the country's thoroughbred brood mares were based between Venterstad, Middelburg, Colesberg, and the southern Free State. The reason lay in the Karoo soil – the high levels of calcium, phosphorous and other minerals gave horses strong bones.

But when minerals were artificially added to horse feed two decades later, the Karoo's geographic advantage fell away. There are now only eight Karoo racehorse breeders left, and Schalk van der Walt (pictured left) of Gelykfontein Farm – just south of the Gariep Dam – is one of them. The Van der Walt family have been on the farm since 1884 and the racehorse stud was started in 1935.

It is thanks to Schalk's wife Christa that the guest cottage and garden suites are sheltered under shady trees, in a lovely garden. Their daughter Marene has joined the farming enterprise, which also includes Nguni cattle, Rubicon merinos, Meatmaster sheep, and Indigenous Veld Goats.

Facilities: Farm Cottage (sleeps four adults with a bed for a child and a cot for a baby) is perfect for a self-catering family. Then there are four spacious garden suites (each sleeps two, with an extra bed for a child) equipped with mini fridges and microwaves, as well as kettles and toasters.

There are braai facilities and braai packs for sale, or you can order a breakfast basket or dinner basket to eat in your cottage or unit. There's also a splash pool.

What else? Guests at Morning Glory Cottages are welcome to watch the daily ritual of leading the beautiful horses out from their stables and back in at night.

Where? From Venterstad, follow the R58 for 9 km towards Norvalspont. Look for the handsome fibreglass horse at the entrance on the left.

Rates: From R550 per person sharing, self-catering. Meal baskets can be arranged: R140 per person. There's also a breakfast basket (R120 per person) and a braai basket (R200 per person).

Contact: ☎ 051 654 0302; ☎ 072 773 0066 (Lynette Henson)

📧 morningglorycottages.co.za; 📧 info@morningglorycottages.co.za

MIDDELBURG**Hillston Farm**

The shearing shed on Hillston is an elegant wood-and-iron building with wooden chutes and pens glowing with age and layers of lanolin. It was once a barracks from nearby Grootfontein, which housed up to 15 000 British soldiers during the height of the Anglo-Boer War. (In 1911, Grootfontein became a College of Agriculture and local farmers were allowed to dismantle the old barracks buildings and reuse them as sheds.)

Current owners Riana and Jonathan Southey moved onto Hillston in 1987. Jonathan's father originally bought the farm in 1943.

Hillston offers two distinctly different guest farmhouses. One is the remote and off-grid Northmead Country House. If you've watched the 2013 film *Stuur Groete aan Mannetjies Roux* (with Laurika Rauch, Ian Roberts and Anna-Mart van der Merwe), you'll recognise the house. Writer Chris Torr (a local guy) imagined a farmhouse where the view from the kitchen swept across the plains, and Northmead was perfect.

Walking in the veld, you sense the freshness of the Karoo, its open, disarming nature, and its little mysteries left for you to find. You'll hear the metallic song of spinning windmills, the call of a turtle dove, and the rising whistle of a clapper lark. Just a few steps away from the house is a large dam, brimming with clear water and perfect for a swim in summer.

The second accommodation option is the solidly built Stone Cottage in the lap of a koppie. Beside it is an Anglo-Boer War-era blockhouse that has been turned into a braai lapa.

Take a walk to see three distinctive hills in the distance: Teebus, Koffiebus and Tafelberg. Sit on the stoep and read, listen to the lambs bleating to their mothers and watch the clouds sweep over.

Hillston is home to more than 100 bird species, include Verreaux's eagles in the hills, blue cranes on the *vlaktes* and flamingos that visit the farm dams in summer.

Facilities: Northmead (sleeps eight) has wooden floors and beamed ceilings, a lovely farmhouse-style kitchen with a wood-burning stove, a gas stove and a fridge.

The smaller Stone Cottage (sleeps six) is also equipped for self-catering and offers a great stoep for dreamy sundowners.

What else? If you have an event or a large group, book well in advance for a memorable meal at the Rabbit Hole venue (run by Riana and Jonathan's daughter, Adrienne) on the farm. You won't regret it...

Where? From Middelburg, follow the R56 east for 47 km until you reach Schoombee. Turn north and follow a dirt road for 5 km towards Oorlogspoort.

Rates: At both cottages, the rate is R400 per person per night, self-catering.

Contact: ☎ 082 322 4403 (Adrienne or Riana Southey; pictured right)

📧 hillstonfarm.co.za; 📧 info@hillstonfarm.co.za





MIDDELBURG

Dwarsvlei Farm

Imagine building a two-storey mansion with a sprung-floor ballroom, for you and your British officer mates on a farm in the middle of nowhere. Imagine surrounding the house with lovely gardens, tall poplars and cypresses, and adding elegant touches like little stone bridges over water furrows. Imagine stabling more than 200 thoroughbred brood mares on this farm to give birth to famous racehorses. . . That's the 120-year-old legacy of Henry Nourse, a Randlord, sportsman, soldier and renowned horse breeder.

In modern times, Matthew and Sarah van Lingen (pictured bottom left) are the new owners of Dwarsvlei, having taken over from Matthew's grandfather, John, who used the land for decades to farm sheep.

It's still a sheep farm, but the young couple have made it so much more. The mansion is now a guesthouse, sheds have become wedding and event venues, and the old stables accommodate trail runners and mountain bikers.

Facilities: The old mansion can sleep 12 people. Only one bedroom is en suite but most of the others have access to their own bathroom, usually across the corridor. The Wi-Fi is strong, there's a pool, a spacious lounge and great fireplaces for winter.

Wild Olive (sleeps six) is a rustic mountain cottage; there's also camping and basic accommodation in the old stables.

What else? In June every year, Dwarsvlei hosts the fabulous Karoo Winter Wool Festival (karoowinterwoolfestival.com). Bring your mountain bike if you have one, or just go for long rambles in the veld.

Where? About 15 km south of Middelburg, next to the N9.

Rates: Rent the whole mansion for R5 500 a night. Otherwise, depending on the room you choose, rates vary from R950 to R1 300 for two people sharing, plus R95 per person for breakfast.

Wild Olive can be rented for R1 000 a night. Stable rooms cost R400 for two people sharing, or camp for R90 per person.

Contact: 066 220 2218; 082 466 7291 (Sarah, WhatsApp)

dwarsvlei.co.za; dwarsvlei.karoo@gmail.com

NIU-BETHESDA**Twefontein Guest House**

Blaauwater Farm, owned by Liesl and Justin Kingwill (pictured with their children, middle left), is set like a jewel in the crown of the Lootsberg Valley on the way to Nieu-Bethesda.

In times gone by, the Graaff-Reinet/Middelburg railway line ran through this landscape. The old steam trains would chug and creak their way up and over the summit of Lootsberg Pass. The nearest stop was Blaauwater Siding, near an old Kingwill family graveyard.

Restored in 2016, the exterior of the elegant farmhouse resembles a Karoo country manor of a century ago. Inside, however, there's a careful blend of classic décor (period fireplace, high ceilings, yellowwood floors) and modern conveniences.

Early morning coffee is best taken on the front stoep, with views of grazing merino sheep and cattle, and Wapadsberg Pass in the distance.

Enjoy your sundowners on the back stoep as the ironstone cliffs turn pink in the late afternoon. If it's windy or rainy, retire to the enclosed braai and entertainment room.

Nieu-Bethesda is less than an hour's drive away, on tar or gravel roads.

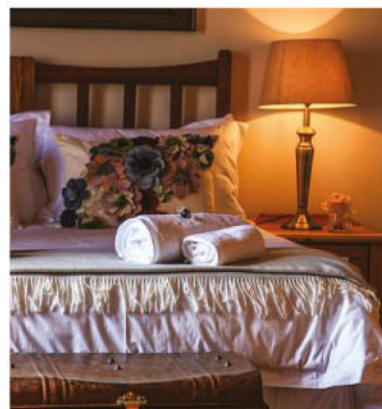
Facilities: The house can sleep nine people, with four bedrooms and two bathrooms, two lounges (one with a fireplace) and DSTV. The kitchen is beautifully equipped with a gas and an electric stove, a dishwasher, even a washing machine.

What else? In deep winter, Lootsberg Pass, which was built under the guidance of Andrew Geddes Bain in 1858, is often covered in snow. If you're visiting Twefontein during that time, take all your warmest clothes!

Where? Along the N9 between Middelburg (50 km) and Graaff-Reinet (57 km) – the farmhouse is 1,3 km from the N9.

Rates: R1 350 to R3 000 per night for the house, depending on the number of guests and the time of year. Peak seasons are school holidays, Easter, and the last two weekends of May, when it's time for Stoep Tasting. (What, you've never heard of Stoep Tasting? It's one of the biggest social events around here – see stoeptasting.co.za for the 2025 dates!)

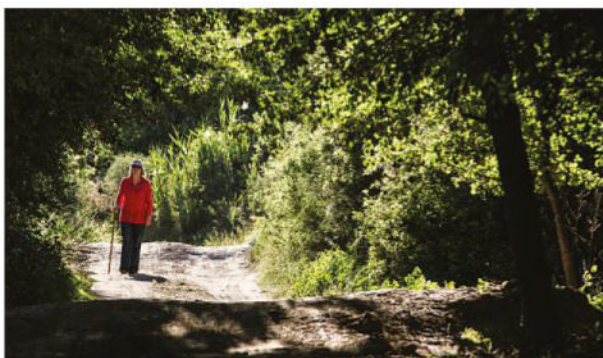
Contact: 📞 082 806 9015 (Liesl Kingwill); 🌐 blaauwaterfarms.co.za
✉ guesthouse@blaauwaterfarms.co.za





NIEU-BETHESDA

Ganora Guest Farm



Ganora, with its views of Compassberg – maybe the Karoo's most iconic mountain – is one of the premier farmstays in the district. It's part of the local "fossil trail" and owner JP Steynberg (pictured middle left) will take you on a tour of the farm, showing you ancient bones still embedded in rock. The farm museum is world class, displaying fossils, stone artefacts and potsherds. In an adjoining area, with a conveniently located pub, you can see old agricultural implements and tools.

JP's wife Hester is a renowned country cook. Expect slow-cooked lamb, venison or bobotie around the big dining table. A local guide, Henry Witbooi, who has a keen knowledge of Karoo plants, is available for veld walks. Rock paintings and a poignant piece of Anglo-Boer War history can be seen on a walk near the house. There are also six marked hiking or mountain-biking trails of varying difficulties. The shortest will take you 45 minutes, and the longest about five hours.

There are various comfortable lodgings (and a tidy campsite), most of them in renovated farm outbuildings.

Facilities: Ten en suite rooms, elegantly furnished, of different sizes. Then there's the Khoisan Cottage (sleeps six), which overlooks the farmstead and is geared towards self-catering guests (rates for the other rooms include breakfast). Dinner is optional and charged separately. Wi-Fi is available. Summertime guests are welcome to use the Ganora swimming pool.

What else? Ganora is a Döhne merino sheep stud farm and guests are welcome to watch activities like shearing, herding or feeding. In February, Ganora traditionally stages its annual ram auction. If you happen to be staying over then, it's an experience not to be missed.

Where? About 8 km north-east of Nieu-Bethesda on the dirt road that leaves town heading north towards Compassberg, then swings east towards the N9.

Rates: B&B R700 per person (standard room) or R895 per person (larger room). The self-catering cottage is R2 600 per night. Camping R200 per person. Guided farm museum visit R80 per person; Bushman and Anglo-Boer War walk R120 per person; the medicinal plant walk R140 per person.

Contact: ☎ 082 698 0029 (Hester); 🌐 ganora.co.za

✉ ganoraguestfarm@gmail.com



GRAAFF-REINET**Letskraal Farmstay**

Restoring a 200-year-old farmhouse that once belonged to famous trekker Andries Pretorius from near ruin was a work of love over many years for former owner Johan Minnaar. This is where Sarel Cilliers visited Pretorius, appealing to him to come to the aid of the trekkers in Natal. He did, of course, leaving this lovely farm to head north into uncertainty.

The current owners of Letskraal are Peter and Chantel Annear, and the whole place is a model of thoughtful restoration; possibly the most authentic 1800s-era Karoo farmhouse open to travellers. Dusk is a magical time: The candles and the paraffin lamps are lit, the veld purrs with cricket song, and the stars are sequins in the sky.

John Battersby, a veteran South African journalist presently living in London, wrote this in their visitor's book: "The place is breathtaking – food for the soul and a profound lesson in the importance of history and engaging the ancestors."

Facilities: The farmstead has five bedrooms sleeping 11 people in total. The two rather luxurious bathrooms are outside. There's no electricity and no cell signal, but candles and paraffin lamps are provided, and there's a gas fridge and stove. There's a Dutch oven if you'd like to try baking bread the old-fashioned way. Staff come to stoke the donkey boiler twice a day.

What else? If needs be, another couple can sleep in an old wagon, which is an original *spogwa* – a grand wagon commissioned by the Minnaar ancestors for special occasions. The wagon is usually stored in the Waenhuis and moved into the garden when in use as a bedroom.

Where? About 17 km along a fairly rough dirt road, about 42 km north of Graaff-Reinet or 62 km south of Middelburg on the N9.

Rates: From R1 800 per night for two people sharing; R2 400 for three people; R2 800 for four. Five or more guests: R400 per person. The minimum stay is two nights. Letskraal is self-catering but meals can be provided on request.

Contact: ☎ 083 977 8917 (Amanda Delport); 🌐 letskraal.co.za
✉ letskraal@eastcape.net





GRAAFF-REINET

Bloemhof Farm Guesthouse

As you're driving along the N9 between Middelburg and Graaff-Reinet, you might glimpse a red-roofed house, far away in a valley. This is the "feather palace" homestead of Bloemhof, a 5 000-hectare sheep, cattle and game farm, intermittently owned by the Murray family since 1838.

The architecture of the Bloemhof house resembles the Oudtshoorn ostrich feather palaces, built in the Edwardian style with Cape Dutch and Victorian influences, complete with wide-planked yellowwood floors. The wraparound stoep offers spectacular views of sheep grazing, horses in the meadow and the distant mountains.

The 10-bedroom house was built in 1912 by Arthur Murray at the height of the feather boom, a couple of years before the infamous feather bust. Arthur's great-grandson Julian (pictured left, in checkered shirt) lives there now, the seventh-generation Murray farming on the land.

Some of the old bedrooms have been converted into living rooms. Bloemhof is not open for guests year-round – it only opens during December and January and for groups heading to the annual Stoep Tasting weekends in Graaff-Reinet and Nieu-Bethesda. (Last two weekends in May; see stoeptasting.co.za for the 2025 dates.)

Facilities: The elegantly furnished guest accommodation can sleep up to 12 people. There's one double bedroom with an en suite bathroom; the other bedrooms share two bathrooms.

Where? From Graaff-Reinet, follow the N9 north for 28 km then turn right towards Bloemhof Farm, which is 4 km further along a good gravel road.

Rates: R700 per person, including breakfast. Dinner R250 per person.

Contact: 📞 082 325 6037 (Julian); ✉ bloemhof@yebo.co.za

PEARSTON

Wheatlands Country House

During the ostrich feather boom of the early 1900s, Arthur Tucker Parkes built his beloved wife Lily a gracious new home, well appointed with stained-glass windows, pressed ceilings, wood-panelled walls, a piano and a drawing room.

This has now become the guest accommodation at Wheatlands farm, about 46 km south-east of Pearston and 50 km south of Graaff-Reinet. The furnishings make you feel as if you're staying in your posh aunt's comfortable home.

Wheatlands is still farmed by the same family (the Parkes and the Shorts that have owned it since 1849), now in its eighth generation. These days, however, it's more about sheep and angora goats than ostriches. Wheatlands was one of the very first mohair farms in the Eastern Cape, and retains a proud tradition of producing fine quality mohair.

The family's generosity was legendary. Arthur Parkes once chased over several hundred goats into Ebenezer Hobson's lands after his neighbour lost thousands in a freezing storm soon after the Anglo-Boer War. "Please take them. I cannot stand the brutes," he lied.

Facilities: The farmhouse sleeps 12 people in two en suite rooms, four twin rooms and two shared bathrooms. You can self-cater or request meals (which are delicious). The dining room and lounge have fireplaces for cosy winter evenings. There's Wi-Fi. Be sure to ask for a location pin to their "Karoo Sundowner Spot".

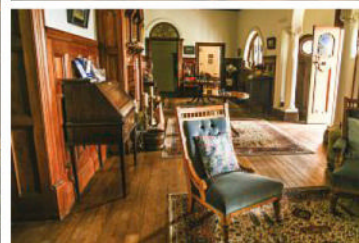
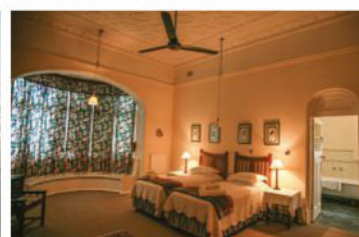
What else? Wheatlands Sports Club is walking distance from the guest accommodation. On some Saturdays you might find the locals playing tennis or a game of cricket. (*As a schoolboy I was hit for six on this field, probably by a member of the Short family. . . – Ed.*)

Where? From Graaff-Reinet, follow the R75 south towards Jansenville for about 45 km, then turn east towards Wheatlands, which is 8 km further along a gravel road.

Rates: The base rate is R2 400 per night for up to six people. For seven people and more, it's an additional R350 per person (self-catering).

Contact: 📞 072 251 9022 (Kirsten Short); 🌐 wheatlands.co.za

✉️ enquiries@wheatlands.co.za



Future classics

With her parents as fellow accommodation reviewers, **Samantha Reinders** drove the big and little roads of the Karoo in search of guesthouse nirvana. These six places hit all the right notes.





IN THIS ARTICLE

- Colesberg
- Luckhoff
- Strydenburg
- Philipstown
- Richmond
- Laingsburg

Given the chance, I'm on a dusty road somewhere, in the sweet spot of the map of South Africa. In other words, I'm in the Karoo. I like to have good music playing in the car (Springsteen, always, and have you heard of Jake Xerxes Fussell?) and a good companion in the passenger seat.

But finding the right place to stay can be a hassle. A glance at any of the booking sites feeds you reams of options. Where to start? You can narrow it down by price, or by non-negotiables like a swimming pool in summer, a fireplace in winter, or in my case, as far away from towns as possible.

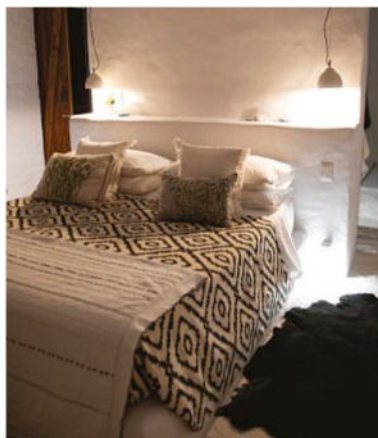
This road trip, mostly undertaken during February 2024, was planned solely to find excellent places to stay. With my Maltese poodle Monty as co-pilot and my mom Megan and dad Pete as navigators and fellow accommodation judges, I hit the highways and byways of the Karoo.

What follows is not a definitive list, of course. If it were, I wouldn't have an excuse to go back and look for more!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Reinders is a freelance photojournalist and former picture editor of this magazine. She lives in Prince Albert (when she's not living in Nepal) and works as far afield as South Sudan, Somalia and Bangladesh. See excerpts from her photography project, The Land of Begin Again, on page 78. Follow her on Instagram: @samreinders



COLESBERG

Pink Hill Karoo

I'm in the passenger seat of my dad's Land Rover and we're on a gravel road from Hanover heading towards Pink Hill Karoo, which is actually closer to Colesberg. It's hot, hot, hot. Several rain gauges we pass haven't seen rain in months. One has a bird's nest firmly lodged in it. As I drop into a spot of signal, a voice note from Cornel Strydom (pictured far left) at Pink Hill squeaks through: "There's home-made ice tea in the fridge when you get here..."

From a little way off, Pink Hill Karoo looks like a stone-built bunker that blends perfectly into the veld. A pale chanting goshawk flutters off as I unlock the gate.

Cornel and her husband Neill farm with merino sheep and cattle on Nagtegaalsfontein, where Pink Hill resides. Later in the afternoon they pop by on their Polaris ATV to check in on us. Their hounds Klippie (French bulldog), Milo (Boston terrier) and Seun (trusty sheepdog) are with them.

Enter the house and you step into luxury. The kitchen is *MasterChef* ready, the bathrooms are opulent and the stoep is like a wraparound IMAX theatre. The stoep is the *kuier* area and has comfy chairs and a large dining table. From here, you can watch the Karoo go by. See that hill in the distance? It changes all the different colours of pink as the sun closes shop for the day, hence the name of the house.

The highlight of Pink Hill is the pool, which is, well... pink. Somewhere in the background there's the *baaa* of a sheep. Clouds the shape of popcorn move slowly across the sky. The N1 may as well be a million miles away.

Facilities: There are two en suite bedrooms – the master bedroom sleeps two and the other sleeps four (two bunk beds). You're guaranteed to fight over who gets the master bedroom – it has the best view! There are two braai places (*Because this is South Africa. – Ed.*), one on the stoep and one outside the kitchen.

What else? On winter days, the small reading room, which has a fireplace, will be your friend. There's Wi-Fi, too, so you can still do your morning Wordle.

Where? 13 km north-west of Colesberg – directions will be sent when you book.

Rates: From R1 300 per adult and R550 per child under 17. Self-catering only. The rate is capped at R4 200 per night, so you won't pay more than that if you fill it up with six people. Enquire for specials when staying more than three nights out of season. See the website below for other accommodation on Nagtegaalsfontein.

Contact: 📞 082 571 6485; 📧 pinkhill.co.za
Instagram: @cornel_strydom

LUCKHOFF

Eco Karoo Lodge

A family of ostriches, with 19 newborn babies, gallop furiously – and with some humour – along the fence line as we head towards Eco Karoo Lodge not far from Luckhoff in the Free State. We're on the farm Knoffelfontein, which belongs to Estée and Bert Viljoen. As we drive, I crane my neck to see where we'll be staying, but I can't. Eco Karoo Lodge is tucked away at the base of a small mountain and you're upon it before you notice it.

Sydney M'bano (pictured middle, far right) manages the place for the Viljoens. He extends his hand on arrival and with the other one he makes a sweeping gesture towards the view. "Look," he says with a smile. "We have the full DSTV package!"

The rooms, common space, kitchen and pool are designed to maximise this view. You can spend hours watching the light change or the clouds tootle along. Bright red dragonflies flicker around the pool, which is also the best place to watch the sunset from as the cicadas soften their sound for the night. The lodge is ultra-modern but doesn't trade comfort for slickness.

Estée explains that the lodge has been a blessing when regular farming income struggles. That was the inspiration to build it in the first place, something they did with their extended family who farm close by. "This place is a full family affair," she says.

Facilities: There are three separate suites – each sleeps four. There's a bathroom inside and an outdoor shower with a mountain view. Eco Karoo Lodge is self-catering and the communal kitchen is properly kitted out. (Coffee snobs, there's a French press and a moka pot...)

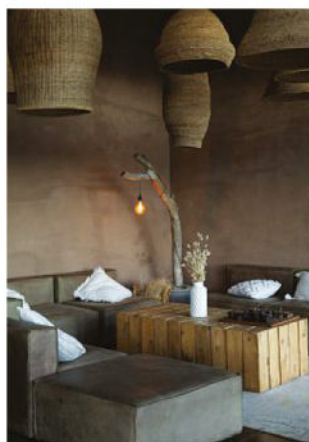
The lounge and pool are also communal. Since the lodge sleeps 12 in total, it's the perfect spot for a group *jol*.

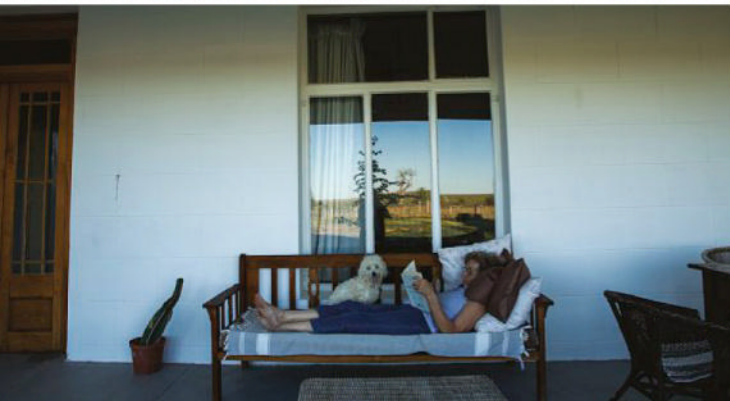
What else? There's fresh farm meat, ice, firewood and biltong for sale. Bring cash.

Where? About 20 km south of Luckhoff. The farm is 190 km from Bloemfontein and 160 km from Kimberley.

Rates: R695 per adult sharing; R395 for kids aged 6 – 12; free for kids under 6.

Contact: 📞 063 700 5215; 🌐 ecokaroo.com; ✉️ stay@ecokaroo.com





STRYDENBURG

Britskraal Guest Farm

The quirkiest thing about Britskraal Guest Farm is the contents of the fridge! It's stocked with boxes of Pulpyvax and other immunisation medicine for farm animals. This kind of medicine needs to be kept cold, and this is the only fridge on the property, but don't worry – there's plenty of space for your groceries, too.

What this says about the place is essential: Britskraal is a *real* farm. So many places that market themselves as "farmstays" these days aren't really that any more. Yes, you're technically on a farm, but you're far away from any actual agricultural activity.

Here, the opposite is true: You're in the thick of it. The front stoep looks out onto a pen of sheep, tufts of wool clinging to branches and fence. The nearby shearing shed is a hive of activity during season; elsewhere on the yard, workers are going about their daily tasks.

The house itself is the original farmhouse but has undergone some major structural changes. Owners Loubser and Jeanine Theron actually live in KZN. In an attempt to be able to spend more time on the farm, they jazzed up the house and they're renting it to guests to pay for the renovations.

It might be renovated, but the home hasn't lost its farm feel. The wooden floors still creak with each step (what joy!) and both sides of the house have stoeps as wide as the Orange River, with accompanying day beds perfect for an afternoon nap.

The kitchen opens onto the braai area, and the – soon to be operational – pizza oven. Decoration includes fairy lights draped over the JoJo tank, and giant tortoise shells.

When farming has halted for the day, the silence is powerful. At the braai, my dad sits with a glass of wine in hand. "You know a place is quiet when you can hear the flap of a bird's wings," he says.

Facilities: The main house sleeps 10 people – there are five bedrooms and two bathrooms. There's a wide selection of games to play – it's a great place for kids, with lots of places to explore around the homestead. A farm dam was recently converted into a pool and there are plans to turn an unused shearing shed into another cottage.

What else? There's meat and wine for sale (bring cash). The farm is pet-friendly – this was Monty's favourite destination by far.

Where? About 13 km east of Strydenburg – directions will be sent after you've booked.

Rates: From R850 per adult sharing; half-price for kids under 18; free for tots under 2. The rate is capped at R4 900 per night if you fill the house with 10 people.

Contact: 071 885 2454; 082 601 9631; britskraal.co.za

stay@britskraal.co.za; Instagram: @karoo_britskraal_guestfarm

PHILIPSTOWN

Die Naaldekoker Kamers

Itching for a project after finishing a degree in architecture, Susan van den Berg and her husband Hekkie put in an offer on a run-down property on the main road in Philipstown that had stood empty for 30 years. After some hard work, that property is now a gorgeous deli and café called Die Naaldekoker – it's the feather in Philipstown's cap.

"I hate seeing things fall down," Susan says. "Restoration really is part of my philosophy when it comes to building."

No surprise, then, that it didn't stop at the deli... I stayed in another of Susan's projects: a beautifully renovated and decorated building dating from 1864. Die Naaldekoker Kamers are at a different address but within walking distance, and it's the perfect blend of old-time Karoo (think those chests of drawers your grandmother used to have, a touch of taxidermy and crocheted cushion covers) alongside more modern touches. On my bedside table was a porcelain pronking *springbokkie* with a green crocheted lampshade; elsewhere I spotted a lone prickly pear hanging in a picture frame.

It's like nowhere else I've stayed in the Karoo – and therein lies its beauty. Book a room for a month and come start your novel...

Facilities: There are three en suite rooms that share a communal kitchen and dining area. Two rooms sleep two and the family room sleeps four. Each has a desk, a sitting area, tea- and coffee-making facilities, and access to a patio. There's unlimited Wi-Fi for your Netflix needs. There's also a twin-sleeper cottage with the same facilities.

What else? The café/deli has a great menu of farm-to-table yumminess. I had lamb curry with flat bread and sambals for R120. The attached gallery exhibits works from Karoo artists and curated vintage pieces.

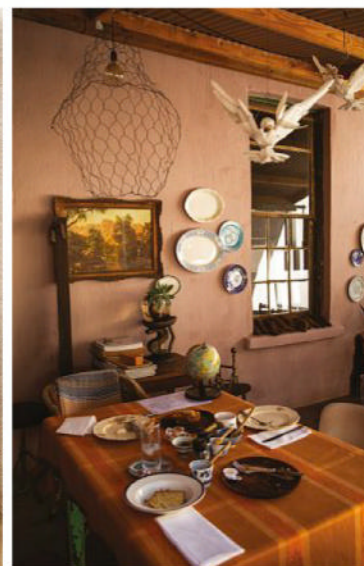
The annual Philipstown Draadkar (Wire Car) Festival, one of the highlights of the Northern Cape summer, happens in September/October each year – contact Kay Fourie (083 277 4142) for updates.

Where? Die Naaldekoker Kamers is at 9 Bree Street. Die Naaldekoker deli (also reception for the guesthouse) is at 37 Groen Street, Philipstown's main road.

Rates: Rooms R1 150 per night for two people; cottage R1 350 per night for two people; R250 per extra person.

Contact: 082 780 4752; info@dienaaldekoker.co.za

Another option: Susan has also just opened Weltevreden at 61 Herholdt Street, a newly renovated house with two of Philipstown's oldest fig trees in the yard. It sleeps six in three bedrooms with two bathrooms, and has an equipped kitchen, fireplace and lovely private stoep. Rates from R1 450 per night for two people, plus R250 per extra person.



STAY HERE



RICHMOND

Richmond Café and Rooms

Klaradyn and Nicol Grobler's guesthouse – born in 2016 – is my all-time favourite place to stay in the Karoo. It's made up of five neighbouring properties of which the main house was a so-called *dorpshuis* for a farming family back when people use to come to town for *nagmaal* with horse carts. Richmond was a good horse-breeding district, hence the local Horse Museum which is across the street.

The place is filled with special touches: sherry and filter coffee in the bedrooms, opulent four-poster beds, and bathrooms that will make you feel like a prince or princess. Most importantly, though, is the heartfelt hospitality on tap. The Groblers have a deep affection for the Karoo, which seeps into everything they do.

To complete its status as an oasis, there's also a café that serves a full English breakfast and dinner to those who stay in the guesthouse. They have a wood-fired pizza oven and they also serve lamb dishes – the lamb curry is a winner. Mains are usually served with a starter of home-baked bread and tomato salad, with milk tart for dessert. They aren't licensed, so bring your own wine.

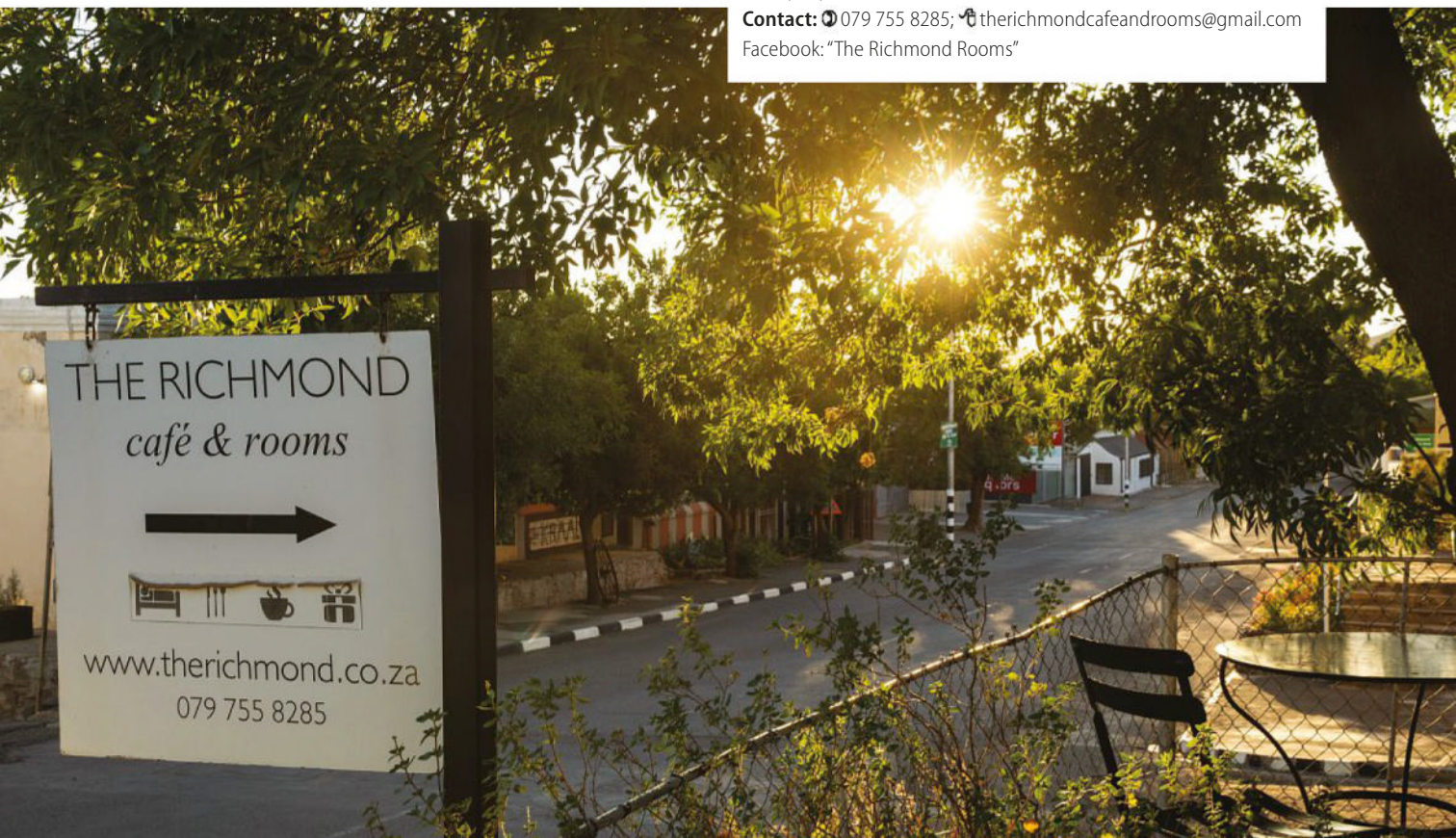
Facilities: There are six rooms, three of which are family-sized, sleeping four and five. Soak in one of their Victorian tubs until memories of the N1 and its trucks disappear. It won't take long.

What else? The guesthouse is pet-friendly and they've just built a fabulous pool to laze in (complete with a pink flamingo). The Groblers also own the Karoo Padstal, 20 km north-east of Richmond next to the N1. Pop in for great coffee, a lamb pie and locally sourced jams, pickles, wine and other treats.

Where? 17 Leeb Street, Richmond

Rates: Accommodation from R1 650 per night for two people sharing, plus R350 per additional person sharing. Breakfast at the café costs R150 per person; dinner R120 – R275.

Contact: 📞 079 755 8285; ✉ therichmondcafeandrooms@gmail.com
Facebook: "The Richmond Rooms"



LAINGSBURG

Zuikerboschfontein

In 2010, Martinette Brunette and her husband Mark packed up their kids and left the Gauteng mining town of Westonaria to start farming in the Karoo – something they knew almost nothing about.

After several failed attempts at farming endeavours, they set up a small butchery business that supplies free-range meat to nearby Laingsburg. (Mark had a similar business in Westonaria.) They also make soap – transforming their leftover beef and sheep fat into sweet-smelling bars ([puracy.co.za](https://www.puracy.co.za)).

In 2019, the couple started renovating five old workers' cottages on the farm. "We wanted to make the most of a resource we had plenty of – space," says Martinette.

In January 2021, Mark passed away suddenly. "In retrospect, we should have got the accommodation up and running much earlier," Martinette says. "Now, since Mark is gone, it's vital income."

One of the renovated cottages is available on Airbnb. In 2023, Martinette won the platform's "Rural Stay Spotlight" award for her efforts, and she has become an Airbnb "Superhost".

The cottage is simply furnished and set up for self-catering. There's no TV here – it's not needed. Rather gawk at the rolling foothills of the Swartberg. Loveable Lizzie, the farm dog, will no doubt join you for your stay.

There aren't any formal walking trails on the farm, but you can walk anywhere and you're encouraged to explore. Bring your gravel bike and ride a challenging 37 km circular route via Rouxpos farm.

Facilities: The cottage sleeps four people in two rooms (one double bed and two singles). There's a plunge pool, an outside drum for a braai (wood can be purchased) and a gas stove inside. The geyser is electric and there are hot water bottles to fill up for cold nights.

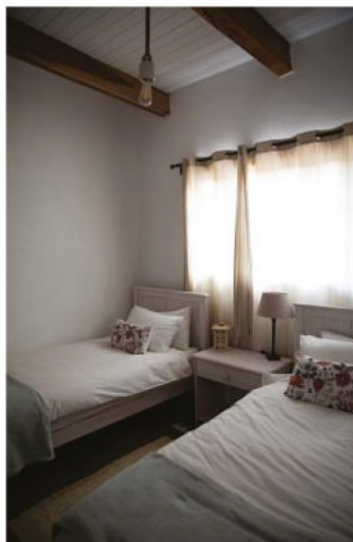
There's a UPS that allows uninterrupted Wi-Fi during load-shedding. Your can't-miss Zoom call will not be disturbed.

What else? Pets are welcome if owners keep them within their company. A R200 (cash) additional cleaning fee is payable on arrival for your pooch.

Where? Off the R323, about 39 km south-east of Laingsburg. The spectacular Seweweekspoort is only 55 km away (further down the R323), making Zuikerboschfontein a great base to explore the area.

Rates: The best deal is offered when you stay at least two nights, which is what's required in any case if you want to stay over a weekend. Two people staying for two nights costs R2 383 (including Airbnb fees); one-night stays are offered from Mondays to Thursdays.

Contact: Search "Zuikerboschfontein Laingsburg" on [airbnb.co.za](https://www.airbnb.co.za)



Time out in the Tankwa

The six self-catering places featured here are spread between the Ceres Karoo and the Tankwa Karoo, with another in the Hantam and one in a tucked-away corner of the Karoo near De Doorns... Next holiday, sorted.

BY TOAST COETZER



When I meet readers of this magazine – sometimes around a campfire in the Kgalagadi, on a road trip through Namibia, maybe at a farm stall on the N1 – the first thing most people say to break the ice is: “You must have been *everywhere*, right?”

Having worked for *go!* and its associated titles for 20 years, that’s a fair assumption. But no, there are always places I haven’t been to – and there are certainly many reasons to visit places over and over, too.

On this research trip, my aim was to discover some great self-catering places in the Tankwa Karoo. And since I live in Stanford in the Western Cape, my departure point was such that I could work in another quirky nook of the Karoo on the way to the Tankwa, tucked away on a back road (tar!) between Montagu and De Doorns.

Suzuki South Africa kindly loaned me the new “stretched” five-door Suzuki Jimny, which allowed me to take friends from Stanford along: Dave and Carol Brammage. They’re originally from KZN and had never seen the Tankwa before. They got into the swing of things quickly, though, including helping to change a wheel on the Jimny along the way...



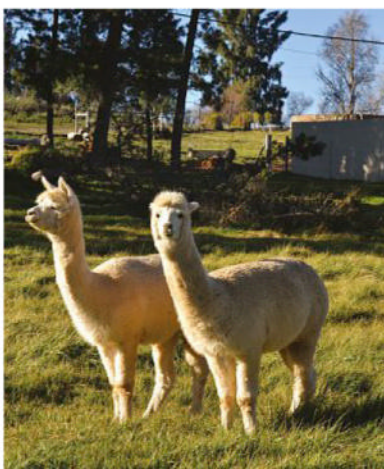
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toast Coetzer was born in Cradock and has travelled widely in the greater Karoo region. But there are always “blind spots”, he believes, so on this trip he tried to see a few new corners of the Ceres and Tankwa Karoo.



IN THIS ARTICLE

- De Doorns
- Ceres Karoo
- Calvinia
- Tankwa Karoo
- Tankwa Karoo National Park



DE DOORNS

Middelberg Guest Farm

When Carin Havinga invited me to come and see her and her husband Heinn's place near De Doorns, I pictured a landscape like that of the Hex River Valley. But I was wrong. Although the western horizon is spiky with mountain peaks, Middelberg is a mix of Karoo and fynbos. (Look out for the rare *Protea sulphurea* – Carol spotted a bush next to the road leading to the campsite.) The area is sometimes called the Koo Karoo – the Koo Valley is just south of here, towards Montagu – but Carin says the locals call it the Agterveld.

Middelberg offers a proper farm holiday: Your new besties will be a trio of alpacas, a couple of friendly pigs and plenty of inquisitive chickens, turkeys and geese. You'll also meet some sheep, horses and a donkey. It's an animal *jol*, for sure!

The Havingas were away for school holidays during my visit, but we were welcomed by their friendly manager, Wilfred Plaatjies (pictured below left). We stayed in the Guesthouse on a chilly night – the fireplace was very welcome. The next morning, the first thing I heard were blue cranes calling in one of the fields...

Facilities: The Guesthouse (10 people, four bedrooms) is perfect for a big family or group of friends. Die Koshuis can sleep a whole school group (32 in bunk beds, plus four in two double rooms – for teachers or parents supervising). The campsite (six stands) is situated in a quiet corner of the farm, about 3,5 km from the homestead.

The Guesthouse is fully equipped for self-catering – there's even a dishwasher, a washing machine and a tumble dryer, so you can stay for two weeks! There's a braai outside, and a dam for swimming.

Die Koshuis also has a large and well-equipped kitchen, with a stoep area and a lawn overlooking the fields.

You need a 4x4 to reach the campsite, which is sheltered by a grove of poplars. There's no electricity, but there is a neat ablution block (toilets and showers – hot water donkey, wood supplied) and a small dam to swim in.

What else? Most of the farm roads can be explored on foot, on a mountain bike or in a 4x4 (ask for a map). Well-behaved pets are welcome at the campsite.

Middelberg often gets winter snow – they had a good dump in July 2024. Buy firewood here: R100 for a large bag.

Where? About 40 km south-east of De Doorns – take the N1 north, then turn south onto the R318 tar road, it's about 18 km further.

Rates: The Guesthouse R2500 per night; Die Koshuis from R250 per person sharing (minimum 10 people); camping R400 per stand (max four people, thereafter R150 per adult and R70 per child under 12).

Contact: 📞 082 927 0210 (Carin); 📧 middelbergfarm.com

📧 carin.havinga7@gmail.com

CERES KAROO

Hartnekskloof

Heading north along the R355, the landscape is sliced open, the skin of it crumpled up and bundled into the foothills of the Swartruggens to your left. To your right, the mostly treeless *vlaktes* roll away into forever. But, as a farmer will tell you, this isn't the proper Tankwa Karoo yet. This is the Ceres Karoo.

Hartnekskloof is just off the R355 at the base of the mountains. Most of the accommodation is in a small, open valley – just inside the first “barrier” of the mountains. Co-owner Susan de Kock (she runs Hartnekskloof with neighbour Jean Theunissen; pictured middle left) tells me Hartnekskloof gets its name from this location: The valley is the sheltered “heart” of the property, and the access road passes through the “neck”.

We stayed in a little house called The Barn, where evening came serenely and the night filled up with stars.

Facilities: There are two cottages: The Barn (sleeps four) and Aalwyn (six). In addition, there are five en suite rooms, each of which sleeps two (Taaibos, Sheriff's Office, Jail House, Bordello, Tack Room) and another (The Shed) which is a single-sleeper. The Barn, Aalwyn and Taaibos have electricity if you want to charge something, the others only have solar lights.

The Barn and Aalwyn have the best set-up for self-catering (gas stove, fridge), but the other units do have gas hobs. Hot water is provided via a donkey – wood is supplied; extra wood costs R35 per small bag. Linen and towels are provided.

There's a central dining area. Meals can be supplied by prior arrangement. This is also the Wi-Fi zone, but rather busy yourself trying to spot a Verreux's eagle swooshing over.

What else? There's an overhang with beautiful rock paintings just a short walk away (2 km there and back; set aside an hour or two). Ask for directions – the last bit is a scramble up a steep section that's only for the strong-of-knee.

Keen birders come to Hartnekskloof specifically to see cinnamon-breasted warbler.

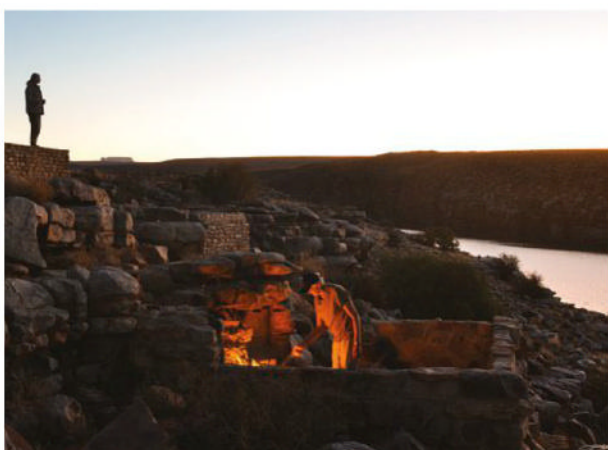
For a fun drive, explore nearby Skittery Pass, also known as Peerboomskloof Pass, which is just 2 km from Hartnekskloof.

Where? About 84 km north-east of Ceres, just off the R355.

Rates: These are based on a two-night stay or longer: R605 per person per night, or R695 with breakfast. Single-night stays cost R720 per person, or R810 with breakfast. Send an e-mail to the address below and you'll receive a PDF outlining the details of each unit.

Contact: 📞 072 447 0003 (Susan, WhatsApp); 📞 076 019 0076 (Jean, WhatsApp); ✉️ info@hartnekskloof.com; “Hartnekskloof Guest Farm” on Facebook and Instagram





CERES KAROO

Karmedo River Cottage

The Ceres Karoo and Tankwa Karoo received unusually high rainfall in 2023 and again in 2024, which is just as well because the years before were so dry that some local kids went through all their primary school years without hearing a thundercloud rumble in anger.

A large body of water therefore isn't something you'd expect to see around here, but Karmedo River Cottage overlooks a huge private dam in the Doring River on the farm Brakfontein, owned by Nicolette and Francois van der Merwe. The dam, originally built in the 1980s by Francois's father, ensures that a variety of produce including grapes (for raisins), dates, tomatoes and onions are grown on this innovative farm.

The thatched cottage sits atop a low cliff; you can scramble down some steep steps to a braai place below. The stoep commands the entire view and is a great spot for sunrise and sunset. Look for the outline of the Cederberg's Tafelberg to the west. Keep binoculars close by to scan for birdlife. We saw a giant kingfisher and the next morning, four otters swam past!

Facilities: The house sleeps seven people, in two bedrooms on the ground floor and in a loft with three single beds. The open-plan area on the ground floor serves as kitchen, dining area and lounge. They have Wi-Fi and solar electricity.

What else? You can fish for black bass or Clanwilliam yellowfish in the dam, or go for a paddle in a kayak (there's one to hire or bring your own). Karmedo is pet-friendly. There are plenty of farm tracks to explore on a mountain bike, and you can walk where you please.

Where? Off the R355, about 123 km south of Calvinia and 164 km north of Ceres.

Rate: R1 200 per night for the whole house.

Contact: 📞 072 476 0437; 📧 karmedo.com

📧 nicolette@hantam.co.za

CALVINIA**Rupert House**

One of the Karoo's major attractions is to stay in a proper, old house in a town like Calvinia. A fancy house, with high ceilings and wooden floors. Calvinia is blessed with a handful of these, restored over many years by local builders and artisans, under the watchful guidance of owners Erwin and Alta Coetzee.

Dave, Carol and I were booked into Rupert House in Water Street, where we immediately fell in love with the place. The house is named for children's book author Rona Rupert (1934 – 1995) who was born in Calvinia and used to own the property.

This isn't just a sleepover – staying in Rupert House made us feel special for the two nights we called it home.

Facilities: Rupert House (sleeps six) has three bedrooms and two bathrooms, and a well-equipped kitchen. There's Wi-Fi, a fireplace and a TV. In the sheltered courtyard outside the kitchen, you can enjoy your morning coffee next to a lemon tree.

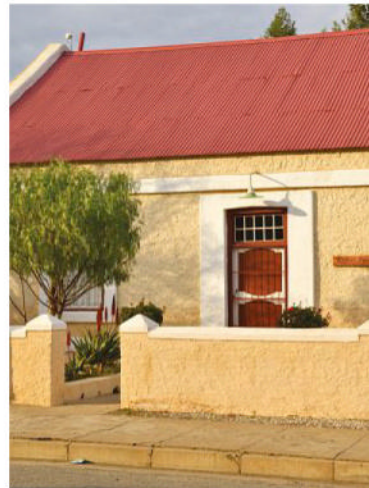
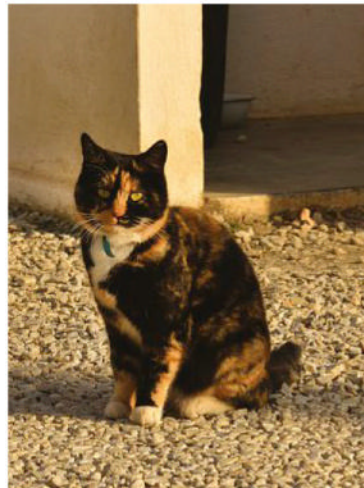
Visit their website below for a breakdown of facilities in the other guesthouses.

What else? Even if you're just passing through town, make sure to pop in at Hantam Huis (the HQ for Rupert House and the Coetzees' other guesthouses) to enjoy a home-cooked meal or cup of coffee. Hantam Huis is open on weekdays from 7 am to 4.30 pm and on Saturdays from 7.30 am to 1 pm.

Where? Hantam Huis (reception, restaurant) is at 42 – 44 Hoop Street, Calvinia. From there, you'll be directed to the place you booked.

Rates: Rooms from R950 to R1 350 per night for two people, self-catering. Family Cottages (Rupert House, Hantam Herberg, Rebunie Herberg, Groendakkies, Tuishuis, Dorphuis) from R1 500 to R2 200 per night per cottage, self-catering. Breakfast available for R125 per person.

Contact: 📞 082 720 1812; 🌐 calvinia.co.za; ✉ hantamhuis@calvinia.co.za



STAY HERE



TANKWA KAROO

Ymansdam

This spot near the bottom of Gannaga Pass had popped up on my social-media radar in recent months as a cool farm-style campsite.

We had no plans to camp – it was late June! – so I booked their self-catering cottage called Oppikoppi instead. The one problem, owner Nettie Steenkamp (who runs Ymansdam with her son, Marnus) told me via WhatsApp, was Oppikoppi only has a double bed...

Carol and Dave would get the bed, no quibble, and Nettie (pictured middle left) was kind enough to allow me to bring my own camping mattress along. I slept on the floor for the night. (It was comfy enough, but I suggest sticking to the two-person maximum at Oppikoppi...)

There's no Bar-One for guessing right: Oppikoppi sits on a low koppie about 300 m from the farmhouse. The Roggeveld escarpment rises to more than 1 600 m just 5 km away – you can see a prominent peak called Bobbejaanskop, a low ridge known as Die Maanhaar, and to the north you'll make out Versteptun Pinnacles, a series of rock "fingers" that jut from the escarpment.

That night we braaied in a wheelbarrow and the next morning we stoked the donkey for a hot shower. Will I be back? For sure!

Facilities: Oppikoppi sleeps two in an open-plan bedroom and kitchen, with a bathroom. The shower has a large window so you can enjoy the view while you scrub your toes. Bedding and towels are supplied. There's a small plunge pool outside and not much shade besides what you'll find on the stoep.

They have two campsites (just over a kilometre from the homestead, hidden in a low valley) called Die Pomp and Die Boskamp (maximum of 12 people per stand). Each has good shade provided by ancient karee trees. Die Pomp has a hot shower whereas Die Boskamp has a cold shower but a hot water bath (under the stars...). A first batch of wood is supplied for the hot water donkeys, but you can buy extra at R30 per bag. A cement dam nearby is your swimming pool.

What else? Ymansdam is dog-friendly, so bring the gang. You can hike, mountain-bike and bird all over the farm, and the stars are spectacular at night.

Where? Next to the P2267 gravel road (which is off the R355), about 85 km south of Calvinia and 200 km north-east of Ceres.

Cost: R800 per night for Oppikoppi; camping costs R150 per person per night.

Contact: 📞 072 505 4121 (Nettie, WhatsApp); ✉️ ymansdam@gmail.com; Facebook: search "Ymansdam Camping & Self Catering Cottage"



TANKWA KAROO NATIONAL PARK

Tanqua Guesthouse

For the day or so that Dave, Carol and I drove around the Tankwa Karoo National Park, we saw exactly one SANParks employee – the woman who checked us in at Roodewerf. It's a park that you can lose yourself in. There's also a sense of fluidity; you're never quite sure whether you're still in it, or on someone's neighbouring farm.

The park doesn't have rest camps like most of our other national reserves. Instead, its main accommodation consists of exclusive campsites scattered around. Many of these are on the sites of old farmsteads; the same is true of the self-catering guesthouses.

We stayed at Tanqua Guesthouse, a stone building so solid it would probably survive a tsunami if one ever reached the Tankwa. That said, it *is* built downstream from the Oudebaaskraal Dam, and that's where we drove to for a sundowner. Jackals howled at dusk and we even saw two African wildcats fleet-footing across the road.

Although there's no cellphone signal, the guesthouse has DSTv, which was a bit unfortunate since we ended up watching South Africa lose the T20 World Cup Final against India later that night...

Facilities: Tanqua Guesthouse is actually two different houses, about a hundred metres apart. We stayed in the smaller of the two (the bigger one reminded me of Duwisib Castle in Namibia). The house is huge and well equipped for self-catering. The other self-catering cottages are De Zyfer and Paulshoek (both sleep six), while there are 10 cottages at Elandsberg (five of which sleeps two, and five sleep four each). One unit at Elandsberg is wheelchair-friendly.

There are eight campsites: Steenkampshoek, Pyperseboom, Skaapwagterspos, Volmoesfontein, Biesjiesfontein, Oom Rickert se Huis, Perdekloof and Langkloof. They all take a maximum of 15 people per site, except Perdekloof and Langkloof (the only ones with electricity), which only allow six per site. Some campsites are 4x4-only – make sure you check whether your vehicle can access the site you're booking.

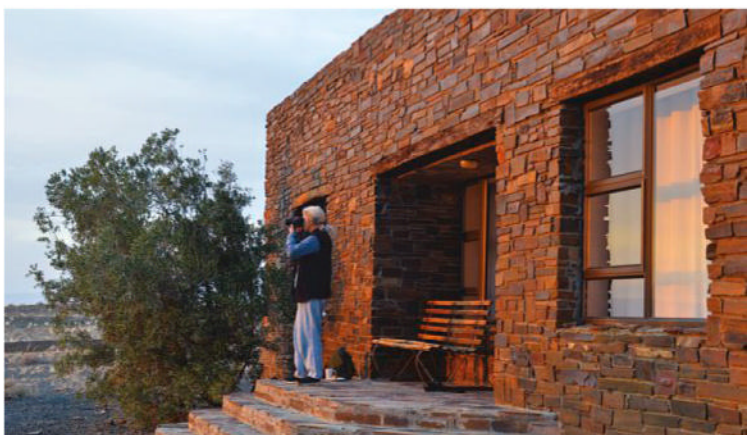
What else? The Tankwa isn't about flashy wildlife sightings. You come here to appreciate space and silence – two of the Karoo's biggest gifts.

Where? The park office is about 175 km north-east of Ceres and 105 km south-east of Calvinia. Tanqua Guesthouse is about 40 km from the park office.

Rates: The smaller Tanqua Guesthouse, De Zyfer Cottage and Paulshoek Cottage all start at R1 025 per night for two people; the bigger Tanqua Guesthouse starts at R1 765 per night for four people. Elandsberg cottages cost R1 617 per night for two people or R2 040 per night for four. Camping from R180 per person.

Daily conservation fee R55 per adult; R27 per child under 12; free with a Wild card.

Contact: 📞 012 428 9111 (reservations); 📞 027 341 1927 (park office, Calvinia); 🌐 sanparks.org





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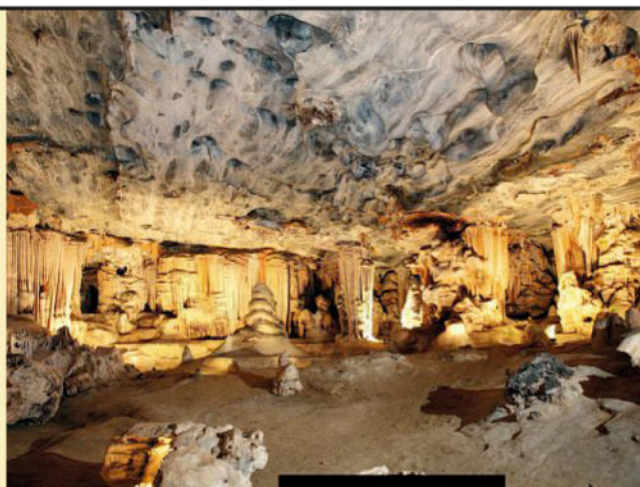


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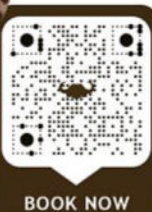
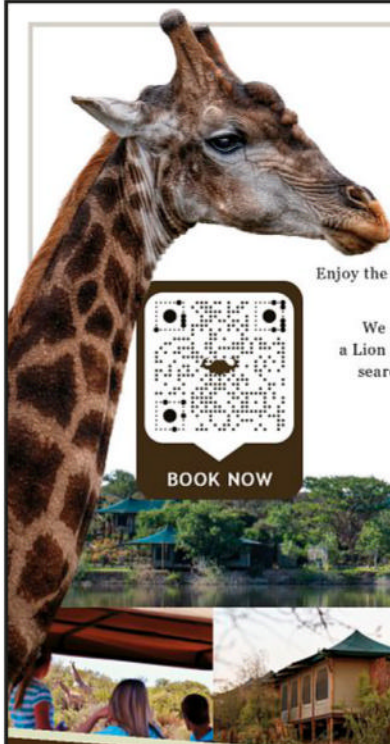
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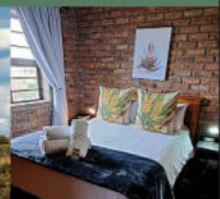
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Contact:
0838819334
 (also on WhatsApp)
zamanigrillsb@outlook.com

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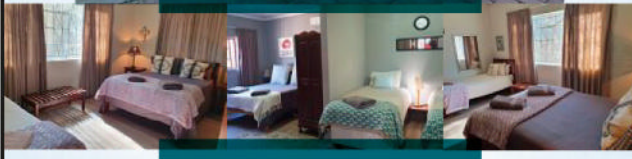
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There's one thing you'll always find
among the koppies and plains
of the Karoo: perspective.

Esma Marnewick got a healthy
dose in the Karoo National Park.

“**W**hat's the point of looking
at a dead animal?” My
10-year-old daughter Bella
wants to know. We're on
the stoep of our cottage in
the Karoo National Park

near Beaufort West and I've just asked if she and her sister
would like to join me on the Fossil Trail.

More than 30 years ago, when my dad asked me the
same question, my sister and I weren't very enthusiastic
about the idea either. When I look at photos of that
holiday, I don't recognise the tween with her mouth full
of braces wearing a jersey in every colour of the rainbow.

The Fossil Trail is an open-air fossil exhibition – you
don't walk very far, you just amble from one glass case
to the next. Some of the fossils are impressive, like the
Bradysaurus; others look like... well, rocks.

The Karoo is rich in fossils for a host of reasons –
sediment deposits, volcanic eruptions, the fragmentation
of Gondwanaland, and erosion. The region is world
famous for having one of the most extensive fossil records
of the Permian and Triassic periods, both of which were
very, very long ago.

The park is our last overnight stop on a two-week trip
that took us from Somerset West to the Eastern Cape,
via Addo, Morgan Bay and Hogsback.

It was great to drive through rural areas again. There
are parts of the platteland where agricultural fields take
over, but there are just as many parts where nature still
has the upper hand.

If you spend too much time going down a social-media
rabbit hole of climate change and greenhouse gases, you

can't help but feel a little despondent about the state of
nature and the world as a whole. But look at a place like
the Karoo – it's still more veld than town. No wonder it
took so long to find Sylvester the lion, who escaped from
this very park. He roamed for days without seeing a soul.

And even though the Karoo might seem “boring”,
it's endlessly diverse. Later in the afternoon, we drive
Klipspringer Pass, which traverses the Nuweveld
Mountains. We see kudu, gemsbok, rhebuck, ostrich and
even a black rhino. Little brown jobs flutter everywhere.
In the veld, I notice plants like cancer bush, bitter bush
and Chinese lanterns.

At the Rooivalle viewpoint at the top of Klipspringer
Pass, we stare down into a deep ravine between the dolerite
cliffs. The earth is resilient, and the Karoo is a landscape
that tells this story best.

So, why do we look at fossils, Bella? For me, it's to
be reminded that life will go on despite asteroid strikes,
volcanic eruptions and climate change.

When we think of fossils, we tend to think of dinosaurs.
But the fossils in the glass cases on this trail are therapsids,
a mammal-like reptile. Back then, like now, there was a
wide variety – from the gorgonops with its sabre-like teeth
to the dicynodont that had a beak like a tortoise. They lived
30 million years before dinosaurs, when the Karoo was a
floodplain. If we had been alive then, we could have taken
a mokoro ride from Beaufort West to see the therapsids!
(*Hopefully therapsids were friendlier than hippos... – Ed.*)

According to the experts, 70% of land animals
(including therapsids) died out during the Permian
and Triassic extinctions. But dinosaurs reappeared –
specifically the lineage we now know as birds – and
the world transformed into what we see today.

Yes, the earth has been through some tough times,
but life somehow always blooms again. That's what
I mean by resilience.

We roll back down Klipspringer Pass to the rest camp,
the tar road winding through the dark valley. The very tops
of the mountains glow orange in the last light.

Fires burn in the campsite. The people in the cottage
next to ours are settled in with a glass of red wine. Jackals
call to each other in the distance. It feels exactly like it
must have felt for that girl in the photograph, when the
emotional rollercoaster of being a teenager still lay ahead.
I survived it.

Everything will be okay.

A full-page background image of a sunset over a beach. The sky is filled with vibrant orange, red, and yellow clouds. In the foreground, two silhouetted figures are on the sand. One figure is walking towards the left, and the other is standing next to a small boat, possibly pulling it out of the water. The water reflects the colors of the sunset.

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Colouring in Cradock

As you drive through Cradock (Nxuba), keep your eyes open for some cool mural art. You may see a mountain zebra wearing sunglasses. Or a pair of technicolour angel wings. Or a dignified woman in traditional Xhosa dress. Or a colourful tribute to all of Cradock's attractions next to one of the supermarkets – that's this photo, taken at Superspar Tams at 5 High Street.

There's even a tribute to South Africa's Freedom Charter near the taxi rank, in all the bright hues of our flag.

The creator of these murals is LT Ndabeni, aka Luthando. He's a self-taught artist from Gqeberha who went from retail marketing to celebrating the attractions of his new home town, thanks to some money from Lottoland and encouragement from Visit Cradock, a local platform promoting tourism. Mural by vibrant mural, commission by commission, he's busy beautifying this Eastern Cape Karoo dorp.

You can contact him on WhatsApp (083 460 4178) and you can see what's happening in Cradock by following the "Visit Cradock" Facebook page.

WORDS JULIENNE DU TOIT PICTURE CHRIS MARAIS

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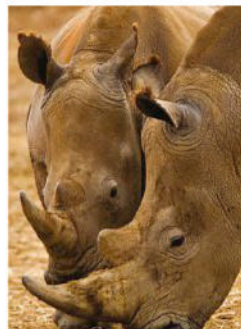
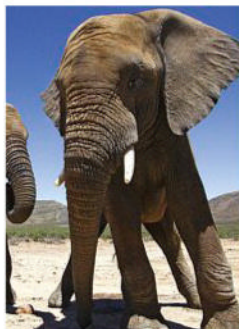
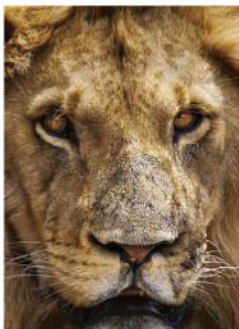
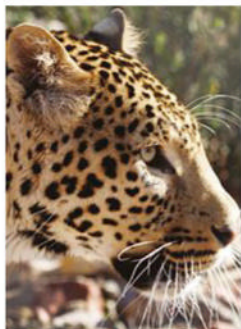
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