

Volume 1

Classic go!

A collection
of our
best travel
stories



In the *go!* office we weigh our words carefully. I’ve learnt the value of considering every word and sentence during the 10 or so years I’ve been involved with the magazine. Sometimes I would squabble with founding editor Bun Booyens over a word he cut from my story (often my favourite word) and he would say: “Are you willing to pay R10 to include a single word?”

His successor Bernie Louw would turn red whenever a journalist handed in a story with lazy, unimaginative descriptions. A *go!* story can never be a rush job. It’s something you mull over for days, weeks, sometimes months. It’s something you care about because you know you have a responsibility to your readers. And you, our readers, know the value of a single word better than anyone else.

The best travel stories write themselves. As the writer you get to experience many amazing things: diving into a mountain pool, staring at a sunrise, eating freshly braaied fish on a beach somewhere. But how do you bring these experiences to your readers without losing the cool, quiet depths of the pool, or the wisp of fog in front of the sun? Do you remember to tell them about the feel of the coarse sand between your toes as you ate fresh fish straight from the grid?

That’s the challenge our journalists and photographers crave and relish.

This collection of classic *go!* stories takes you back to some of our favourite travels and experiences over the years. Stories so good they deserve to be told (and read) again. Enjoy.

TOAST

NOTE: *Some of these stories were first published years ago and much has changed in these areas since then. Research your destination properly before you set off on an adventure of your own.*

COVER PICTURE **TOAST COETZER**

CONTENTS

4 AFRICA The ship that would not die By Dana Snyman	58 NAMIBIA On the roof of Damaraland By Esma le Roux
14 ANTARCTICA A year in the loneliest place on earth By Bun Booyens	66 ZAMBIA Bat explosion! By Toast Coetzer
22 KAMMANASSIE Lone range of the Little Karoo By Albertus van Wyk	72 BOTSWANA Zen and the art of dodging donkeys By Toast Coetzer
30 FAURESMITH Free rein in the Free State By Sophia van Taak	80 KAROO Karoo railway blues By Dana Snyman
38 WINBURG Smooth operator By Erns Grundling	92 SOUTH AFRICA The Great Ramble, Part 1, 2 & 3 By Toast Coetzer
44 NAMAQUALAND Oom Gert Dirkse looks into the future By Erns Grundling	118 NAMIBIA How to feel small By Sam Reinders
50 ANGOLA Rockin’ and rollin’ to Luanda and back By Bernie Louw	

THE SHIP THAT WOULD NOT DIE...

This ship is more than 90 years old. It has sunk twice – the first time during World War I. Dana Snyman explored Lake Tanganyika aboard the indestructible ferry the *Liemba*.

WORDS **DANA SNYMAN** PICTURES **RUVAN BOSHOF**



T

he *Liemba* might arrive at 10 or at 11. Or perhaps only this afternoon at four. No one here at Mpulungu Harbour on Lake Tanganyika in the north of Zambia is sure – not even the harbour master, Whiteson Mubanga. “One never knows,” he says; and then, almost as if it should be an excuse, he adds: “She’s a very old ship, you know.”

Indeed. As far as can be established, the *Liemba* is the world’s oldest passenger ship still in use. She was built in 1912, and she sails from here to Kigoma in north-west Tanzania every week. It’s a distance of more than 500 km, through the wild heart of Africa – Lake Tanganyika is bordered by Zambia, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi.

The American travel writer Paul Theroux reckons a voyage on the *Liemba* is one of the most special African experiences. Photographer Ruvan Boshoff and I have come here to experience it for ourselves.

We’ve been waiting since early morning with our heavy luggage. Our car, which brought us from Pretoria (three days, 2 983 km later), will remain at the nearby Nkupi Lodge.

I have to say, it looks rather like we’ve come prepared for a long stay in a Gauteng state hospital. We have

sleeping bags, plasters, Dettol, energy bars, and a collection of pills that would make a hypochondriac jealous.

The *Liemba* (pronounced Lie-hem-ba) departs from Mpulungu every Friday on a three-day voyage to Kigoma. That’s what a woman working for the Zambian Tourism Board in Lusaka told us.

There is no central booking office for the *Liemba*. On the Internet we could establish the following:

- Officially the ship has space for 600 passengers (but occasionally it carries up to 1000).
- The *Liemba* has sunk twice.
- Congolese rebels have fired at the *Liemba* from the shore.
- The use of Valium or other tranquilisers is compulsory for passengers... (Only joking.)
- It has a first, second and third class.

However, it’s very important to make that old Swahili motto your own if you want to travel on the *Liemba*: “Hakuna matata.” In other words, don’t get yourself worked up about small things, such as punctuality.

Half past 10 comes and goes, and then some time after 11 a small puff of smoke appears on the horizon. A while later the small puff turns into a large, old ship blowing an asthmatic horn to announce its arrival: *Toooooee!*

The *Liemba* is a total assault on your senses. All around us people shout and speak at once, the smell of fish and bananas hangs in the air, somewhere a goat bleats, and from a tiny radio Lionel Richie’s voice croons: “Dancing on the ceiling...”

On the main deck, a few disconsolate chickens are tied to the railing with rope.

We’ve just clambered up a ladder from the pier with Paul Manaka, a Zambian harbour official. He helps us find a cabin, because here things are done differently to Durban Harbour.

You don’t buy a ticket – there’s no ticket office. Nor is there a gangplank. In fact, there seems to be no order at all. Moments after the ship sounds its horn, hundreds of people suddenly descend upon the harbour as if from nowhere. Now everyone clambers onto the main deck over the railing on ladders, without any control.

Paul Manaka knocks on a cabin door. A voice shouts something from inside.

“We wait a while,” says Paul.

It is exciting and somewhat strange to be in the middle of Africa, more than 1 000 km from the nearest ocean, on such an imposing old ship. The *Liemba* is 70 m long and can officially carry 850 tonnes. On the main deck are four first-class cabins, a dining room, a bar, a kitchen, bathrooms and toilets.

Below the deck, in the ship’s bowels, are the engine room and the second- and third-class cabins. There is also a foredeck, and an upper main deck, where the bridge and the captain’s cabin are.

We wait outside the closed cabin door. A succession of passengers squeezes past us. Some carry bags of dried fish on their head. We also see an old man with a goat on a rope, a man with a bicycle, and a woman with a bunch of bananas. One guy has a globe in a plastic bag with him.

The *Liemba* isn’t a cruise ship. For most passengers it’s just transport. The shore of Lake Tanganyika is lined with tiny villages and hamlets, and the only way the residents can

A succession of passengers squeezes past us. Some carry bags of dried fish on their head. We also see an old man with a goat on a rope, a man with a bicycle, and a woman with a bunch of bananas. One guy has a globe in a plastic bag with him.

get themselves and their produce to larger places such as Mpulungu or Kigoma is on the *Liemba*.

Paul Manaka knocks again and opens the cabin door. Inside, in the dimly lit cabin, a man is sitting at a table with a book in front of him, which he appears to be reading: *Think Big* by Ben Carson.

Meet Mr Mussa Baya, the *Liemba*’s admin head.

“No problem,” says Mr Baya. “We can host you in two first-class cabins.”

It costs US\$50 per person, first class, to Kigoma, no meals or drinks included.

“But you must first go for a security check,” says Mr Baya.

Huh? Security check? While everyone boards and leaves the ship as they like? A short while ago I saw a guy with a panga on board.

But we don’t ask questions. We duly wait outside a tiny office Mr Baya points out to us. Inside soldiers are searching and questioning four Americans who are hitch-hiking through Africa and are also on their way to Kigoma.

We’re lucky. They interrogate the Americans for about 45 minutes; our “security check” is much quicker, although a soldier searches my bags, and even struggles through words like “maltodextrine” and

“acesulfame potassium” on the packet of Game in my backpack.

The first-class cabins are clean and remind me of a train compartment. There’s a basin and a tap with running (cold) water. The single bed is freshly made with a sheet and a pillow that feels like it’s filled with a Western Cape telephone directory.

It is now shortly after three in the afternoon and we’re still in the harbour.

I peer through one of the portholes. It’s an exotic picture. Lake Tanganyika is the longest lake (673 km) in the world and, at 1 470 m, the second deepest (only Lake Baikal in Russia is deeper). Look north and you see no land, only water. In the west, the mountains of the Congo form a dark line on the horizon, and somewhere on the foredeck that goat bleats again: “*Mééé!*”

I leave the cabin and lock the door, because apparently the *Liemba* even has its own full-time pickpockets.

There aren’t really tourists on the ship: only the four Americans (who immediately retreated to their cabin after the security check), a British

The Germans didn't want the ship to land in Allied hands, so they scuttled her. For nearly seven years she lay at the bottom of the lake, until 1923, when Winston Churchill ordered that she be salvaged.

woman and an Irish couple.

At the bar you can buy cold beer and cooldrinks. On offer are, among others, Castle, Kilimanjaro (a Tanzanian beer) and Zambezi (a Zambian one).

"One thousand shillings," says the man behind the counter. It's about R7.

I give him 5 000 Tanzanian shilling, but he gives me only 3 000 change.

Meet Good Victor Mukuka, the *Liemba's* barman.

Good Victor would probably have lost his front teeth to an angry fist had he been the barman in the Station Hotel in Boksburg, because Good Victor, you notice very soon after meeting him, almost always short-changes you. With a smile.

I sit down on the rear deck with a Kilimanjaro beer. Here I meet two other guys: The one seems to be a karate fundi, because he is energetically demonstrating a whole range of wild kicks and chops.

"Jean-Claude van Damme," says the other one, pointing to his kicking friend. "Very dangerous."

Van Damme and Chuck Norris are great heroes in Africa. You'll find posters and videos featuring them in most towns.

I ask them about the ship's history, but they don't seem to know much about it. Jean-Claude only says gravely: "This is a ship with history."

He's right: The ship was built in Papenburg in Germany, taken apart

again and shipped to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's capital, in 1914, in about 2 000 crates. It was the beginning of World War I, and Tanzania – or Tanganyika, as it was known then – was a German colony.

In Dar es Salaam the 2 000 crates were loaded onto a train and transported 1 200 km to Kigoma at the lake. There the pieces were re-assembled and in 1915 the ship was launched.

But back then she wasn't called the *Liemba*. Her name was the *Graf von Götzen*, after a German governor of Tanganyika, and she was equipped with several cannons.

I look out over the quiet water.

It's difficult to picture it, but during World War I there were naval battles between the Germans and the Allied Forces on the lake, and this old ship took part in them.

Because Lake Tanganyika has such a strategic location, it was important for the two warring powers to control it.

But right now there's no time to think about the *Liemba's* past because it sounds like we're about to depart. Someone – hopefully the captain – has just revved the idling engines, and the wheezy horn coughs again.

There are probably 500 people on board now, plus the goat, about 40 chickens, and a flea market of baggage.

Then, slowly, the familiar world of the pier starts floating away from us.

We are an hour from Mpulungu and sailing at a speed of about 9 knots – about 20 km/h – into the belly of Africa. Or that's what it feels like.

We stand on the foredeck at the ship's bow and across the lake the late-afternoon sun comes floating at us in thousands of pieces, while the *Liemba's* diesel engine chug-chug-chugs comfortably below us, like a giant Lister engine, and a few Muslims on the upper deck kneel in prayer with their faces turned to Mecca.

Somewhere behind us a rooster crows, the goat bleats and a mother rocks a baby to sleep.

To the north of us, on the shore of the lake at Ujiji in Tanzania, the historic meeting between the explorer David Livingstone and the journalist Henry Morton Stanley took place – the one during which Stanley apparently said to the explorer: "Dr Livingstone, I presume." (Some historians claim these weren't Stanley's precise words.)

Here on the *Liemba's* foredeck, with the warm wind fanning your body, you also feel a bit like a modern explorer, because this part of Africa is really still desolate, empty and undeveloped.

A man comes up to us. His upper body is bulky and he wears glasses with large lenses that almost cover his cheeks. In his hand he has a shiny pair of clippers, like those the conductors on trains carry with them. Perhaps I'm just missing familiar past certainties, but all of a sudden he reminds me of Vause Raw, that seasoned South African politician, leader of the former United Party.

"Vause" is the *Liemba's* ticket controller. "Nobody gets past me without paying," he says.

Many passengers can't afford to

buy tickets for a cabin. They pay about R30 as an access fee, and then settle in somewhere on a deck or in a narrow passageway. There they sit, sleep, eat, and from there they get up to, well, use the first-class cabins' bathroom.

We haven't been in the bathroom and toilets ourselves. We've only walked past, too afraid to go in.

Michael Palin, the popular British TV travel programme presenter and former *Monty Python* star, took a trip on the *Liemba* a few years ago. The best cure for these toilets, he said, was Imodium, a drug that puts the brakes on the digestive system.

Palin isn't the only writer who has travelled on the *Liemba*. In the 1930s the British writer Evelyn Waugh sailed on it. The *Liemba* was also the inspiration for CS Forester's novel *The African Queen*, about a ship by that name. Later, the book was turned into a classic movie, starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn – but it was shot on another ship on Lake Victoria.

Lawrence Green, the famous South African travel writer, sailed on the *Liemba* in the 1960s, and not much has changed since then.

"Her lower deck held at least 300 laughing, chattering Africans," he wrote. "It is a ship of bananas and dried fish, fowls and goats."

Next to the dining room, outside the kitchen, one of the *Liemba's* chefs, clad in a white jacket, has just untied one of the chickens, picked it up and taken it into the kitchen.

There will be chicken on the menu tonight.

There's more than just chicken for supper. The meal also includes fish, *nsima* (pap), tomatoes and bean salad – and it costs about R60.

PREPARE FOR BOARDING. There are no jetties or gangplanks for the passengers who want to board the *Liemba* on its route between Mpulungu and Kigoma.



But I'm thinking about that little chicken on the deck and decide to skip supper and return to the cabin.

I am reading an interesting book: *Mimi and Toutou: The Bizarre Battle of Lake Tanganyika* by Giles Foden.

The book is about the history of the *Liemba* and the battle between the Germans and the Allied Forces – the British, mostly – that raged on Lake Tanganyika during World War I.

The ghosts from the past are also on board the *Liemba*, and it's good to know about them. It gives the journey so much more meaning.

Initially, the Germans controlled the lake. They patrolled the waters with this ship, as well as a smaller one, the *Hedwig von Wissmann*.

But in 1915 the Allies decided to mount an assault on the lake.

Lieutenant-Commander Geoffrey Spicer-Simson of the British navy and 28 men were sent to Africa. With them on board the ship were two large motorboats, *Mimi* and *Toutou*, both specially equipped with cannons. Spicer-Simson and his men landed in Cape Town, where *Mimi* and *Toutou* were loaded on a train.

It took them about a month to get to Kisangani in the Congo. There the boats were unloaded, and towed overland in the direction of the lake.

I get up and go outside. A woman has unrolled her blankets on the deck in front of my door. She's fast asleep, next to a bunch of bananas. Everywhere dim light bulbs glimmer.

According to Foden's book, an Afrikaans man helped Spicer-Simson and his comrades to load *Mimi* and *Toutou* on two wagons and hauled them to the lake with his oxen.

Foden doesn't mention the young man's name. Who was he? Where did he come from?

While you stand here on the deck, you can't help but wonder: What were things like on this

ship in 1915? Commander Gustav Zimmer, captain of the ship then, would probably have been in his cabin by this time.

Commander Zimmer was the one who finally ordered the sinking of the *Liemba* – or the *Graf von Götzen*, as she was known then – on 26 July 1916.

The Allied Forces were winning the war on the lake, and in the rest of East Africa.

The *Hedwig von Wissmann* had been sunk by *Mimi* and *Toutou*, and this ship had been hit and damaged by Belgian warplanes.

Zimmer didn't want the ship to land in Allied hands, so he and his men scuttled her, near Ujiji, after they'd covered the parts of her that could rust in a thick layer of grease.

For nearly seven years she lay at the bottom of the lake, until 1923, when Winston Churchill ordered that she be salvaged.

Her engines and instruments seemed to be undamaged.

About three months later, after everything was cleaned and repaired, the ship started sailing on the lake once more – but now as the *Liemba*.

Outside, people call out in Swahili. Loudly. Non-stop. Some of them whistle too, and the goat is bleating again. Then the ship's horn goes and we stop.

I wake up with a start. It's shortly after midnight. What's going on? Could it be the Congolese rebels?

I get up and peek through one of the portholes. The ship's floodlights are on and around us in the water a clump of small boats bob, filled with people and all sorts of cargo. It's just one of the ship's regular ports of call.

The *Liemba* stops at 14 places between Mpulungu and Kigoma.

But there are no harbours. She stops about a kilometre or two from the lake shore, the anchor is dropped, and then the boats converge on the ship, small ones and big ones, with or without engines.

Passengers climb down from the *Liemba* onto the boats, clutching suitcases and shopping bags and bicycles. Others climb up from the boats to the *Liemba*, with more bags of fish and cassava, a potato-like staple food here.

I step out onto the deck, wide awake. The famous Valiant rule clearly applies on the *Liemba*: There is always space for one more.

The man with the globe walks by. He is about to leave the *Liemba* for one of the smaller boats. In broken English he explains that he is a teacher in a village called Lagosa.

"Where did you get that?"

I motion to the globe.

He takes it out of the packet and spins the earth around.

"She turns," he says. "You see?"

It's a good idea to pack earplugs if you want to travel on the *Liemba*. Not only for the crowing roosters.

People start talking loudly in the passageway outside the cabin from early in the morning.

Several passengers arrived in the night. One of them, a woman, is very ill. She lies on a mattress opposite the dining room, emaciated, with large, despondent eyes. Her husband sits with her, in a T-shirt with "*Rough Rider*" emblazoned on the front. He looks devastated.

"It's her lungs," he explains.

Something else happened in the night. That bleating goat on the foredeck suddenly went quiet. Did he go the same way as last night's chicken? We're too afraid to ask.

We go to the dining room. Breakfast is a rather tasty omelette, with something that looks like vetkoek, and a bowl of bean salad – all for about R40.

It is our second day aboard the ship, and below us her diesel engine still chug-chugs away reassuringly.

After the British salvaged her in 1923, the *Liemba* was used as transport on the lake. But in the 1950s she sank again, in the harbour in Kigoma, because of rust and holes in the hull.

In 1970 the *Liemba* was hauled to the surface once more, with a crane. The hull was repaired and the old steam engine was replaced with a diesel engine. Ever since then, she has been doing duty as a ferry on the lake just about full time.

There are no deck games or other entertainment on board, but you can watch recordings of Tanzanian soap operas shown on the two TV screens in the dining room. Good Victor (after probably handing you too little change for the Coke you bought) is more than willing to translate from Swahili.

In Tanzanian soaps, it would seem, there are only two emotions at play – passionate love and uncontrollable anger. In 10 minutes the hero kisses the heroine four times, and slaps her twice.

I fetch my book and find a seat on the upper deck, on a bench in front of the captain's cabin. A little while later, a woman sits down next to me. Her lips are just a little bit too red and her top is cut a tiny bit too low, and she smells of perfume.

She winks at me and puts her hand on my shoulder.

Meet one of the *Liemba*'s travelling prostitutes. I quickly retreat to the lower deck.

The *Liemba*'s most famous

The *Liemba*'s most famous prostitute was called Mila, Good Victor tells me later. She worked on the ship for more than 20 years.

prostitute was called Mila, Good Victor tells me later. She worked on the ship for more than 20 years.

"This ship is like a town," he says. "Everything you get in a town, you get here as well."

There is no swimming pool on board, but no one stops you from diving into the lake when the ship stops. The water is clear and clean and the average temperature is 25°C. (If chemistry is important to you, the average pH is 8.4.)

There are crocodiles and hippos in some parts of the lake, but generally they keep close to the shore.

Perhaps it's time to introduce ourselves to the captain. We knock on the door of the control room, but no one answers. We turn the door handle and enter. The bridge is clean and organised, and behind the steering wheel stands a man, his eyes fixed on an enormous compass.

To his left sits an older man on a high chair. He plays the game Snake on his cellphone. This is all you can do with a cellphone on the lake, because there's no signal here.

The man with the cellphone is the captain, Beatus T Mghaba.

Captain Mghaba has been working on the *Liemba* for 28 years. He knows the ship's history well. "Come and look here," he says. He walks to the compass. "This is the original one."

You can see the words clearly: "Deutschland, 1912".

In the rainy season, from October to April, it can get quite stormy on the lake, Captain Mghaba tells us. Through the years several smaller boats have sunk and their passengers drowned.

A few years ago, during a storm, the *Liemba* collided with another boat. Fortunately the crew was rescued from the water unscathed.

Now they have radar and a GPS device, he says, but 10, 15 years ago they had to rely on their knowledge of the lake and this old German compass to navigate.

There were occasions when Congolese rebels fired at the ship. This was in the 1990s, when they brought refugees from the Congo to Tanzania.

Captain Mghaba stares ahead pensively. "*The Liemba* is a life saver," he says.

It is estimated that the ship has brought more than 70 000 refugees – yes, 70 000 – from the Congo to refugee camps in Tanzania.

After more than a day on the *Liemba* you start realising Good Victor was right.

The ship is a village on its own, with an *onderdorp* (third class), a *bodorp* (first class) and ruling class (the captain and Vause Raw with his clippers). And, as villages go, you gradually become involved in everybody's business.

Some of the passengers are refugees from the Congo, Burundi

One of the chefs has just untied one of the chickens and taken it to the kitchen. There's chicken on the menu tonight.

and Rwanda. You hear of fathers, mothers and small children hacked to death with pangas. You also discover a honeymoon couple from Kigoma on board, in second class.

Devlin Kamoto, a Congolese, tells me about Manba Muta, a giant crocodile apparently living in the lake. "As big as a bus," he says.

How did Manba Muta get this big? He only eats the bodies of people killed in the wars of the Congo, Burundi and Rwanda, who are thrown in rivers and are washed down into the lake.

The ill woman on the mattress is not getting better. It doesn't look as if she's aware of anyone around her any more. Her name is Yemo Kasongo, we have since established. This morning the Irish couple prayed for her and made the sign of the cross in the air above her. Earlier in the day someone accidentally trod on her hand.

And yet, the longer you are on this ship, the more you realise how much you still have to learn about Africa.

Breyten Breytenbach writes in one of his books: "To travel in Africa is to be confronted with the endlessly unfolding articulations of an elusive reality. It is to travel in a mythical world of invisible powers, of dusty miracles, of taboos and drum language, and people who unroll the seamless fabric between the magical and a possible reality before you."

It is late in the afternoon and we're back on the foredeck at the ship's bow, with the warm wind in

our faces. The sun colours the water red, then almost blue, then silver.

I've stood in many places in Africa in the late afternoon: in Knysna's forest and in the Namib, on those rocks above Port St Johns, at the Victoria Falls, in the Karoo, and on Clifton beach, but nowhere have I ever felt as close to Africa as here on the bow of the *Liemba*.

Yet Africa is a frightening place: In the Congo, on the lake shore not very far from me, more than three million people have been killed in political conflict. Further north in Burundi, the Hutus killed more than 200 000 Tutsis in 1994. Many of the dead became food for Manba Muta.

Perhaps life in Africa is a bit like a Tanzanian soap opera: full of compassion and empathy the one moment, unbelievably cruel the next.

Is it possible to fall in love with a ship?

It's now about 11.30 on Sunday morning. It is our third day on the lake and we're still about 100km from Kigoma.

I even ate chicken last night. (I think it might have been the reddish rooster.)

At Muhale the ship drops anchor one last time, while the heavily laden boats float over from the shore and bob around us. Sometimes tourists alight here. The Muhale National Park is close by, one of few places in Africa where you can still see chimpanzees in their natural habitat.

There must be about a thousand people on board now. Everybody is friendly. It's just very, very noisy.

I stand on the upper deck and look out over the people. We're going to spend two days in Kigoma, and Wednesday we'll return to the *Liemba* and sail back to Mpulungu, where our car is waiting.

Paul Theroux was right: A voyage on the *Liemba* is definitely a unique adventure. You also learn a lot about other people's realities.

There are the old women who have been sitting patiently with their bags of fish and cassava down below en route from Mpulungu to sell their produce at the market in Kigoma, where they will earn about R70 for their efforts. There is a father on his way to his daughter's wedding. And there are pickpockets and guys with karate dreams.

In Kigoma's harbour, after we moor, there's no immediate rush to get off the ship. Everyone first stands still and watches a few men lowering the desperately ill Yemo Kasongo, mattress and all, onto the quay.

Two days later. We're ready for the return voyage.

I am at Kigoma Harbour, standing in the office of Mr Mussa Baya, the admin head of the *Liemba*, and can't believe what I've just heard.

The *Liemba* isn't returning to Mpulungu this week. Nor next week. "Tough luck for you, my friend," he says.

Apparently she has mechanical problems. This means we're stranded.

There is no direct road from here to Mpulungu. And even if there were a road, there are no taxis, trains or planes going there. Dar es Salaam is about 1200km away.

This is a problem. A big problem...

Dana and photographer Ruvan finally made it back to Mpulungu after a bumpy 700km ride in Mr Mussa Mwakiringo's Hilux.



CARGO FOR MARKET. The *Liemba*'s cargo bay contains anything from dried fish to a bleating goat. Some passengers dry their produce on the deck and, come nightfall, sleep next to it.

A year in the strangest place on earth

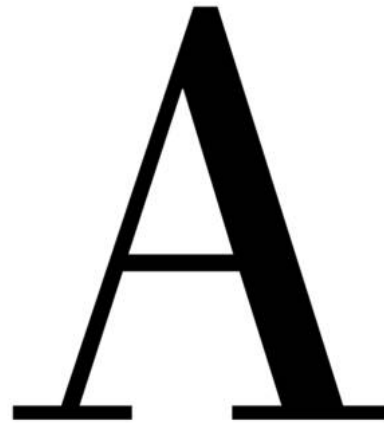
Every year in December, a group of South Africans depart for Antarctica. What do they do during the year they spend on this icy continent? And, more importantly, what does the continent do to them?

WORDS & PICTURES **BUN BOOYENS**



MARK VAN AARDT

MOVING MOUNTAINS (previous page). Antarctica is covered by ice with an average thickness of 2 000 m. In places, this ice shelf extends as far as 200 km into the sea. When sections break off they become giant icebergs like the ones visible in this photo.



Antarctica is a strange place, more like another planet. Walk outside on a mild day and have a look around. You don't see any colour. From horizon to horizon, everything is dazzling white. It's as if someone still has to come and paint the rest of the landscape. You don't hear anything – there is nothing to hear, except perhaps your own breathing or your stomach growling. Nothing moves and there is nothing to smell.

It is as if someone has all of a sudden disabled most of your senses.

You can just feel the cold burning.

Or go outside on an overcast day. Then everything is a drab white – above you, below you, around you. There is no horizon; there are no shadows.

You feel as if you're immersed in large pool of milk.

In winter, on the other hand, everything is pitch black. At the South Pole there is only one sunrise and one sunset per year. The polar night lasts six months; then the sun comes up and shines continuously for six months.

Antarctica is not a people-friendly place. As the English polar explorer Apsley Cherry-Garrard said: "Polar exploration is at once the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time which has been devised."

Yes, it is a stark, denuded environment, but the magnitude of everything around you is astounding.

You stand on an ice sheet that is 4 km thick in places – that's about four Table Mountains stacked on top of one another.

There is enough water for all the rivers on earth to flow for a thousand years, yet it is the driest continent. The annual precipitation is just more than the Sahara gets.

There are places in Antarctica where not a drop of rain has fallen in more than a million years.

It is also the windiest continent. Weather forecasts here are simple: The weather is horrible and the wind always blows. Gusts of nearly 300 km/h have been measured.

But Antarctica is also beautiful beyond words.

When you get the opportunity to see this magical continent at its best – the subtle colours, the mirages, the desolation – there is no more beautiful place on earth.

Let's take a glimpse into life on this big white continent.

Your voyage to Antarctica begins at the Cape of Storms – not exactly the best point of departure for someone struggling to find his sea legs.

And that's the good part.

Between Cape Town and Antarctica lies 4 500 km of open sea, and barely two days south of Cape Town the trouble starts.

You literally sail out of the blue into a grey blanket of cloud and hit the infamous belt of strong westerly winds called the Roaring Forties.

Then you hit the Furious Fifties and next the Screaming Sixties.

When you finally reach the calm waters of the pack ice near Antarctica a week later, you're on first-name terms with Roaring, Furious and Screaming.

The Southern Ocean's waves are

huge. If you stand on the bridge of the SA *Agulhas* – about four storeys high – these gigantic waves come rolling towards you at eye-level, one after the other.

It looks as if the swell will break on top of you. First, the *Agulhas* presses its bow into the grey mountain. The ship shudders, and then, after a few lo-o-ong seconds, it starts to climb upwards and then pops out on top like a cork.

The *Agulhas* is a flat-bottomed vessel, and, like the crew would soon tell you, it rolls quite nicely on a stormy sea, especially if it's wallowing side-on to the swell. It easily lists 20°, 30°, 40°, maybe more. I was too afraid to ask.

The worst, however, is when the waves are coming from behind. Then the ship gets tossed about in all directions. You spend long periods of the voyage on the toilet floor.

Every winter, the sea around Antarctica freezes and the continent basically doubles in size. It's as if a giant white sheet is thrown over Antarctica that stretches more than a thousand kilometres into the sea.

In summer, the ice recedes and ships are able to get close to land.

When the SA *Agulhas* reaches pack ice, there is one godsend: The waves calm down. The sea is suddenly like a pond, with large chunks of melting ice floating in it.

In places, the ship has to break through the ice. Sometimes the ship is stuck for a day or two; sometimes it has to turn around.

Thanks to the use of satellite images this happens less and less. (In the Nineties the crew of the Russian icebreaker *Michail Somof* misjudged the pack ice and ended up being stuck for a year.)

As you move southwards, the days begin to get longer. You cross the Antarctic Circle. Now, the sun

Take Vostok, the remote Russian research station in the interior. It's where the lowest temperature yet on earth was measured: -89,2° C, so cold that your eyelids would freeze together and your teeth may crack. (The freezer section of your fridge is about -20° C.) Here, in the thin air 4 000 m above sea level, water boils at 88° C. It takes up to three hours to cook a potato...

shines for 24 hours of the day.

Finally, about 10 days after leaving Cape Town, you reach the "coast": a thick ice shelf that juts more than 20 m out of the water. You're still about 200 km from the mainland, but you can't get any closer by ship.

The South African base is about 250 km from here on a rocky outcrop by the name of Vesleskarvet.

Welcome to Antarctica!

Antarctica has no permanent inhabitants. The only people are the roughly 800 researchers who spend time at about 40 scientific bases on the continent.

Some of these bases are under the ice and others are built on stilts to allow for the constant wind to blow the powder snow underneath the structure and thus prevent the build-up of snowdrifts.

Wherever you stay, it's not an easy life. Take Vostok, the remote Russian research station in the interior. It's where the lowest temperature yet on earth was measured: -89,2° C, so cold that your eyelids would freeze together and your teeth may crack. (The freezer section of your fridge is about -20° C.)

Here, in the thin air 4 000 m above sea level, water boils at 88° C. It takes up to three hours to cook a potato...

This is where the former Soviet Union did psychological tests to determine how their cosmonauts would handle the solitude of outer space.

At the Australian base at Commonwealth Bay, things don't look much better. This base is located in the windiest place on earth. In winter, the average wind speed is 110 km/h.

In fact, visit any of the bases and the picture looks pretty much the same: Outside, it is cold and windy. Inside, the dreaded winter-over syndrome will eventually take its toll among the handful of people who have to get along with one another.

You become listless. You have trouble sleeping, and then you have difficulty getting up. Your fuse gets short. Some people get depressed. Sometimes it affects only one or two team members, at other times an entire team can fall prey to it.

When the icebreakers and cargo planes arrive a year later to pick people up, they may have a situation like the one encountered in the Fifties at an American base: No

one was there to welcome the new arrivals. During the polar night, the team had suffered a psychological and social breakdown.

Here's how the scene inside the base was described: "We discovered, in the different rooms, little animal dens where, as base life had broken down and they had become no longer on speaking terms with one another, each man had retired to make himself a little corner in the wreck of his personality."

There was the well-known case of the American who lost the plot so badly that other team members had to pad the walls of his room so he wouldn't injure himself.

There are many stories about emotions running high, especially in late winter.

There's the team leader who apparently started to set the base's buildings on fire, the chef who ran amok with a carving knife...

And then there was Antarctica's only murder. According to *New Scientist* magazine, a Russian beat his mate to death with an ice pick in a fight over a game of chess. (No prize for guessing what the former Soviet Union's reaction to it was: They banned chess.)

Life here is peaceful. But certainly not easy.

South African teams have manned a base in Antarctica for the past 45 years.

The first one, Sanae I (South African National Antarctic Expedition), was a base taken over from the Norwegians in 1960. Sanae II was a timber building, and within a few years the ice had crushed it.

In 1979, Sanae III was constructed in the form of a network of steel tunnels, but barely 10 years later it also succumbed to the ice.

Sanae IV, the current base, was

built on a rocky outcrop in the Nineties – it was South Africa's first base built above ground.

This 45-year history has not been properly documented. Great dramas have played out here. In 1969, Gordon Mackie died in a mountaineering accident.

In 1979, Ged Bell fell to his death in a crevasse. An appendix has had to be removed in a hurry.

But what is an average day like?

In a cupboard in the South African base lies a tatty old notebook in which people have over the years penned an assortment of sayings and comments.

They're written in dozens of handwritings; here and there the words are muddled. But it does paint a picture of what such a small group of people – normally about 10, and until recently only men – experience in the course of a year.

Let's page through this book to see how South Africans have experienced Antarctica over the years.

"I was keen on a white Christmas, but not a white New Year's," someone by the name of Carel wrote in 1976.

Most teams set foot on shore in Antarctica at the height of summer, amid great excitement.

The sun shines day and night, and the temperature is quite bearable – a degree or five below freezing.

By April or May, when it gets really cold, the first signs of anxiety set in, as evidenced by Carel's entry above.

Outside it is now -15°C , even -20°C . Nothing works as it should, least of all the caterpillar tractors. Any task that has to be done outside turns into a trial.

Here's a conversation recorded

between Tjaart and Dave, also in 1976, presumably while they were struggling to get the caterpillar to start amid the roar of the wind:

"Man, as ons honde gehad het, was hier geen probleme nie!"

"Honda?! Watter Honda?"

Yet people weather the physical hardships remarkably well. It is the isolation rather than the cold that's the cause of more serious problems.

When the sun sets for the long polar night (two months of darkness on the coast, six months at the pole), the team members' normal day and night rhythms go haywire.

Soon, people start to suffer from insomnia, or they battle to stay awake. Many develop "big eye", a condition that has them wandering around for days on end without sleeping, and when they've finally come to a rest, they have a hard time waking up properly. The result is a chronic apathy, even if you've just got out of bed.

Like a certain Jo summed it up in 1987: "You know, I can doze till I'm a goner."

The first signs of friction between team members start to show. They're totally cut off from the outside world. And inside the base there is virtually no privacy. It's a difficult combination.

Usually after about six months on the continent, tempers seriously start to fray.

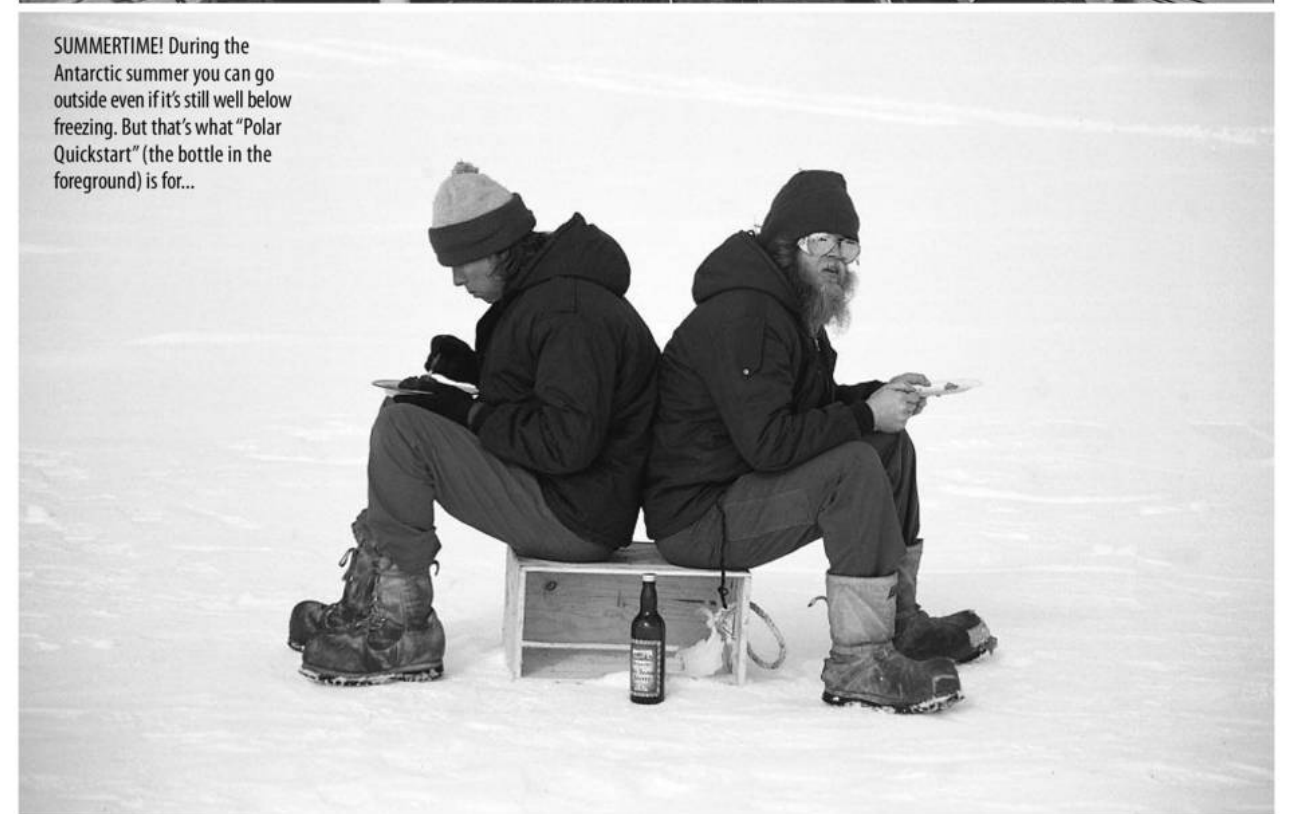
For want of a suitable weapon, one Joe warned someone at the dinner table in 1988: "Man, I'd just stab you with a spoon!"

Sometimes, things boil over. "If I were as big as Nick, I would have flippin' punched every one of you!" one smallish member threatened the whole team (except Nick, presumably).

At most of the polar bases, fighting is strictly forbidden. If you



ROAD WORKS AHEAD. During winter the sea around Antarctica freezes over. Ice-breakers can make their way to the continent in the summer months.



SUMMERTIME! During the Antarctic summer you can go outside even if it's still well below freezing. But that's what "Polar Quickstart" (the bottle in the foreground) is for...

ANTARCTICA

were to raise a hand against someone at one of the American bases, you'd be on the next aeroplane or ship going home. As for the Russian bases, they say the fists fly merrily, especially at Vostok, widely known as Antarctica's fist-fight capital.

A much more common problem than aggression, however, is the emotional numbing that sets in while the polar night drags on.

Until recently, women have not been allowed as part of winter teams, a situation with its own set of complications.

Everyone gets lonely, as is evident from this conversation between Rassie and Hannes in 1980: "Where are you, lovey? If I can just lay my hands on you..."

"Uhm, Rassie... who's with you?"

"I'm alone."

"So who are you talking to then?"

"Oh, just to the hammer."

Sometimes the team members are quite philosophical about the solitude.

Marius: "Look, one can go far without sex."

Carel: "Yep, look how far we've come."

Hope doesn't disappoint, however. "Sex is heaven's reward for hard work," one team member said during a discussion about religion.

"Well, in that case I'm going to work hard all day tomorrow," a passer-by quipped.

A blue movie or two is shown. Here, a porn film is called a "sneller" (after the exclamations of "*Schneller! Schneller!*" repeatedly heard in the German ones).

Inside the base, the temperature remains the same day and night, and the lighting remains the same – there is very little sensory stimulation. Nothing much happens.

You cannot exorcise the boredom. You watch the same movie over and

over. People disengage themselves mentally from the situation and at times sit-lie for hours in a big-eyed trance.

They wonder why on earth they came to this godforsaken place.

Then someone calls you to come outside to see the aurora australis, a ghostly light show in the sky caused by solar winds interacting with the earth's magnetic field.

The colours are the subtlest shades you can ever hope to see.

Antarctica takes your breath away, and everything is worth it again.

As time goes by, the calendar loses its meaning. One day is as good as another. At one meeting, the leader announced that the team would go fetch supplies on Sunday. "Okay," they agreed, "but we'll vote on which day is Sunday."

Only when the sun comes up does the daily routine get re-established at the base.

Outside, there is some colour again for the first time in months and the sensation of floating aimlessly in space suddenly lifts.

But even then the confusion between day and night persists.

"You should have seen the beautiful sunset this morning," one team member gushed.

People's normal perception of cold and hot also gets out of whack. "You should come outside," one of Deon's friends urged him. "It is lovely outside. Minus 25!"

Now, you have the opportunity to go and explore the world out there.

You drive to the coast and get to see other forms of life for a change – inquisitive little Adélie penguins, large emperor penguins and seals.

You drive a caterpillar tractor inland and set foot on solid ground

for the first time in months. You smell the soil.

Slowly, your senses get readjusted and things return to normal.

What do you gain from having spent a year in Antarctica?

Well, you have a few odd new skills. To this day I can recite large portions of the dialogue of the Eddie Murphy movie *Beverly Hills Cop*.

This is what happens when you spend 14 months in a base 30m under Antarctica's ice with a smallish collection of videos – you tend to watch the okay movies more than once. If I remember correctly, I watched *Beverly Hills Cop* 54 times; Barbra Streisand's *Yentl*, on the other hand, was ripped out of the video player after 10 minutes, and disappeared without a trace, forever.

Another strange accomplishment: I have not read Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, but I have watched someone read it from cover to cover.

Yes, watched...

We were trapped in a small caravan in a snowstorm. The guy in the bunk opposite me, Steve Irons, started to read *War and Peace*.

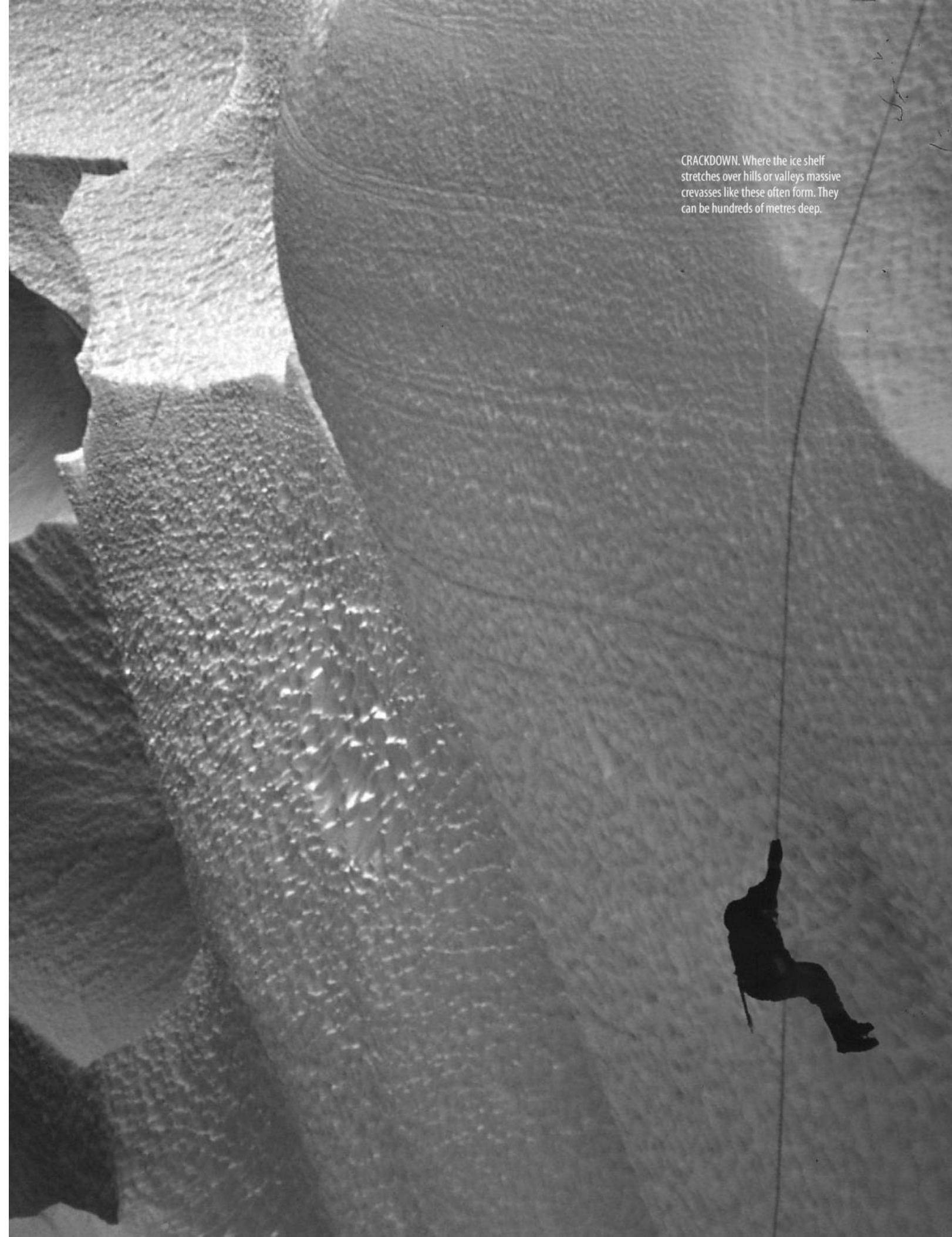
The storm raged for seven days, and I lay in my sleeping bag and literally watched him read all 1472 pages. There was simply nothing else to do.

But then there are the other things with which you return from Antarctica: impressions of a place so supernaturally beautiful, so unearthly cruel that even 10, 20 years later you still don't have adequate words to describe it.

Nobody returns the same person they were when they left home. Antarctica leaves no one unaffected.

Even if it is only like one JC put it in 1980: "Well, it's the closest I've ever been to Tahiti."

CRACKDOWN. Where the ice shelf stretches over hills or valleys massive crevasses like these often form. They can be hundreds of metres deep.



KAMMANASSIE

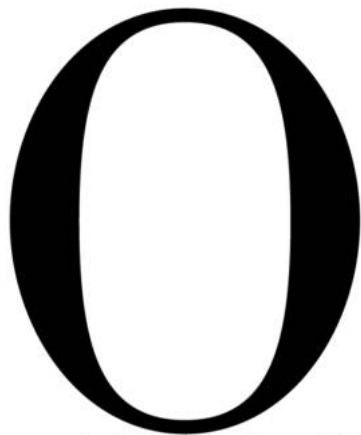
LONE RANGE OF THE LITTLE KAROO

Between Oudtshoorn and Uniondale in the Little Karoo lies the Kammanassie, a mountain range that few people know about.

WORDS **ALBERTUS VAN WYK**
PICTURES **DAWIE VERWEY**



WHERE'S THE BRIDGE? (previous spread)
February 2008 was unusually wet in the Kammanassie, but it was nothing compared with the floods that swept through the area in November and December 2007.



Our car is pitching over the undulating topography of the Little Karoo as we're driving in the direction of De Rust. It's February, the hottest and usually the driest month in these parts. For the past week the mercury has touched 40°C – "40 degrees without VAT", as people say around here – but it's much cooler today. It poured all night and it's still drizzling.

We're looking for a good back road, just following our noses. Somewhere up ahead there's the Oude Muragie dirt road that swings to the left and shimmies its way along the foot of the mountain towards the Cango Caves.

It's a lovely road, but we'll leave it for another day.

I've been through Meiringspoort and over the Swartberg Pass quite a few times, and I have three jars of peach jam from Die Hel in my kitchen cupboard. Today, however, we're looking for a road that's not on the tourist maps.

The Dysselsdorp sign is faint in the rain – it doesn't promise a scenic drive.

"Let's turn here," Dawie says.

We drop down onto a long bridge across the swollen Olifants River. Just before Dysselsdorp's bleak low-cost housing we turn left onto a gravel road, past a soccer stadium that, judging by the state it's in, won't see any 2010 action.

We keep right at a fork in the road and pass through the last streets of the village hugging the Dysselsberg, which is the foot of the Kammanassie Mountains.

Two mud-splattered boys wave to us from a stormwater drain and a thin man leans over a wretched wire fence, staring into the distance.

The dirt and shale road surface is almost as good as tar, and a joy to drive on. The road follows the foot of the mountain and gradually starts to rise.

The Kammanassie range stands all alone in the middle of the Little Karoo, between the Swartberg range in the north and the Outeniqua Mountains in the south.

We're heading roughly in the direction of Uniondale and Avontuur.

I've never been in the area and don't know the stories of the Kam'nassie, as the locals call it.

I wonder whose wagon-wheel rims or white bones might lie beneath the fynbos in the small kloofs that cut into the mountain.

Does this region have stories of a legendary 19th-century character like Bloubaard of the Attakwas-kloof or Coenraad de Buys of the Camdeboo and the Soutpansberg?

The clouds part for a moment. Silvery arcs of water shoot from sprinklers over a green field of lucerne. A white Hilux bakkie with sheep railings roars past and the farmer lifts two fingers.

Among the renosterbos a herd of soil-red Bonsmara cattle materialises.

Hiluxes and Bonsmaras deserve their own museums, like the ones already built for the koeksister, windmill and donkey.

So do Dorper sheep.

Without Dorpers, Hiluxes and Bonsmaras, farmers in South Africa would never have made it. (Around these parts, I see, you can add

ostriches and Boer goats.)

We drive over a neck. The cliffs of the Voor-Langkloof now lie stacked sideways like slices of toast, in the direction of the Outeniqua Mountains off to the right. Streaks of fog are suspended in-between.

The road twists lazily over the limbs of the Kammanassie. On roads like these you switch off the air conditioner, wind down the window and stick your elbow out like someone without a care in the world and lots of time on his hands.

The soil smells damp and we catch the herb-like scent of a Karoo shrub.

The road does a wide turn to bring us to neat lucerne patches, a circular field of mealies under centre-pivot irrigation and an excavator cleaning the bed of a stream after the summer floods.

"Leeublad", it says on a stone wall. The road runs between the farm house and a shed.

A man in blue overalls guides a herd of Boer goats down the road and four others carry a dead ostrich from a camp.

The young farmer who walks up with his hand outstretched to come and chat reminds me of Ernie Els just after an eagle on the 18th.

"Tourism?" Bennie Terblanche laughs in response to my question.

"No, the farmers around here are just trying to make a living from farming. It's a hard land this. You're seeing it at its most beautiful now. It hasn't rained this much in quite a while."

Bennie won't hear of us leaving soon. We get into his Hilux with some boerewors and a bundle of wood, and head up the mountain to see the valley from the top.

"Things aren't easy around here.

He wrote in his will that no one was allowed to live or farm there again.

My father always used to say you have to farm everything to keep going: ostriches, goats, sheep, cattle, lucerne, fruit, vegetable seed, and so on. If the price of one thing drops, the others have to keep you going."

We bump along a jeep track high up the mountain, near the Kammanassie Reserve, which is run by CapeNature.

"Sometimes a few of the Cape mountain zebra get out of the reserve into my fields. They're very rare and wild," Bennie tells us as we're driving. "Occasionally we also see leopard spoor, but I've never seen a leopard."

The higher we go, the more proteas, grass and fynbos we see.

Wabome (*Protea nitida*) – wagon trees – grow on the mountain slope.

The trees were as important to earlier inhabitants of the region as Hiluxes and Dorpers are to today's farmers.

The wood was used to make wagon wheels and brake pads, and for fire. The tannin in the bark was used as stomach medicine and as a dye for leather.

We get out and look over the Kammanassie Mountains. The rain has cleared for the moment and the clouds have parted over the Voor-Langkloof.

"I still pick up old iron belts down in the kloofs," Bennie says. "The old people built long foeie slides to lug bundles of waboom wood to the foot of the mountain."

I ask Bennie whether a legend like the one of Bloubaard is told in this region.

Bloubaard, also known as Gerrit Johannes Swanepoel, was the last South African to be hanged in public – in 1856 in George.

It is said that he murdered more than 40 people, although that's probably an exaggeration.

Bennie just grins. "All I remember is the story my grandfather told me of the old Jew from whom he'd bought Leeublad – William Guess. Guess fought on the English side in the Anglo-Boer War.

"One day a General Scheepers arrived here with a commando, convinced he was arriving at the home of sympathetic Boers.

"Guess immediately sent a guy to go and warn the English unit, and it wasn't long before a gunfight broke out. I still pick up spent cartridge casings on the farm.

"The people of the Kammanassie are fairly isolated from the rest of the world. I think it's always been the case. The ones who knew the old stories died in the past few years.

"Perhaps you should try Oom Koos Stander, up the road in the direction of Sanddrif."

The road twists on over the tongues of the mountain. We drive past Rietfontein, Koutie (some people say Koutjie), Dieprivier...

Then we descend into a valley via a long downhill. We see a small group of skinny, bent-over shapes walking up the hill.

On their shoulders they carry rolled-up mattresses in grain bags. We stop to speak to the man in front, who's barefoot and has

a cloth around his neck and a bandage around one shin.

His sunken cheeks and clumps of grey beard make his face look as if it's carved out of wood.

"I worked for a farmer in the area, Sir..."

He looks down at the ground and he's reluctant to talk.

"Now on my way to Calitzdorp."

People drifting like grass seeds... We continue on our way and I can't help feeling slightly glum.

A valley full of thorn trees with yellow blossoms unfolds before us. The road runs to a causeway engulfed by a strong brown stream, the Kammanassie River.

I'm not sure if it's safe to drive through. I take off my shoes and trousers and walk to the middle of the river.

The water comes up to my knees. The stream is stable but fast.

It's good for my soul to stand here on a Tuesday morning while elsewhere millions of people are blinking at PowerPoint presentations under neon lights.

The muted rumble of the water fills the air and a few masked weavers flit among the rushes.

We drive through the water without incident.

At a T-junction showing Uniondale to the left and the R62 to the right we turn left and drive parallel to the river. The road perches on a ledge carved into the valley wall, about 15 m above the water. In places it's supported by stone masonry, almost like one of Thomas Bain's passes.

The scars of the floods that devastated the Southern Cape in November and December 2007 are evident everywhere. Vast clumps of

reeds lie flattened in the direction of the sea, and uprooted trees and shrubs comically perch on the eroded riverbank.

In many places the valley is narrow and there are few signs of human habitation.

In other places it's wider, with a flood plain on which various crops are farmed.

There are plum, peach and pear orchards, pastures where angora goats are grazing and fields of grey saltbush planted for fodder.

It feels as if you can read the farmers' history from the scars on the land. You can see it's not easy to farm here. Many people tried, and many failed.

The oldest buildings are tiny stone structures, and in places you still see the remnants of walls in the grass. Perhaps they were homes, perhaps they were sheds.

Some of them might have been built by the first migrant farmers, perhaps even before 1850.

And then, every 5 km or so, there's a slightly more stately house with a corrugated iron roof and wide verandahs, built early in the 1900s when the ostrich industry was at the height of madness.

Kleinganskraal, Rusoord, Waterval, Boplaas, Kommandantsdrif, Volstruislaagte...

But I don't see a true Victorian *volstruispaleis* anywhere – the Kammanassie was probably too far from the markets, and it's simply too dry out here.

There are newer houses, too, less attractive, and occasionally a tiny asbestos house. Some are neatly painted and have colourful curtains in the windows, a newish Hilux under a sloping lean-to and a satellite dish.

Chickens scratch in some of the yards, and in one there's an empty

pigsty under a bluegum tree. Some houses are empty, and have been for years.

We drop down to the river again and find another causeway. The water has risen higher. If we're washed away here, a young fish-eagle in a bluegum on the opposite bank will be the only witness.

The sign at the crossroads points right to "Eensaamheid" and left to "Buffelsdrif"; we go straight.

A smallish bird of prey with a snake in its talons flies across the road – it looks like a jackal buzzard.

The pear and apricot orchards and fields of lucerne get bigger. There's some serious farming going on along this stretch of road. Koos Stander's place is still some distance further, on the left.

It starts to rain again, coming down in a grey shower. We slow down. Then an imposing, slightly ramshackle yellow house with a pointy roof looms to our left, in the middle of a lucerne field. It no longer has doors, windows, a garden or a fence. It looks as if bales of feed are stored in the dark interior.

Somewhere in the rain beyond Withempie se Draai we find the turn-off to Sanddrif – Koos Stander's place is on this road.

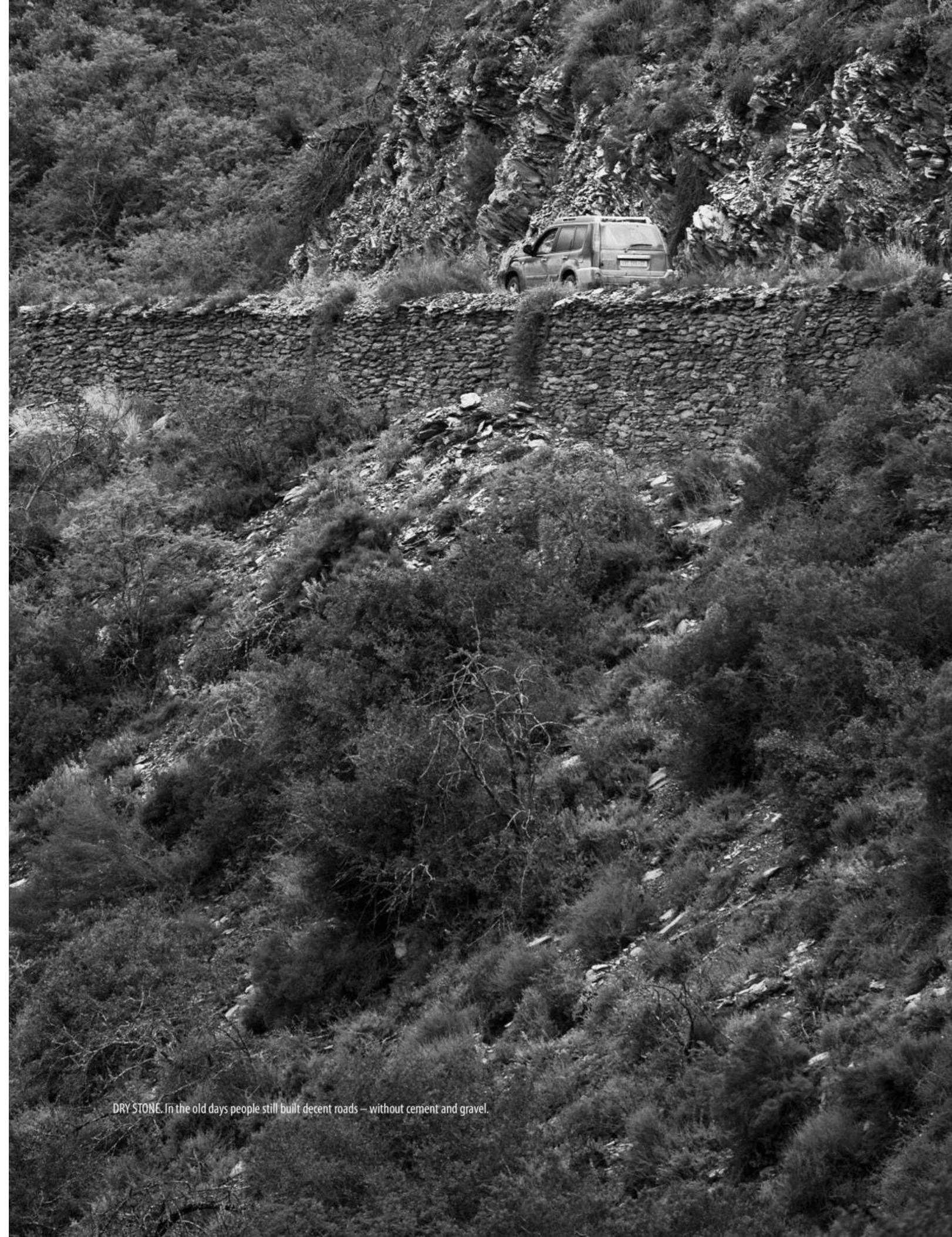
I stop next to a bakkie approaching our car, with a boisterous mutt on the back.

"That's me, yes, Koos Stander," he greets us – a short, stocky man wearing shorts and a weathered Billabong cap.

He laughs just as much as Bennie Terblanche did when I ask him about tourism.

"No, people are welcome to pop in anywhere for coffee if they're passing through the Kammanassie.

"They don't have to worry; the dominee stopped passing here



DRY STONE. In the old days people still built decent roads – without cement and gravel.

It seems to me this is the way of the Kammanassie: isolated from the outside world.

years ago.” And he gives another belly laugh.

I ask him about the deserted house in the lucerne field.

“Oh yes, the *oubaas*, what was his name? An old Englishman... ja, Will Richardson.

“He died in the late 1970s. He put the farm in a trust and wrote in his will that no one was allowed to live or farm there again, because his plan was to come back and carry on farming.” He laughs again.

“It stood like that for years, but a while ago the will was declared null and void in court and the farm was sold.”

Koos doesn’t know of any murderers or rebels that lived in the area either. It seems to me this is the way of the Kammanassie: isolated from the outside world.

Perhaps the people around here prefer it this way.

We get back onto the road. The clouds around the mountain open up once more.

That must be the Kammanassie’s highest point: Mannetjiesberg, the peak standing guard over the Perdevlakte (people of the area call it the “Pêrevlak”).

In the old days, the farmers used to take their horses and mules up to graze on this large, flat plain on top of the mountain after harvest time, around January. They say there’s only one crevice through which man or animal can get through to the top, at Piet se Berg.

Later, Annelie Botes, a storyteller who grew up in the area, tells me that the Boers who fought in the Anglo-Boer War took their horses to the Perdevlakte and then rolled a large stone over the access pass so the horses couldn’t get back down.

“You see, horses get horse-sickness from a midge that leaves a bacteria in their noses. The Perdevlakte is too high; the midges can’t survive there.

“The Boers around here who fought in the war always had fresh horses, whereas the English soldiers’ horses died.”

The road pulls away from the river. We’re now back in a semi-desert that stretches to the east, to where the landscape falls into the Baviaanskloof. Here and there, bare red soil shows through the grass and shrubs.

I wonder if it has always looked like this or whether the land has been overgrazed. A few large dongas confirm my suspicions. Those and the renosterbos, which grows only where the veld has been damaged. Apparently this region had sweet grass and even eland 200 years ago.

As the sun starts dropping low, we pop out at the N9, the tar road to the left that runs past Uniondale.

There are no cars, but you can feel the world roaring past. The last time our speedo touched 120 km/h was this morning.

It’s like coming out in the bright light after being in a cinema.

MIGRANT BIRDS. In the Kammanassie people farm with ostriches, angora goats, Boer goats and cattle.



FREE REIN IN THE FREE STATE

For three days in July each year, a big cloud of dust hovers over Fauresmith as hundreds of horses and riders compete in one of the toughest equestrian races in the world.

WORDS **SOPHIA VAN TAAK** PICTURES **RUVAN BOSHOF**



T

he loudspeaker blares over the showground: "Someone has lost an orange stokie. If you find an orange stokie, please hand it in."

You really shouldn't walk around barefoot at the Fauresmith Agricultural Society showground this early in the morning. The light is grainy, the ground is covered with frost and you have to sidestep the dung of about 400 horses. The horses in question whinny and snort – these are the best long-distance runners in South Africa and they have spent months training for the toughest event of the season, the 201 km 38th annual Fauresmith Endurance Ride.

The horses take one last saunter around the field in the middle of the oval dirt track, staring straight ahead, seemingly focused on the three-day challenge ahead. Once or twice a head drops down to the grass, but soon that gaze is fixed on the horizon again. They're as committed as Elana Meyer was during the 10000-metre race at the Barcelona Olympics.

In an endurance ride, stamina matters more than speed. Every rider is grappling with the same question: Will my horse and I be tough enough to finish?

It's July and the Free State

is freezing. An icy wind rustles through the yellow grass where about 2000 supporters are gathering at the starting point of the ride. Moms, dads, friends, girlfriends and boyfriends; all sleepy-eyed, with hands stuffed deep into their pockets. Judging by the proliferation of equestrian club windbreakers, Stetsons and cowboy boots, every-one here is a horse lover.

Campfires burn brightly in the sea of tents, caravans, horseboxes and white bakkies all parked on the edge of the showground. The restaurant is doing brisk business and the smells of sizzling boerewors, coffee and pancakes mingle with lucerne, diesel fumes and fresh horse dung. I stamp my feet in the cold – the sun still isn't up. Apart from the floodlights around the track, the only source of light is a big neon cross on a koppie outside town.

At the starting point, a technician tinkers with a big electronic clock until a string of red zeroes flashes on the screen. Suddenly "Eye of the Tiger" splutters from the speaker beside me. Nearby, a stallion jerks his head and snorts. He pricks his ears and paws the ground. Apparently that's how a pure-bred Arabian horse should be – intelligent and always aware of its surroundings.

When I arrived yesterday afternoon, I could barely tell a Clydesdale from a Basotho pony, but the director of the Fauresmith Endurance Ride, Rinie White, showed me the ropes at the stables.

"This year almost 98% of the entries are Arabian horses," she explained. "You can recognise them by their small, pointed ears and slight build, and by the way they

move. Look how that one in the pink halter lifts her tail. An Arabian always carries its tail high."

The riders are just as graceful and fit as their horses. There are more people in tights here than at the Royal Ballet.

“Will the following group please proceed to the starting line: 103, 324, 2146..."

The horses and riders assemble behind a white chalk line on the track in front of the pavilion. The numbers that the announcer read out are painted on the haunches of the horses and printed on the riders' bibs.

The big, red seconds tick by on the clock. At 07:00:00 exactly, South Africa's toughest endurance ride starts off with an unassuming announcement: "There goes the first group. Enjoy the ride, you guys!"

The horses bolt. After one lap around the track to find their stride, they head out of the showground into the hills.

"*Lekker ry, poppie! Ons kyk vir jou!*" a mom shouts after her daughter.

As the groups gallop off, bakkies speed to the first check point. A groom sits on the back of each bakkie with a bale of lucerne or teff, a container of water, brushes and buckets.

Over the next three days, the contestants will complete three circular routes through farms around Fauresmith – 201 km in total. Today's 74,2 km leg zigzags through some low hills and along farm roads.

Horses urinate loudly, chew straw and slurp water while brushes, carrots, stethoscopes and sponges change hands. Everything takes place with speed and precision – it's like watching a pit stop at an F1 Grand Prix.

The first stop is on a farm called Metzpoort. Ruvan and I follow the dust trail from the bakkies. The horses in the lead thunder past, steam rising from their bodies. Some riders have a steely, determined look in their eyes, but most are relaxed; they wave at the bakkies and chat about the weather while their horses fall into step.

I get the idea that Fauresmith is not so much a competition as an annual gathering of old friends. It's a serious ride, that's a given, but the emphasis is not on winning. Each rider is here to see how far he can push himself and his horse without overworking the animal.

Stef Cilliers, a vet from Newcastle who has been involved with the ride from the very beginning, sums it up: "It's not about what you do, but how you do it."

We pull over on the shoulder of the road to take photos as the horses gallop past. The rhythmic *da-roof, da-roof, da-roof* of their hoofs hitting the dirt is hypnotising – you can hear it long after they've disappeared down the road. Then it's quiet again – with only the plains, the high blue sky and the wind combing through the yellow grass.

Metzpoort is a hive of activity. What's going on? Why the rush? As the horses tear past the timekeepers, bakkies charge into a big fenced-off area. The riders dismount and the grooms loosen girths and slide saddles off backs dripping with sweat. Then the horses are hastily led through the fleet of vehicles.

I slip in a few questions here and there and things start to make sense.

From the moment a contestant clocks in at the checkpoint, he has 20 minutes to bring his mount's heart rate down to less than 64 beats per minute. The horse must then be examined at a special veterinary checkpoint. If the vet is satisfied with the animal's condition, the rider is allowed to tackle the next stage to Grapfontein. After a second check-up there, he can carry on back to Fauresmith. If a vet deems that a horse is not fit to go on, the ride ends. Finish and *klaar*.

Most horses are shorn to help them cool down faster, with only a patch of hair on their backs where the saddle rests. At each checkpoint the grooms wash the animals and check their hoofs.

Horses urinate loudly, chew

straw and slurp water while brushes, carrots, stethoscopes and sponges change hands. Everything takes place with speed and precision – it's like watching a pit stop at an F1 Grand Prix. The riders also have a bite to eat and drink coffee to stave off the cold. They check their watches every few minutes, waiting for a signal from a vet that they can bring their horse to be examined.

The vet takes the horse's pulse and checks for dehydration, injuries and muscle spasms. Then he pulls back its upper lip and presses down on the gums – when a horse is very tired, its circulation slows and the white thumbprint will take longer to turn pink again.

One of the riders – a lightie who looks like he's still in high school – stands in line with his mom, waiting for his turn with the vet. He looks very pleased with himself.

A cellphone rings. "It's your dad," the boy's mom says. "He wants to speak to you."

"Hey Dad," the boy says cheerfully. "No, *lekker*, about 20 km/h, I think." Then the smile drops from his face. "Yes, but... but... Okay, Dad."

"What did he say?" his mom asks as she slips the phone back into her pocket.

"Dad says I should slow down."

The horse-bakkie-vet procedure is followed for three days straight. Things only quieten down late in the afternoon when everyone is back at the showground. The horses are examined again from head to hoof, washed down and dressed in hooded blankets and socks.

The day's results are pinned up outside the office and everyone sets off to see how they did. I love the

names of the horses. Some have an Arabian flavour, like Vidiko Rabib and El Jamani Bukardi; others are distinctly South African: Vonk, Vrees, Sökkies, Skemer...

After checking the results, everybody goes back to what they were doing: kids chase each other between the caravans, while their parents sit around the campfire talking about horses; in the kitchen a team of women peel potatoes for tomorrow's salad; teenagers skulk around the outskirts of the camp, clutching their cellphones. The riders and grooms? They're busy in the stables, of course.

A farrier in leather pants works on a horse's hoofs with a small hammer, a set of files and a tool that looks like a pair of pliers. At the Trail Rider stall, saddler Kylon Liversage tells a client about a new design: "This is my short Kentucky for light- to standard-weight riders," he says. "It's a compact saddle – it forces you to sit upright – but it's just as stable as a Western saddle."

Every now and then an announcement rings out across the veld: "Eliska Botes, please come to the pavilion. Your mother is looking for you."

Songs like "Simply the Best", "Skarumba" and "Forever Young" sound from the speakers, adding to the carnival atmosphere.

The slower riders who arrived late lead their horses around the track to cool them down. Some horses didn't pass a vet's check and their riders look disappointed. A stout female rider tells everyone within earshot that she just couldn't control her horse that morning. The reins cut into her hands and left red marks on her palms.

Two men in checked shirts and farm jackets look on, arms resting on a fence. One man holds a glass in his left hand and a half-smoked

cigarette in his right. "What's the sheep price these days?" he asks his friend.

"Eliska Botes, your mom is standing here with a wooden spoon. You better come to the pavilion right now!"

After dinner the music dies down and silence descends. Only a few *bittereinders* are still in the bar. Lapwings call to each other in the long grass.

In the physiotherapy tent, strained muscles are being massaged back to life.

The loudspeaker crackles one last time: "They tell me a horse has got loose. He's wearing a red rug. By tomorrow he'll be in Bloemfontein!"

The first notes of "Chariots of Fire" echo over the showground. Spectators on the pavilion crane their necks to see which rider will emerge from the mountains first. A lively horse comes onto the track at breakneck speed, kicking up dust, chased by a TV crew towards the finishing line. The front-runner takes the last bend at full speed and gallops down the home stretch. He looks unstoppable.

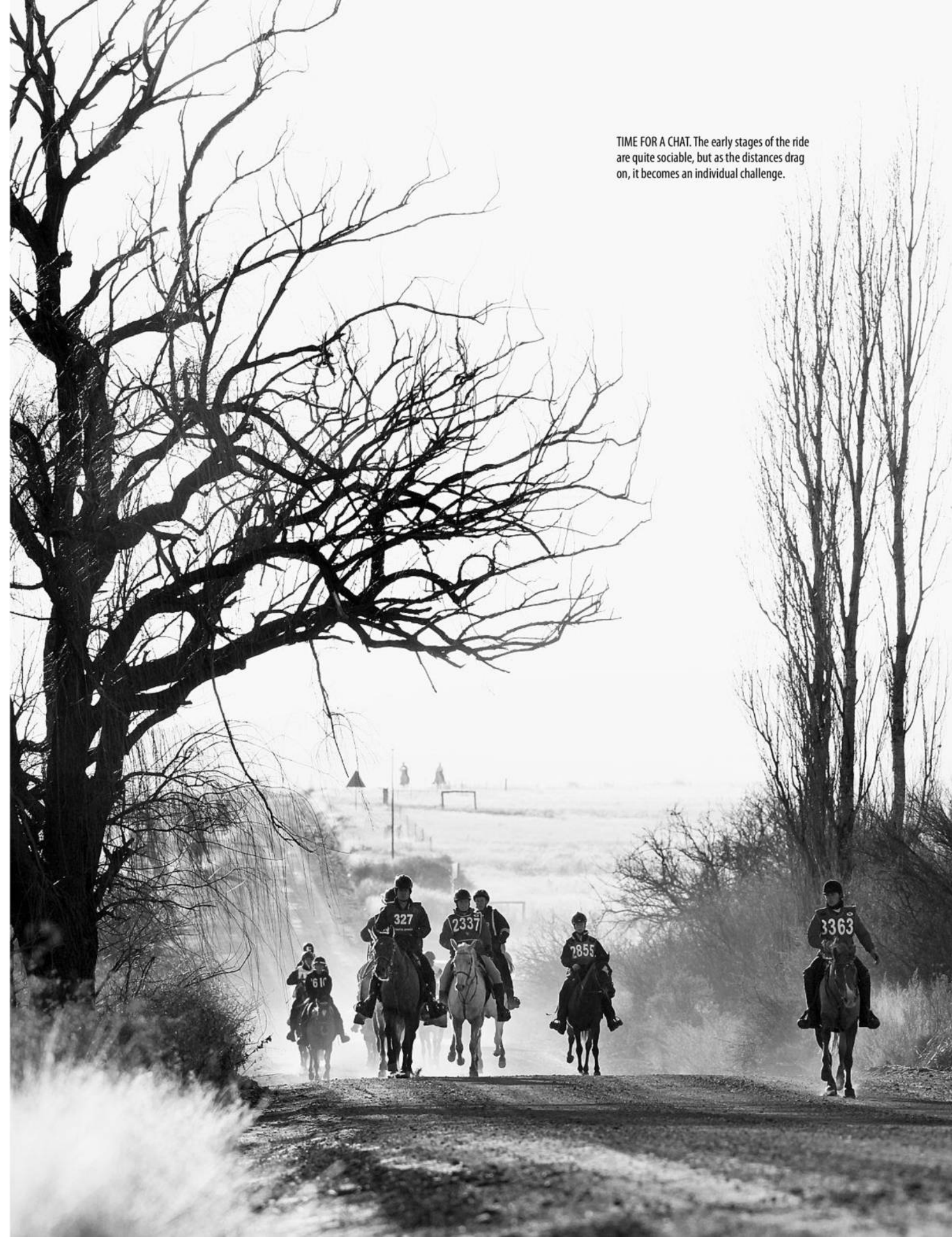
"Who's that in the lead?" the announcer says. Everyone is up on their feet. "Here comes, uhm... a bay horse in first place! Off the track! People, get off the track!"

The sound system is cranked up and the triumphant melody of "Chariots" carries the steed over the last 100 metres.

It's a poignant moment.

"Ait! Kyk hoe lekker kom hierdie perd nou hier aan! Give him a round of applause, people!" The announcer must have consulted his notes because he's identified the rider. "Congratulations... Corné Fick!"

TIME FOR A CHAT. The early stages of the ride are quite sociable, but as the distances drag on, it becomes an individual challenge.





LONG STRIDES (above). On the last day of the race, the front-runners try to shake the rest of the pack on the main road between Fauresmith and Koffiefontein.

DRINKING BUDDIES (opposite page). This little terrier got in on the action when his equine pal stopped for refreshments.

Friends, parents, grooms and spectators throng around the track. Seconds later, another rider bursts through the gates of the showground. "They're coming in fast, watch out people!"

"Hey, it's Dicky!" a surprised shout goes up. Again "Chariots" blares from the speakers.

"It's number 329! *Baie moo!* Well done, Dick Kruger!"

Now the horses are pouring over the chalk line. Riders flop from the saddles. Some are crying – from exhaustion, relief or both. It's the highlight of any endurance rider's career to complete a Fauresmith, and this year it has been a particularly cold week. Of the 397 horses that qualified for the ride, only 246 managed to complete the event.

Proud dads lift their boys out

of the saddle; older riders give their horses free rein to reach the finishing line at their own pace. And "Chariots" plays over and over, for each and every rider when they enter the showground.

Fritz Breytenbach (72) and Ami de Wet (73), the two oldest contestants, embrace each other without speaking. After so many Fauresmiths over the years, no words are necessary.

A photographer breaks the silence. "How do you feel?" he asks Ami.

"My horse is fine," she says. "But my legs are tired and my muscles are sore."

And Fritz? "I don't count kilometres," he says. "Not mine, not my horse's. When you're 72, the only important thing is whether you enjoy it or not. I'll be back next year, God willing."



Smooth operator

Long before cellphones, there was the manual telephone exchange. There are still a few left in the country, but probably not for long. Join operator Magdel Krüger on her last shift at the Winburg exchange in the Free State.

WORDS **ERNS GRUNDLING** PICTURES **CHARLÉ LOMBARD**



T

he church bell sounds from across the street. Otherwise it's a quiet Friday evening here in the Winburg post office. It's the last day of April, 7 pm, and Magdel Krüger's shift as switchboard operator has just started.

This will be her last day of work. In five hours' time, at midnight, she'll take off her headset and end a career spanning 47 years.

Magdel turned 65 earlier this month – Telkom's mandatory retirement age for employees.

I sit next to her in the post office, in a room with 10 switchboards. It feels as if I've stepped back in time, so far removed are the lights, shutters, cords and switches from the world of BlackBerrys and iPhones.

On one of the switchboards there's a list with codes and contact numbers: Avbob, Alpha Steakhouse, the magistrate's office, Jakkalsdrift Farm Stall, Lewis Stores, Prison, Home for the Disabled...

There's a cartoon on the wall, with the tagline: "Wat is 'n dorp sonder 'n sentrale?"

I guess Winburg wouldn't be the same without its manual exchange.

In the old days, before the cell-phone became the default mode of communication, people connected via the manual exchange. It was also the main source of up-to-the-minute

information – just like Twitter and Facebook are now.

People would phone the exchange, not to be put through to someone else, but because it was the fastest way to confirm a snippet of news.

Contact was made not with the click of a mouse but with a turn of a crank-handle and a curt, "Number, please."

T-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r. A shutter drops down; someone on a farm line is calling in.

Magdel picks it up. "Number please," she says.

"Hello, you! Should I put you through to your dear mother? Have a good night's rest and lots of love!"

The days of the manual exchange are numbered. In the 1970s there were more than 1000 across the country, but now only 33 remain.

Telkom is busy phasing them out – apparently the deadline for fully automated exchanges across the country was 2002.

Eight years later, and it's only a matter of time before they disappear.

"The end is near," Magdel says, nodding. "We talked about it at my farewell, at the bowling club. It's not cost-effective, and the cables are stolen."

When they switch over from a manual to an automatic system, she tells me, the final step in the process is to cut the cable to the switchboard with a pair of pliers. All the shutters drop down... and then you know it's goodbye.

Magdel takes a patch cord in each hand.

"With these two hands I connect people. It's wonderful. I can sit in Winburg and put someone through to Cape Town.

"People chat, laugh, do business, even fight...

"There are sad moments, too, like when I have to put through a call

about someone's father passing away. It all goes through my hands. In joy and sorrow, I've been involved.

"It's been a privilege, but everything must come to an end."

There's no question about Magdel's commitment to her work. She is single; this is her life.

"It's been great to work here," she says. "Look, not everyone likes having to deal with a switchboard operator, but if you can win them over it's a different story."

Magdel was 18 when she started working at the Bultfontein post office, on 7 March 1963.

You could say it was written in the stars – two of her sisters also worked at manual exchanges.

"In the beginning they were very strict. Oh, those women were unreasonable!" she exclaims.

"If you didn't do it right, they'd twist your ear or whack you on the knuckles with a wooden ruler. But I suppose it taught us discipline."

A year later Magdel moved to Theunissen, also in the Free State, where she worked for 25 years.

She moved through the ranks and in the 1990s she criss-crossed the country as senior itinerant superintendent to check on the manual exchanges.

She has worked here in Winburg for the past five years, serving 76 Telkom clients on farms in the district.

A light twinkles. Magdel plugs the patch cord into a socket on the switchboard.

"Telkom Winburg; Magdel, good evening." She listens for a moment; it seems someone dialled a wrong number. "This is Winburg," she says. "Your finger must have slipped. We're 052; they're 053. Good evening, bye."

In those days, the exchange at Theunissen handled about 80 000 calls a month, and sometimes more than 300 calls an hour. Since this morning, fewer than 50 calls have been routed through Winburg's exchange.

She gets up and pours each of us a glass of Coke.

It's quiet this evening and she starts to fidget.

"If only it would ring," she sighs. Then she checks herself. "I don't really get bored when it's quiet. I clean the switchboard, take out the vacuum cleaner, or sometimes I wipe down the walls and window panes."

In the 1960s the average manual exchange was anything but quiet. Magdel remembers how busy it got, especially in Theunissen.

"Some days the switchboard would light up like a Christmas tree and you would just have to parrot the words. We worked up a real sweat; all those people on hold, breathing down your neck."

In those days, the exchange at Theunissen handled about 80 000 calls a month, and sometimes more than 300 calls an hour. Since this morning, fewer than 50 calls have been routed through Winburg's manual exchange.

There was a time when an operator would have sat at each of the 10 switchboards in the room, but now I can only imagine the drone of voices and the clicking as patch cords were slotted into the correct jacks.

Magdel says the exchange was usually busiest on Mother's Day and New Year's Day.

"As the clock struck 12 on New Year's Eve, you'd work. Everyone

would help out. It's different now. People SMS one another."

She spent more than 30 Christmases behind the switchboard. "I didn't mind it at all – it's the most beautiful thing when someone wishes you a blessed Christmas."

When then Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd was assassinated on 6 September 1966 the exchange also went haywire.

"It was ten past two in the afternoon. The shutters on the switchboard dropped down like dominoes. Everyone picked up the phone. They wanted to know from us what was going on. 'Have you heard he was stabbed to death?' they told us."

There's an open Bible lying nearby. I ask Magdel about it.

"A colleague of mine, Bertha, believes this Bible should always be open," she says.

"There was a suicide – Oom Daantjie, who killed himself with a shotgun. Bertha says one evening when she was working, Oom Daantjie's ghost appeared next to her. She even noticed the neat parting in his hair.

"She believes he haunts the building, but he doesn't come near if the Bible is open."

Another call comes through and Magdel dials two long rings.

The person on the other side doesn't pick up.

"Tannie Miemsie must be having

her bath,” Magdel says to me. “Afterwards she’ll phone and say, ‘Sentrale, wie het my gesoek? Ek was in die bad.’ It happens every time.”

Over the years, Magdel has learnt a lot about human nature. “You learn quickly what makes people tick,” she says. “Their moves, their moments, their moods... And your mind is programmed to remember numbers.”

The public expects a switchboard operator to know everyone in town, and their corresponding telephone number. Magdel once got a call from someone looking for “Oom Jan who drives a green Ford”. People would even drop their children off at the exchange and expect the operator to babysit!

“You get all sorts,” she says. “But don’t make a mistake; you get all sorts of switchboard operators too.”

She recalls one of her former colleagues, Liefie Visagie, who was very averse to bathing, and Poppie Voges, who once drew a picture of a bath and tacked it to Liefie’s switchboard.

And Meisie de Beer. On Sundays, Meisie would push back her chair, put her feet up on the switchboard and sing.

Magdel tells a joke at her own expense about mispronouncing a town name.

“I couldn’t pronounce Phutha-ditjhaba,” she says, laughing. “When someone called there, I’d say, ‘Sir, your call to Put-on-your-pyjamas is going through.’”

The operators enjoyed playing tricks on one another. “I was fresh from high school and new at this. Another operator told me that if I looked through one of the holes in the switchboard I’d see Hoopstad on the other side – and I believed him!

“Or someone would walk behind the switchboards, light up a cigarette and blow smoke through the holes. An inexperienced operator would jump up and scream: ‘Fire! The board is on fire!’ Oh, we were naughty!”

Think of a manual exchange

and you picture a nosy switchboard operator listening in on calls. But Magdel is adamant: She’s never done it.

“You know, I can’t,” she says, turning serious. “I’ve always said that if you listen in on other people’s conversations, you have a flawed character. There are those who did it, of course, but not me.”

That’s not to say Magdel hasn’t been privy to a secret or two.

“When I worked at the exchange in Theunissen, a doctor was having an affair and only the switchboard operators knew about it.

“It’s funny but also sad, because you know about this thing and the people who should know about it, don’t. And we’re not supposed to give any information or talk about it, even if you get asked directly.”

There have been some traumatic calls, too.

“A woman called one night... How she screamed! Her husband had shot himself. She was too distraught to call the doctor so I told him what had happened.

“I don’t ask questions; I just do what I have to do.”

Magdel looks pensive. “This job is not for everyone,” she says. “I always say we’re like clowns. We have to cajole and laugh, but no one ever asks how we feel.”

It’s 11.30 pm and Magdel’s last shift is coming to an end. She does some paperwork while the minutes tick by on the wall clock.

Dominique will be here soon for the next shift.

A few farmers have called to say goodbye and wish Magdel all the best. She’s moving to George soon, where she’s going to live with her sister.

She remembers the manual exchanges of her past: Fouriesburg, Westminster, Excelsior, Clocolan, Ficksburg, Kestel, Vrede...

“All those places, what wonderful memories! It’s why I have a lump in my throat.”

She starts to laugh. “I’m not laughing on the inside,” she says. “I’m being a clown. In my heart the memories are doing funny things.”

Switchboard operators from other manual exchanges are phoning to say goodbye. Fransie in Richmond, Dina in Brandvlei and Japie in Edinvale.

A fax drops into the tray. It’s from an operator called Joey who works at the exchange in Dewetsdorp. Her message starts: “I wanted to say this one last time: Thank you very, very much for your compassion, your kind-heartedness and your thoughtfulness.”

Just before midnight a light flashes on the switchboard. “It’s Oom Daantjie!” Magdel says with a giggle before she answers, for the last time: “Telkom Winburg; Magdel, good evening.”

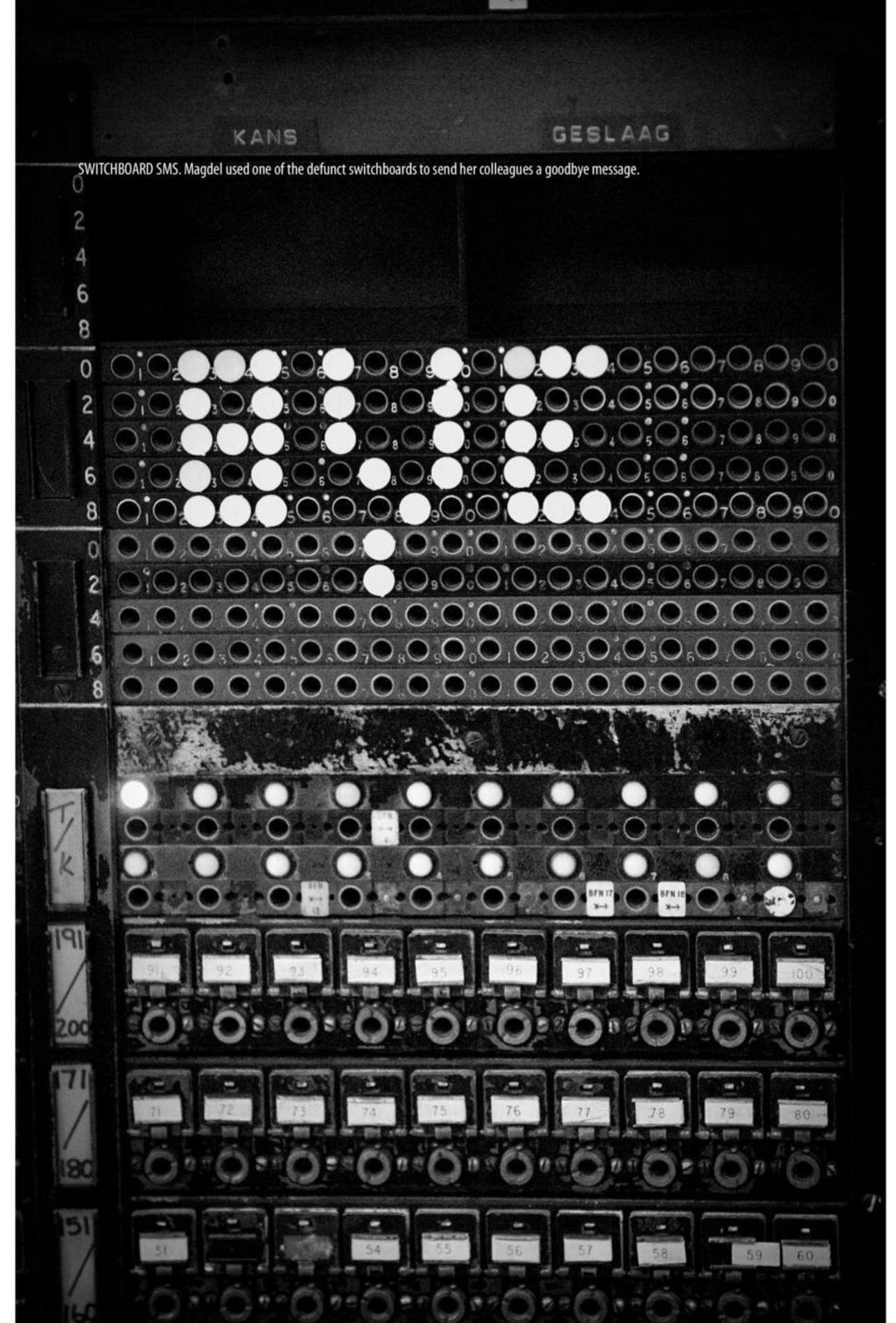
More lights start to flash and the switchboard resembles the Christmas tree of old.

“It’s the other exchanges calling. They’re teasing me!”

The church bells ring. It’s midnight and Dominique settles down to work. Magdel and I step outside.

“I’ll have to go and sort myself out now; it’s all I can do,” she says. “But don’t worry; watch me: I’ll be fine.”

As I walk back to the guesthouse I look up at the clear Free State sky. All those stars, twinkling like lights on a busy switchboard.



SWITCHBOARD SMS. Magdel used one of the defunct switchboards to send her colleagues a goodbye message.

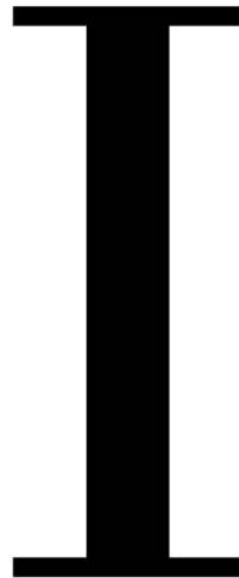
OOM GERT DIRKSE LOOKS INTO THE FUTURE

On the outskirts of Paulshoek in Namaqualand lives Oom Gert Dirkse, a herbalist and seer who receives visitors from as far away as Johannesburg.

WORDS **ERNS GRUNDLING** PICTURES **SIMONE SCHOLTZ**



TRICKS OF THE TRADE (previous page). Oom Gert swings a set of keys over a hand mirror before looking into the mirror to “see” the future.



In the yard of the small house on the hillside, a few people are standing next to a red Tazz, eating sandwiches. I wonder how on earth they managed to negotiate the gravel road that leads here.

Paulshoek may be only 60 km from Kamieskroon on the N7, but these Namaqualand back roads are something else.

It's not yet flower season, but the mountainous landscape is beautiful.

On the way here we drove past Nourivier and Leliefontein. We saw a few donkey carts, a tannie wearing an old-fashioned bonnet, and a few goatherds with their flocks, but time has not stood still in these hamlets. The round Nama *matjies-huise* have mostly been replaced by RDP houses, electricity and further government promises.

And jobs are scarce.

We drove through the tumble-down Paulshoek and then tackled the road into the mountains. The Condor bounced over the bumps – ideally you need a 4x4 for this road.

And now we're here at Kalkgat, on the patch of land that belongs to Oom Gert Dirkse, the respected

herbalist and seer of the Kamiesberg.

A man approaches us.

“The doctor is still busy,” he says. “He should be done soon.”

The man and his family left Augrabies early this morning and drove almost six hours to come and consult Oom Gert. After the session they have to drive back home, because tomorrow they have to be back at work and school.

There's a tin shack next to the house, and the door opens every so often as the family members enter and exit to speak to Oom Gert in his consulting room.

A sign made out of blue cardboard on the door tells us that “Dr Gert Dirkse” is on duty from 9 am to 6 pm, Monday to Saturday. No work on Sundays. “By order.” It's written in faded koki pen.

A few goats bleat in the distance next to a *matjieshuis*. It's late afternoon, and after waiting for an hour I start to wonder whether we'll get to see Oom Gert. But then the man from Augrabies tells us he and his family are done. His wife walks to the car with a full plastic bag – I suspect it contains herbs. The Tazz drives off towards Paulshoek.

Oom Gert's door stands ajar. I enter the tiny consulting room. He sits behind a small table, surrounded by boxes, plastic bags, pots and animal skins.

His telephone is neatly placed on a jackal skin. It's stuffy in the room.

Oom Gert is reclining in his chair; he looks tired. I introduce myself and start talking.

Are there many seers left in these parts? I ask.

“There are three others in the neighbourhood,” he mutters.

I have to lean forward to hear what he's saying.

“But one is deaf. The other one, he doesn't have a leg – he sits there on a rock on a hill. The third one you'll find not far from here. But the people trust me more. They believe I'm the head now. I don't want to be the head, but I don't have a choice.”

Oom Gert says he doesn't advertise at all. “Look, so many people come to see me, and then I just have to take a look at them. Then the one tells the next one, and that's how people get to know about me.”

Sometimes he even consults on the telephone, and he has been phoned from jail a couple of times.

Even the police have asked him for help.

His mother, Anna Dirkse, was well known in the region as a seer and midwife. “Mother has passed on; she's been in the ground for three months,” Oom Gert says, even softer. “Ja, I don't have a mother any more; I don't have a father any more either.”

Above his head hangs a piece of embroidery with the words: *Wat is 'n huis sonder 'n moeder?* (What is a home without a mother?)

He tells me he was born with the second sight. “No one taught me to do this. I taught myself. When I look at you, I don't only look to find your illness. I look for two illnesses. I look for *godsiekte* and *kindsiekte*. If you have *godsiekte*, I send you to the white doctor so he can heal you. If you have *kindsiekte*, I treat it myself.”

The difference between these two illnesses, Oom Gert says, has to do with movement.

“*Godsiekte* is an inflammation, wind or pain in your body. The *godsiekte* stays in one place. It doesn't move around.”

He leans forward and puts his left hand on his back. “You see,

I would have liked more detail, but the mirror is not revealing anything else.

if it's here, then it stays there, the *godsiekte*. Then it's work for the white doctor.”

But the *kindsiekte* is restless.

“It moves around: If it's in your leg, then it works itself out of your leg into your torso.” Oom Gert motions with his arms. “Then it goes into a shoulder, or sometimes it's in your head.”

People who've been sent home by doctors who were stumped often arrive at Oom Gert's doorstep.

“People who can't walk are carried in here. They come and lie here. Sometimes I just let them lie on the bonnet and then I have a look at them. Then I give them medicine so they can get healthy and be the way they used to be.”

Oom Gert motions to the herbs on his shelf: *hotnotskooigoed*, *ballerja* and *aambeibos*. “All of it comes from nature. When I was younger, I went to get the herbs myself. Then I'd take what I need and dry them on the drying rack outside.”

He laughs when I ask him whether he enjoys what he does. “Yes, I do, but I'm getting old. I'm 72 now. I don't want to work full time any more. But if they come, I have to receive them. Sometimes this yard is full of cars, then I sit here from morning till evening.”

It's half past five and the sun hangs low in the sky. I hesitantly ask him if he'd look into my future. “Ja, I look at those things, too. The paths of your life, the paths of your happiness, the misfortune

you'll encounter... I look at all those things.”

He quickly explains the ritual he follows at every appointment. “I look in a mirror, but first I grind a twig that I throw onto a stone. Then I put the mirror on the dust; then I have a little bottle that I put on top of the mirror. Then I dangle my keys over it. Then I take the mirror, and I look into it. And then, in there I see the man's truth.”

Now it's my turn. It's quiet in the room, even quieter outside. Only now do I see the stone on Oom Gert's table. It lies on a dassie skin. Next to him is a little box on which the word “*duiwelsdrek*” (devil's dung) is written.

He does exactly as he said he would. First he grinds up the twig, then he sprinkles the powder onto the stone and puts the hand mirror on top of it, face down. He picks up the bunch of keys.

“Now you have to put down R40,” he says.

I fumble in my wallet and put the banknotes under the stone.

He swings the keys to and fro, like a pendulum. I watch him. It's as if he's in a swoon. His focus is somewhere else, far from here.

“How old are you?” he asks.

“Uh... twenty-nine.”

Oom Gert laughs. “Twenty-nine! Hey, where are the days when I was that young?”

Now he turns over the dusty hand mirror, and angles it to catch the last rays of the sun. He is deep in thought. The minutes tick by.

“You'll have more happy years,”

NAMAQUALAND

he says, his gaze fixed on the mirror, “until 2014; then you’ll be in a car accident. But these years until then you’ll be happy and prosperous. It’s just... 2014.”

My heart beats faster. I’m not the superstitious type, but there’s an intensity in the air. I wait for him to elaborate.

Oom Gert sees my discomfort. “You won’t die; you’ll still be able to walk after the car accident. That’s all I can see now. Wait, I just want to see in which month it’ll be.”

While he waves his keys once more, a word involuntarily flashes through my mind: October.

Oom Gert looks deep into his hand mirror once more.

“It will be in October. That’s what the mirror shows me.”

“Right, thanks,” is all I can manage.

Our consultation is over. He packs up his things. I would have liked more detail, but the mirror is not revealing anything else.

I can see Oom Gert is exhausted.

“It’s only us three brothers who live here,” he says pensively. “The one with the crutches is Jan, my youngest brother. And Niklaas lives in the veld with his goats.

“All three of us are sickly. My legs are poor; I can’t walk wherever I’d like to go. It’s the *godsiekte*. And then I also suffer from the high blood. But it’s not that bad, because I also take the medicine.”

He says goodbye warmly and we walk back to the car. Oom Gert walks to his front door with some difficulty.

You don’t find many people like Oom Gert Dirkse any more, I think as we venture back to Paulshoek.

I feel privileged to have spent the afternoon with him.

In my head, I start making plans for a month-long boat trip.

In October 2014.



FAR OUT. A narrow gravel road winds to the isolated settlement of Paulshoek, north-east of Garies. The road is not kind to cars so drive slowly.

ANGOLA

ROCKIN' AND ROLLIN' TO LUANDA AND BACK

Yes, you can drive to Luanda
in Angola. The question is
whether you *want* to do it.

WORDS **BARNIE LOUW**
PICTURES **MOUTON VAN ZYL**



DAILY REALITY (previous page). Fishermen (top) try their luck in the Kueve River south of Luanda. The war-ravaged town of Quibala (bottom) is about 300 km south of Luanda.

In a dilapidated museum in Luanda, a beige Peugeot that used to belong to Agostinho Neto sits on blocks. They say someone stole the wheels of the first president of Angola's car. A country that was at war with itself for three decades cannot help but have scars. Landmines still outnumber citizens. In places, they still fish with hand grenades. In some built-up areas, you can't get around without a 4x4.

Still, Angola keeps surprising you. The soothing music of Michael Bolton and Kenny G enjoy cult status here. Day-Glo colours are all the rage.

A journey often turns out to be unlike what you expected, because reality can be a let-down. In exceptional cases, the journey can turn out to be better than expected.

Angola is such an exception.

They say life is not measured by the number of breaths you take but by the number of moments and places that take your breath away. Angola has many such places.

The country is a puzzle of dramatic landscapes and diverse climates. There are mountains and plains, deserts and rainforests, waterfalls and bizarre rock formations. And along the mostly pristine 1 600 km coastline there are numerous white beaches.

It is, of course, also a country of people: poor, rich, displaced, homeless, friendly, maimed, hungry, orphaned and sick. People for whom three decades of war has caused such trauma that some run

away when you aim a camera lens in their direction.

Still, wherever you go, people along the road give friendly waves.

Exactly a year ago, a small group of us got a taste of what Angola has to offer when we had the opportunity to explore the south-west of the country – mostly a barren desert landscape with beautiful sandstone formations along the coast and kilometres of excellent fishing waters, as many South African anglers can attest.

This time, like Captain Kirk and his crew, we're venturing deeper into the unknown, travelling northwards along the coast to the capital Luanda and returning via an inland route through the highlands, where the fiercest battles of the civil war were fought.

The challenges are the same as a year ago: relatively unknown routes along roads in need of repair – actually, they're in an atrocious state – past numerous war pockmarks surrounded by scenic yet merciless natural beauty. And the tap water is undrinkable.

These days, you have to go far to find wild places like this.

The bullets that ended the life of opposition leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002 finally helped to bring the country's 27-year civil war to a grinding halt – peace thanks to mutual exhaustion rather than a negotiated settlement.

Since then, South Africans have been able to go exploring north of the Kunene. And currently it is just about only South Africans who dare to tour in Angola's hinterland. And judged by the reception we got at the border posts, the Angolans are not exactly interested in tourism yet.

In general, on a bad day, Africa's border posts try your patience and benevolence, but

Angola's border officials are masters of the slo-o-o-w border crossing. They're relentlessly inefficient.

This we learn the hard way at the outset when we present ourselves at the new Calueque Border Post.

An official in civvies has us unload and unpack everything. Everything is searched. Shampoo bottles are sniffed; fingers are stuck in pill bottles. Underpants are felt for contraband in front of a group of curious onlookers.

In the meantime, all our passport details are diligently – and at a snail's pace – written down in a school notebook.

"Where is the document that proves this laptop is yours?"

"Where we come from, we don't have documents like that," we try to explain.

"I want a document from Cape Town that says it's yours. How else do I know it belongs to you?"

Finally, more than two hours later, we have the required stamps in our passports.

We enter Angola via a wet jeep track.

The next day, in a street in Lubango, the capital of the south-west, someone taps me on the shoulder. "Ek hoor julle praat Afrikaans," Daniël Botha introduces himself. He has a slight accent but speaks flawless Afrikaans. He is a black Angolan who has never been to South Africa.

"There are many Bothas in Angola," he says proudly. "And there are still a few of us who speak Afrikaans, but our numbers are dwindling." He is talking about the descendants of the Botha, Swart, Pieters, Slagyster and Strykster families of this area.

Daniël was born and grew up in Humpata just outside Lubango, the place to which his grandmother,

In general, on a bad day, Africa's border posts try your patience and benevolence, but Angola's border officials are masters of the slo-o-o-w border crossing. They're relentlessly inefficient.

originally from Mozambique, moved with the Dorsland Trekkers more than a century ago. She later adopted the surname of the farmer for whom she worked.

This fertile region attracted the Dorsland Trekkers after they set out from the Transvaal between 1874 and 1905. Here, they established a thriving farming community, but in 1928 most of the Angolan Trekkers moved south to what is now northern Namibia.

In 1958, the last roughly 200 *bittereinders* (die-hards) were brought to South Africa. Today, there's only a church, a cemetery and a memorial left. Plus a few Angolans who speak fluent Afrikaans.

The coastal route we chose to drive from Lubango via the towns of Namibe and Benguela offers a wonderful four-wheel-drive experience – it's part of the route that was used for the 1992 Dakar Rally from Paris to Cape Town.

It is remote and you definitely don't want to have vehicle trouble in this part of the world. Don't hold your breath waiting for mechanical support.

Our route takes us down Serra da Leba Pass with its series of hairpin bends, where you descend about 1 500m within a few kilometres from the plateau to the barren coastal flats.

Angola's road users – and these

include drivers, cattle, goats and chickens – guarantee an action-packed trip. The country's roads try your fortitude to the max. A route that would be closed to traffic anywhere else in the world is regarded as a good road in Angola. Every route marker and road sign has been rendered illegible over the years by target-shooting enthusiasts and trigger-happy soldiers.

The best advice I've been given about driving in Angola? Don't watch where you're going; you'll get a fright. And another nugget of information: South African taxi drivers, you drive like sissies! You should see how it's done in Angola.

These people can drive – on their side of the road, your side of the road, anywhere on the road. Neither potholes nor oncoming traffic nor animals in the road slow them down. Buses, trucks, taxis and motorbikes trundle on as if none of these obstacles exist.

It's best to take the road maps with a pinch of salt, because in Angola you measure distances in hours. Where the map says "170km" it should say "half a day", with a warning that the jolting could in time cause one's gonads to ascend to the neck.

From Namibe, a lovely tar road winds along the coast through a barren landscape to the next town, Lucira. Then it becomes four-wheel-drive

WEG #7 APRIL 2005

This article appears here in English for the first time. Note: Angola has changed a lot since this journey was made in 2005. Roads, especially, have improved.

country through valleys, gorges and dry river courses.

We cross the Cimo and Coporolo rivers numerous times, and traverse three difficult mountain passes.

The inhabitants of this region belong to the Mucubal tribe. You see these people standing next to the road, selling wood and charcoal to passers-by. I can't imagine that they have a profitable business, because in the two days that it takes us to cover the roughly 300km between Namibe and Benguela, we encounter only two other vehicles.

In Lobito, just north of Benguela, we eat grilled cheese sandwiches under palm trees outside the Zulu Restaurant. We drink cold beer out of Highveld Stereo 94.7 mugs, and in the bathroom there's a toilet in working order – and soap and a clean towel. We continue on our way. At Sumbe, about 190km further along the coast, we turn inland to the village of Gabela. Here, you realise what the British explorer and travel writer Wilfred Thesiger meant when he said it is not the goal but the way there that matters, and the harder the way the more worthwhile the journey.

Seeing the waterfall in the Kueve River is one such goal. It is not the world's highest or most impressive waterfall, but after a day's hard driving on harsh roads it is one of the most beautiful sights you can ever hope to see.

A day's travel further, at Cabo Ledo on the coast, we eat like kings at Queiroz Pescatoria, arguably the best seafood restaurant on Africa's west coast.

And here, too, there's a South African connection. The restaurant owner is one Queiroz (apparently no one knows his full name), a man of mixed race who was involved in South Africa's former 1 Reconnaissance Commando, the Reccees, for about 20 years.

Queiroz is robust of stature,

moustache and voice. Between mouthfuls of fresh kob and pulls of his big glassful of firewater, he tells us of the difficulty he had years ago to buy property in the white neighbourhood of Langebaan. He uses the f-word liberally.

"Everyone said the *Boere* wouldn't [bleep] allow me to buy land in a white neighbourhood. But [bleep] no one tells Queiroz what he may and may not do. [Bleep] them!"

His South African wife still lives in the house that he eventually built there. He is, however, not bitter about his run-in with Langebaan's city fathers. "I have nothing against the *Boere*. They're my brothers. I've even danced with Tannie Elize Botha!"

We tackle the last stretch to Luanda, where we're planning to turn back. There, we're met by "Baas" Jan, Kobus, Nols, Elbie and their colleagues from Group Five International, who've been working on a housing project on the outskirts of the city for the past few years.

They treat us like royalty.

Those who think wartime is dangerous have not experienced the traffic in Luanda. It's important to set out early in the morning, because at that time only about three-quarters of the city's residents are on their way somewhere.

It's a city built for 750 000 people. Currently, it is home to between 3 million and 5 million people. And ostensibly only three traffic lights – of which not one is in working order.

Now, in the rainy season, it's a pernicious quagmire of a city. The boxlike Soviet architecture is etched against brown smog.

The streets are named after Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh and Karl Marx. They're busy, dusty, noisy, dirty, exciting. It's a city where you spend a lot of your time in traffic,

but can do almost all your shopping from your car. Street hawkers sell videos, ties, mosquito nets, CDs, tinned food, screwdrivers, fans, bar fridges, ice, water and cold beer. All you have to do is wind down your window and they come to you.

They say until recently you could buy an AK-47 at the Benfica Market, and apparently even a Russian tank.

It's a city where the new elite is not shy to flaunt their wealth. You see luxury imported vehicles. Renting an ordinary family home costs up to \$5 000 per month, and in the upmarket neighbourhoods between \$6 000 and \$10 000.

It's a city that's ringed by picturesque beaches. Here, you can find a cold Castle without much effort and then watch the Stormers play on a DStv channel. You do your grocery shopping at Shoprite, eat at Steers and Nando's, and order wine from the Tulbagh Valley.

If you like angling, you can set out for the deep sea and fish until you're bored of catching dorado, marlin and sailfish. (Or you can, like some people here do, use a hand grenade for this purpose.)

At the end of the Marginal, Luanda's 7 km-long promenade, you can visit São Miguel Fort, built in 1576. It still has remnants of the original Portuguese tiles on the walls, statues of distinguished military men and an exhibition of South African war booty. Against the wall is the flight uniform of a South African Air Force pilot.

It's not only the wheels of the former president's Peugeot that were stolen; the two South African Buffel personnel carriers that are exhibited are without wheels, too.

After three busy days in Luanda, we're back on the road, travelling south through central Angola, the part of the country most ravaged by the war.



TAXI! Motorbike taxis are a common sight in most towns in Angola.



PORT CAPITAL. Luanda's beachfront and promenade.

The bridges, especially, were badly damaged. Virtually every bridge on this route was blown up in the conflict at one time or another by a faction that wanted to block or thwart another's advance or disrupt a supply route.

The concrete bridges across some rivers were replaced by military bridges. Elsewhere, the United Nations constructed steel bridges on the most important routes after the war. And in places the local people and truck drivers have built their own makeshift bridges – thick logs that creak ominously as a vehicle drives over them.

Where rivers are too wide for a temporary bridge, a pont is used. One evening at sunset, when we want to cross the Cuevo River outside Uaco Cungu, we're casually informed the pont is broken... and has been for two weeks.

A detour of about 150km, crossing the upper tributaries of the river via numerous dodgy wooden bridges, is the only way to get to the other side. If the rivers were coming down in flood, we would've been stranded for a long time.

This detour gives us the opportunity to travel through the heart of Jonas Savimbi's home region around Bailundo. It's a scenic area, but not special enough to warrant 30 years of fighting over it.

One of the interesting bridges we cross is the so-called Bridge 14, which spans the Nhia River, where South African forces did battle with a powerful Cuban and MPLA force in December 1975 in the course of Operation Savannah.

We drive south. Relics of the war lie strewn along the road: countless wrecks, now half-obscured by vegetation, of convoys, tanks and armoured vehicles destroyed in ambushes.

I have nothing against the *Boere*. They're my brothers. I've even danced with Tannie Elize Botha!

In the road there are many landmine holes. You see people with missing legs on crutches.

Most of the towns' infrastructure was battered beyond recognition during the war. Just enough of the old colonial buildings are still standing to create the illusion of charm. The walls feature patterns carved out by machine guns, mortar shells and hand grenades.

The further south, the worse the signs of the conflict. In Kuito, the scars of the suffering and destruction brought on by a siege of nine months by Unita are clearly visible.

For six long months, the frontline of the war ran through the middle of the city. It's estimated that 15 000 people died. Unita's months-long bombardment of the city left virtually no building unscathed. Kuito is known as Angola's city of heartache for good reason.

The war didn't only damage people and buildings. Farming activities in the fertile region around Uaco Cungu – once called the breadbasket of Angola – were reduced to not much more than a pasture for a few goats. This once beautiful rural town with its town square used to be surrounded by kibbutz-type farms. Cattle and dairy farms, in particular, flourished here, and it was home to some of the largest cheese producers in Angola.

Jan Breytenbach writes in his book *Forged in Battle* – about 32 Battalion – that they came across thousands of Hereford, Simmenthaler, Brahman and Friesian cattle in the area in 1975 that had been abandoned by fleeing farmers.

Shortly after the South Africans withdrew from the area after the

battle for Bridge 14, the Cuban forces allegedly removed all serviceable equipment from the cheese factories, made tinned food of the milk cows and shipped it with some of the breeding cattle to Cuba.

Recently, the Angolan government brought a group of Israeli agricultural experts to the area in an attempt to get farming going again.

Everywhere along our route, we see signs warning against landmines, but in the south, especially around bridges and main towns and the wrecks of military vehicles, there are red-painted stones that mark the places where mines are still lying in wait. We encounter international teams working to clear the landmines. Statistics are hard to come by, but in 2002, for example, 69 people died in the country in landmine explosions and no fewer than 218 were injured.

Most tourists are still a bit wary of Angola. You don't see backpackers or Japanese or English tourists.

Most visitors, apart from a few South Africans, are business-people who don't venture outside of the city limits of Luanda.

Thanks to the strong dollar, Angola's unofficial currency in which nearly all business is conducted, "normal" holiday trips are expensive and difficult.

A night in an ordinary hotel without bullet holes could cost you up to \$300. The tourism infrastructure is in an even worse condition than the roads. Tourism is simply not a priority yet.

There are numerous national

parks, but they actually only exist on paper. You'll see more wildlife around the birdbath in your backyard than in some Angolan parks.

Statistics regarding Angola's best-known park, Kissama National Park outside Luanda, reflect the story of all the national parks. In 1950, there were 450 lions in Kissama, in 1997 only 5. In 1970 there were 1 200 elephants, in 1997 only 20. Hungry people and nature conservation are not good bedfellows.

There are signs of hope, however. In collaboration with South African conservation authorities, dozens of "surplus" elephants were translocated from South Africa to Kissama about a year ago. More such operations are in the pipeline to help restore the park to its former glory.

Elsewhere, there are also signs of recovery. In many towns one

sees teams of people busy removing years' worth of filth from the streets, mowing the lawns on the town squares and planting flowers. New filling stations are being built all over, many towns have new streetlights in the main thoroughfare, and in places there is actually something being done about the state of the roads.

Outside Huambo, three new road signs have been put up to warn against sharp bends, steep downhill and – surprise, surprise – potholes.

Three weeks later we're back at the border. At the smart new Cuangar Border Post, two dapper officials command us to a halt in the sweltering midday sun.

I don't understand the long-

winded explanation in Portuguese, but it boils down to: "Unpack. Everything." And they mean everything. Dirty underwear, empty cigarette packets, toolboxes, malaria tablets... It's a good thing Angolan border post officials don't understand Afrikaans.

Finally, passport control is dispensed with. We get back in the vehicles. Namibia, here we come!

Barely 30m further we're stopped again. Again we have to unpack everything.

"But we've just..."

"They're customs; we're police."

Things are improving in Angola. We have wonderful memories of an expansive country with amazing people and beautiful places. But it's not yet a place where you dare to argue with men sporting shades and automatic rifles.

BEACHED. Fishing trawlers wrecked on the coastline are reminders of a colonial era which came to an abrupt end.



On the roof of Damaraland

Thought rugby players and
bodyguards were tough?
Traditional rock climbers consider
a 5 cm ledge on a perpendicular
cliff a safe place to take a breather.
Edge up Namibia's Spitzkoppe
(and wipe away quite
a few tears).

WORDS & PICTURES **ESMA LE ROUX**



LIFELINE (previous page). Avid rock climber Bernard Spies scales a granite wall at Spitzkoppe in Namibia.

E

lvis legs, rock climbers call it – when your legs suddenly start shaking uncontrollably while you’re trying to balance on a smooth granite wall hundreds of metres from the ground.

I’ve got Elvis legs, here on this ledge where I’m standing, trying to find a grip in a tiny indentation in the granite with sweaty fingertips. In fact, I am Elvis. My knees are dancing from my efforts at trying not to slip. “Don’t look down” is my mantra. I duck as a swallow swoops past my head.

“I’m tired,” I mumble softly.

“You have to hang in there,” says Bernard, who has six years’ climbing experience.

I look down at our tents, which look like Jelly Tots strewn across a picnic blanket. What else can Bernard say? With rock climbing there’s no plan B. You have to stay calm, keep your wits about you and look up.

And then, very carefully, like a chameleon reaching out for the next slender stem, I stretch and my fingers find the next crack in the rock.

“Esma, are you afraid of heights?” my editor asked me one morning. A red hazard light flickered on in my brain, but I ignored it. “No, not at all,” I said. “Why?”

“The Mountain Club of South

Africa wants someone to go with them to climb Spitzkoppe in Namibia.”

It’s now three months later. Here I’m strapped in a harness, my toes are squashed into tight rock-climbing shoes and there’s only a rope between me and the hereafter. I swallow and dig in my toes. And Elvis is still at it.

This is a practice session for tomorrow’s climb to the top of Great Spitzkop. It’s barely a third of what we’re planning to do tomorrow.

I swallow and reach for a handhold about an arm’s length above me. And another... and another... and then we’re at the “resting” spot, which is really just a bush on a slight ledge. I sit and cling to a branch. It takes a while for my legs to stop shaking.

The rock climbers in this group are hard core; they like smooth, perpendicular cliffs.

Jacques van Greunen, an attorney, and Bernard Spies, a strategic analyst, have been climbing for six years. Al Grant, a youth camp leader, and Hector Pringle, an engineer (apparently the sport is popular among engineers), have been climbing for more than seven years. Christie Stiff, a student, has one year’s climbing under her belt.

“Why climbing?” I ask later at the campfire.

“While you climb, you’re so focused you forget about everything else,” says Alard Hufner, one of South Africa’s top climbers, who has had to overnight high up on a rocky ledge several times. “There are no cellphones, advertisements or billboards – just this one thing you have to do: Get to the top. Things are very simple.”

Teamwork is a matter of life and death. Your life depends on your gear and your climbing partner. It’s

a bond stronger than the one between Timmy and Lassie, Starsky and Hutch, yes, even Herbie and Spence.

When you’re dangling from a rope, you have to trust your partner’s abilities and judgment.

The climbing routes up Spitzkoppe, I’m told, range from grade 11 to in the low 30s. The average person should be able to manage anything up to an 11; higher than that and you need ropes. In the mid-20s, the places where you can grip the rock get smaller and more difficult to find. Sometimes you have to cling to a piece of rock little bigger than a thumbnail, or stick your fingers into a crack and hang on.

Today’s climb was a grade 17 – “average” for those who climb regularly, but difficult for a greenhorn like me. Jacques and co just wanted to show me the ropes on a shorter route. Tomorrow is also a grade 17, but much longer and higher than this morning’s wake-up call.

The first people to reach the top of Great Spitzkop were Hans and Elsa Wongchowski and Jannie de Villiers Graaf in 1946.

For the next 25 years, their route remained a two- to three-day-long gamble. Then, in 1971, a group led by JW Marchant climbed the route in six hours.

Great Spitzkop is the highest Bernard, Jacques and Christie, my chaperones, have ever climbed and scrambled. But between them they have climbed many rock faces in the Drakensberg.

Climbers are always anchored, either to one another or to bolts or other gear on the rock face. Climbers talk about “the system”.

“You always stay in the system,” Jacques explains.

There are two kinds of climbing: sport and traditional climbing.

Okay. It makes sense. You can fall, but you won’t fall to your death. I spend all night rolling around in my tent, dreaming of Elvis dancing his way down Spitzkoppe in his blue suede shoes.

Sport-climbing routes are clearly marked by a trail of bolts hammered into a cliff face by climbers who pioneer the climbs. As you climb, you thread your ropes through karabiners, which are clipped to these bolts.

Traditional climbing routes have no bolts – or very few – inserted beforehand. The expedition leader has to place all the anchor points for the group.

These routes are planned in such a way that there are regular “natural” anchor points all the way, like a sturdy protruding rock or a tree on which slings and karabiners can be fixed, to be recovered by the last climber on the way up.

The routes at Spitzkoppe are mostly traditional routes, but because the granite is so slippery, the friendly pioneer climbers hammered in a few bolts here and there.

Many routes have a few anchor points (ledges or small caves in the rock face, also known as stances or belay points) where the climbers regroup and rest a while, and from where a new climber might take over the lead.

“When you get tired or scared, just lean back on the rope and shout ‘take in’ or ‘catch me’,” Al says.

“The climber who accompanies you will hold you. There is enough friction in the system to enable your climbing partner to hold you easily, even if you’re swinging.”

And if I fall?

“Climbing behind the leader, you’ll only fall as far as the rope is slack between you and the leader. Once you feel calmer and up to climbing again, you can continue.”

Okay. It makes sense. You can fall, but you won’t fall to your death. I spend all night rolling around in my tent, dreaming of Elvis dancing his way down Spitzkoppe in his blue suede shoes.

Thursday morning we get up early. Outside we stand in the long, wet grass and look up towards the peak – our climbing destination for today. Great Spitzkop is 1 728 m above sea level, but from its foot it is only 600 m to the top.

It shouldn’t take more than six hours, Jacques said earlier.

The first section of the route is difficult in parts, but we walk and clamber, mostly on all fours, over the boulders. This is why it’s called bouldering. We climb through a few cracks in the rock, and now and then we secure a rope. We also get a bit lost, but after half an hour we’re back on course.

The sun comes out. It’s a slightly cloudy day. Down below it looks like the set of a movie.

The route starts to get harder and steeper, and we start to use the rope to get up the rock wall. On one such

cliff, I suddenly feel the rock wall disappear below my feet. It's a weird feeling.

"What now, guys?" I call out, while my legs hang in the air.

The first tears start to run down my cheeks. I'm scared of what lies ahead. Very scared.

"Don't worry. You're stressing, but at the end of it all it's going to be an epic experience," Jacques says.

Boom-boom-boom, boom-boom, boom, boom... gradually my heartbeat slows down.

It's four in the afternoon. I've cried twice. I've said "I can't do this" at least a dozen times. And I've banged my fist on the granite several times mumbling: "Why me, why?"

We've been climbing for eight hours and we're not even at the top yet.

But at least we are at the last resting spot before the summit. In front of us is a narrow crack in the rock we must use to pull ourselves up and then it's a short scramble to the top.

It ought to be easy. Eckhardt Haber's *Spitzkoppe and Pontoks* guide book says it's only a grade 6.

But first there are three big, awkward steps to the crevice.

Bernard, with his long legs, manages easily. He searches for a foothold in the crevice, which is about 30cm wide. He says nothing, but we can see he's battling.

He forces his foot into a position that would try even an octopus's dancing skills. He pulls himself up. His foot slips. He tries again, now hanging in the crevice. We hear a few "uhm, you guys..." from up there. If Bernard is battling...

It's my turn. Every cell in my body aches with fear. My palms are burning. I carry on breathing deeply. It's nearly over; just stay calm, I tell

myself. Just don't start crying again.

I swallow and send the umpteenth little prayer to heaven, which feels rather close right now.

With my back turned to the void, I edge to the crevice. I'm in!

It's so narrow I can barely turn around. My eyes dart around, searching for a foothold. I can't see a single hollow or crack. Bernard has tied a sling to a bolt in the crevice for me. But there's not enough space to even lift my leg.

Panic spreads through my body like hot lava. I can't look in Christie or Jacques's direction because then I'll see the abyss, and myself tumbling down it in giant cartwheels.

Oh, no! I start crying for the third time. Bawling, actually.

"Stay calm. I'm coming," Christie says. She calmly tells me to anchor my foot in the sling and push myself up. "Trust your shoes. They'll grip."

I put my foot in the sling and try to push myself up.

I'm hanging onto three granite pebbles (or that's what it feels like) by my fingertips. "I'm going to slip," I shout, half hysterical.

"Stay calm. I'll catch you," Christie encourages me. The adrenaline courses through my veins. My head is aching.

I sigh deeply and talk to myself sternly. I can't turn around. We have to get up here. I breathe in and out and in... and... out. With my last ounce of strength I hoick my body upwards and brace my back against the cliff behind me, with both feet firmly on the opposite wall.

As Christie said, one small step and you've got a whole new perspective. Suddenly I notice a few new footholds. The bubbling adrenaline is back in the mouth of the volcano, for now. My body

feels limp and empty.

We scramble out of the crevice and up to the peak. Jacques insists that I keep tied to the rope. "We're not about to lose you now." The poor guy apologises again for dragging me along.

The sun is touching the horizon. The view of Damaraland from the peak is of Imax quality. The heavens are awash with all shades of pink, the clouds the colour of popcorn.

"You are so high up, you can see the earth's curve," Hector said at the campfire last night.

Last night. The campfire. Mother Earth. I've completely forgotten there's a world down there.

"I found the abseil bolt," Christie calls. The sun is setting fast and we switch on our headlamps. Bernard descends quickly.

"Rope free," we hear. He is about 50m below us, but we can't see him in the dark.

We tie the two ropes together. So every time we abseil about 50m to a safe ledge, where everyone finds a spot to sit and something to hold on to. At each anchor point all the ropes are gathered again and the next climber prepares to lead the abseil.

I lean back in my harness and slowly, gingerly, edge down the cliff. I swallow and look down. It's pitch dark. Where is Bernard?

You shouldn't think about where you are for too long. Somewhere in the cold, dark expanse, on a rope, hanging on a bolt that someone hammered in, however many years ago. Not even the blinking stars give me any encouragement.

Finally I can make out the faint yellow beam of Bernard's headlamp. But he's not standing on a flat piece of rock. I squint to see better. He's



ON TOP OF THE WORLD. After the hell, a heavenly 360-degree view over Namibian soil is the reward.

standing on a part of the cliff that has a slightly steeper gradient than the one I'm sailing down. There isn't even a tree or rock nearby. He stays upright simply by leaning back on his sling, which he tied to a lone, lonely bolt in the middle of a large, empty granite sheet. Where...? How...?

My foot slips and I swing away from Bernard into the dark night. I point my toes like you would in a ballet class for beginners, but I just can't get back to the cliff. I'm just hanging there.

I don't know what to do. I start crying again. My breath is short and my heart hammers against my breastbone.

"Stay calm. Just lean back in your harness," Bernard says. "I've got the rope. Try coming to my side." I point my toes again. Come on. I barely touch the cliff. Just a small distance further and I have a foothold again. My toes are throbbing in the tight little shoes.

Slowly, with determination, I edge in Bernard's direction. I'm close. He grabs my hand and clips my karabiner, at the end of a short sling attached to my harness, to the bolt. I'm not even apologising any more for being such a crybaby. Christie and Jacques descend effortlessly.

There are about eight karabiners tied to this one bolt. What if Bernard accidentally unhooks mine? In my mind's eye I see how the bolt slips out and all of us tumble down in the darkness.

But these climbers know what they're doing. Their fingers move deftly. Ropes are hoisted and slings hooked in. Christie is going to abseil with me.

We quickly descend to where Jacques is standing, fortunately on a fairly wide ledge.

I cling to the cold granite and sit dead still – anything that feels familiar. I breathe a long, deep sigh of relief. As deep and far as you can fall here. I switch off my headlight, close my eyes.

Will I get married one day? Should I buy a flat? I miss my mom. I want to be in my own bed, asleep.

Everything is compressed until it disappears like the head of a pin. Nothing is important any more, except standing barefoot on wet grass on the ground.

Silently, I follow the others' instructions. Down. Home.

The landscape below us is beginning to look familiar.

I see a cairn. "It's our route! This is the way we came this morning," I call out. It's nice to be sure of myself for a change after behaving like a Grade 1 kid on the first day of school all day.

We jump and clamber over the last rocks in the moonlight.

"Guess what the time is, guys?"

"About eleven?"

"Nine-thirty?"

"Twenty-seven minutes past two."

"What?" I consider sending my editor an SMS, insisting on danger pay. We've been climbing for 20 hours – 14 more than we'd planned.

Would I have done it if I'd known what lay ahead?

Would I ever do it again? I don't know.

The tagline in the book *Touching the Void* reads: "The closer you are to death, the more you realise you are alive."

Sure. For 20 hours all I could think about was to keep breathing...

Since this story appeared Esma has bought a flat, got married and has two little girls.



SAM REINDERS

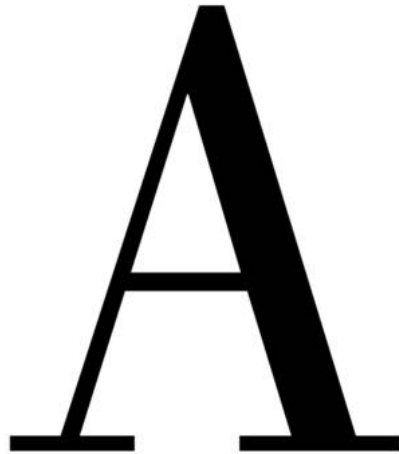
Bat. explosion!

The world's biggest mammal migration isn't the throng of wildebeest that thud across the Serengeti every year. Instead, you'll have to venture into a remote corner of Zambia to witness this spectacle. And they're not hoofed mammals either, they're winged...

WORDS & PICTURES **TOAST COETZER**



BAT FLAK (Previous page). There are at least 700 bats in this picture. Go ahead: Count them.



At first it sounds like the sharp clatter of millions of finches. But then, as we park and walk closer, the noise starts getting more nuanced, louder and weirder.

Now it sounds like thousands of feet trampling on squeaking plastic toys. We enter the mushitu – a type of forest found on the banks of the Musola River in Zambia's Kasanka National Park – where the bats sleep during the day. Mushitu forest is characterised by massive tree species such as red mahogany and waterberry, but of these giants only skeletons remain here. Over the years, the combined weight of millions of straw-coloured fruit bats (one can weigh up to 700 g) has stripped them down to only their strongest branches.

The first bats become visible. They're huge, the size of a chihuahua, with a wingspan just short of a metre. Their noses are longer than a chihuahua's, though – more like a dachshund's. Yup, what we're seeing here are thousands of flying sausage dogs!

It's five o'clock in the afternoon and the bats are getting restless. Every now and then a squadron noisily loosens itself from a roost to fly a crabby arc or two before settling down again.

Our guide, Webby Mwewa, leads us closer to the riverbank. We pass several viewing platforms, slosh through ankle-deep water and then follow the trail deeper into the forest. Eventually we reach the end of the trail and the last of the viewing platforms. Rebecca follows Webby up the ladder and I make up the rear.

When I slowly stand up on the small platform the noise around me is deafening. And I can't believe what I see. We are in the heart of the colony. Tens of thousands of bats swirl around us. Hitchcock could've made a good movie out of this!

Bats are not easy to count, but scientists estimate the size of the colony at anything between 5 and 15 million individuals when the migration peaks late in November.

They start arriving from neighbouring DRC by mid-October, when the rains herald a feast of abundant fruit, and stay until mid-December. By Christmas, they're all gone, back to their equatorial hangout in the Congo – Kasanka is only 30km from the border with the DRC.

For the rest of the year Kasanka is a quiet park. Situated a 500 km drive north of Lusaka, it lacks the masses of crowd-pulling big game and predators of the southern super-parks (South Luangwa and Kafue).

Kasanka has a magic of its own, however. There are some elephants (we spotted two), as well as buffalo, sable antelope and roan antelope (which we did not see). Lions pass through once in a blue moon, and there are crocs and hippos near the rivers.

The puku – which looks like a long-haired impala but with

dropped suspension – is the most common antelope.

The park's other attraction is the rare sitatunga. It looks a bit like a bushbuck in size and shape, but it has long hoofs (like braai tongs), which enable it to walk on top of marshy vegetation.

Sitatungas aren't easy to see. Rebecca and I are sitting on the porch at Wasa, the park's main rest camp. (It's small – just 10 rondavels.) Somewhere in the marshy area in front of us, just 30m away, we've been told, a sitatunga ewe was spotted earlier in the morning. But right now, despite the area being completely treeless and shrubless, she's invisible. As soon as a sitatunga lies down, it vanishes.

Suddenly, between sips of coffee, the ewe appears. We see it for only a few seconds, then she's gone again. It's as if we'd seen a ghost.

Sitatungas aside, what we're actually here for is the fruit bat spectacle. The bat colony can be visited twice a day, at sunrise and sunset, and always with a guide because of the possibility of an encounter with a hippo or a croc.

Our first visit is at sunset. After a close look from the viewing platforms, you step back a bit to see the sky fill with bats as they head out to feed between about 6 and 6.20pm.

At one stage there are literally bats from horizon to horizon. It's a positively biblical sight.

Sunrise is the less popular option, because you have to get up at 3.30am to be in position when the bats return from their nightly shenanigans.

The bat roosts are only a 20-minute drive from Wasa,

followed by a short walk (about 500m) across muddy terrain to the hide, where Webby leads us this morning. This one's about 18m from the ground in a massive red mahogany tree, so it's with some trepidation that we start climbing up the narrow wooden ladder.

The platform's not much bigger than a desk, but there's room for all three of us. Around us, the misty mushitu forest is eerily visible thanks to the bright moonlight. We're the only people here this morning, but the almost Jurassic landscape is all but quiet. Night insects are still out (and biting) and the early-rising birds are beginning to pipe up, too.

Then, slowly but surely, the squeaky-squeak of the bats becomes audible. Their return is less orderly than their sunset departure: 10 here, 50 over there, 100, 60, 200... For the next hour it doesn't stop. Every now and then one flashes past the white face of the moon.

As it becomes light, the scene below and around us is filled with more detail. Our treetop perch is like the air-traffic control tower at a busy airport, the aeroplanes endless in number and haphazard in their approach paths.

The bats land clumsily against the trunks of the trees and then crawl upwards using their short legs and the long thumbnail on their wings. It's comical – like Batman falling in the soup and waiting for his cape to dry.

The first sunlight catches their yellow backs where they hang from the trees like tightly packed clusters of grapes.

They remind me of something else, too: those locusts that descend on Karoo farms every now and then after heavy rains.

After two nights at Wasa we move to Pontoon, the campsite next to the Kasanka River where there's a pontoon to take you across if you want to explore the western half of the park.

There are only two (large) stands at Pontoon and the facilities are basic: a long drop and a shower area where the staff can rig up a bush shower for you.

The setting is beautiful, with a row of gigantic mahoganies to provide shade. While pitching the tent, a troop of blue monkeys (*Cercopithecus mitis doggetti* – similar to the Samango monkeys you find in parts of South Africa) swings past in the treetops. Kasanka also has lots of yellow baboons, which are slightly smaller than our chacma baboons.

Late in the afternoon we head back to the bats. This time we climb up (about 20m up another mahogany) into the Fibwe hide, known as the premier sitatunga viewing place in Africa.

The best time to look for them is early in the morning. We scan the tall grass, sedge and reed bed below and eventually we spot a chocolate-brown ram some distance away.

Fibwe hide's setting is really quite something – the platform feels like your own private suite floating high above the floodplains. With the setting sun casting a hazy orange backdrop, the bats do their fly-by right on cue. For 20 minutes – and for the third day in a row – the spectacle silences us.

The next morning we're up early. Frank Willems, the park's ecologist (and ornithologist), is joining us for a guided walk up and down the Kasanka River. Frank's originally from the Netherlands,

but has been here for two years now. Accompanying us is armed scout Marley Musonda Katinta, just in case.

About 100m from our campsite Frank stops to listen to a bird high in the canopy. "Narina trogon," he whispers. I can't believe it! I've wanted to see a bloody trogon for years now, but it's always eluded me. Marley locates the red-and-green bird and Frank sets up his spotting scope so Rebecca and I can have a good look.

We see both the male and the female. One for my life list!

It's warm when we step out onto the floodplain; the raptors have already taken to the skies. Within an hour we see a western-banded snake-eagle, bateleur, Wahlberg's eagle, white-backed vultures, hooded vultures and a swirl of migrating Amur falcons.

It becomes a long walk and by the time we turn back to the campsite it's past lunchtime. We're heading straight for a threatening-looking thunderstorm. It hangs in deep Blue Bulls colours above the almost unrealistically green floodplain. Thunder rumbles over us, lightning flashes and pukus scurry around nervously.

I take a final few photographs and pack my cameras away just before the first drops hit us.

For the next hour we trudge through an apocalyptic downpour. I haven't been this wet since the last time I tried to swim a length of backstroke.

The next day we cross the river by pontoon and drive further west, to Luwombwa Camp. It's probably the prettiest camp in the park, with some of the chalets built on the bank of the Luwombwa River.

In the afternoon we go for a cruise on the river. You can paddle if you want to, but we opt for the motor-boat option.

Boars Mwape skilfully guides us through the twists and turns of the narrow, fast-flowing river. It's home to plenty of specials – several kingfisher species and also the weird African finfoot, which swims around with just its neck sticking out. But we're on the lookout for Pel's fishing-owl, one of the prime species often seen here.

And we're in luck – just as Boars tells us to watch the next copse of trees, as it's a common perch of this large bird, we see it!

Sadly, it silently flies off before I can get a picture.

Birding is a year-round activity at Kasanka, but it's the fruit bats that make it a unique African destination. It's certainly something to add to your wish list of things to see on the continent.

The Kasanka Trust, (which manages the park under contract with the Zambia Wildlife Authority) has done an excellent job here. Regular scout patrols limit the influence of poaching and the park infrastructure is well maintained.

During our last night in Kasanka, we enjoy our meal next to the Luwombwa River. It's hot and steamy and the night is alive with insects.

The horizon lights up every now and then with distant explosions of lightning. Suddenly something big lands in a tree near us: It's a fruit bat, also enjoying its dinner.

SHOWER HOUR. Frank Willems, Marley Katinta and Rebecca Hodes look at the storm racing towards them.



ZEN AND THE ART OF DODGING DONKEYS

Gautengers who regularly drive through Botswana to Namibia know it all too well: the Trans-Kgalagadi Highway, a seemingly endless road via Jwaneng, Kang and Lonetree. Hang on, via where?

WORDS & PICTURES **TOAST COETZER**



KALAHARI SMILE (previous page). A rainbow brightens the sky above Kalahari Rest, a guest farm outside Kang owned by Marinda Sieberhagen and her husband Bill. It's a great spot to break your journey.



It must be the Myprodol talking. Or maybe I'm just exhausted after all the driving. Is that really a flock of vultures up ahead, tearing away at two donkey carcasses? I slow down as I approach the scene and, sure enough, there are about 20 white-backed vultures next to the road.

This isn't the Midlands Meander. This is edgier. Less "coffee shoppe" and more donkey carcass. Welcome to Botswana's A2, known as the Trans-Kgalagadi Highway.

Ask people who know this route and they'll tell you to look out for donkeys, horses, cattle, goats and sheep in the road.

Thankfully the verges have been cleared, so at least you see the animals coming. Still, most of them like to chill slap-bang in the middle of the road, playing chicken with your car – in my case a rented Hyundai i20.

I have a quick look at the dashboard. Air bags, phew. Would a vulture pop an air bag? I doubt the Koreans tested this.

My journey starts at the Cumberland Hotel in Lobatse. It's a lived-in place, but I feel right at home. Lilian Motanyane is behind the front

desk under the framed gaze of the president, Ian Khama. It's busy; Lilian tells me I'm lucky to get a room.

I drop my bags, change into trousers and stroll through the hotel garden to the Mokgotleng Pool Bar. Most of the guests are here, because the power keeps tripping in the restaurant.

I find a seat at the bar counter and order a T-bone with vegetables and pap – a bargain for just 58 pula. People are watching soccer on TV: Chelsea 1 – Liverpool 1. Long after my plate has been scraped clean and Liverpool has scored an 86th-minute clincher, the barmaid comes to ask me what she's clearly been burning to ask all night long.

"Are you from Lobatse?"

"No," I tell her. "I'm from Cape Town."

"Did you know Bennie?"

"Nope."

"You look exactly like Bennie."

Apparently Bennie was a local businessman who died in a car accident on the road between Lobatse and Zeerust. I'm the walking dead.

I will think of Bennie often over the course of the next few days. It's healthy to give death a nod when you get into your car – whether it's to drive to the café to get a newspaper or to Kang for curiosity's sake. Driving is dangerous business: A tyre can burst, a drunk driver can take you out or a cow might decide to waltz into your path.

South-west of Lobatse, at the traffic circle, I turn right. The sign here makes for intimidating reading: Kanye 45, Jwaneng 127, Ghanzi 650, Windhoek 1080 – a full day of rubber on tar to the closest eisbein. Luckily I'm not going that far. My end destination is the border post at Mamuno, 734km from here. Tonight I'll overnight in Kang, halfway there.

This part of Botswana is un-

expectedly pretty. The tar road rises and falls over a series of gentle hills. The first big town is Kanye, which sits on top of one of these hills. I make a detour off the highway to take a closer look.

There's the New Hope Liquor Rest, the National Centre for Food Technology Research (do they eat steak every day?), the Plateau Bar and the Embassy Bar. It's a typical Botswana town: bustling main road, cellphone shops, and bargain outlets.

Back on the A2, midday thunderheads have built up. In places, I follow in the wet tracks laid down after an earlier rain shower.

Closer to Jwaneng, the hills disappear, the marula trees fade out and the landscape flattens. The world's largest diamond mine is in Jwaneng. Tourism and beef might keep Botswana in the black, but it's the vast diamond wealth that pays for the flashy cars and shopping centres in Gaborone.

Every guy in Jwaneng looks like he's just come off a shift or is about to go on a shift. Bakkies with lights on the roof, people in overalls. I swing through the town, past Too Unique Furnishers and Supabrain Computers, and pull up outside the Link pharmacy. There's a painful twinge in my back and Myprodol is all I can find. You're not supposed to drive a car when you've taken a Myprodol, but what am I going to do, hire a chauffeur in Jwaneng?

If ever a town's name had a ring to it, it's Kang; like the sound of someone being hit with a frying pan in a spaghetti Western – *kang*!

Nobody in Kang can tell me what the word means, but I've heard a lot about this town from my brother. He lives in Namibia and often drives the Trans-Kgalagadi if he has to go to Gauteng for business. Kang

I've learnt that a wet donkey is harder to see than a dry donkey. Truck driver Abraham Radebe taught me that you can drive past the backside of a donkey, but you must never trust a cow with the same move.

is his overnight stop, as it is for most people driving this route.

I take the first turn-off into Kang and book into Nakabu Guest House. It's not exactly a City Lodge, but the TV talks cricket and the aircon breathes out a type of cool.

A five-minute crawl through the town centre, past Bigfoot Paradise Chicken House, confirms what I could have guessed: Kang is not typical tourist fare. Billboards state the obvious: "Aids thwarts our economy to prosper" and "Sexual networking is risky".

My brother told me to try the fillet at the Kang Ultra Stop Restaurant, but first I take some photographs of the town, the road and the sunset. At the intersection where the Hukuntsi Road joins the Trans-Kgalagadi, I meet a few hitchhikers: Josephine Berend, her one-year-old daughter Adelaide and her friend Mariana Pieters. They just got off a truck that had brought them here from Gobabis, their home town. Now a tougher stretch awaits: The sun is gone and Hukuntsi, where they're heading, is still 100km away.

"The Botswana people don't give you a lift," Josephine tells me as she tries to flag down a passing bakkie. "Even if there's only one person in the car."

The trio is heading for Hukuntsi to visit Josephine's father. Josephine

tells me that he has lived there since he left his "burdens" behind in Gobabis.

"Life is faster in Gobabis," she says. I'm not sure whether to take this as an explanation for her father's move to Hukuntsi or whether she's saying it in defence of him.

I'm often amazed by people like Josephine. If I were in her shoes I would be worried sick about where I'd sleep tonight, but she's friendly, she has time for a chat and she poses for photos without a problem.

I say my goodbyes and stroll over to where a truck driver is smoking a cigarette by the roadside. It's Abraham Radebe from Johannesburg, a 15-year veteran of the industry. He drives the Trans-Kgalagadi at least once a week, sometimes twice.

"It takes about 18 hours from Windhoek to Joburg; I always stay over," he tells me, his eyes drifting past my gaze towards the road. "I've hit cattle three times. The donkeys are okay; they stand still. But if a cow sees another cow on the other side of the road, it just starts walking."

Cigarette smoked down to his fingers, Abraham gets back into the cab and drives off into the warm evening. Earlier today, as I drove, I killed time by counting oncoming vehicles. There were roughly 100 per hour; more than half were trucks.

The Kang Ultra Stop is a fuel station, curio shop (buy your Kang camo cap here), restaurant and overnight spot. For the passing tourist, this pretty much sums up Kang.

"No Speeding", warns a sign in the parking lot. Rules are rules. Tonight I'm going to abide by the laminated notice in the bar inside the restaurant: "If you're drinking to forget, please pay in advance."

I end up ordering spare ribs, but I should have followed my brother's advice and had the fillet.

When you travel slowly through a landscape like this, you become aware of its rhythms. To some people, this long, straight drive is boring. It's true – the monotony gets to you and you find yourself wishing for a pothole or two just to perk things up. (*Toast saw one pothole on the entire route, close to Jwaneng. – Ed.*)

It helps to zoom in and focus on the small things. For the past 30km the air has been filled with white butterflies, as if the thorn trees have scattered confetti. Then, suddenly, the butterflies are gone and for the next 50km the remains of a veld fire mark the land to the right of the road.

Far away, on my left, is the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park; on my right, along sandy tracks, is the Central Kalahari Game Reserve – two immense protected wilderness areas with not a single fence between them.

This means you might encounter more than donkeys on the A2. I see a few ostriches and, fleetingly, a red hartebeest, although it might have been a red cow slimmed by heat waves. I don't stop to check.

The colour of the tar varies. In places it's deep black, freshly

licked; elsewhere it's purplish grey; right here it's almost white. Skid marks read best on white tar and they appear regularly – the double rear wheels of a braking truck are like quotation marks. They're empty quotation marks, but if you were to put a word in there it would be a short one: "cow", "donkey", probably "ostrich".

Ostriches! How big they are! You realise this in such an empty landscape. They tower like giants on the plains. Hitting one would be just as bad as hitting a cow. I'm sure ostriches are also in short supply in the Hyundai test lab...

Then there are the donkeys. They're remarkable, hardly batting an eyelid when trucks rumble past. Are they in a permanent state of prayer? Engaged in telepathic chess matches with friends in Nepal?

As the monotony of the road grinds on, observations are simplified, Morse-coded: Pale-chanting goshawk on treetop; steenbok left; black crows on yellow line; mirage ahead; car thermometer 32°C.

I pick up three hitch-hikers heading for Lonetree. The oldest (and shortest) of the three, Sarafina Butterfly, speaks some English.

"Butterfly? Where did you get that surname?" I ask her.

"From my father," is Sarafina's logical answer.

I share my box of Choc-kits with them and try to find out more about the name Lonetree. Sarafina and I muddle along in sentences neither of us fully understands. She says something about "the tree meeting the sky". Was the tree struck by lightning? I drop them at the settlement and roll on.

Suddenly there's a dip in the landscape. It's the Okwa valley, an ancient riverbed that flows north-east. When rain of biblical proportions comes back to this

part, the Okwa might add its waters to the Makgadikgadi Pans.

Now horses start to outnumber donkeys. Up ahead the sky is a wall of rain. Although I plan to overnight in Ghanzi (a town just north of the A2 but still an integral stop en route), I first want to complete my run to Mamuno on the border.

I turn west at a sign that reads, simply, "Namibia". There's another sign pointing north – disappointingly, it doesn't say "Egypt".

While I'm eating lunch in a lay-by a stuttering red Isuzu pulls in. The three occupants jump out and get busy: One pumps the left rear tyre, another lifts the bonnet and starts fiddling, and the third gives advice while chewing on a stalk of grass.

I walk over and offer them each an apple. Grass-stalk man, Takiso Phuete, asks for a cigarette instead. Rambo Motsenyana quits his pumping and comes around to see what's going on.

They were in Ghanzi for the day, "on business", Rambo says. It's hard to say what sort of business – there's nothing but a cardboard box with six cartons of sorghum beer on the back of the bakkie. Now they're heading home to Karakopis, 100 km away.

Onalenna Rabolalwa, the driver, pours a pint of oil into the heart of the engine, then slams the bonnet shut. They pile in and the bakkie roars off, blue smoke billowing in its wake. Although I follow barely five minutes later, I never catch up with them again. Maybe there was more business to attend to along the way.

Soon I hit that wall of rain. It slams into the car like a tsunami and I slow down to 60km/h. At the turn-off to Chobokwane I stop to offer a lift to an old man bearing a can of petrol. I drive him down to the



HITCH-HIKERS. Josephine Berend plays with her one-year-old daughter Adelaide near Kang. The two of them and friend Mariana Pieters were travelling from Gobabis to Hukuntsi.

BOTSWANA

village. There's a sign that promises camping, but the Hyundai isn't built for sand, so I don't investigate.

Then it's back to the A2 with its trucks, Land Cruisers and government bakkies. I see some South African number plates, too. *Whoosh, whoosh* – everyone's in a hurry.

Charles Hill (with not a hill in sight) is just this side of the Mamuno border post. I buy a Steri Stumpie at the Engen and then make a U-turn.

After the storm, every cow, horse and donkey is in the road – drinking from puddles. I think of Bennie again and take my foot off the pedal.

On the return journey there is much to think about. I've learnt that a wet donkey is harder to see than a dry donkey. Truck driver Abraham Radebe taught me that you can drive past the backside of a donkey, but you must never trust a cow with the same move – cattle turn around at whim.

At the Kalahari Arms Hotel in Ghanzi I learnt that the T-bone steak is too big to finish in one sitting. I was bullied into it; the waiter said the fillet is something that women order.

Is the Trans-Kgalagadi a boring stretch of road? Of course it is, especially if you just race through. Then it's all about staying awake and dodging livestock.

But if you stop for an hour or two or, better still, sleep over, your brain migrates from its lax position behind the wheel to a fresh vantage point. Stand by the roadside long enough and you realise this is more than just a conveyor belt for people and cars and trucks and goods. Here, in the shade of a camel thorn, under the foot of a donkey, in the eye of an ant lion, time stands still.

Modernity speeds past. But the solemn, ancient landscape goes nowhere.

Sometimes the two meet. Maybe the grille of a Korean hatchback grazes the hindquarters of a donkey; maybe three young people snack on Choc-kits for the first time in their lives.

In Ghanzi I bought a CD called *Trans-Kgalagadi Highway*, by Ras Jesus. It's a mix of traditional music and reggae, with Ras Jesus (aka Steppin' Jesus) singing in Setswana and Shekgalagari.

Yes, Dire Straits would have got me home, but Ras Jesus added something tangible to the landscape. The kilometres became liquid, my mind a quiet pool of donkey thought.

Heading back to Gaborone, I stay over at Kalahari Rest, a guest farm outside Kang. There's even an all-sand cricket field here – Lords II – with a thorn tree at third man.

Binoculars in hand, I walk around the campsite at sunset. The summer's first shower has just poured itself out onto the farm and the veld is singing in stereo. Birds are everywhere. A Klaas's cuckoo calls for companionship; red-billed spurfowl sound the trumpet; fat buffalo weavers *kwik-kwik*, and the rollers roll. I also see impala, springbok and kudu.

I'm only about a kilometre from the highway, but this is pure Kalahari. It gets me thinking about how accessible and close "remote" places actually are. From here, there's a tar road back to Gaborone, two short flights to Cape Town, then a 45-minute drive along the peninsula to my house in Simon's Town.

I turn back to my little chalet, but something stops me dead in my tracks. Up ahead, up high, wider than the wide-angle lens on my camera, a rainbow spans the sky. A double rainbow.

Cheers, Bennie.

ROAD OF MANY NAMES. The Trans-Kgalagadi Highway is also known as the Sir Seretse Khama Highway in Botswana, and the Trans-Kalahari Highway in neighbouring Namibia.



Karoo Railway Blues

Drive through the Karoo and you'll see them everywhere: railway stations and sidings abandoned to the elements. What happened to the people who once worked at these stations? Where is the stationmaster, the train driver, the stoker and the conductor? Are they still alive?

WORDS **DANA SNYMAN**
PICTURES **DANA SNYMAN & SAM REINDERS**



T

he railway station in Touws River looks like many others in South Africa: outbuildings are roofless, window frames have been ripped from walls, the platform is dirty and the garden is long dead.

I drive slowly down the railway line. How different it must have been in the 1970s and 1980s, when this was one of the busiest stations in the country. Touws River is on the main line between Cape Town and the northern provinces, and trains once rolled through day and night. There was also a busy shunting yard and workshops where steam locomotives were cleaned and repaired.

Currently, more than 11 000 km of South Africa's railway lines are unused and there are hundreds of stations where trains no longer stop. Most goods are transported by truck these days. Cheap flights have all but killed rail travel.

Maybe I should try to find some of those former railway employees and write down their stories. If I don't do it, who will?

It's just after 3 pm on a Monday and the streets of Touws River are quiet. I drive deeper into town. The high school has been closed down – classrooms are empty and the playground is riddled with weeds.

Most houses around here once belonged to the Railways. A typical

railway house has red bricks up to the windows, white or cream walls, a corrugated-iron roof, a red front stoep and a silver garden gate.

I see a woman standing at one of those gates – Aletta Groenewald. Maybe she'll know if there's a former train driver who still lives around here.

"O, *nee, jitte, kind,*" she says. "Most of the old people have passed away. Only us widows are still here. The town has gone downhill since the depot shut down." She opens the front gate. "Come in, come in."

Her husband Jan worked for the Railways as a conductor – he punched tickets on the route between here and Beaufort West. But Jan has also passed away.

"He got muscular dystrophy and his old heart couldn't take it any more," Aletta says, her voice growing soft. "He died on the operating table."

She points down the street, in the direction of the station. "Sometimes I stand here and I can see Jan coming around that corner with his lunch box and his cap on his head. He always walked to work, even when he became ill. Sometimes I walked with him to help him carry his things."

Like many men of his generation, Jan turned to the Railways for a job out of sheer necessity. The Groenewalds farmed near Laingsburg, but lost everything during a drought in the 1960s. So Jan approached the South African Railways and Harbours (SAR&H, now Transnet) for employment.

Back then, if you were a white male, working for the Railways was a fail-safe option. Jobs were freely available, even if you were still a teenager or had only Std 6 to your name.

"Jan always said he was born a farmer and was made a conductor," Aletta says as she leads me through

her house. We walk down a corridor, past a framed photo of a steam locomotive and a wall clock ticking exactly on time. The smell of furniture oil hangs in the air. In the sitting room, she stops in front of a shelf where she displays some of Jan's belongings: a flashlight, binoculars, a lunch box.

"His food had to be ready when they came to call him." She runs her hand over the lunch box. "Meat, I always packed meat. Mutton. Sometimes pork."

Years of bottled-up memories flow freely from Aletta now. She tells me how Jan's handwriting became difficult to read when his illness set in. This was a problem, because the conductor had to pen down the exact time the train pulled into each station in a logbook.

"I started writing down the names of the train stations at home so he only had to fill in the times," she says with a faint smile. "I can still remember all the stations from here to Beaufort West. After Touws River you get Draai, then Jan de Boers, then Konstabel, then..."

She also tells me how the *roepman* would come wake Jan for work. The *roepman* played an important role: It was his job to wake the conductors and other employees so they would be on time for their shift.

"Jan never had a problem waking up," Aletta recalls. "He didn't drink at all. The *roepman* would be pedalling down the street and Jan would say: 'Here he comes.' Then he would get up."

She can't remember the name of the *roepman* or if he still lives in Touws River. It has been too long. However, she knows of a few other railwaymen still living in town: Koos Möller, Joep Joubert, Jan Stassen, Christie Coetzee.

"Go chat to them, *kind.* One

Back then, if you were a white male, working for the Railways was a fail-safe option. Jobs were freely available, even if you were still a teenager or had only Std 6 to your name.

of these days they'll be gone too, just like Oom Jan. And then what?"

Koos Möller lives in a part of Touws River known as "Die Kamp". Many towns and cities with a sizeable railway community had a suburb called Die Kamp – a housing compound where white railway workers and their families lived.

Koos walks out onto the stoep in a pair of tired takkies. Almost all of the neighbouring houses here now belong to people who never worked on the railways. Many have fallen into disrepair. In the past decade, Transnet has reportedly put nearly 9 000 of these railway houses up for sale.

In Koos's sitting room there's also a picture of a steam locomotive and a clock running on time. Koos was a labourer on the railways and his story is a familiar one. His parents were poor, so he left school in Std 8 to help bring in money.

"I was in the workshops, *ou maat,*" he says, holding out his rough hands like a testimonial for me to read. "With these hands I carried around bars of iron and cleaned trains. I worked these hands to the bone." He's quiet for a while, then says: "I can tell you many things, my friend. Many things."

He recalls how a group of

children, pupils at the School for the Blind in Worcester, came through here on a train one night, years ago. It was during the school holidays and they were on their way home. They stopped in Touws River and some of the carriages were disconnected. One boy walked down the corridor but he couldn't see that the next carriage had been disconnected and he fell onto the tracks. Another carriage ran over him and severed both his legs.

"I can tell you many things, my friend. Many things..."

I drive back to town. Joep Joubert, whom Aletta mentioned, now lives in Du Plessis Street. He's pottering around his garden when I pull up. The grass is mowed and roses and sweet peas are in full bloom.

Joep was the station foreman at Touws River for 21 years. It was his job to make sure that all the trains left the station on time and that there was a driver and a conductor on each train.

"It was busy, *maat.* We had 63 drivers and 63 conductors." He points towards the defunct high school. "Some years we had up to 50 kids in matric."

Joep gets upset when he talks about the ruined stations and how the former Railways employees are being treated. Last year he received only a 2% increase on his pension.

KAROO

To supplement his income, couples can have their wedding pictures taken in his beautiful garden for R100.

In Joep's sitting room there's also a mantelpiece clock, also exactly on time. "I have a clean record," he says. "In all my years as station foreman I never delayed a train – not once." He shakes his head. "You should see how late the trains are these days. It's a disgrace."

When you talk to people like Joep, you soon realise that many of them hanker for the old days and, more specifically, the days of the steam locomotive. For them, the world was a more innocent place back when those big old steam horses puffed over the plains.

Christie Coetzee, who lives a block or two down the street from Joep, was a train driver for two decades. I decide to pay him a visit.

Most of the houses where former Railways employees live have neat lawns with trimmed edges and flower beds. The roofs are freshly painted and there is often a dog kennel in the backyard. It's as if the discipline of the former SAR&H still holds sway.

Christie's house is a case in point. The smell of Sunbeam polish greets you on the stoep and a mantelpiece clock tells the time on the display cabinet in the sitting room. Next to him on the carpet are two wooden clogs, displayed like ornaments.

"I was 17 years and 9 months old when I started working on the railways," he says. "I had just finished Std 8 and I had to find a job. I had no choice – we were poor."

You couldn't be a driver straight off the bat. Not like now, when you can be a driver after a year or two. I started as a cleaner. I cleaned the locomotives by hand.

"After three years I became a stoker. The stoker worked under the driver. You had to make the fire. Hell, those drivers were strict. You would greet him, 'Môre Oom' and he would say, 'Man, luister, ek slaap nie by jou antie nie. Ek is nie jou blêrrie oom nie!'"

In 1970, after working for eight years as a stoker, Christie was promoted to steam locomotive driver. Just like Aletta Groenewald, he can name all the stations and stopping points from here to De Aar, in order – a mantra to summon a lost world.

He has heard about the blind child who lost his legs, but he doesn't know what became of him. "Go ask Niekie Theron in Laingsburg. Niekie knows all the railway stories."

Christie also knows of a *roepman* who is still alive: Koos Swarts. He picks up his cellphone and scrolls through his contacts, dials a number.

"Hello, Koos! Where are you?" he asks. They chat for while, then he hangs up. "Jong, Koos is now in Kimberley."

Christie worked as a driver until 1992. One day he was informed that the depot would be closing down and the railway line to Beaufort West would no longer be controlled from Touws River; it would now be done from Worcester. Drivers, conductors and other workers were forced to take severance packages.

The early 1990s marked the start of the decline of South Africa's rural railway stations in towns like De Aar, Noupoot, Springfontein, Breyten and Waterval Boven.

"For a while I worked as a barman in the club up the road," Christie says. "I also painted people's houses and fixed roofs. I'm just grateful that my daughter had finished university when I took the package."

He shows me a photo of his daughter Chrisna, taken on the

day she received her BCom degree from the University of Stellenbosch. He looks at the photo with pride.

"Things were tough on my driver's salary sometimes, but I'm happy that I could at least give her that."

Chrisna has been working in the financial services industry in the Netherlands for a few years now. That's where the clogs on the carpet come from.

Take the N1 north towards Matjiesfontein and Laingsburg. The railway line runs close to the road; one after the other, derelict stations and sidings appear: Draai, Jan de Boers, Konstabel...

Just before you reach the bridge over the Buffels River in Laingsburg, you'll see Lategan's Truck Stop on the right. This is where you'll find Niekie Theron, Laingsburg's former stationmaster.

Niekie owns the café at the truck stop, but trains still run in his veins. The walls of the café are hung with photos of steam locomotives and there's the obligatory wall clock. On time, of course.

Niekie tells me that many former Railways employees now work as truck drivers. When they stop at his truck stop they look at his photos and tell their stories.

Niekie knows of the blind boy who fell under the train in Touws River. Apparently he now runs a café in Prince Albert.

You'd be hard-pressed to find someone more passionate about trains than Niekie Theron. He sets down a small CD player and takes out a disk labelled "Train Recordings". He slips the CD into the machine. Moments later the sound of a steam locomotive rumbles from the speaker.

"This is a classic recording," Niekie says, showing me the CD cover where he has written down



DOWN MEMORY LANE. In her home near Touws River Station, Aletta Groenewald shows off a train lamp that belonged to her husband Jan, a conductor.



DUTY CALLS. Former *roepman* Rassie Erasmus still has his Railways cap. He dug it out of a cupboard for this shot.



GARDEN PROUD. For 21 years Joep Joubert was the station foreman at Touws River. His lovely garden is a popular place to take wedding photos.



TEAMWORK. Piet Cordier is blind and lost his legs in a train accident. He and his wife Leonora run the Lekkerbek Café in Prince Albert.

the details – Locomotive: 19 D; Driver: MJ Barnard; Train number: 13010; recorded at Willowmore Station, 11 October 1979.

“You have to sit downwind if you want to record a steam locomotive,” he explains. “And the driver mustn’t know that you’re recording, otherwise he’ll show off and blow the whistle.”

The last commercial steam locomotive ran from Kimberley to De Aar in 1991. Some were overhauled and are now used for short tourist trips for enthusiasts, but most were disassembled and sold for scrap.

“I left the Railways in 1993,” Niekie says. He turns the volume down. “They cut my job. One day I received a letter saying that from this and this date I would no longer be the stationmaster of Laingsburg. Laingsburg would have no stationmaster in future.”

It was a bitter pill to swallow. In 1992, only a year previously, Niekie had won the Stationmaster of the Year award for the Western Cape.

“It was traumatic to lose my job like that,” he says. “I was 49 years old.”

I ask him to accompany me to Laingsburg Station. At first he isn’t up for it, but in the end he agrees. We park in front of the building and he gets out reluctantly. He looks at the dust on the stoep and shakes his head then he leads me into an empty room – his old office.

“The clerk sat there and the parcel counter was over there,” he says. “Ai.”

From Laingsburg I drive further north, past more deserted stations: Koup, Prince Albert Road, Leeu-Gamka...

In Beaufort West it’s the same

story as in Touws River: Most railway houses no longer belong to railwaymen. But here and there you’ll still find an old train driver, a conductor or a labourer.

In his small house near the hospital Maans Slabbert, a former Railways labourer who has been unemployed for years, takes a newspaper clipping from a cake tin full of documents. It details the death of a certain ASJ Meiring of Cradock who was welding the line at Nelspoort when he was struck and killed by a train. He hadn’t heard it coming.

Maans didn’t know the man who died; he just tore out the article years ago and kept it – a grim souvenir that somehow keeps the old days alive for him. He also knows of many old railwaymen.

“Talk to Ockert Botha in Richmond,” he says. “Ask him to tell you about the red eye of Angola.”

Unsurprisingly, a clock hangs prominently on Ockert Botha’s wall in Richmond, about 250km north of Beaufort West. Ockert started out as a stoker in Ladysmith in Natal. Later he became a driver in Johannesburg.

After he received the severance package in the 1990s, life took a few wild turns until he ended up here, in the deepest Karoo.

First he shows me the lunch box he’s kept for all these years and then, out of the blue, he starts to tell me the stories that most other train drivers choose to keep to themselves.

“I ran over lots of people. A train is not like a car; you can’t just slam on the brakes and stop,” he says. “One time I saw a man lying on the tracks. He was a security guard, wearing a uniform. I blew the whistle but he didn’t move. He actually gave me a thumbs-up as if



OUT OF STEAM. The dilapidated buildings, rusted and vandalised signs and fences barely holding up are all signs that the time of the steam locomotive is truly over.

The walls of the café are hung with photos of steam locomotives. Many former Railways employees now work as truck drivers. When they stop at Niekie's truck stop they look at his photos and tell their stories."

he wanted to say, 'It's okay; I want to die.' Then the locomotive took him and ripped him up."

Ockert rubs his chin. "Then there was a young man and his girlfriend at Cachet, a railroad siding near Potchefstroom. They were waiting on the platform, their arms around each other. When the train came close, they jumped."

And what about the red eye of Angola? He laughs. "When I was a stoker, one of my jobs was to fill the driver's pipe. Not just tobacco – a pinch of dagga, too. I would hand him the pipe and he would light it and take a puff. Once he'd exhaled, he'd show me the chamber of the pipe and say: 'See that? That's the red eye of Angola.'"

Almost every long-distance train in South Africa once ran through De Aar. It was the busiest station in the country after Germiston – at least that's what the residents have been telling me.

The station is fairly well maintained, but it doesn't see nearly as much traffic as it once did. Trains stop at only one of the four platforms, and sometimes a day or two will pass in silence. As the note in the waiting room declares: "The

train is running only on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Sorry for the inconvenience."

It was here on the platform at De Aar Station that army conscripts waited for a connecting train to South-West Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. To the border.

The restaurant and bar – the so-called Bar in De Aar that Koos Kombuis sang about in a protest song – are no longer there; they were demolished.

Bettie Stodard, who worked at the restaurant for 19 years, still lives in town.

"I have such a pain in my stomach, *my kind*," Bettie complains when she opens the door. But once she starts talking about the old days at De Aar Station it's as if her stomach ache lets up.

"I always felt so sorry for the army boys on their way to the border," she says. "In winter I brought some of them home so that they could sleep here. It was too cold to sleep in the train."

The Bar in De Aar was renowned for its delicious pie and gravy – Bettie's recipe. "That was me," she says, beaming.

Not far from Bettie's house lives 88-year-old Hans van Vuuren. Hans was a driver on the Blue Train in his day. In his sitting room a



FORGOTTEN PLACES. All over South Africa there are abandoned station buildings where trains no longer stop.

grandfather clock reaches halfway to the ceiling.

He started working as a stoker in Mafikeng at the age of 16 and retired after 38 years of service. During that time, Hans put three of his sons through university. Two of them obtained master's degrees. Hans van Vuuren is one of the best of a generation of men whose contribution to the development of this country isn't always acknowledged.

While he tells me how he stoked locomotives as far afield as then Rhodesia, his eyes suddenly fill with tears. "The Railways threw us away," he says. "They threw us away."

On my way back to Cape Town I take the turn-off to Prince Albert. In the main street I find Piet Cordier in a wheelchair behind the counter of Lekkerbek Café. The blind boy who ended up under a train in Touws River one night has now become a man. He runs the café together with his wife Leonora.

"I was 15 years old when the accident happened," he says. "The dining carriage was always hitched behind ours. I ran there; I wanted to go to the bathroom."

A man with a wild beard emerges from the storage room behind the café. He introduces himself as Rassie Erasmus and chips in when he hears us talking about the railways. "I was a *roepman*," he says.

It feels as if this is exactly how it should be: a *roepman* to assist disabled Piet.

Rassie worked in Touws River. "I still have my cap," he says. "Do you want to see it?"

We drive to Rassie's house and it takes him a while to track down the cap in his chaotic cupboard. He puts the cap on and looks at me with pride in his eyes.



FADING INDUSTRY. Currently, more than 11 000 km of South Africa's railway lines are unused. Most goods are transported by truck now.

THE GREAT RAMBLE

PART 1

To drive from Cape Town to Musina sounds simple. But what if you keep to the back roads instead of the N1, take 25 days instead of two and drive through every province on the way? Is that just a silly thing to do? Who will you meet? And what will cross your path?

WORDS & PICTURES
TOAST COETZER



C

an you say you're heading for the moon if you've only just left earth's atmosphere behind? Maybe. But are you on your way to Musina if you can still see Table Mountain in your rear-view mirror? I don't think so. The longer the journey, the longer it takes to get going properly.

My mind is still racing with domestic thoughts (will the weevils decimate my kitchen while I'm away?) as the Condor shudders out of Cape Town, northwards on the N7. For now, I just want to shake off the city. I want to sleep in a new bed. Visit a town I've never been to.

Like Riebeek West. I've been to Riebeek East before, which is in the Eastern Cape. I remember buying a cheap 'n' nasty bottle of cane there – but it wasn't cane at all, the proprietor told me, it was tequila, labelled incorrectly at the plant. B is for Bargain!

Riebeek West is immediately more appealing. I find a cool, dark room at a guesthouse and then walk to the Spar to buy some food. On the way back a man overtakes me – barefoot in PT shorts with a ciggie dangling from his lips. He's chasing a cockatiel down Voortrekker Street.

The cockatiel flies clumsily, like all caged birds do when unexpectedly freed. It almost crashes into a speeding car, then settles in the road. The man catches up with

it and grabs it gingerly, as if he's holding a piece of cake and doesn't want to drop any crumbs.

"Is it hurt?" his friend calls from an open door down the street. It looks like the DVD shop.

"Nope," the man answers, slightly short of breath, but taking a drag on his cigarette anyway.

Across the road a little boy plays toktokkie – he presses the buzzer on the gate of a house and then runs off. It's Friday afternoon and some people have had a dop already. "You with your pap face," one young woman tells another, giving her a face wipe with the back of her hand, "you must watch it."

What will I remember about Riebeek West if I never return to the place? The man who chased the cockatiel? Or the abandoned school, where youths with dark minds wrote charcoal words on the walls: "Why must we live in a cruel world but must still die?"

Or the wind that blew and blew incessantly, rushing down the slope of the mountain, erasing all other sound, chasing it deep into the Swartland where someone must've had his eardrums blown?

Or maybe the starlings that gathered in the tall pine trees in front of the guesthouse by dusk, their tweets rising in crescendo before they flocked away, the consensus having shifted to another roosting place for the night?

I'm driving towards Gouda. The Swartland's last dry strokes of summer are being painted as I speed along. This time of year there are only five colours to work with. White are the clouds and the bakkies. The sky is light blue, that exact hue of a sun-bleached Ford Sierra. The mountains are grey, or purple, depending on your outlook on life. Yellow are the fields and

ground and sheep. The bluegums are washed-out green as if they're all covered in dust, which they are.

Into the Boland I go, which is also dry and baking. I stay outside Ceres in Prince Alfred Hamlet with my cousin and his wife and their little boy, Simon. It was Simon's third birthday yesterday and we're eating the leftover chips. As with most kids' parties, the chips were mixed together, all the different flavours. Now it tastes a bit like Nik Naks and fruit chutney and Fanta Orange. We swim and then Simon climbs a tree while I make sure he doesn't fall out. Later we sit on the stoep and pop the remaining balloons.

The next morning I head north, up the Gydo Pass. When I pull over and get out, the pass is alive with the noise of trucks. Going downhill their exhausts and brakes burp-burp loudly; uphill they race like dragsters. Those descending are all filled with apples, some red, some green, always in separate trucks. They offload in Ceres at the storage sheds (today the town looks nothing like the picture on the back of the fruit juice box, unless you're talking about a flattened one) then they race back up to the apple orchards where the harvest is in full swing.

Time is money. That's the feeling you get when you see the larger machinations of farming in action like this. We're inclined to romanticise farming – the farmer putting his hat on in the morning and striding out onto his land to dig his hands into the soil – but much of it is pure business. And the business side is vital, because without it we'd have more subsistence farming, lower food production and more unemployment.

Later, while driving between the apple farms at Op die Berg, I chat to some of the workers. It turns out very few of them are from around

here. Most come from Sterkspruit, a town in the Eastern Cape's north-east corner. (It used to be a shard of the Transkei.)

A massive baboon crosses the road with the casual arrogance of a celebrity chef; he's on his way to an apple orchard. North of Op die Berg I pass a farm called Tandfontein and a turn-off for Donkerbospad, and eventually exit the Koue Bokkeveld via the dusty Middelberg Pass.

Now I'm in the Olifants River Valley, just outside the town of Citrusdal. It's almost sunset and there are a number of power walkers and runners and dog walkers.

I'll sleep here tonight. Why not?

I'm still wearing my swimming shorts, as I've just taken a dip in a mountain stream, and my right knee is being lashed by the sun through the windscreen. Foot loosely on the petrol, I'm crawling, doing about 20km/h. It feels as if the Condor is being pulled along the road by some invisible force, the horizon a tide I'm forever being sucked into.

The Cederberg peaks are all around me. I've cleared Uitkyk Pass and the road is easy again. I pitched my little yellow tent under the pines down at Algeria and now I'm exploring. It's easy to see why this area is popular as a weekend retreat: It's accessible yet isolated, and there's plenty to do. The area is still recovering from the veld fires of early 2009, but the fynbos is already making a comeback, slowly regreening the ash-coloured slopes.

I stop to watch a troop of baboons. They're so relaxed you'd swear they're on Myprodol. You can see no one has fired a gun at them in ages, as should be the case in a protected area.

I get out where a new bridge has

been built. Someone's already added graffiti. Who drives out here with spray paint in the boot? Probably the same kids who played toktokkie when they were younger.

My days are divided into three cups of coffee. (I make strong filter coffee for my flask every morning.) The first cup is for breakfast. Then I'm awake and I can drive the Condor with the perky alertness of a Jensen Button. Now I'm on my second cup of strong stuff and looking at an ant lion's trap. It's the perfect trap, and soon it will be the black hole of some unlucky ant passing by.

Driving back to Algeria, I stop at the top of Uitkyk Pass again. The light is better now, and it's time for my last cup of coffee. If you get a good view, you should use it. Otherwise, what? Yes, life's too short.

Far down below I can see people unpacking a vehicle outside one of the chalets. Their voices are loud, excited. In the city you can talk loudly, but no one will hear you. Here, surrounded by so much silence, your voice almost doesn't know what to do with itself.

Suddenly I hear something above me. It's two Verreauxs' eagles, their wings cutting the air like fighter jets. They're diving into the kloof, wings folded back. Then they put the flaps up and slow down, easing into a glide as they enter a shaded section of the kloof, their black feathers disappearing into the background with just the white Y-shapes on their backs visible, like floating wishbones.

Mountain water is premium water and I stop to fill my bottle at the marked spring on the pass. It's sweet and cold and without a middle man; as "bottled at source" as it gets.

That night the moon wakes me. One slope is slowly lit, as if a veil is pulled down over it, but a veil that

uncovers rather than hides.

I am inside the husk of my tent,
and I am small.

Trawal, Klawer, Vredendal and then eastwards, across the Knersvlakte and up Vanrhyns Pass where, as so often happens, a truck has overturned and blocked the road. Luckily the Condor can sneak around the side of the wreck, pulling its boep in like a guy squeezing through the aisles at Edgars.

I've got two evangelists in the car with me, Dawid and Enstine Fouché, hitch-hikers I picked up in Vanrhynsdorp. They're heading for Upington, but I can't take them much further than Nieuwoudtville, as I'm spending the night with a friend near Oorlogskloof.

"Ouboet, what are you doing there?" Dawid asks rhetorically when we see a baboon sitting next to the road. He – Dawid – is wearing a tie.

The next morning I pick up two more hitch-hikers – Jacobus Bhaha and Angeline Cloete. Their story is a sad one. It's the story of so many people in South Africa, people who have virtually nothing. They've been kicked off the farm where they worked and now they're here in the car with me, with a few hastily grabbed essentials in a plastic bag.

"It's not easy being me, Meneer," Jacobus says.

I drop them in Nieuwoudtville, too. They walk off, Jacobus with his arm around Angeline's sobbing shoulders. I follow the course of the Oorlogs River in the direction of Calvinia, slowly getting rid of the sadness of that scene.

In Calvinia it's lunchtime and I find the world's finest burger: Myl 250's Deluxe Lamb Burger. It would be another two days before I felt hungry again.

At this sign (right) between Middelpos and Calvinia, G. Louw loved E. Smith, Sökkies loved Matthys and L is loved Bobbie. Sampie just wanted to say that he was there, as did Shaun, Jason, Sofia, Dikkies and many others. And somebody thought it apt to remind everyone that "love is a denjaras game".

My friend in Nieuwoudtville told me about the Gannaga Pass, which climbs up the Roggeveld mountains to connect the Tankwa Karoo with Middelpos. From Calvinia I drive south towards the Tankwa, down the Bloukrans Pass, past the farm with the "Trespassers Will Be Shot" sign, past dust devils rising from the stone-eyed earth and crows and pale chanting goshawks and equally pale lost Dutch tourists in a motorhome.

Halfway up the Gannaga Pass I spot two smart-arse klipspringers that think I can't see them when they're standing still, and seven, eight, nine, ten dassies that follow one another into the same hole.

There's some good stonework on the pass and it clings to the slope like blackjacks to a sock.

The pass leads to Middelpos. Middelpos is the middle of this place. Middelpos is all there is. There's not much here, but what's here is sincere. Some people are born in Middelpos and stay here forever. Middelpos sounds like boerbulls and exotic birds and smells like goats because that's what Helena and Koos van der Westhuizen farm with.

The Van der Westhuizens own

the single shop that is to Middelpos what the sun is to our solar system. If you see someone with polished shoes in Middelpos, they bought that tin of Military Tan Nugget at the Middelpos shop. If someone smells like Blue Stratos – same thing.

Helena tells me that Koos is out of town. He's in Williston for the SA Milch Goat Breeders' Society Show. (Yes, that's right: milk-giving goats are milch goats, look it up in your dictionary.)

I sleep at the hotel, which is old and rambling, like that other legendary Karoo hotel, Melton Wold, near Loxton. Inside it's dark as a shipwreck, you have to switch on a light even if you just want to scratch your head or think clearly.

For breakfast I spread the goat's butter extra thick on my toast as I peruse the regional newspaper, the *Noordwester en Oewernuus*. The headline, "Kevin Brand op 7de Laan" catches my eye.

Kevin, I discover, works on the set of the soapie. The report says that in one episode he was the man who carried the bowl of fruit juice that later landed on Paula's hair. He is the son of Mr Sammy and



PILGRIMS ON TOUR. Evangelists Enstine and Dawid Fouché live in Lutzville on the West Coast. Once a year they hitch-hike to Upington to visit Enstine's mother. Here they are in Nieuwoudtville.

Mrs Toekies Brand, well-known teachers in Calvinia.

I arrive in Williston at the Milch Goat Show. It's lunchtime and I'm invited to join. I get some potjiekos and someone buys me a beer.

It's hot and windy, and dust clouds race through the show-ground. I learn a new word for a cool box: a carrycot.

Someone tells that joke about the young dominee about to deliver his first sermon. An older dominee gives him some advice: Fill the carafe with mampoer instead of water, then you can take a sip every so often to relax your nerves.

The day arrives and the young dominee delivers his sermon, his confidence soaring with every sip.

Afterwards he asks the old dominee what he thought.

"It was very good," the old dominee tells him, "but there were 10 commandments, not 12 – and 12 disciples, not 10. And Cain beat Abel to death, he didn't kick him in his *moer*..."

"*Mastag manne, dit kook, dit kook*," says Koos Pansegrouw over the microphone as he welcomes the next batch of aspirant champions to the shed floor.

"Poena, get out of the way; I want to photograph the goat!" someone yells from the sidelines.

Mervyn Swart of the farm Houtkraal near De Aar wins the main prize – his white Saanen ram named Lattaia Padre, an enormous animal weighing 151 kg, is crowned All-breeds Champion.

A *Landbouweekblad* reporter photographs the winning goats. Each animal has to stand in profile, its head turned.

While the photographer concentrates on her composition, the farmer waves his hat or bashes a plastic bottle on the floor so that the goat will look in that direction.

If you think you've been hot, you haven't been to Van Wyksvlei. In Van Wyksvlei the sun is so close that you singe your hair when you straighten your back after pulling up your socks.

In 1882 the first government-financed irrigation dam in South Africa was built here. Why did they build a dam in the middle of the Great Karoo? Optimistically, they wanted to grow lucerne and wheat.

Today, the dam is a tourist attraction, not because you can go fish there or take your rubber duck for a spin, but because it's never been full. Never. I go and have a look. There's a bit of water in it, about as much as you can fit into your swimming pool at home.

But I'm not here for the dam. I'm here for rock art. At Springbokoog outside the town you'll find some of the country's finest rock engravings. The black dolerite rocks were the perfect canvasses for the Bushmen to chisel and scratch their art onto.

Last night I slept at a guesthouse run by the De Kocks (where I had delicious cold lamb neck at 10 pm). This morning they directed me to Springbokoog. I turn off the main road past the tennis club, which must've last seen action when Jimmy Connors was still on the scene.

Then I follow a gravel road almost to where it runs out.

Even today it's harsh terrain, but in the 1800s the last of the Bushmen found refuge here as their world got smaller and smaller. Modernity and rifles and farming constricted them, eventually killing off their way of life.

But before that happened, they made the engravings you can see at Springbokoog. Farm owner (and artist and golf player of renown) Rina van Wyk takes a break from dosing sheep to take me up to the koppie. For an hour I wander among the engravings: elephants, lions, a

rhino, gemsbok, ostriches and buck of all sorts. Elsewhere on the farm there's even an engraving of a hippo.

These koppies and rock engravings are our pyramids and hieroglyphics. Sure, they don't make tourist-friendly silhouettes against the sky, but the Bushmen were never people who tried to imitate their god. Their creator, their world, looked them in the eye every day, in every passing cobra and roaring lion. Springbokoog is like a library of their thoughts, now almost indecipherable to us.

What worries me is what will happen when Rina doesn't live here any more. She's been the custodian of the art, but does the government care? Will future generations be able to come here and appreciate the rock art, or will it be forgotten almost as quickly as our forefathers forgot about the people who made it?

I continue my journey through the Northern Cape, heading further east, encountering locusts on the white dirt road to Vosburg, through Britstown, De Aar, Philipstown, Petrusville.

The Great Karoo gives and gives when no one is looking. Every grid you drive over becomes a chorus of sorts. You realise that crows are crafty and always have their eye on you. You recognise that something like a sociable weaver nest is a miracle.

Get out of your car at sunset. Stand dead still and close your eyes. Around you you'll hear the everything of nothing. Lift your arms like a bird spreading its wings.

You'll hear the landscape breathing. You'll realise that you're an ant travelling on the dried veins of this ancient lung, just waiting to become a fossil like so many living things have done here before you.

Open your eyes slowly and look down at your feet. You're levitating, aren't you?



Where the people live

The road from Cape Town to Musina doesn't always go via Philippolis, Qumbu, Highflats and Keate's Drift. But once you start veering off course you end up running into unexpected pleasures...

WORDS & PICTURES
TOAST COETZER



THE SECRET IS OUT (previous page).
The Tsitsa Falls are 20 km south of
the N2. Turn off the N2 at Tsitsa
Bridge about 10 km south of Qumbu.

L

isten, if you want to see a dam overflow, just drive to the Gariep,” Maxi van Staden tells me. The Vanderkloof Dam is about a ruler’s length from overflowing, but it might only happen tomorrow.

During the past week I’ve driven through the arid Northern Cape – Williston, Van Wyksvlei, De Aar. To suddenly stand next to such a massive volume of water feels a bit weird.

It’s February and the Vaal has come down in one of the biggest floods in two decades.

On the Orange River things are more muted, although the summer rain has also filled both big dams here. Soon, thousands of people will descend on Augrabies further downstream to watch the mass of water roar into the canyon below.

Everyone likes to see a waterfall in full spate, or a dam overflowing, especially farmers. There’s something about the excess of water, the sound that makes you raise your voice and the cool spray that draws people out of their houses to witness a spectacle television can’t hope to replicate.

No such action at Vanderkloof, though. It’s just Maxi and her husband Johan and me. They’ve lived here for 20 years. Johan tells

me a fisherman’s tale about a farmer who caught a barbel so big that he later parked his bakkie in the shade of its skull.

Sure, I think as I drive to the Free State side of the dam.

The Free State. Isn’t that just the best name for a province ever?

If you’re in the southern Free State town of Luckhoff after lunch on a Sunday, you’ll be lucky to see more than five people on the street. I drive past the primary school (motto: Aim High), the Dutch Reformed church (which has an IN and an OUT gate, maybe for the Nice and the Naughty) and the General Dealer (where you can buy tyres *and* ladies’ shoes).

I’m heading to Philippolis and taking every little detour I possibly can because the area is so beautiful right now. I wish I had a busload of tourists that I could pile out every now and then so that they could feel the ground under their feet, smell the rain in the distance and just look, breathe and take it all in.

But I’m alone on the Bosrand road, except for some lethargic sheep dozing in their woollen blankets, the odd crow and the thunderclouds up there, rumbling like passing elephants.

In Philippolis I need to fill up, but the pumps are closed until 4pm, so I have half an hour to kill. I notice an Indraf Kafee. There’s an Indraf Kafee in Van Wyksvlei and Vosburg and Britstown, too. Catchy name in these parts.

At number 70 Voortrekker Street there’s action: The stoep is full of people. It’s Oom Louis Kok’s 85th birthday and his family has come from far and wide to be with him. They invite me in for coffee and cookies. Talk is about the good old days when meat was cheap and one

shilling was a lot of pocket money.

The summer’s good rains are a hot topic and they also reminisce about the great flood of 1988. Tannie Kobie Gouws, Oom Louis’s sister, tells the grandchildren what Augrabies looked like that year. Oom Louis remembers flying over the falls in a helicopter. He uses his hands and his eyebrows to show how big, how wide, how amazing it was. In 1988 even Philippolis was cut off from the outside world, he says. Food supplies had to be brought in by military helicopters.

“And again in 1905,” Tannie Kobie adds pensively.

“1905? No man, you must mean 2005?” Oom Louis says and Tannie Kobie blushes about her mistake.

Oom Louis’s cellphone starts to ring and he looks at it as if it’s a limpet mine he’s supposed to defuse within 30 seconds.

“The green button!” Tannie Kobie shouts.

“I’m trying, but it isn’t working!”

Later, I drive out of town with a smile on my face.

What will I remember from my afternoon in Philippolis? Not the AWB flag the guy at the garage showed me in his bar next door. (“Are you a member?” I asked. “I was,” he answered.)

No, I’ll remember the people of number 70 Voortrekker Street.

Family time is a precious and fragile thing. You don’t know whether your grandfather will live to 85, just like you don’t know whether you and your brother will remain friends throughout your lives. It’s good to think about this next time you’re all sitting in the shade sharing talk and coffee and rusks.

Have another rusk and smile when Grandpa tells that same story for the umpteenth time.

Sometimes the thunder is soft and distant like comfy couches falling off a truck but then – crack! – it’s a glass table and sliding doors all smashing together.

After a night at the Gariep Dam – which was indeed overflowing – I continue on to Smithfield. There’s a place called “Breipaal” marked on my map and I want to see what it looks like. Giant mushroom clouds have been building up all morning and now I drive in under their billowing skirts. Sometimes the thunder is soft and distant like comfy couches falling off a truck but then – crack! – it’s a glass table and sliding doors all smashing together.

When I reach Breipaal I see it’s just a farm – a very pretty farm. These days you don’t just drive up to a farm house uninvited. Gates and fences all over the country have signs adorned with the silhouettes of machine guns, snarling dogs and skulls and crossbones, warning what might happen should you trespass.

It’s one of the realities of today, with stock theft and farm murders grabbing the headlines in regional newspapers on a weekly basis. Farming is not just about living close to nature any more, but also about ways to preserve that privilege.

At Smithfield I luck out. The Pigout Restaurant has excellent coffee and food. There are even oysters for R12,50 each, just 50c more than in Cape Town. As I drive out of Smithfield, though, it’s clear that the town isn’t doing as well as the oysters might suggest. There are people sitting around everywhere –

on the pavement, on low walls, on any surface worth sitting on. That means one thing: unemployment.

It’s less obvious when you drive through sparsely populated areas like the Great Karoo, but from here, through the Eastern Cape and into KwaZulu-Natal, unemployment and poverty become far more visible.

But there’s always someone who gives you hope. Like Itumeleng Phooko, barely 21, but already with her own hairdresser business. I give her a ride to her house in Rouxville – or at least to the township, Roleleathunya, which means “dusty place” in Sotho. She’s saving up to study and, one day, she tells me, she wants to live in Durban.

I cross over into the Eastern Cape at Aliwal North. “It is illegal to buy chameleons,” a big board proclaims. Apparently dwarf chameleons unique to this area have been sold at the roadside in recent years.

The R58 from Aliwal past Lady Grey and Barkly East to Elliot is easily one of the most scenic drives in the country. There are beautiful farms, the homesteads hidden amidst poplar groves and sandstone cliffs and buttresses. You cross nameless passes and clear rivers like the Kraai and the Karringmelk. But there are very few picnic sites or viewpoints

for the casual motorist to pull off and appreciate the splendour.

I often wonder about who makes this call. Who decides how many picnic spots to build next to a new road? Does it cost much extra?

Compare the R58's lack of picnic spots to the N9 between Colesberg and Middelburg.

There they've got picnic sites at every third combo of windmill and haggard prickly pear bush.

From Elliot I drive to Ugie and then to Maclear, where I turn south through the old Transkei towards the N2. The green hills bulge all the way to the horizon, colourful houses strewn over them like hundreds-and-thousands on a cake.

Arriving at the N2, I turn left towards Kokstad. Just as I cross the Tsitsa River I spot a sign that says "Tsitsa Falls Lodge". I've always wondered exactly where these falls are, so I turn in.

Even though my map shows no road at all, it's tar – a thin, Bovril layer of tar that is usually the result of a politician having promised people a road and then, when it came to delivering, cut corners and built it cheaply.

About 13 km further it becomes gravel, and I drive up a steep aloe-covered koppie. A ravine opens up on my left. What a sight... Tsitsa Falls!

If this were the Lowveld there would be two buses full of tourists, cameras cocked, cash at the ready for a curio. But it isn't; it's a former homeland and there isn't even a proper viewsite.

I drive down to the lodge, which is right next to the falls. From the top it looked pretty, but now I can see that they're still busy building. The safari tents are standing on their platforms, but the reception

area is still under construction.

Bongi Ngqongwa welcomes me and says, sure, I can stay the night, but there's no running water yet, which means no flush toilets or showers. I've got my camping mattress, so I pay R60 and pick a tent. The stoep looks down into the ravine, the falls thundering to the right.

Just before sunset another guest arrives. Graham Roebuck is from East London and he and his team are busy putting up the electricity network in the area. He tells me that the local municipality is "quite jacked" and that the lodge is one of their initiatives.

Graham, Bongi and I walk to the top of the waterfall to go take a dip. I lie on my back, digging into the sand with my elbows so that the current can't take me. The water is lukewarm, but after a boiling day it's refreshing. A crow flies past overhead, mocking me. I stick out my tongue and it guffaws off, out of sight.

With my ears under water, all I can see are the brown waves of the river for about 100m in front of me – then it tumbles out of sight into the ravine.

Euphorbias and cycads cling to the steep slopes. On the opposite bank I see cattle being spurred on homewards. It's a ritual almost as old as the T-bone steak. The evening star twinkles to life at about the same moment that the nearby settlement's lights come on – thanks to Graham and his team and the jacked municipality.

Tsitsa Falls is as close to paradise as you will get.

If they don't finish the lodge it will be a tragedy, because this place deserves to be appreciated by more people.

I don't know the KZN South Coast. I take the N2 and drive straight into Port Shepstone, get lost and eventually find myself in Shelly Beach.

Everything here looks radically different from where I was just five days ago in the Karoo. Van Wyksvlei and Shelly Beach are two different planets. Here at the coast the subtropical green sprawl seems to be strangling houses at the throat, reaching over walls and across roads. And there's so much more stuff: more people, more cars, security gates, high walls and shopping centres.

In Van Wyksvlei it's hot and everyone wishes they could win the R70 million Lotto Powerball. At night people sing sad, drunken funeral songs that drift towards you on the otherwise silent air.

In Shelly Beach it's overcast and I get the feeling that the town is still in recovery mode after the summer holiday crush.

The dress code is different, too. It's totally fine to walk around with your beach shirt open all the way down to the last button, mid-morning on a weekday, as if you've got a million rand in the bank. (Maybe you do.)

Personalised number plates also tell a story: GLORY ZN, SOUTIE 1 ZN, RAVE ZN and the visiting THE KING GP.

I book into a B&B near the sea and at sunset I stroll down to the Sonny Evans Small Craft Harbour. A lighty arrives on a fifty, but there's no one to show off to, so he mopes off with a half-hearted wheelie.

The harbour itself is deserted except for the ninjas. Well, okay, guys in karate outfits. They're practising in the parking lot, swivelling kicks at chins, mock punching,



EVERYBODY RELAX. Louis Kok (on the stoep, second from left) celebrates his 85th birthday with family in Philippolis.



NO LEG TO STAND ON. This telephone line between Lady Grey and Barkly East is missing a pole.

blocking... It's like I've walked into a scene from a Bruce Lee movie. To their right a couple of cars are parked, the people inside are having the kind of conversation you just know is about money or relationships or both. Behind them, the sea.

Two guys bow to each other respectfully, arms at their sides.

"Who's the sensei around here?" I ask them.

"I am," says the one with the brown belt. Mlangeni Sakhile shakes my hand. "We do Shotokan karate," he explains. "We come here once every three weeks to practise by the sea – usually we just train in the township."

The others gather around, too. One has just bought a PS You Make Me Happy chocolate. I take a photo of them in their open-air dojo: Mlangeni, Ndovela, Jonie, Bhalulu, Nduduzo, Themba and Zulu. It's getting dark and they have to go back home.

"Do you take the taxi?" I ask.

"No," says Mlangeni. "We jog. It's only 15 km."

Off they go, jogging in formation, sensei at the front. Most of them don't even have shoes. Bruce Lee would have been proud.

Just north of Hibberdene I impulsively turn off the old tar road (the R102) into the interior. It's like flipping a scene switch. The big holiday houses, cabanas and dads taking their kids down to the beach with Christmas kites are all gone.

This is what we talk about in South Africa when we talk about a "rural area": a former homeland, an area where mostly black people live, where communities sprawl and road maps mean nothing.

The "platteland" is something different. The platteland is somewhere near Beaufort West, more desolate, sparsely populated and with the promise of a quaint farm stall on the horizon.

Whatever you call it, the area I'm driving through now never makes it onto the average holidaymaker's list of must-see places.

It's a real pity, although it's understandable, as there are no caravan parks or coffee shops as we know them – and it can be unsafe, especially if you get lost, which you will (and I do within minutes).

It's beautiful, with sugar-cane fields, mielies and natural forest jostling for space amidst the homesteads; wild rivers and hordes of schoolchildren dressed in light blue in one area and maroon just a few kilometres further. I kind of expect to bump into Johnny Clegg at any moment, jamming at the crossroads. The people I meet are teachers, clinic nurses and someone who works for the Salvation Army – it's amazing what you find out once you start talking to people.

What you see, smell and feel in an area like this gives you equilibrium when you return to your comfort zone later, complaining about the price of property while sipping a latte.

Or when you're stuck in traffic and you lower your head onto the steering wheel – this place is the opposite of that place.

You also get an idea of how enormous the government's task is when it comes to service delivery. Yes, your rubbish must be removed from your suburban home once a week, but here, between uMzinto and nowhere, such concerns are small fry.

And further inland, north of Angus Buchan country, past

Greytown, past Keate's Drift where saggy bakkies billow blue smoke as they trudge uphill towards Pomeroy, the concerns are simpler, too.

Is there running water close to your house? Do you flick a switch and a light comes on? Are there qualified teachers in the schools?

It's superfluous to say that South Africa is a land of contrasts – we know it. But the great thing is that it's also full of pleasant surprises.

Two days ago I stopped in Kokstad for brunch. I found a great place called Cassandra's, which is at the first filling station on your left as you enter the town from Mthatha. (Don't waste your time, as I did, by driving through town for 40 minutes trying to find a place that looks good. Cassandra's is all you need, despite deceptive appearances.)

There was an Afrikaans couple sitting in the corner of the restaurant – the man ordered steak.

When they had finished and paid their bill, the man turned around at the door. He demanded from the (black) waitress that he see the chef. Oh no, I thought, this doesn't look good. The waitress fetched the chef from the kitchen – also a black, middle-aged woman.

I could see she looked nervous; here before her stood a big white man, the archetypal "Boer".

I think she was expecting exactly what I was – that he was going to scold her for some mistake regarding the food. But we were both wrong.

"Here," the man said, handing her R10. "Thank you very much for that steak; you cooked it perfectly. I can't remember when last I had such a good steak. I know the waiters usually get all the tips, so I wanted to give it to you personally. Thank you."

I could've given him a hug.



DOJO BY THE SEA. Ndovela Mlungisi (left) and Zulu Johnson practise karate with their friends in Shelly Beach. They're from Msikaba, 15 km into the interior, but they jog to the sea every three weeks for a change of scenery.

THE WORLD OF BAKKIES. On the far right you can see the cooling towers of Ingangane Power station outside Newcastle. Guess what? Mac Maharaj, Peggy-Sue Khumalo, Sizwe Motaung and Bakkies Botha were all born in Newcastle!



THE NORTH

South Africa's northern provinces aren't like the rest. Everything, from the towns to the landscape, is wilder. And before you get to Musina you know that a black mamba will cross your path.

WORDS & PICTURES
TOAST COETZER



COWS LIKE CLOUDS (previous page).
A herd of Brahman cattle somewhere
between Skuinsdrif and Silkaatskop in
North West.

In my mind, the north of South Africa is everything that used to be the Transvaal. I grew up in the south, in the Eastern Cape. Once a year we hit the N1 north to go visit family near what was then called Warmbaths. If it was a good year for the wool and mohair price, we'd also go to the Kruger National Park.

If you look at a map of the country, Gauteng sits there like a tight knot from which the major highways fray out: the N3 to Durban, the N1 south-west to Cape Town, the N12 west to Klerksdorp, the N4 east to Nelspruit and Maputo. And then there's the N1 north, wriggling upwards like a sprout trying to break free from the ground, to Musina, Zimbabwe, and the rest of Africa.

Sure, Cape Town is also in Africa, but up in the north the rest of the continent feels considerably closer. You can see it in the silhouettes of baobabs on the horizon and feel it under your feet in Johannesburg – a city no longer just South African, but African, belonging to others who have chased their Eldorado dreams to its skyline, just like our ancestors did, lured here by the promise of gold, money and the prospect of a better life.

Since I left Cape Town about two weeks ago I've driven through five provinces. Now only Mpumalanga, Gauteng, North West and Limpopo remain. With the green hulk of

Amajuba to my left I cross the Drakensberg, and the N11 sets me down softly in the summery lushness of Mpumalanga. Just past Volksrust I pitch my tent at the Mahawane Country Resort. It's a weekend, but the place is quiet.

My camping neighbours are *Weg* readers – Diana and Solly Cronjé from Newcastle. Diana works at Absa and Solly at Spoornet. Some people take drugs to escape from reality. Some run the Comrades. Others like to play house music very loudly in their cars. But for people like Diana and Solly it's this: to sit in their camping chairs in the shade of a tree, watching the sunset play out on the cloud in front of them, a giant meringue of a thing, billowing in slow motion from white to dirty orange to midnight blue.

The next morning Diana and Solly are down at the water's edge. Diana is reading and Solly is fishing. All is quiet, even the Egyptian geese.

The fish aren't biting, but Solly and the other fishermen don't seem to care. They're not fishing for food; they're fishing for peace.

Tent packed, I take the back roads towards Wakkerstroom, past Vlakpoort and Rooipoort, Schoongezicht and Wydgelegen. It's midday and another summer storm is heading my way. Lightning bolts snake between earth and cloud, the ruminating cows observing it all with a dull sense of alarm.

It's Sunday and on a green slope next to the township at Wakkerstroom, members of the Shembe Church are kneeled down in ceremony. From a distance, the scene of white robes and the whitewashed circle of stones within which they worship looks like a mini cricket match frozen in time. They say the Shembe use the vuvuzela in their ceremonies, but I don't see one as I drive past.

In Dirkiesdorp the rain comes down hard, the town just manages to cling onto the edge of the main road by the tips of its porches. In Piet Retief I drive through pothole after pothole, red puddles like milky rooibos; and in Ermelo – past equally rain-rutted Iswepe and Sheepmoor – I get lost because the signboards are not very irie, despite the fact that Lucky Dube was born here.

I spend the night with family in Hendrina and leave the next morning with a bag full of tomatoes and rusks.

I'm in coal country now, the horizon dominated by the cooling towers of power stations. This part of the country always makes me a bit anxious. You can feel the pull of Johannesburg, the traffic gets more hectic and the landscape can be depressing. But without these ugly silhouettes and the constant scraping of coal from the ancient folds of the earth, the beer in Van Wyksvlei won't get cold, nor will the spotlights come on at Newlands.

Gauteng swallows the Condor, and soon a highway deposits me at the doorstep of a friend's house near the Wanderers. We eat out in the Chinese part of Cyrildene, my fortune cookie warning me to "be cautious and examine any business plan". In the morning, tuned to the Radio 2000 commentary on the final cricket test between India and South Africa, I aim for North West.

This is easier said than done because Joburg doesn't always let you go that easily. A combination of roadworks, heavy traffic and poor directions causes me to get lost somewhere in Roodepoort. I pull in at a shopping centre to get something to eat.

Finally I reach the Magaliesburg road and drive west, to Derby and Koster along the R509, the city finally off my back. Now, among

the mielie fields and silos, Landmark shops and tractor smoke, North West rises up around me with a smile on its face.

“You slice him open like this,” Vincent du Toit says matter-of-factly, running a bloody finger along the barbel's gut. “This one's still alive; they're very tough. Then you stuff it with coarse salt and you leave it in the bath. The salt draws out the muddy water. After that you put it in clean water and it sort of rinses itself out.”

I'm at Barberspan, between Sannieshof and Delareyville. About a week ago, at the Vanderkloof Dam, someone told me that a barbel's skin is so tough you need pliers to pull it off. Before that, in Van Wyksvlei, Vase de Kock explained how you should first cut off a barbel's head and leave it to bleed out overnight. Then you put it in fresh water for a while before rinsing it in vinegar water. (Vase also told me about an old-timer he knew who liked nothing more than baked terrapin for his birthday.)

Vincent and his wife Lynn are from Vereeniging and are regular visitors to Barberspan. The wind is blowing and the fish aren't biting. Another storm rolls in, the sun wrestling with the clouds as they all sink to the horizon, and by the time I put my short coil of sausage (bought at Lichtenburg's legendary Uitkyk Vleismark) on the gas braai, I have to take shelter under the rear door of the Condor to stay dry.

In the morning my only neighbour at the campsite invites me to his motorhome for coffee. Frans van der Merwe is from Pretoria, where his wife is resting at home, too frail to travel after recent hip troubles. It's just Frans

and his dog Tika, who turns 11 in two days' time.

Frans grew up near Barberspan. “Five miles from here,” he tells me as we dig into my stash of rusks. “My brother and I would sometimes put the horses to the cart at three in the morning to come fish here. When we'd filled a bag, we'd pack up and go home. My mother would get out the big pot, heat lard in it, cook the fish and put them in preserving jars. This way the fish would keep for months.”

Frans's motorhome used to be a panel wagon. He shows me the neat woodwork, the drawers and the cupboards. He says the alterations were done by a convicted murderer who learnt his trade in prison. Just before I leave, Frans shows me a little secret. He shows me his walking cane, with a warthog tusk as a handle. If you unscrew the cane at a special place, it reveals a long, narrow blade.

Klippan, Leeuwpan, Taaiboschpan, Deelpan. Pan country is flat country, and around here you see the silos of the next settlement from 15 km away. I'm driving north now, past signboards that say, “*Dis mos mielies!*” I drive past Grootfontein, Wonderfontein, Bakerville's diamond mines and farms with names like Knoffelfontein and Broekmansfontein.

At Broekmansfontein the landscape has changed. I stop and look around me: the Bushveld.

In Groot-Marico I pull in at Jouba Koffiehuis, where home-made cakes and meat pies await purchase. Engela Engelbrecht recommends River Still as a place to spend the night, so I follow a gravel road southwards out of town.

Jacques du Plessis welcomes me.

It's clear that the pace of life at River Still is about equal to Lance Armstrong's heart rate when he's watching a game of chess. The rustic resort is laid out on the banks of the Groot-Marico River. Jacques is busy digging new foundations for an extension to the main house – he wants to start a meditative retreat. I ask him about mampoer, a speciality around here. I follow him to the kitchen, where we each have a shot of delicious citrus mampoer – his own produce. I buy three bottles on the spot.

It's hot. After I've unpacked I head down to the river for a swim. Soon the kingfisher returns to its perch, used to my presence. It's midweek and River Still is quiet – weekends are when Gauties come here to revel in the Bushveld's anti-clock-watching ethos. Otter-like, I paddle down the deep, almost motionless stretch of water. I can see yellowfish in the clear water.

Despite the regular influx of visitors, Groot-Marico seems to have retained a roughshod charm. Other weekend refuges, like Clarens in the Free State and Dullstroom in Mpumalanga, have succumbed to the city influence. But the Bushveld isn't easily tamed. There's a certain edginess to the Bushveld – it's a kaross, not an @Home duvet.

The bird sounds I hear from the comfort of my stoep at River Still are also different: the garish racket of a Swainson's spurfowl, the chatty cackling of green wood-hoopoes, the endless broken-alarm-clock whirl of a crested barbet.

The next morning I stop in town again to visit the information office, run by Santa and Egbert van Bart. I find them on the stoep with their friends Harriet and Piet "Rympies" Swanepoel. Soon, coffee and a plate

of koeksisters materialise.

Piet finds out that I've never heard of Groot-Marico's legendary "water baboon". He's flummoxed; it's like I'd somehow missed the news about the moon landing. So he tells me about this shadowy figure, allegedly spotted in remote ravines around here. It's half-man, half-beast, or an ancestral ape-man...

Seven stories later I head further north. I'm aiming for Dwarsberg, then Dwaalboom, where I plan to spend the night. One of my mother's old school friends lives near there.

With the Groot-Marico River to my right I eventually run out of tar road. The landscape opens up; cattle appear. Some of the Brahmans mirror the white clouds above. This used to be a piece of Bophuthatswana, and even though there are a number of villages, almost none of them are marked on my map.

Way over in India the fourth day's play in Kolkata has come to an end. South Africa is hanging on desperately to avoid defeat. I stay tuned to Radio 2000 and the minister of finance, Pravin Gordhan, comes on air to give his budget speech.

Just past Debrak a bus is stuck in the mud. I stop. The driver, Samuel Mosine, tells me he's been here since early morning. The bus company promised to send a tow truck, but it hasn't arrived. The best I can do is to give him and his friend Nicky Khupari an apple each.

Samuel suggests that I call the bus service to complain. I dial the number stencilled on the bus and eventually get through to the right person. I tell him that the road is obstructed and that I can't get past (a white lie – the Condor can squeeze past). The man from the

bus company promises me that the tow truck is almost there.

Samuel wants to know whom he should contact to complain about the shocking condition of the roads he has to drive every day. I wish Pravin Gordhan were here right now to explain why the money allocated to the upkeep of roads never made it to this muddy stretch outside Debrak.

I cruise on, eventually reaching Dwarsberg, which is nothing more than a police station, petrol pump, shop and a couple of houses. I wind down my window to enquire about the correct turn-off to Dwaalboom.

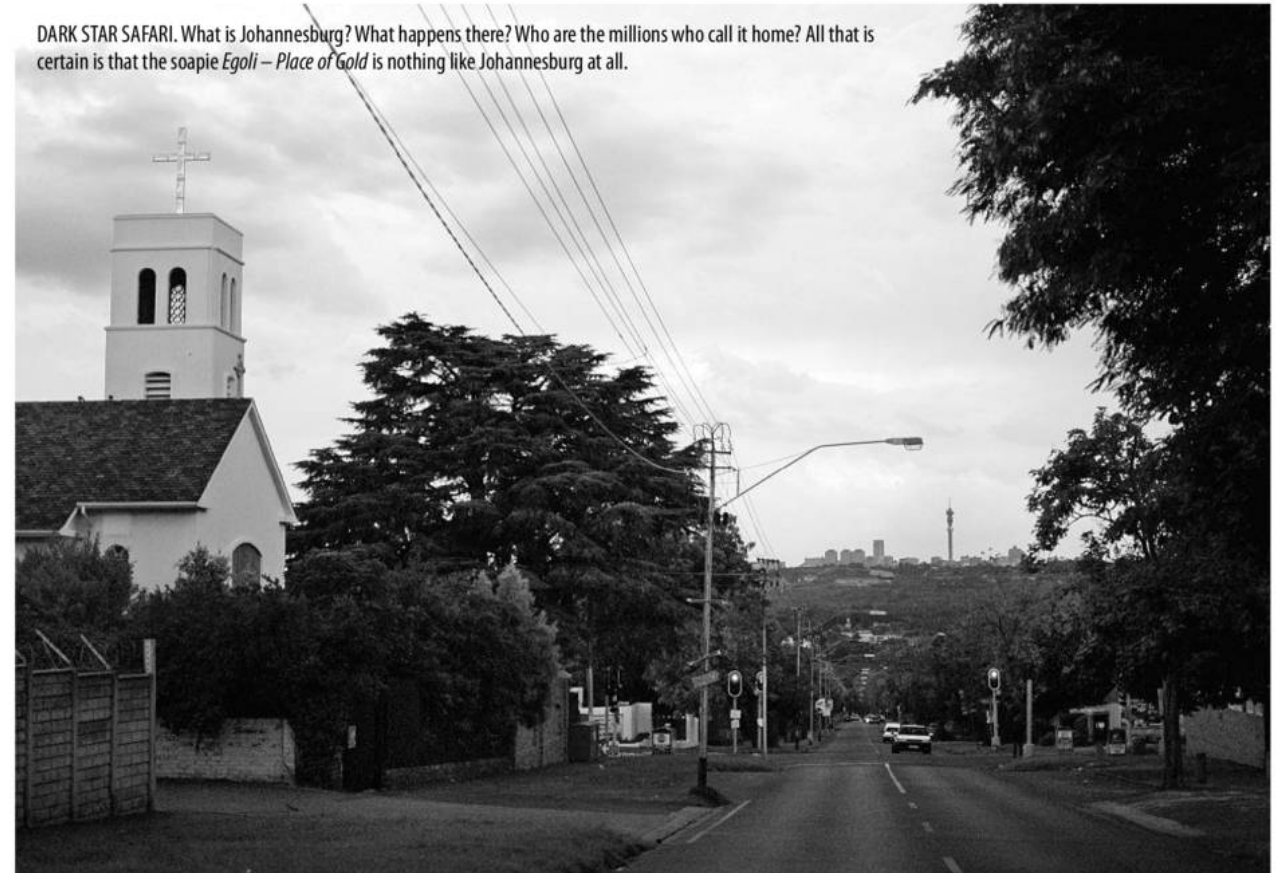
"Yes, right here, left there," the woman points, "and watch out for those *turflope*." No one in Cape Town will know what a *turfloop* is. A *turfloop* is a place where the road crosses a patch of black turf soil – exactly like where the bus got stuck. After heavy rains these sections become car traps.

Not much further I meet a young man named Ascension Kheswa, walking in the road. From what I can gather he has spent the day swapping regular light bulbs for energy-efficient ones. I give him a lift to Welverdiend village. What a cool name: Ascension.

Soon I reach the farm where my mom's friend Fransie Smit lives. Her husband Jurie offers to take me on a quick tour of their game farm. He tells me that many of the cattle farmers in this part of the Bushveld have switched to game farming.

We're in his Land Cruiser, elbows out the windows, sunset to the left. The sky is a freshly scraped hearth, the cirrus clouds are orange coals sucking oxygen. In the city people show you their homes when you visit for the first time. Farmers do the same, but with their whole

DARK STAR SAFARI. What is Johannesburg? What happens there? Who are the millions who call it home? All that is certain is that the soapie Egoli – Place of Gold is nothing like Johannesburg at all.



STUFFED HEAD EMPORIUM. The award-winning Uitkyk butchery in Lichtenburg sells excellent cuts of just about everything.

property. Here's the dam; there's the border fence; look at the wildebeest over there. A farm is the sum of parts, not all equally important, but all vital.

Earthed after a good night's rest and Fransie's great cooking, I head for Lephalale (Ellisras). I'm driving on an old military tar road, built years ago to provide quick access to the Botswanan border.

I was very young the last time I was in this part of the country. We were visiting another of my mom's friends, Yolanda, who lived near Rooibokkraal. I recall four things from that holiday: Jacob, Yolanda's husband, drank his coffee from a 1-litre enamel mug; we saw lion spoor while on a walk on the farm; Jacob gathered wood by driving over dead trees with his bakkie; and a man that we'd asked for directions gesticulated using a long, bloodied knife (he was busy making biltong).

Game farm after game farm after game farm. Inyati Camp, Msigi Safaris and Kassabella Lodge (owned by Kabous and Isabel). When I stop to take a photo somewhere, security company Mapogo Private Policing's yellow tiger logo growls at me from a warning sign. "Live and let live," it says. I move on, past warthogs, giraffe, two kinds of vultures, the reassuring silhouettes of rollers and donkeys meditating the living hell out of the midday sun.

The road is white and bright. Up ahead a shadow suddenly moves. What? I look again. It's a black mamba! Within seconds it has disappeared, gone in the grass, leaving me with nothing but the coldness of the Condor's air conditioning suddenly turning frosty.

As I cross the Matlabas River,

Harbhajan Singh traps Morné Morkel in front with one that pitched middle and straightened just enough. In distant Kolkata, the Proteas lose by an innings and 57 runs.

In Steenbokpan, three bakkies are parked in front of the Bosveld Pub & Grill. Inside, a tannie is playing a one-arm bandit. The pool table has Blue Bulls branding. A stuffed red hartebeest, warthog and impala look on glassily. I order a burger, which arrives with slices of bread instead of a roll, maybe a minor detail this far off the Sasko truck's route. The tannie wins R242 from the slot machine and I hit the road again.

Since construction started on the Medupi Power Station outside Lephalale, the town has changed dramatically. Entire neighbourhoods have sprung up overnight, like instant puddings, complete with DSTV dishes obediently pointing in the same direction.

Every second bakkie has a light on its roof: building contractors and construction workers. There's a busy, hurried feeling about the town. At the half-finished Lephalale Square shopping centre, customers at the Steers lick soft serves while a cement mixer grinds away next door.

I drive through town, further east, going nowhere in particular but ending up at the Bateleur Tented Safari Lodge. It's a great place, with comfortable tents and friendly staff. The next morning I go on a game drive and then the guides take me to a nearby farm, owned by Rudolph Britz, who also breeds dappled dachshunds. (Cute!) We climb a steep slope to where huge clay pots have been built into the cliffs. Apparently they date from the 1820s – some are still in good shape. They were most likely used for grain storage during times of conflict.

In the small town of Marken I hang out at Aldrie Shop, so named because it was started by a father, daughter and son – all three. I meet current owners Frieda and Jan Nortjé, and their dogs Stompie, Trixie and MacGyver. Customers come and go. The shop sells everything from bananas and beer to Minora blades and, off course, Lotto tickets. You can also bet on a Premiership soccer match, like the Newcastle vs "Crastal Palace" game, according to the whiteboard at the door.

From Marken to Tolwe (where an old man almost drives into me despite the fact that we're the only cars on the road) and from Tolwe to Suzie's Corner, where I hook a right and drive past Simson and the Schiermonikoog turn-off to Alldays, where I park in front of a bar called At se Gat.

At se Gat looks like trouble. Maybe it's the big corn cricket someone has squashed outside the front door. It's not owned by anyone called At. It's the kind of bar where stories – rough, freshly minted stories – can be heard for the price of a double rum.

Maybe Boos is holding court. Or Dirk, the owner. Depending on whose version of the story you choose to believe, Boos arrived at the hospital after the birth of his child bearing either a Russian and chips (Dirk's version) or a Just Juice and Nik Naks (Boos's version) – "in case the baby was hungry".

Steyn, who drills for water, doesn't talk much. His dust- and sun-blasted face hints at a tough day. He's accident-prone. Someone once drove over him, he's burst an eardrum three times, and he walked away from a microlight crash. At the moment his drill truck is stuck in the mud, with little hope of it being pulled out.



BOSMAN'S BUSHVELD. Egbert van Bart's impressive beard makes him look a bit like Oom Schalk Lourens, one of author Herman Charles Bosman's best-known characters. Egbert and his wife Santa run the tourism office in Groot-Marico. Coffee, koeksisters and tall stories are free.



FIRM HAND. Jurie Smit's Tswana nickname is "Maboa", which means "man with lots of hair". Jurie and his wife Fransie have a game farm near Dwaalboom.

Boos tells us about the time “the women” wanted to bath and Steyn decided to assist them by getting the donkey boiler to burn faster so that they could have hot water. There was, as always, a party going on. Steyn, bare-chested, walked to the donkey to throw what he thought was a cup of paraffin onto the fire, but it turned out to be petrol, so the donkey’s chimney blew skywards and Steyn lost his eyelashes and chest hair and some skin, too.

While Boos tells this story, Steyn just sits there, delicately stirring the ice in his drink using his fingertips, as if he’s trying to take its pulse.

Boos and someone else, maybe it was Lelik, put Steyn in a bath and started making plans to take him to hospital. Started, because first they had to pack a cool box for the long trip ahead.

Once they had packed the cool box they loaded Steyn into the brown kombi and headed for the hospital, where the doctor who used to be a vet treated him with that foam stuff they put on severe burns.

Later, Boos walked down the hall in search of Steyn. He saw someone familiar in a bed, but it wasn’t Steyn, it was another friend called Rottweiler.

“Don’t worry, you’ll meet Rottweiler later,” Boos says. “He’s the kind of guy who can *bliksem* an entire rugby team, but that day in the hospital he was *tjanking* because a scorpion had stung him.”

I decide to go to bed before Rottweiler arrives.

South Africans know Dubai and Toronto and Taipei, but how well do we know our own country?

A great ramble like the one I embarked upon is something every South African with a car and spare

cash should tackle at some stage. It’s not the distance that matters; it’s the time.

Three weeks and 5425 km after I left Cape Town I arrive at Musina. I stop at PostNet and send a few postcards to thank the friends and family with whom I stayed during my long trip.

On such a tour you rely heavily on the goodwill of people. You also realise that it’s not necessarily the overflowing dams or thundering waterfalls you’ll remember long afterwards, but more likely the gratitude of Magrieta Michael, who had hitch-hiked to Britstown to attend a friend’s funeral. I gave her a ride back to De Aar.

You also relearn the value of driving slowly on a road with many potholes. You learn new degrees of hotness (hot, hotter, Van Wyksvlei). You see amazing place names: Beauty (which isn’t terribly scenic, sadly), Voëltjie-se-Werf (“little bird’s yard”), Beskuitfontein (What?! Rusks actually stream from the earth?). You learn how to clean a barbel, and how to tell the difference between a British Alpine and a Toggenburg milch goat (a Toggenburg looks friendlier, I think).

The long, solitary hours on the road also make you think about things you haven’t thought of in years. Childhood things, like fixing your own bicycle tyre. Painful things you thought you had long since locked away. Happy times that make you smile without realising it.

You see snakes and rainbows and baobabs. The sun moving shadows across the landscape. Rain upon everything. Dust lives in your eyes. You dream of buzzards’ shadows and sun-bleached signboards splattered with microscopic cracks like those on your own skin. And the dotted line, stretching endlessly into the distance: the road, always the road.



THE THERAPY OF SILENCE. A Bushveld sunset like this one on the farm Somerset near Dwaalboom is worth 10 hours in the psychologist’s chair.

How to feel small

WORDS & PICTURE
SAM REINDERS

In the geological scheme of things, change happens very slowly. Rocks become what they are over millions, even billions, of years, outlasting natural disasters, climate change and the rise and fall of civilisations.

You're very aware of this fact when you see the Giant's Playground, near Keetmanshoop in southern Namibia, for the first time.

From a distance, the otherworldly piles of boulders look like they're part of a cosmic game of Jenga, inexplicably interrupted. When you get nearer, the rocks dwarf everything in their presence. Take an even closer look and you'll see creatures that have made the rock labyrinth their home: insects, lizards, dassies...

The dolerite formations have their origins about 180 million years ago – fairly recent, in geological time – when magma coursed up from the belly of the earth and solidified. The boulders have been sculpted by wind and water ever since.

The beauty of the landscape lies in its starkness. You're alone with your thoughts, aware of the silence, the scale of the natural world and the weight of time.

The play of light and shadow is a photographer's dream. The rocks glow orange as the sun starts to set and the shadows turn darker than a line from a Tom Waits song.

We'll come and go, but the Giant's Playground will remain.

