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OCTOBER–NOVEMBER 2025

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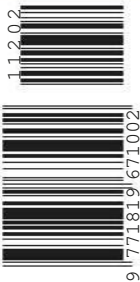
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go!
#202

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"If you're prepared to stretch your 4x4's legs, the remote national parks of North Luangwa and Nyika will reward you with rivers and waterfalls, miombo woodland, mopane and montane forests, rare animals and lifer bird sightings. And, above all, solitude!"

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"These broad-shouldered crags intercept high clouds and wring out their moisture in rain, snow, frost and mist. In a wet summer, the land can look like the Scottish Highlands. In winter, its bones lie bare."

54 THE KRUGER TRAIL

"I don't turn to look at the buffalo again. How far off were they? A hundred metres? Less? Although I feel remarkably calm, that sound of the guns being loaded has twisted my stomach in a knot..."

88 RHODES

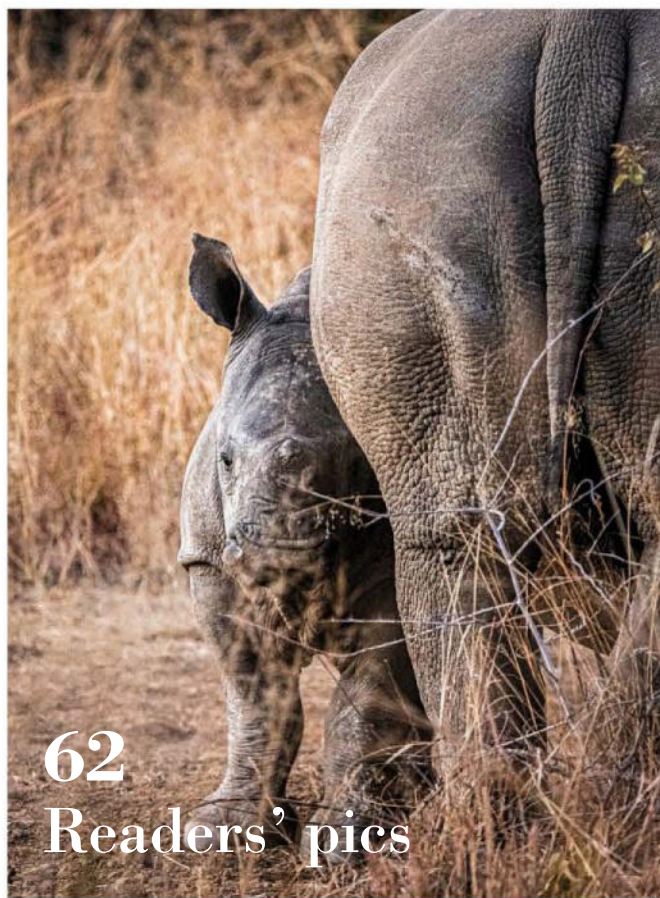
"The village still looks the same. The gin-clear Bell River murmurs past and there are still more sheep than vehicles in the dusty streets. Somewhere you'll have to hit the brakes to avoid a chicken scratching around."



COVER PICTURE
STUART BUTLER
Road to Nyika National Park,
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"There's an air of bygone history; of mystery and memories gently simmering beneath the oak leaves. The scent of apples, of soil and grit; the intrigue of generations of families living off the earth in this verdant valley."

130 AFRICA AT ITS BEST

Yes, the silent ride

does make awkward silences more awkward.



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V O L V O



Pierre exploring Nyika National Park in Malawi on a hired mountain bike.

Turn it off!

everything must always be available, things had lost their taste.

I decided back then that when I came home to South Africa, I'd happily sacrifice some convenience and let the seasons guide me, in pursuit of food that actually tasted like food. Choose that path and there will be many, many delicious things to savour in life, like those ugly but supremely tasty little bananas I bought for a few bucks from a street vendor in Mpika in Zambia, and the sweet mangoes on the beach at Lake Malawi...

The good news is that sacrificing convenience and being guided by nature also applies to holiday destinations. Make that little extra effort, visit at the right time of year and you might find yourself in a properly wild place like North Luangwa National Park in Zambia (p 32), which is only accessible to visitors from June to the end of October.

In North Luangwa, you won't be crowded by 50 other game-viewing vehicles at a special sighting, and you won't have to contend with your campsite neighbour's boombox blaring Sabrina Carpenter. You also won't be able to order a cortado or watch the Springboks on SuperSport.

I'm fine with that.

When you choose a place to travel to, you can choose "always available, always on", or you can slow down and surrender to the rhythm of nature. I'm going with the latter. Over and out, until the next issue!

Years ago, in a previous career and another life, I moved to the US with my family and lived and worked in Washington DC for three years. We regularly shopped at our local Costco supermarket (a bit like Makro, but on steroids).

I remember you could buy any fruit or vegetable available to mankind, imported from all over the world, regardless of the season: giant bananas, unblemished peaches, blood-red tomatoes... Everything looked beautiful but tasted like flour mixed with the wind. The produce was cultivated (and treated) to stay "fresh" for weeks on a container ship. In a consumer world where

DON'T MISS OUR NEXT ISSUE!

The December/January magazine will be on sale at retailers from 21 November 2025.

Pierre

PIERRE STEYN

PSteyn@media24.com

BEHIND THE SCENES

We hear you're a bit of an archaeology fan...

I grew up in George and the town museum was my favourite place. I spent many afternoons there with my dad, exploring the exhibitions. It's wonderful how archaeologists can bring the stories of long-gone people and places back to life.

I'd love to visit Türkiye one day, specifically the neolithic settlement of Göbekli Tepe and the underground city of Derinkuyu. Ethiopia's rock-hewn churches at Lalibela are also high on the list, as is the Iron Age village of Chysauster in England.

Is there a story Tim told you that didn't make the cut? He mentions his run-in with a herd of elephants, but he also had another exciting animal encounter... He was doing

research in Botswana and had a bit of cellphone reception, which was rare in the area. He decided to call his brother and was chatting away when he saw an animal in a nearby bush. He thought it was a warthog and out of curiosity walked closer, still on the phone. But when he came around the bush he saw it was a leopard. Needless to say, their conversation was cut short!

What's your favourite travel destination in South Africa?

Wilderness. Growing up, I spent hundreds of hours on Leentjiesklip Beach, working as a lifeguard. The long, open beach, with the mouth of the Kaaibans River and the waterfall on one side, and the scent of milkwood trees in spring... Those things are close to my heart.

Your next adventure? Tim has invited me back to Gwalala Hill to document the work he and his team are doing there. After that, I have a motorbike adventure planned: My dad and I will follow the course of the Orange-Fish River Tunnel – the third longest continuous aqueduct in the world, which moves water from the Gariep Dam to the Eastern Cape; from Oviston to the outlet at the Teebus River.

What's always in your travel bag?

A quality rain jacket and a poncho. I hate getting caught off-guard by the weather. Also a big roll of duct tape... I've repaired a kayak, camera gear, backpacks, tent poles and shoes with it...



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COMPILED BY **MARTINETTE LOUW**



**WINNING
LETTER**

▲ Smile, you're on camera

In March this year, we travelled to Mabuasehube on the Botswana side of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. We were camping at Mpayathutlwa Pan with our friends when a pride of young lions showed up.

The grass was high after good rain and the lions were obscured. One of the young males was playing with something – at first we thought it might be the tail of a wildebeest from a kill. But then we saw that it was a camera! We're not sure where he'd found it.

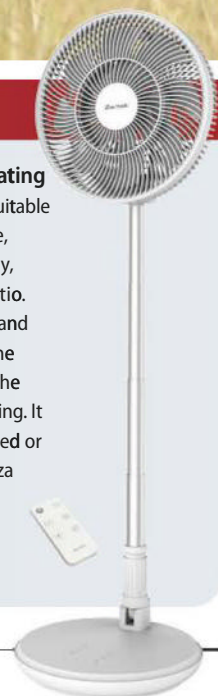
The lion eventually dropped the camera in the road and we retrieved it. We tried to activate the SD card, but it seemed to be corrupted and we couldn't download any images.

FRANS BREWIS, Somerset West

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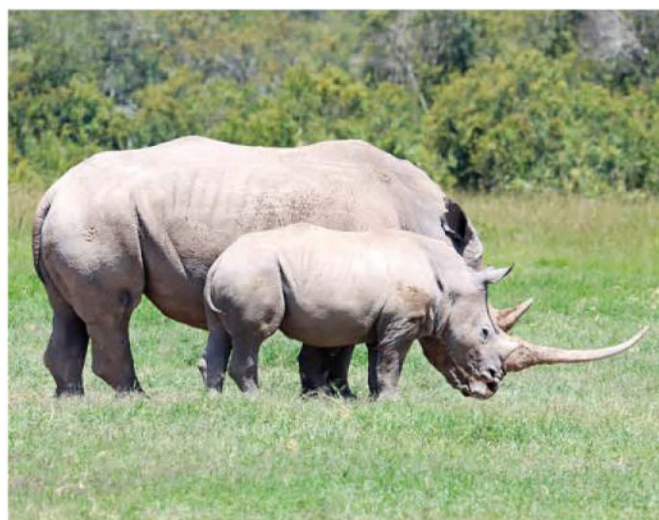
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▲ West Coast nibble

In December 2024, I was riding my e-bike on the beach at Paternoster one morning, with my camera in my backpack. The fishing boats had already come in and there were crayfish heads strewn on the sand. The kelp gulls were in heaven. I managed to capture this shot of a gull with a head in its bill. I wonder if it has a crayfish permit!

REGAL COLYN, Cape Town



▲ One day when I'm big...

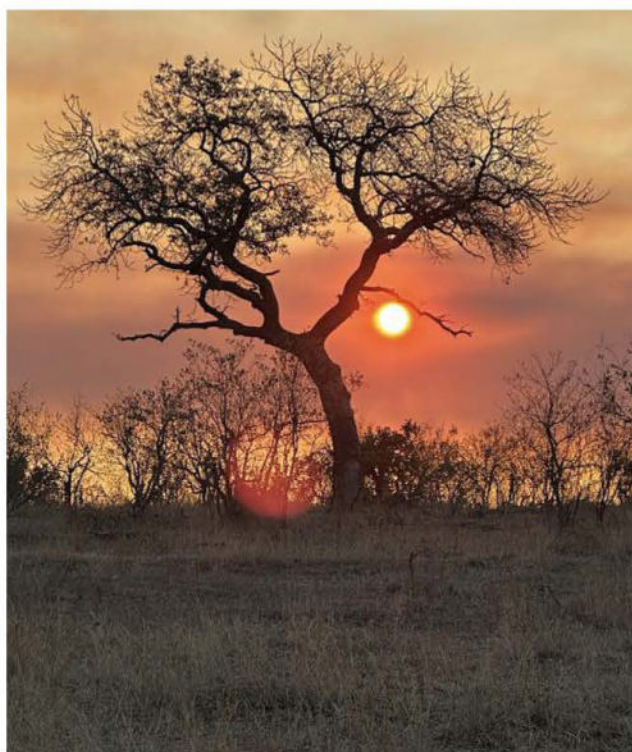
In May this year, we visited the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in central Kenya. I photographed this rhino mother with her baby during a game drive.

I was impressed by how seriously the Kenyan anti-poaching units take wildlife protection. When we saw animals, we'd wait a while for photo opportunities. During these moments, a guard almost always seemed to materialise as if from nowhere.

I got the impression that the park management works with the people who live along its borders to conserve nature, thereby improving the living standards and education opportunities for the local communities.

The rangers treat every animal as if it's their own – they'll even intervene if a rhino calf is threatened by a predator. This little guy has a great chance of becoming just as majestic as his mom.

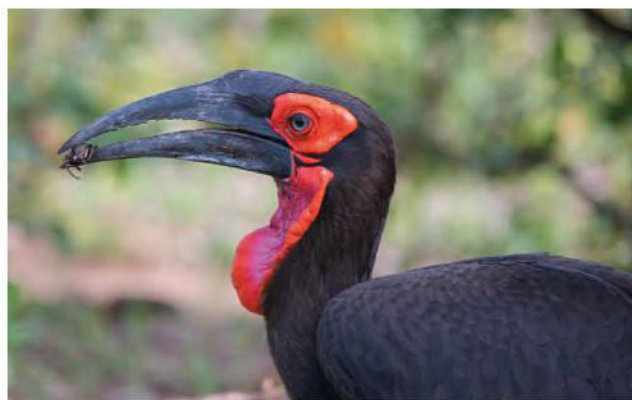
GERHARDT KOORTS, Randburg



▲ Silence in silhouette

I took this photo with my iPhone during a short but memorable July holiday in Mjejane Game Reserve near the Kruger Park. I was with friends and this lonely tree against the sunset made us all fall silent for moment. The whole scene – the deep shades of orange and gold, the silhouette of the tree – emanated a sense of calm that's hard to put into words.

DUTOIT MOUTON, Durbanville



▲ Breakfast on the run

With its striking red face and commanding presence, this southern ground hornbill strode through the Kruger Park near Shingwedzi. It had caught some sort of insect and was carrying its catch in its bill.

This iconic bird is often seen in family groups patrolling the grasslands; it plays a vital role in the ecosystem. It's a rare sight for many – the fact that I managed to snap one mid-meal was a true photographic treat.

ELEANOR HATTINGH, Krugersdorp



< Thanks for the road trip!

Sophia van Taak's writing in the new *go! Namibia* guide often put a smile on my face. In June this year, I travelled to Namibia to hike the eight-day Naukluft Trail in the Namib-Naukluft National Park. Unfortunately, I had to pull out of the hike a few days before because I fell ill. But we'd driven all the way, so we decided to make the best of it.

Sophia's article, "Cracked, but still a gem", inspired us to go explore Etosha National Park. The maps, accommodation options and information in the guide really proved invaluable as we travelled north. The pages were soon dog-eared from use!

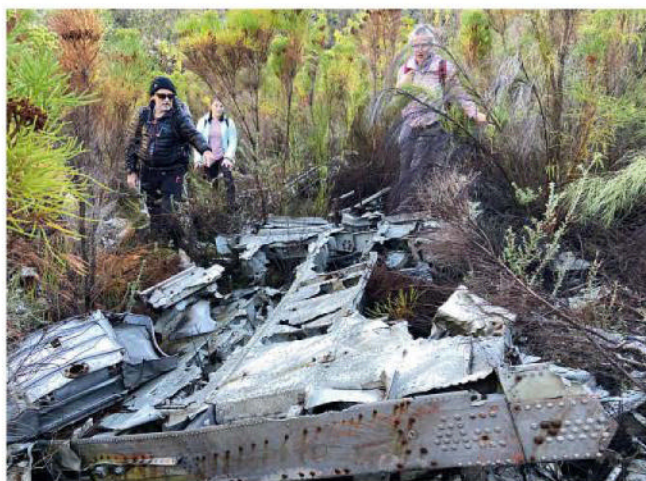
Etosha was great. If you haven't been to the park and you have no idea what it might have looked like before, the "decline" of the facilities won't bother you as much. We found the accommodation inside the park to be neat and clean. The wild animals brought us so much joy, and the waterhole at Halali (pictured) was a spectacle at night.

Thank you, Sophia, for reminding us not to focus on the bad and to rather celebrate the wonder of nature.

TRIX ROUX, Bloemfontein



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^ Hike to history

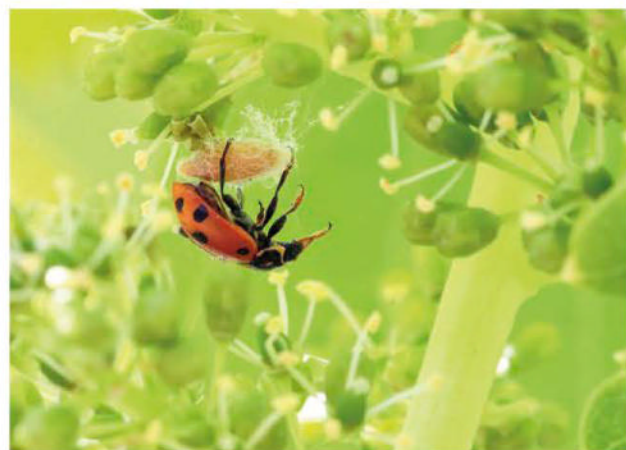
On 8 August 1963, in poor weather, the Shackleton 1718 military aircraft crashed in a remote valley called Stettynskloof, in the mountains between Villiersdorp and Worcester. Thirteen people died on impact. Pieces of the wreck are still visible – a quiet testimony to the tragedy that unfolded here years ago.

I'm interested in aviation and the outdoors. So, on a beautiful winter's day in July, I hiked with a group to see the wreck. Pictured here are Paul Coulthard, Nikita Roux and Linda Venter.

Starting from the wall of the Stettynskloof Dam, it's about a 13 km return hike to get to the wreck. The path is well trodden and takes you through fields of fynbos full of sunbirds and mountain streams running down the cliffs.

It's a really special historical spot in South Africa. I don't think there are many places where you can see an aircraft wreck at the original crash site so many years later.

RUDOLPH SCHARNECK, Rawsonville



^ Ladybird or zombie?

I took this photo on our family farm in De Doorns. The fluffy object under the ladybird is the cocoon of *Dinocampus coccinellae*, a kind of parasitic wasp.

The adult wasp deposits an egg (and a virus) inside the ladybird. When the larva hatches, it starts to eat the ladybird from the inside. After a while, the larva breaks through the ladybird's abdomen and weaves a cocoon beneath the insect. The larva then turns into a pupa and uses the ladybird as a shield. The virus paralyses the ladybird and causes involuntary contractions of its wings to deter predators.

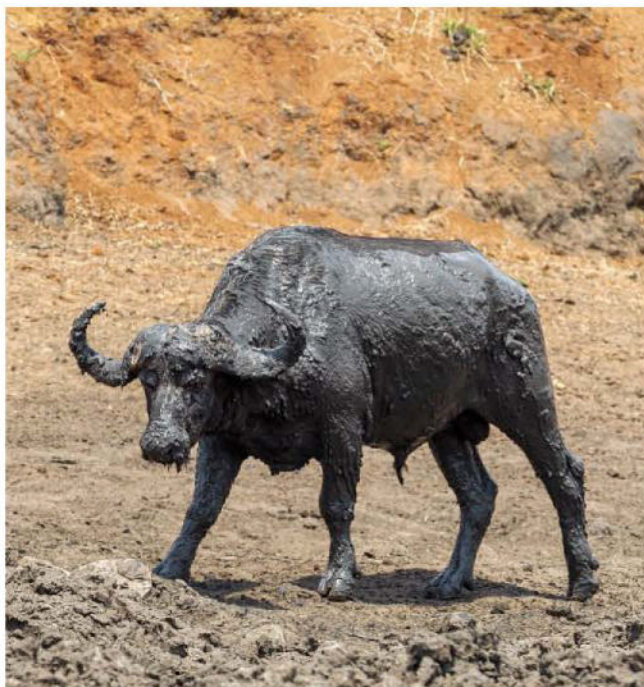
A week later, when the wasp is fully developed, it flies off. In 25% of cases, the ladybird actually recovers and can be used as a host again for another wasp! How crazy? The insect world is full of surprises.

SUMARIE ROSSOUW, De Doorns

▼ Mud bath

At the end of October last year, I went to the Kruger Park for a long weekend. One morning we visited Jones Dam, which is just off the S36 near Skukuza. A huge herd of buffalo were enjoying what was left of the water and the soft mud. As they trudged off, I singled out this fellow who had dipped himself properly. He was covered from nose to tail!

STU BOWIE, Centurion



▲ Little but fierce

This is a photo from one of my most amazing wilderness experiences. We visited Serengeti National Park in Tanzania in July 2024. On a guided game drive in the Ndutu region, we came around a bend and heard something calling from the bushes. The guide pulled over and a lioness appeared with a tiny cub in her mouth. She was moving her cubs closer to the pride, which was about 500 m away. She returned again and again to retrieve her five cubs.

We have travelled widely, all over Africa, but this is a sighting that will stay with me forever.

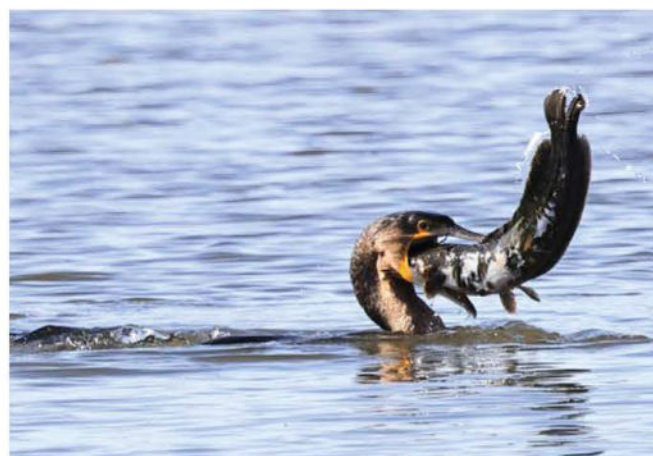
VIOLET VAN ZYL, Willowvale



▲ Blue crane celebration

I photographed these two silly blue cranes next to the R27 between Velddrif and Vredenburg on the West Coast. They were right next to the road behind a farm fence. It was an overcast, slightly rainy day and they were playing with clumps of soil by throwing them in the air and hopping around. We really enjoyed their antics.

SANETTE SMIT, Vredenburg



▲ One-way ticket

I watched this African darter at the Sonstraal Dam in Durbanville as it tried and tried to catch a fish. It finally succeeded, but then it struggled to swallow its prey. It was interesting to see how the darter's throat expanded to accommodate its meal, which it finally managed to keep down.

RENÉ BOSHOFF, Durbanville



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



▲ Strange stripes

CHARLENE PATTERSON from Ermelo writes: I saw this female kudu in October 2024 on the S41 gravel road near Satara in the Kruger Park. Apparently, she's seen frequently in the area and doesn't seem to be part of a herd. It was the first time I'd seen a kudu with such unique stripes – what causes this colouring?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN says: The white spots might be the result of a condition called leucism, which is caused by a recessive allele that leads to low levels of pigment in the body. Leucism occurs in grades of severity – the animal can be nearly all white or just have white spots. The condition shouldn't be mistaken for albinism, which is a complete lack of pigment, even in the eyes.

Indeed, this kudu cow is a Kruger celebrity. We discussed her condition in issue #183 and photos of her are often posted on social media, including pics of when she was a young calf. Her longevity goes to show that leucistic animals aren't necessarily more vulnerable to predators.

It's unlikely that the cow is moving about all on her own. Kudus are relatively social and not territorial. They form "home ranges" that they share with other individuals. Cows and calves form loose family herds that can consist of up to 14 individuals.

Cows tend to stay with the herd they were born into, but herds will often split into smaller groups if they become too big. When this happens, the home range is also divided among the groups. Bulls form bachelor groups, but will join the family herds during breeding season.

To date, there's no proof that leucistic animals are rejected by their herd or actively driven out.



▲ Two for the price of one?

PIETER BROERE from Pretoria writes: I took this photo at Lake Panic near Skukuza in the Kruger Park. I only noticed later that the pied kingfisher was holding two fish in its bill. Did it catch both at once? If so, how?!

Bird expert LUKAS NIEMAND says: There have been recorded instances of pied kingfishers catching two or more fish during a single dive. This technique is only used when visibility under water is very good and the prey is abundant and small (under 6 cm).

Hunting more than one fish at once is probably more common among birds that occur near big dams and lakes, like Kariba between Zimbabwe and Zambia, where they mainly feed on small kapenta fish. Here, they often hunt far from land (or any perch) and are forced to swallow fish in flight.

They can swallow small prey while hovering or flying; with bigger prey they usually head to a perch where they beat the fish against a hard surface (like a branch) until it's dead.

Another possible explanation here is that the pair photographed had a nest in the vicinity. The male on the left (the double breast band is faintly visible; females have a single band) might have brought one or both of the fish to his mate as part of a courtship ritual.



▲ Who goesss there?

ELIZE BOTHA from Stellenbosch writes: We recently camped at Leopard Trail Guest Farm near Bonnievale. We saw this snake strangling a frog at a waterfall. What kind of snake is it?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN says: This is a brown water snake. They're found all over South Africa, except in the Northern Cape and the Limpopo River Valley.

In general, the species is light to dark brown, with salmon-pink to yellowish underparts. In the Western Cape, the dorsal colour is usually much darker. Another characteristic to look out for is its bulging eyes and round pupils.

The brown water snake occurs in rivers, streams and wetlands. They're active at night and are good swimmers, but by day they're often seen near shady streams.

The snake kills its prey by constriction. It hunts frogs, tadpoles, fish, geckos and occasionally baby rodents. It's harmless to people and often mistaken for an olive snake or yellow-bellied house snake.



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CHECK THIS





During a stay at Kalahari Trails Meerkat Sanctuary (kalahari-trails.co.za) in the Northern Cape, I was entertained by the playful and cheeky antics of these three meerkat youngsters! They have so much character and make wonderful subjects to photograph. See more of my work here: braemehollandphotography.com

PICTURE BRAEME HOLLAND



Hush now...

When last did you experience real silence and true darkness? Both seem to be on the brink of extinction, writes **Toast Coetzer**.

ILLUSTRATION **NICOLENE LOUW**

The other day, I was on a group tour and we were all sitting around the campfire. Above us, the leaves of a mopane tree moved against the night sky, the Milky Way stretched from horizon to horizon, and the Southern Cross bowed like the sails of an invisible ship. Sparks rose and tendrils of smoke curled from the burning logs.

But then someone approached from the tents with their headlamp on. It wasn't any old headlamp – it was one of those modern gadgets that curves across

half your forehead and shines so brightly it could guide a Boeing in to land. When the man reached the fire, his beam pierced the smoke column and moved from one face to the next, blinding us like escaped prisoners peering back at the spotlight sweeping from the guard tower.

Gone was the campfire atmosphere, the subtlety of the sparks. My eyes smarted with the afterburn of the bright light that cut into my retinas like a laser. I asked the man to please switch it off and he did so, apologetically.

We had to wait a while for the darkness to settle around us again, for

the light in the sky to descend onto the rocks and tree trunks, so we could become one with the night and with nature.

This is just one example of how light pollution can disturb our relationship with the natural world. Most of us live in cities or towns, where streetlights burn throughout the night. We have security lights that turn on automatically when a cat comes around a corner, or when a vehicle pulls into the driveway. Inside our homes, each room is illuminated by the latest energy-saving LED bulbs. Even the salad and tomato sauce get lit up the moment you open the fridge door for another slice of yesterday's milk tart.

Zoom out further and look at your town or city from above – like from an aircraft window – and you'll see bright highways linking other clusters of light: the parking area of a mall maybe; the floodlights of a sports stadium; or the tower lights that guard over townships like spaceships to make sure everyone can find their way home safely.

Go even further, to the command deck of the International Space Station, where a lonely pair of astronauts can see the densely populated places on earth – Europe, India, China, Japan, the east coast of America, even Gauteng – clusters of light that glow and grow and never stop shining.

The world wasn't always this bright. You had the sun during the day, but if you wanted a glow at night, you had to live near a volcano. You could follow the flight of a firefly and admire it for its ability to bring forth a golden hue from deep within. Lightning might set the veld ablaze, and later someone discovered that if you strike two rocks together, a spark will ignite a handful of dry grass, which you can build into a campfire. Or, if you rub two sticks together until hot, you can make a coal that becomes a cooking fire so you can braai rabbit ribs, a mielie, three field mice on a stick.

Much later, the industrial revolution gave us electricity, and the world would never know true darkness again. Now

Let's switch off the electric lights every now and then. Switch off the machines. Let the aircon rest and give the fan a break.

trains could tunnel through the night like moles while passengers sat cosily inside, bathed in light, drinking port and playing cards.

A few decades later, you could board a plane and fly to another continent in half a day. You could press a button above your head to cast a light on the book in your lap, or to call the flight attendant to bring you a bottle of water. Sparkling, please.

Along with the light that flowed forth from the engine rooms of the revolution, also came sound. There was the whistle of the steam locomotives, the rumble of trucks carrying copper from the Congo, the drone of air conditioners in the streets of our cities where traffic never ceases... The only time it all fell silent was for that brief three-month period in 2020, the Year of the Virus.

As with light, sound brings a sense of safety. The television talks over the absence of other people in the house; a place where a family once gathered is now filled with the loud commentary of a random rugby match on the other side of the world.

Millions of people no longer know silence or darkness. When they come across one or the other – or worse, both at the same time – it's terrifying, something that inspires fear. In the darkness, a criminal waits. In silence, a con man is making plans to cheat you out of your pension.

Nature didn't adapt to the new order

of noise and light as easily as we did. Moths still mistake every outdoor light for the moon; and leopards drink at the Nossob waterhole in the Kgalagadi under the glare of a spotlight while thousands of people watch its every move via a webcam on the Internet, which doesn't know what it means to sleep.

Migratory birds in North America clatter into skyscrapers when they try to navigate using the stars, lured off course by brightly lit office floors where computer screens cast a blue sheen over deserted chairs while a lone cleaner roars back and forth with a vacuum machine.

I also have a headlamp, but I prefer the dimmest setting. Sometimes, I also drive on district roads at night and my car's headlights blind a poor scrub hare, or a trio of bat-eared foxes, an innocent nightjar. At home, I sometimes play my music too loudly, so that the crickets and frogs outside fall silent.

We'll never escape the light and noise. But let's seek out silence and darkness where we can – while we still can. For your next holiday, go find a stretch of veld, a mountain, a dark plain that rolls out to the horizon. Find a stoep where you can hear a jackal calling, or an owl; where you can see the silhouette of a bat against the Milky Way and appreciate a shooting star among all of Elon's satellites.

And let's switch off the electric lights every now and then. Switch off the machines. Let the aircon rest and give the fan a break. Put a candle on the windowsill and bathe in its glow. Wait for a full moon and walk a path you know well. Make a fire, just big enough to braai a piece of sausage, and let it burn down to coals, then ash.

Let's use the silence to say something meaningful to each other, to listen to ourselves, to wonder. Let's pull the darkness around us like a blanket, allow it to comfort us. May our inner light shine instead, and the flame of our own thoughts flicker and pulse. In this way, may we remember who we are again.

IN BRIEF

COMPILED BY VANIA JOOSTE



Rare underwater habitat discovered in KZN

It's hard to imagine that there are still new things to be discovered, but here we are...

One of those recent discoveries was a substantial rhodolith bed, which was found off the coast of iSimangaliso Wetland Park in northern KZN.

What is a rhodolith bed? It's a marine habitat formed by accumulations of rhodoliths – unattached, nodular structures made up of red algae that grow around a core (like a shell fragment or pebble) and roll around on the seafloor. Like coral reefs and seagrass meadows, these beds play an important role in the marine ecosystem – they offer a place for many animals, from invertebrates to fish, to find shelter and safe breeding sites.

Only one other rhodolith bed has been recorded in South Africa, off the coast of the Eastern Cape near the Kei River. The algae are fragile and grow slowly – a bed can take centuries to recover from disturbance. They're threatened by overfishing and pollution.

This new rhodolith bed was spotted by scientists on a research expedition for a non-profit organisation called Wildtrust.



TOE THE (FISHING) LINE

Just like you can't hunt an impala or drive more than 50 km/h in the Kruger Park, rules apply in the various Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) along our coast. If you're a saltwater angler or water sports enthusiast, you can download a digital MPA map from Google Earth to get an idea of what you may and may not do. The map shows catch-and-release zones (yellow) and no-fishing zones (red).

How? Visit mpaday.org/boundaries-and-zonation for instructions about how to download the map for your tablet or smartphone.

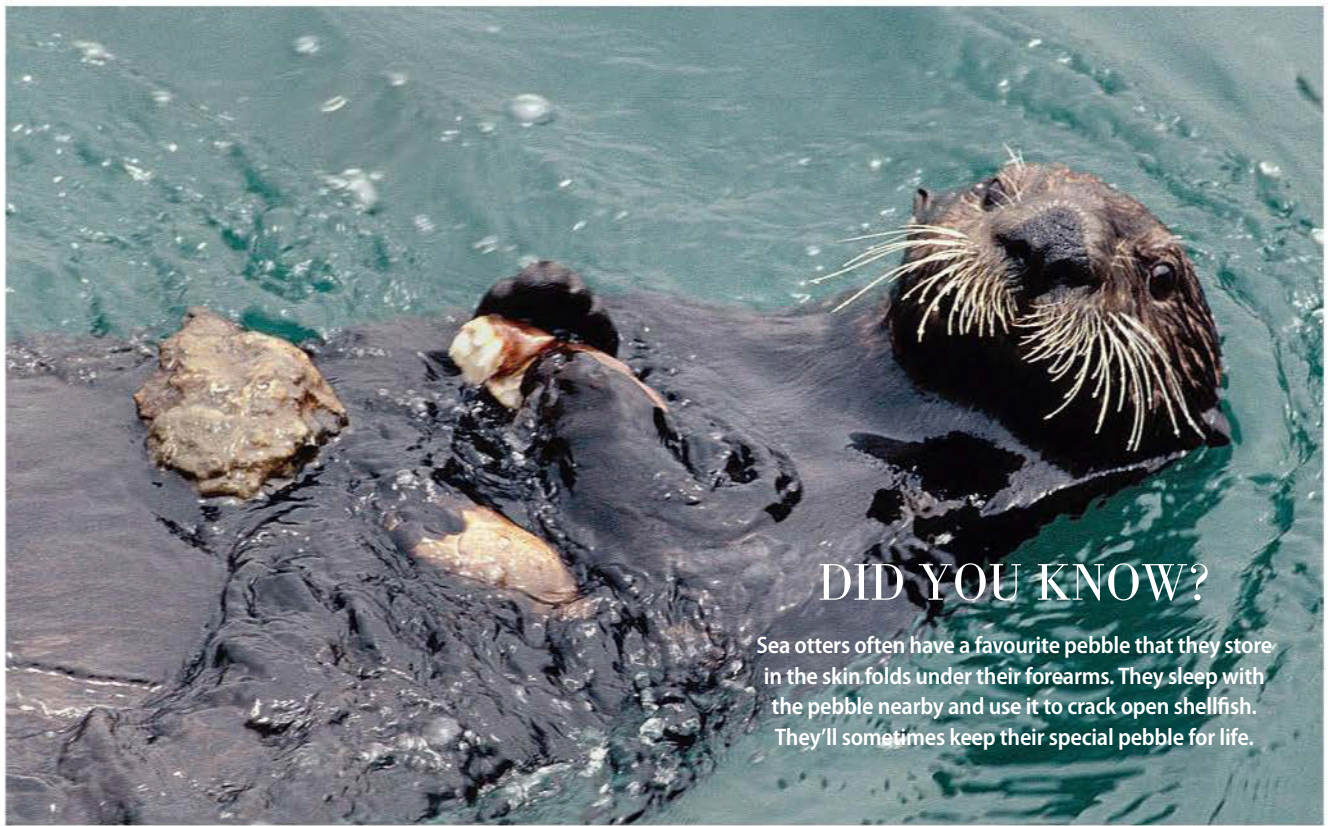


The story of an ellie orphan

Not sure what to do on Friday night? Get some tissues, find a comfy spot on the couch and watch *Diary of an Elephant Orphan* – a documentary about Khanyisa, a three-month-old albino elephant that was orphaned after being caught in a snare.

Khanyisa spent four years at the Hoedspruit Elephant Rehabilitation and Development Trust, the only centre for orphaned elephants in South Africa. The documentary, which won multiple awards, covers her progress.

Watch the trailer: Search for *Diary of an Elephant Orphan* on YouTube
Stream the full version: eventive.org



DID YOU KNOW?

Sea otters often have a favourite pebble that they store in the skin folds under their forearms. They sleep with the pebble nearby and use it to crack open shellfish. They'll sometimes keep their special pebble for life.

GALLO/GETTYIMAGES.COM



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NIGHT WATCH



Three supermoons to end 2025

The last three full moons of 2025 will be slightly bigger and brighter – they're classified as supermoons. The moon's orbit around the earth is elliptical, which means the moon moves closer and further away every month. When the closest point of the orbit – the perigee – coincides with a full moon, the moon can appear about 14% bigger and 30% brighter than usual.

We've been down this road before, but it's worth mentioning again: The term "supermoon" was coined in the 1970s by a sensationalist US astrologer called Richard Nolle, who pseudo-scientifically linked the phenomenon to earthquakes and storms. There's no evidence to suggest that any of his claims are true...

At first, astronomers ignored the term, but it was popularised by the media over the years and now even NASA uses it to explain why the moon sometimes looks extra big and bright.

The upcoming supermoons are listed here in order of the number of hours between full moon and its perigee. The biggest full moon for 2025 is the "Milk Moon" on 5 November: It will be 356 978 km from earth. The official full moon will be at 3.19 pm and the moon will reach its perigee nine hours later, just after midnight.

The full moon in December will be similar but slightly smaller. It's known as the "Springbok Moon" and will be at its fullest at 1.14 am on 5 December, at a distance of 357 219 km from earth, about 12 hours after perigee.

The third biggest supermoon for 2025 will be the "Whale Moon" of 7 October, which will reach full moon at 5.47 am at a distance of 361 455 km from earth, 33 hours from its perigee.

Each of the supermoon names represents an aspect of our South African heritage. Visit cfah.org.za/fullmoon to learn more.

– Willie Koorts



AMPHIBIANS



COURTNEY HUNDERMARK

The weird and wonderful rain frog

Picture a quiet, misty morning in the dunes of the West Coast, with the ocean rumbling nearby. A soft, mournful whistle, repeated every few seconds, breaks the silence. You might be inclined to imagine the sound coming from a bird, but no, what you're hearing is the characteristic call of one of South Africa's strangest creatures: the rain frog.

These grumpy-looking frogs with rotund bodies and short, clumsy limbs live below ground, where they absorb moisture from the soil or from dew cast by morning mist. As the name implies, the frogs generally only come to the surface after heavy rain and are seldom observed otherwise.

Classified in the genus *Breviceps*, a total of 19 different rain frog species have been documented in South Africa. They occur in a diverse array of habitats, including deserts, coastal dune belts, montane grasslands, savannah and forests.

An interesting fact about the rain frog is it doesn't have a tadpole stage! We're all familiar with tadpoles – the larval form of many frog species, typically seen swimming through the vegetation in your garden pond. Fertilised eggs are laid underwater, tadpoles hatch and grow, and they eventually lose their tails and sprout limbs.

That's how it works for most frogs, but rain frogs skip this part of the life cycle altogether. The jelly-like eggs are laid in a small, damp underground chamber, where the adult female remains alongside her brood until they hatch. The tiny hatchlings eventually emerge and move into the undergrowth. This kind of life cycle is referred to as direct development.

During breeding, the male rain frog will attach his belly to the backside of the (much larger) female by secreting a sticky adhesive, temporarily cementing himself in place. The female then searches for a suitable place to dig her burrow. Using her spade-like hind feet, the female digs a chamber in which to lay her eggs, which are fertilised by the male who is still glued to her! Talk about attachment issues...

After the eggs are fertilised, the male frees himself within a few hours. This only happens once a year during the breeding season, which is in winter in the Cape and in summer in the northern parts of the country.

– Courtney Hundermark

Courtney is a herpetologist and conservation student, and the author of *A Guide to the Reptiles of Prince Albert & the Swartberg Pass*. Follow him on Instagram: @cr_hundermark



BIRD BRAIN

CHALLENGE # 7

Do you know your birds?
Play along to test your
knowledge! Can you
identify this species?

Clue: When it comes to LBJs,
habitat is as important as plumage.

Use your bird guide or app and
see if you can figure it out. Turn
to page 117 for the answer.



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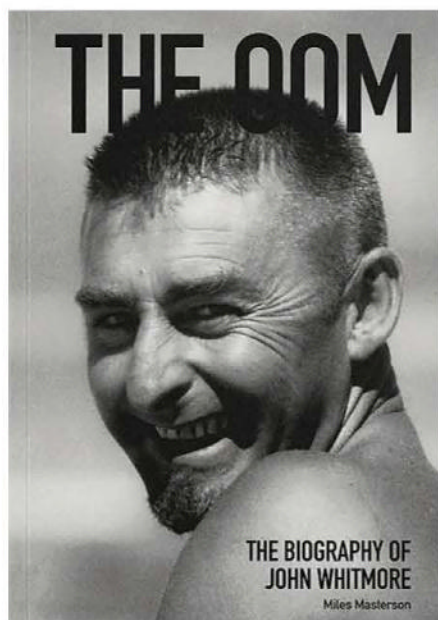
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The Oom – The Biography of John Whitmore

by Miles Masterson, self-published

R495 at all good surf shops and johnwhitmorebook.com

Any South African who has surfed or ridden a bodyboard, sailed a Hobie cat or free-dived in the ocean, partly has John “The Oom” Whitmore to thank.

This meticulously researched and well-told book is not just a biography of a fascinating sportsman and entrepreneur; it’s in many ways a history of South African beach culture.

Whitmore was not the first South African to ride a wave standing up (although he did pioneer several spots including Elands Bay, Llandudno and Outer Kom – without a wetsuit, *nogal*), but thanks to a combination of happenstance and perseverance he had an outsized influence on the history of surfing in South Africa and beyond. His chance encounter with American surfer Dick Metz on the Sea Point Promenade in January 1960 would not only catapult South African surfboard manufacturing into the future – it also led directly to the event that put South Africa on the global surf map: the iconic Bruce’s Beauties scene in the global box office sensation that was 1966’s *The Endless Summer*.

To his great credit, author Miles Masterson doesn’t shy away from the prickly stuff – most notably Whitmore’s close relationship with nationalist Sports Minister Frank Waring, and his equally fractious relationship with “coloured” surf pioneer Ahmed Collier. The book is funny (I still can’t shake the mental image of The Oom recording his daily radio surf reports from the toilet) but also heartfelt: The chapters dealing with Whitmore’s death from cancer, on his farm on the banks of Verlorenvlei on the West Coast, hundreds of kilometres from medical help, left me with a lump in my throat.

Masterson spent over a decade putting the book together, and it shows. His interviews with dozens of people who knew The Oom result in a balanced portrayal. The book is further enhanced by close to 100 photographs covering every era of Whitmore’s life. Highly recommended for surfers and non-surfers alike.

– Nick Dall



Let’s Go Wild!

by Lori-Ann Preston, Penguin
Random House South Africa
R220 in bookstores

If the barrage of questions from the back seat is killing your road-trip vibe, keep your kids busy with this trivia book about animals, birds and reptiles. Children’s author Lori-Ann Preston puts a fun spin on the Big Five concept and creates her own groups of five animals – five snakes with superpowers, five awesome antelope, five giants of the bush...

Your kids will learn more about many different species, and there’s an activity page at the end of each chapter so they can colour, draw, write and play games. Preston also shares her own memorable animal encounters in short stories.

The book promises to teach your kids more than 100 super cool facts – turn the tables and ask them questions about what they’ve read!



ROAD MUSIC

Precious Bane

by Jim White & Trey Blake
US\$10 from bandcamp.com

I’ve been a fan of Jim White since 2001, when he made his name with a standard-bearing album in the Americana (aka alternative country) genre, called *No Such Place*. After that album, however, he drifted back into relative obscurity.

On this album, he collaborates with an even more obscure artist called Trey Blake. She has a voice that reminds me of Portishead’s Beth Gibbons at times, or Patti Smith.

The songs are all long, meandering stories, sometimes apparently without a point. Indeed, it’s the wandering that seems to interest Jim White the most. “I fell off the bridge, I remember that day well,” he starts on the opener, “Ghost Song” – a line that’s typical of the journey that follows.

On “One Last Love Song”, Trey Blake takes the reins: “The road leads on forever through the dark, the stars sweep down around us, and the air beats like a wing”.

Spooky and beautiful, it’s the perfect soundtrack for a starlit night drive between Keetmanshoop and Mariental, tent in the back, final destination still unknown.

– Toast Coetzer

MEET THE AUTHOR

David Williams

On the Railway: The Great South African Train Story tunes into the hum of the tracks and lays out our local railway history, from steam to diesel to electric.

What's your earliest memory of the railway? When I was about five years old, I remember standing in the lounge of our little railway house in Estcourt, KZN, where my dad worked as an electrician. I'm leaning on the cold stone of the sill and I've pulled the net curtain over my head to clear the view. I'm watching a black steam locomotive, in the grey light before the sun comes up, shunting goods trucks. Puffing dark smoke from the chimney, hissing out jets of steam near the front wheels, she pulls a line of trucks forward to the left, past the points, then pushes them back.

In the book, you blend your memories with a historical look at the country's railway system. How did you strike the balance? My personal experiences – watching the trains on the Johannesburg-Durban line, travelling long distance and sleeping in the bunk, eating in the dining car – led to an interest in how the railways worked and their history. When I became a journalist, I made that interest part of my work. I was never bored!

Why write a book about the South African railways? The SAR & H (South African Railways and Harbours), as it was called, was one of the great railway systems of the world – the tenth-biggest by route mileage, and bigger than all the rest of Africa's railways combined. It was an integral part of the economic and social life of the country, linking the smallest towns to the big cities. I felt it was a story that had not been told, especially to people who would be interested but were not railway experts or enthusiasts.

Tell us about a memorable moment you had while researching the book. The most thrilling moment was not on a train, but when I first visited the Transnet Heritage Library in a basement of the grand old Johannesburg

Park Station. The library has vast stores of books and documents, and more than 400 000 photographs, going back to the 19th century, all beautifully cared for by Yolanda Meyer.

This is one of the major railway archives of the world – I hope the leadership of Transnet ensures that it survives and thrives.

You interviewed several people who worked on the railways – what's your favourite anecdote? There were so many. I so enjoyed speaking to the steam-engine drivers, especially, who loved their work and were often heartbroken when they were forced to retire at 65.

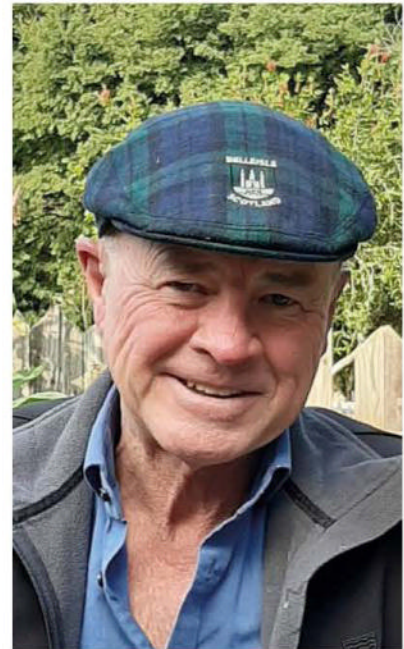
The best experience was riding on Billy Bester's narrow-gauge engine on the Estcourt-Weenen line in KZN in the early 1980s – he was a world-famous driver. He was like a tour guide rather than a mere railwayman, and he was so proud of his spotless engine and the little branch line he worked on. As a boy growing up in Weenen, he dreamt of driving that train – and he lived out his dream every day for 20 years.

You write with such fondness about the steam locomotive – why is it so special?

A steam engine has personality – it's almost like a living creature. The food and drink for the engine is visible – the coal is shovelled, the water is poured into the tank... Like a human, the engine has to pause frequently for water, less often for food. A steam engine seems to move like a human: lots of moving parts, steadily progressing but with variations in sound and tread.

Above all, a steam engine seems to breathe. Even when unattended, there are constant sighs and hisses from an engine at rest. And nothing beats the sound of a steam engine at night.

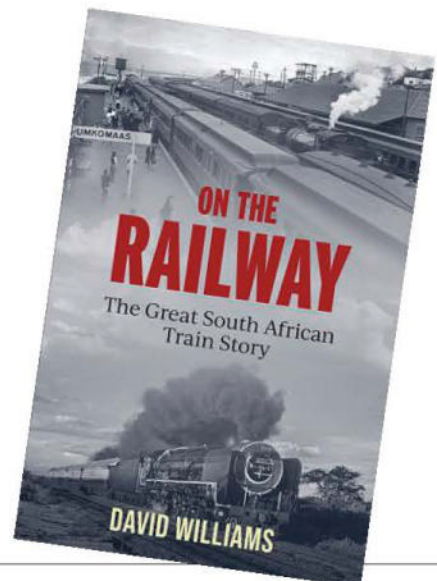
Also, nobody waves at electric and diesel locomotives...



SUPPLIED

You detail the peak of the SA railway system and the reasons for its decline – how do you feel about its future? There's a lot of talk about restoration and revival, but walking that talk is going to take a lot of time and money. I'm not sure people understand the extent of the destruction of our railways because of crime, corruption, bad policy and incompetence. So much experience and institutional knowledge has been lost. I'm beginning to doubt that long-distance passenger travel, which was once world-class and had such potential for tourism, will ever be restored. I remain hopeful, but also rather depressed, about the future.

On the Railway is published by Tafelberg and costs R330 in bookstores.



Beads of barter in ancient soil

In the far north of the Kruger Park, **Dr Tim Forssman** and his team are unearthing archaeological secrets that are reshaping the way we understand the last thousand years of trade in southern Africa.

BY HANCU LOUW

“**T**he whole idea that history ‘began’ here in 1652 is nonsense,” says Dr Tim Forssman, who has been trying to fill in what he and the team of archaeologists and historians he works with call “a thousand-year gap” in our understanding of southern African history.

“The story that previous generations were taught at school – that trade began when Europeans first rounded the Cape – discounts a rich and complex history, especially here in the Limpopo River Valley.”

The collection of stone tools, tiny beads and pottery shards on the workbench in front of him all testify to this.

As an Associate Professor at the University of Mpumalanga, Tim says his love for archaeology was sparked as a teenager when an uncle introduced him to the pseudoscientific writings of Zecharia Sitchin, and his book *The 12th Planet*.

“I mean, it’s all ancient aliens and that sort of thing, but he introduced me to the *idea* of archaeology, and what it can reveal. From then on, my mind was made up.”

As an outdoorsman and keen birder, the fact that his chosen profession would allow him to spend time in the bush is what sealed the deal.

Growing up in Johannesburg, Tim remembers his first field trip to Mapungubwe in his honours year:

“I was like, ‘This is heaven – koppies everywhere, animals all around and archaeology at my feet.’”

He completed his honours and master’s studies at the University of the Witwatersrand before going on to obtain a doctorate from the University of Oxford in 2014.

“Much of my post-graduate work focused on forager-farmer interactions, forager economies, trade dynamics and landscape archaeology, in the area where modern-day Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa meet. Doing all that research for my PhD allowed me to live in the bush for multiple years. I mean, that was the dream!”

Living in the bush came with its fair share of challenges and dangers. While working on a site in the northern Tuli region of Botswana, Tim found himself in what he considers one of his most memorable pickles: “The site was near a waterhole and I was working alone. I was sort of in the zone, you know – head down and not really paying attention. The next thing I realised, I was literally in the middle of a herd of elephants. I don’t know how I didn’t hear them,” he says, chuckling about the potentially life-threatening situation.

There was one small bush close by, where Tim decided to take cover. “After a little while, I came to terms with the situation and I realised: ‘This is pretty epic, and at the end of the day if it goes horribly wrong, well

you know, what a way to go!’”

But patience – and keeping a level head – paid off: He was able to scamper back to camp once the herd had moved on.

It was during this stage of his post-graduate research that Tim started to uncover evidence that questioned much of the conventional understanding of the history of pre-colonial trade in southern Africa. The generally accepted view of that era of the Limpopo region is that there was trade between different local groups, including the people of Mapungubwe. However, Tim and his team’s research indicates a much larger trade network in the Limpopo Valley that included forager communities and involved them in trade from the East Coast of Africa and across the Indian Ocean.

“It’s really quite fantastic,” he beams. “Let me show you!”

Carefully placing a triangular stone tool roughly the size of a pinky fingernail on his palm, Tim explains how tiny artefacts – easily overlooked by the untrained eye – can lead to big shifts in the way we understand the habits of long extinct communities.

“These rough edges here...” he says, holding up the seemingly insignificant stone between thumb and forefinger. “By experimenting, researchers have found that when you shoot these tips into an animal, there’s one of four specific ways in which it can break: and it only happens on impact.”





JUSTINE VAN HEERDEN



JUSTINE VAN HEERDEN

From left: One of the pot shards found at Gwalala Hill. A member of Tim's team carefully brushes away soil to expose a freshwater mussel shell. Tim (middle) with Chanté Barnard, Chris Pottas and Jaco van der Spuy, all students on the project, on their first research trip to the Thulamela region.

Building on this knowledge, Tim got to work. "I had collected a whole bunch of these from one of my sites called Dzombo Shelter, which was weird because usually during that period in history, hunter-gatherers would normally be making a different kind of tool: scrapers, to process animal hides."

After hours of painstaking examination of each little artefact, Tim was able to uncover evidence indicating that trade networks had already been established in the central interior of southern Africa, centuries before the arrival of Europeans.

"I examined each tool under a microscope and started to notice specific breakage patterns, indicating their use in hunting in more than half of the tools. That enabled me to argue that during this time – more than a thousand years ago – Bushmen at that particular shelter were maximising their hunting efforts, perhaps to trade the meat."

According to Tim, during this same period in the archaeological record – about 1300 to 1100 years ago – there's an emergence of glass and porcelain beads, commonly traded articles and a coveted form of wealth.

"That's remarkable," he says. "Through chemical analysis, people have found that the beads, especially the white ones..." he points out a bead about half the size of a grain of rice. "Almost every single one of them was produced in Southeast Asia, China or India, and then shipped across the East African trading network by traders, all the way down to Sofala near modern-day Beira in Mozambique, then brought to the interior."

With no evidence of bead-making on the African continent at that particular time, Tim says it's likely the hunter-gatherers at Dzombo Shelter specialised in hunting, and exchanged their catch for wealth – in this case, highly prized beads.

But getting stone and glass to speak is no easy feat. "What we're trying to do is create historical narratives, the way a historian would, but drawn from the cultural remains," he says, holding up a small plastic bag filled with tiny blue and white beads.

It's these narratives that Tim and his colleagues have been constructing, which point to a rich history of trade and co-operation between the inhabitants of the



vast and fertile Limpopo River Valley.

"Literally every koppie has archaeology on it," he says of the floodplain around the confluence of the Limpopo and Luvuvhu rivers, and especially Gwalala Hill, a site that Tim believes might yield important evidence of well-established, pre-colonial networks that criss-crossed the valley and the shores of East Africa.

Located in the Pafuri region of the Kruger park, the 200 x 80m site was first excavated by Tim and a team of 15 students in August 2025, following its identification in 2022.

"It's really an epic site and I can't wait for the results of the first round of tests to come back, so we can start understanding the chronology," he says, following three weeks of field work during which the team gathered 70 buckets of soil to be carefully sifted. "There was a big settlement here and there are lots of early indications of trade, because we uncovered a lot of glass beads – I'm talking probably thousands by the time we finish counting."

Another clear sign of early trade, stretching far beyond the Limpopo River Valley, is the presence of little clay discs called spindle whorls. "You see the hole

in the middle?" he asks, gently placing the thousand-year-old artefact on his palm. "It was used to spin cotton thread, and that's significant because it's through exchanges with Muslim traders on the coast that it emerges in the interior. So when we see spindle whorls at a site like Gwalala Hill, we immediately know: trade!"

These findings, along with those made at Thulamela – a precolonial kingdom that existed from the 13th to the 17th century – point to the existence of distinct "states" that were all part of an international trade network extending along the East Coast of Africa into North Africa, the Middle East, India and China.

Thulamela is also in the Pafuri region of the Kruger, on a hill overlooking the floodplain of the Luvuvhu River. Identified by archaeologists in 1983, it has been described as one of the most dramatic archaeological sites in southern Africa, due to its sheer size and also because of the astounding beauty of the surrounding landscape, which is dotted with fever trees and baobabs.

"It's a truly magical place," Tim agrees. The first major excavations were

conducted in the 1990s – 30 years ago – but so much remains to be discovered about the people who inhabited the stone fortress on the hill, which likely played host to a ruling elite of around a thousand individuals.

According to Tim, the discovery of gold beads and other artefacts contributed to discounting the commonly held misconception that gold was only discovered in the 1880s, by prospectors on the Witwatersrand.

The most amazing thing about all of this is that Thulamela and Gwalala Hill are only two of potentially hundreds of archaeological sites in the Limpopo River Valley, which still need to be excavated for further study.

"There are about 250 known sites in the southern part of the Kruger alone," Tim says of the high concentration of significant cultural heritage, which so often remains overlooked. "Not to mention South Africa's rock art sites – there are at least 20 just around Mbombela, where I live.

"Very few people realise it, but in this part of the country, archaeology is flippin' everywhere!"



Trailblazing Africa's secret parks

So, you've been to the Kruger, Etosha, the Okavango Delta and all the other great wilderness areas of southern Africa? It's time to head further north – far off the beaten track, into **Zambia** and **Malawi**...

WORDS **PIERRE STEYN** PICTURES **STUART BUTLER**

In the Malawian highlands, the road to Chelinda in Nyika National Park winds through dense Afromontane forest.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: If you're travelling to North Luangwa National Park from the west, you'll enter at the Mano Gate. Colby Mughogho looks out over Kapamba Falls, which has pools where you can cool down. Crossing the Luangwa River by pont looks harder than it actually is – the ferrymen know what they're doing.

It can be a headache to plan a holiday in the popular game parks of South Africa and our neighbouring countries. In many cases, you have to book at least a year in advance. Costs have also rocketed, especially if you want to stay in lodges at peak times. And once you're there, you might find yourself arm-wrestling 20 other vehicles to catch a glimpse of a lion dozing on the side of the road.

It's no wonder that adventurous South Africans looking for a true wilderness experience – and value for money – are venturing further into Africa, specifically to Zambia. More than 41% of the country is reserved for wildlife, in 19 national parks and 34 game management areas. Of those, South Luangwa, Kafue and Lower Zambezi are the most popular. (See issue #196.) The game viewing, especially in South Luangwa, is world class, but it's also fairly popular, which means you're not going to have it all to yourself.

If you're prepared to stretch your 4x4's legs and extend your overlanding trip by another two weeks or so, the remote national parks of North Luangwa (in Zambia) and Nyika (in Malawi) will reward you with rivers and waterfalls, miombo woodland, mopane and montane forests, rare animals and lifer bird sightings. And, above all, solitude!

I recently explored the massive Malawi-Zambia Transfrontier Conservation Area with a group from Boundless Southern Africa, a SADC initiative that promotes tourism and investment in areas such as these. We visited communities directly bordering the national parks to see the real-life benefits that eco-tourism can bring. In North Luangwa, we mostly stayed in well-run and clean campsites managed by those communities; and in Nyika National Park we explored the range of accommodation, which includes camping, self-catering chalets and a lodge.

No visit to Malawi is complete without a visit to the lake, so we tacked on a couple of days in Nkhata Bay before flying back from the capital, Lilongwe.

Since this was a work trip, not a holiday, it was fairly jam-packed with activity. I'll definitely add more leisure time to properly explore the area when I visit again. Yes, I'm planning a holiday back here next year! Read along and you'll see why.

Big, bigger, North Luangwa

At first glance, North Luangwa National Park seems like a hard sell. It's tucked away in the north-eastern corner of Zambia, almost a 15-hour drive from the capital Lusaka. You can only visit in the dry season (June to October) because in the wet season (November to May), you *will* get stuck in the soggy, black soil; and you won't be able to cross the swollen rivers. There are no fuel stations or shops in or near the park, so it takes planning and preparation to be self-sufficient once you're there. And although game is plentiful, the animals have had very little exposure to humans over the last few decades, so they're not going to hang around for selfies. Plus, they have plenty of space to wander: The park itself is 4636 km² in size, and is part of a 30000 km² connected conservation landscape that the animals share with the local communities. That's bigger than the Kruger.

But you could also look at it another way. All the "negatives" listed above aren't actually negatives. They're massive positives if you're keen on experiencing a part of Africa that is still wild yet accessible, safe, and not overrun with tourists.

Make sure to stock up in Lusaka if you're approaching from the south, or in Kasama if you're coming from the north. Both cities have modern Shoprites that will make any South African feel right at home. Beef in Zambia is top quality – it's worth visiting Bonaventure Butchery in Lusaka. Mpika on the Great Northern Road is the last big town where you can refuel the car and the jerry cans – from there it's about 80 km to the park.

We're rolling through Mpika now. Once the refuelling is done, we buy a big bunch of small, sweet bananas from a street vendor for 20 Zambian kwacha (about R15). As we head out of town, Paula Vrdoljak, our Zambian guide, hands out chunks of cooked cassava (10 kwacha per bag) that she's cooled against the aircon vent in her Toyota Fortuner. Paula used to be the project manager for the North Luangwa Conservation Programme – she knows this area like the back of her hand.

"In the 1980s, growth in Mpika was funded by elephant and rhino poaching. Today, it's the headquarters for conservation in the area," she says.



PIERRE STEYN



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Edward Kale helps to pull the pont with the vehicle across the water. Wild camping at Muzungwe inside the park. Pukus occur in small herds in North Luangwa.

In fact, the Luangwa Valley has the highest concentration of elephants in Zambia. There's also a special protection zone for black rhinos, with limited access for the public.

Our first overnight stop is Samala, a community-owned tented camp just outside the park on the banks of the Mwaleshi River. We're still on the Zambian escarpment, more than 1 500m above sea level. Afternoon sun filters through miombo trees and lights up the red-dirt road.

We're just in time for a quick dip in the river pools in front of the four walk-in safari tents. Since this is a fast-flowing, rocky part of the river, we don't have to worry about crocodiles. (There's a separate section of riverfront for self-sufficient campers, too.)

Samala is part of a new tourism initiative in North Luangwa known as the Amatololo Experience. It consists of three community-owned tented camps bordering the national park, as well as four wild and remote campsites within the park itself, on the banks of the Lufila and Luangwa rivers. You can stitch together your own self-drive itinerary, meandering around and through the park over the course of a few days, which is exactly what I recommend you do. (See *Where to Stay* on p 40.) It's what I'll be doing when I come back here.

I could easily have spent another day at Samala – the spectacular Kapamba Falls is a 45-minute drive and 15-minute hike away – and you can catch and release yellowfish and bream. Enquire about a permit when you book.

We're on a tight schedule, so we cut through the middle of North Luangwa the next day, entering through the Mano Gate in the west. A troop of yellow baboons, long-armed and slimmer than our chacmas, scatters as we drop steeply into the Luangwa Valley – the oldest section of Africa's Great Rift Valley.

The climate changes rapidly, as does the landscape. It's about 10 °C hotter down here, and it's humid too, even though it's the middle of winter. Tsetse flies congregate around the car when we stop. As we approach Muzungwe, our wild campsite close to the Luangwa River, a massive cathedral of mopane trees envelops the road.

We're supposed to be racing the sunset, so we don't have to pitch our tents in the dark, but sightings of buffalo, elephant and my first Cookson's wildebeest (endemic to the Luangwa Valley) mean my head torch is

going to get a workout tonight.

After we've braaied thick Zambian rump steaks and washed them down with cold Mosi lagers from the cooler box, I retreat to my tent with the howl of hyenas in the distance and the snorting of hippos very, very close by. This is Africa... raw and unfiltered.

Muzungwe is also a birding paradise. The campsite is close to the river and it's full of apple-ring acacia, mopane, tamarind and sausage trees. I sit in my camp chair the next morning, sipping my coffee, and spot one lifer after the next. (With the help of Paula, it must be said, and my Sasol eBirds app...) Lilian's lovebird, tick. Bearded woodpecker, tick. Arnot's chat, African hawk-eagle...

A small herd of puku (they look like shaggy impala) wanders down the dry part of the riverbed, oblivious to our presence. Another first for me!

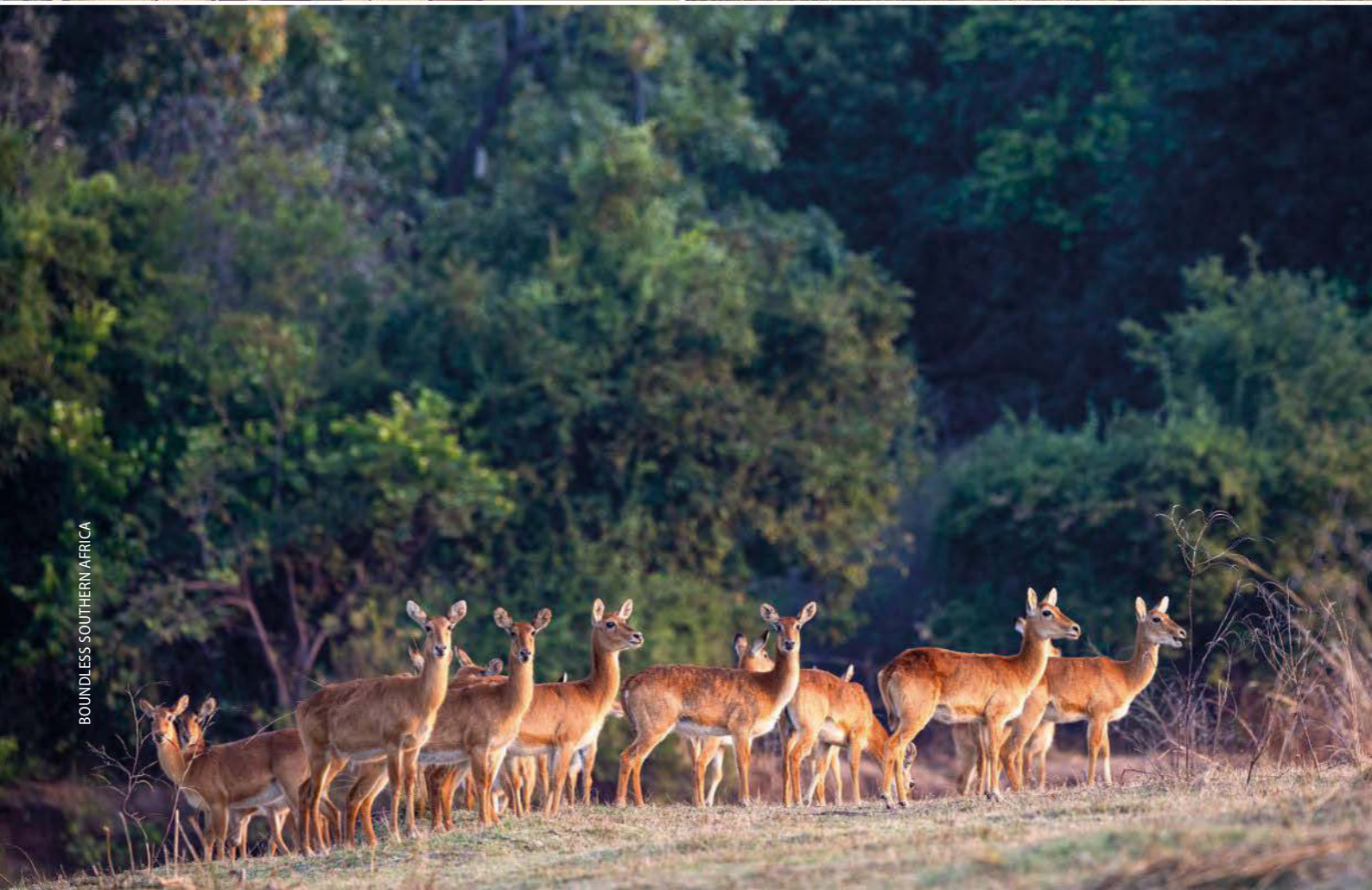
A few hours later, it becomes clear why park authorities recommend you don't tow a trailer in North Luangwa. There's only one way to cross the Luangwa River if you intend to exit the park to the east – via a rickety, hand-drawn pont. The ferrymen, Edward Kale and Dalitso Nkhoma, make a formidable team. They guide your vehicle carefully onto the platform and pull you across the river within minutes.

Dalitso has been doing this job for 21 years. "The river is not very deep... but there are lots of crocodiles," he says with a smile.

There was no fee when we crossed, but a US\$5 charge might be implemented later this year. (You might have to pay the ferryman, after all.)

Once across the river, it's a 10-minute drive to Ituba tented camp, owned by the Chifunda community, where we spend our last night in North Luangwa. You can stay in walk-in safari tents, or camp on one of three shaded riverside stands. We arranged for a home-cooked meal of chicken, local spinach, pumpkin leaves and pap. Check the prices and what's available when you book.

In this part of Africa, travel is measured in time, not distance. Even though Nyika National Park in Malawi is only about 300km north-east of Ituba, it's going to take us the better part of two days to get there. We're going to learn the lesson the hard way that an African border crossing, especially a remote, seldom-used one, is not to be underestimated!



PIERRE STEYN

BOUNDLESS SOUTHERN AFRICA

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Blessings Munthari has been guiding walks, rides and game drives in the park for 15 years. It's possible to fly-fish for trout in one of the dams at Chelinda camp in Nyika National Park. The group saw roan antelope and Crawshaw's zebra during their visit.

Into the highlands

The main border between Zambia and Malawi is Mwami-Mchinji – an orderly crossing on the main route between the capitals of Lusaka and Lilongwe. But that's very far to the south, and we're heading north – to Nyika National Park.

Both our guides – Paula and Colby Mughogho, our Malawian guide – have heard from colleagues that we'll be able to cross at a border post called Katumbi-Hewe. When we arrive at noon, however, there are only Malawian immigration officials on duty – the Zambian office is empty. This rural checkpoint is mainly used by the local inhabitants travelling on foot or by motorcycle, or maybe the occasional truck that can navigate the rough sandy road that leads to this isolated spot.

Tourists are seldomly seen this far north – we're told we should have had our passports stamped by Zambian officials in Chama, the town where we spent the previous night. But that's more than four hours of driving just to get back to where we started this morning!

Colby and the Malawian officials come up with a plan: One of the officials will jump on a motorcycle and ride to Muyombe, the closest town to the border on the Zambian side, and have our passports stamped by a Zambian immigration official there. It's a bit more than two hours there and back, so we unpack lunch in the shade of a thorn tree. There's no point stressing about these things, Colby says. We'll be at Nyika before sunset.

He's right. We get our passports back at about 3 pm, stamped by both authorities, and we're on our way again, winding into the Malawian highlands to Thazima Gate – the sole entrance to Nyika. Even though it's just 60 km from the gate to Chelinda Lodge, which is the only accommodation in the park, it takes almost two hours. The dirt road is dreadful. Fortunately, the Peace Parks Foundation signed a co-management agreement with the Malawian government in 2023, and a major upgrade of this main road – and other facilities – is underway.

At sunrise the next morning, all memories of potholes and dongas are banished by the beauty and scale of Nyika, Malawi's largest national park. The name means "where the water comes from" – it's 2 300 km² in size and 2 500 m above sea level. Some say it resembles the Scottish Highlands: rolling grassland dissected by rivers and dotted with granite domes and big patches of Afromontane forest.

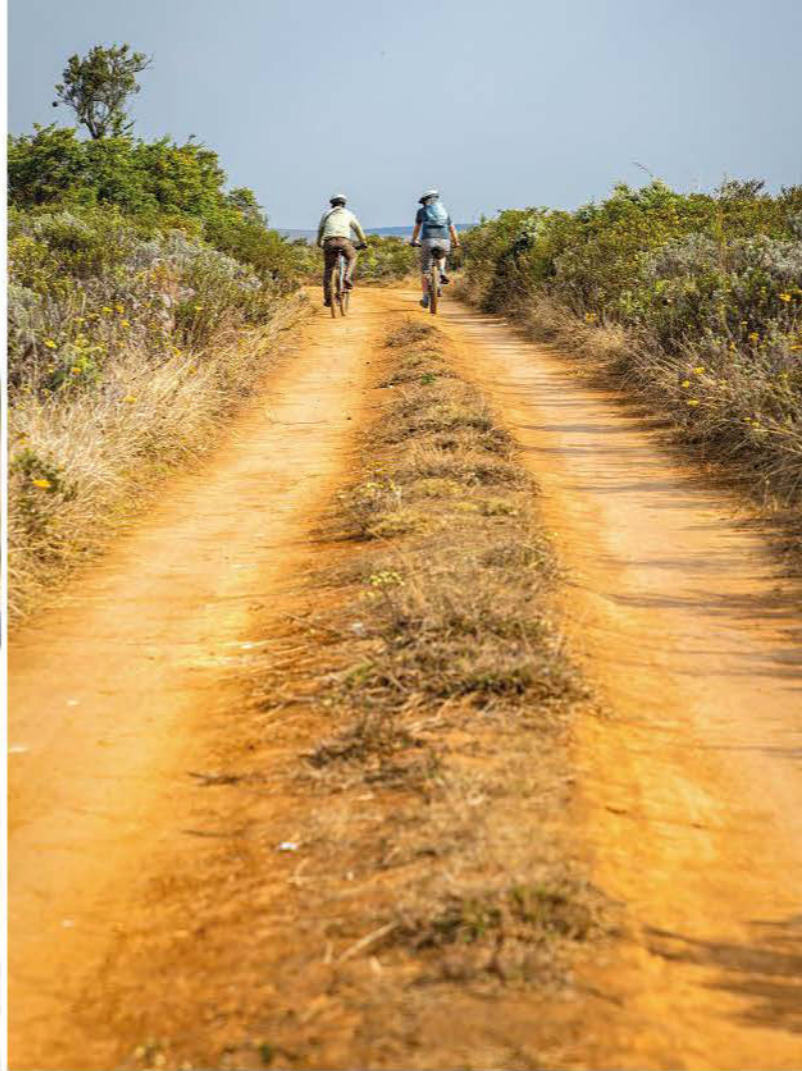
It's a serious mission to get here, but I'm blown away by the unexpected scenery. Chelinda offers fancy lodge accommodation, plus more affordable self-catering cottages, a campsite, and rooms that share a communal kitchen. We cram our only full day with a guided hike in the morning, a mountain-bike ride after lunch, fly-fishing for trout in the afternoon, and a sunset game drive, where we see reedbuck, roan antelope, eland (the largest in Africa) and Crawshaw's zebra. Denham's bustard and an endemic red-winged francolin get added to the life list – two of the more than 400 bird species that have been recorded in the park.

Nyika is a special place that deserves more tourists. On my next visit, I'll spend a week here in summer, when more than 200 species of wild orchids bloom, some of which are only found here. The park also has the highest density of leopards in central Africa – as evidenced by the scat we find just outside the lodge.

But leopards and orchids are in the future. Right now, it's time to say goodbye to one of Africa's best kept secrets and head down to Lake Malawi for well-deserved rest and recreation!

BOUNDLESS SOUTHERN AFRICA







PIERRE STEYN

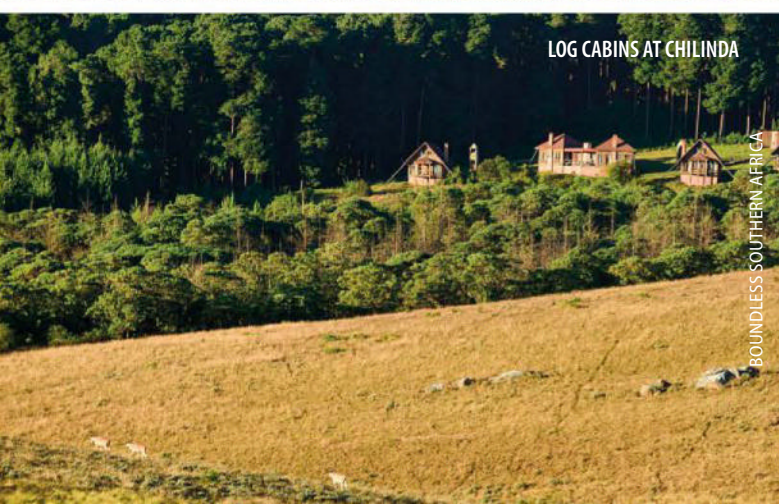
ITUBA



MUZUNGWE



CAMPSITE AT CHILINDA



LOG CABINS AT CHILINDA

BOUNDLESS SOUTHERN AFRICA

WHERE TO STAY

NORTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK

Samala, Ituba and Mandalena are scenic tented camps owned by local communities in the game management areas overlooking the rivers that border the park.

Samala and Mandalena are open all year round. Mandalena has two walk-in safari tents, each with a private outdoor bathroom and veranda; Samala and Ituba have four similar walk-in safari tents. All have communal kitchens, dining areas and solar-powered freezers, plus separate campsites with ablutions. Each camp has its own caretaker.

There are four wild campsites in the park itself, for self-sufficient campers: Lufila Falls, Nkhola, Muzungwe and Mushika. All have long-drop toilets and a hand-pumped borehole, except for Lufila Falls where the water from the river is clean. Campsites can accommodate up to 15 people and are booked exclusively per party.

Rates: Community tented camps US\$25 per person in a safari tent; US\$10 per person to pitch your own tent. Wild camping US\$10 per person, plus park entry fee (US\$15 per person and US\$15 per vehicle, both per day).

How to book: 📧 bookings@northluangwa.com; WhatsApp 📞 260 950 987 579; 🌐 northluangwa.org/tourism

NYIKA NATIONAL PARK

Chelinda is the only place to stay in the park. There's a range of accommodation on offer, from a lodge with eight upmarket log cabins and a dedicated restaurant and bar, to four self-catering cottages (each sleeps four) and six twin rooms that share a communal kitchen. There's a separate campsite with ablutions about 2 km from the lodge with uninterrupted views over Nyika's rolling grass plains.

Rates: Lodge from US\$350 per person sharing (all meals and select activities included); self-catering from US\$350 per unit; twin room from US\$120 per night (US\$80 single rate). Camping US\$10 per person.

Rates were correct at the time of going to print, but can vary according to the season. Check when you book.

How to book:

📧 reservations@causmw.com

📞 265 888 822 398

🌐 causmw.com/chelinda-lodge

Hike to the lake! If you're keen on doing a multi-day, guided hike from Nyika National Park to Lake Malawi, via Livingstonia and the impressive Mantchewe Waterfall, contact Colby Mughogho: 📧 info@adventureswithcolbymw.com 🌐 adventureswithcolbymw.com

After a game drive in Nyika, it's time
for a sundowner.



ZAMBIA & MALAWI



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

What vehicle do I need? A proper 4x4 – and you need to know how to use it. Keep in mind that North Luangwa is closed during the rainy season (November to May). At the height of summer, Nyika might also be difficult to access – at least until the main road through the park has been upgraded.

If you don't have your own vehicle, you can hire a fully kitted 4x4 in Lusaka from Brian Ross of The Wild Life Africa.

📞 260 963 957 271

🌐 thewildlifeafrica.com

For 4x4 rentals in Malawi, contact Land & Lake Safaris in Lilongwe. 📞 265 881 757 120

🌐 landlake.net

Supplies? You need to be self-sufficient and it's advisable to travel with at least one other vehicle. Fill up with drinking water and fuel wherever you have the opportunity.

Paperwork? Carry all the necessary documentation for your vehicle in an easily accessible folder (registration papers, police clearance certificate, certified letter from the bank if your vehicle is still being financed). See 🌐 zambiatourism.com and 🌐 malawitourism.com for information about what you need to carry and the costs involved.

Park entry? Entrance fees from US\$15 – US\$20 per person per day, plus US\$15 per day for your vehicle.

Money? It's advisable to travel with cash: A mixture of the local currencies (Zambian and Malawian kwacha) and US dollars is best. Card machines aren't readily available in the smaller towns, at fuel stations and at the entrances to the national parks.

Border crossing? The bigger and busier borders, like Mwami-Mchinji, are one-stop shops where you can use your credit card, get all the necessary entry and exit stamps, and a temporary import

permit for your vehicle. This is not necessarily the case at the more remote crossings. You sometimes need to travel to the closest large town to get this done. Do your homework ahead of time and double-check with the officials at the border crossing you plan to use.

Navigation? Google Maps might lead you down the garden path on a road never travelled...

It's a much better idea to use the latest Tracks4Africa maps on your GPS. Maps for Zambia and Malawi cost R350 each from 🌐 shop.tracks4africa.co.za and are valid for a year.

Zambia's Wilderness Awaits

Claim park specific promotions by quoting the promo code: **Zambia2025** (T&Cs apply)



KAFUE NATIONAL PARK

Wild ~ Diverse ~ Vast

visit.kafue@africanparks.org
+260 96 0401437 (WhatsApp)

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+260 96 4168394 (WhatsApp)



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+260 75 0936262 (WhatsApp)



Where the land loves you back

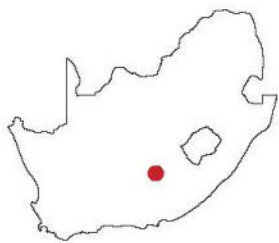
Stay on a farm in the Sneeuberg and discover one of the most spectacular regions in the Karoo, if not the entire country.

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





Farmer James Brodie and his dog Emma,
on a plateau overlooking the magnificent
Sneeuwberg range.



We're on a high plateau west of Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape Karoo. The late-summer sun glows on sandstone rock faces. In the foreground are 2 000 sheep, 18 irritable alpacas, one lean man in a cowboy hat, and a three-legged Kelpie dog called Emma.

The man is farmer James Brodie, and he offers to move his carpet of sheep to a spot where the light will be better for photographs. My husband Chris and I find a comfortable rock to sit on while we wait.

Before our eyes, the flock moves from left to right. The alpacas are swept along, towering above the sheep like indignant woolly giraffes.

"Haai, haai, haai," James calls with his arms outspread. Emma tacks back and forth, bunching the sheep and bringing them closer, as if moving thousands of bleating beasts is the easiest thing in the world.

This one camp on James's farm Doornplaats is 20 hectares in size – 40 rugby fields. In a day or so, he'll move all the animals to the next paddock, leaving the fertilised veld to recover for a year. By using this method of holistic veld management, James has dramatically increased his farm's carrying capacity.

In a few weeks' time, the first frost will be the signal to bring the sheep down to lower altitudes, just as generations of Sneeu Berg farmers have done when winter bites. Up here there are few diseases – no mosquitoes to spread Rift Valley fever and no midges to spread horse sickness. But in the snowy season, the cold can kill.

Here's a quick geography lesson for those who think that the Karoo is flat. Between Cradock (now called Nxuba) and Graaff-Reinet, stretching to points as far as Nieu-Bethesda, Middelburg and Pearston, is an enormous arc of mountains. This is the Sneeu Berg – the second highest mountain range in the country after the Drakensberg, measuring about 200 km at its widest girth, between Cradock and Murraysburg.

There is no better place for road trippers who love the Karoo. Smooth tar roads link the major towns, which are mostly a two-hour drive apart. The towns themselves are full of history, and there are lots of interesting places to stay. And you're always within sight of mountains.

Crumple up a piece of paper, throw it to the floor and you'll have a rough idea what the geography looks like from above. There are high peaks, sure, but many are half hidden in the middle, only visible from certain angles.

All along their east-west axis, these broad-shouldered crags intercept high clouds and wring out their moisture in rain, snow, frost and mist. In a wet summer, the land can look like the Scottish Highlands. In winter, its bones lie bare. Ironstone crowns rise above the snowfall that settles on the long contour lines of ancient riverbeds.

Jutting head and shoulders above these great interlinked massifs is the distinctive peak of Compassberg (2 502 m), South Africa's own Matterhorn and the Karoo's greatest free-standing mountain.

Nardousberg, at 2 429 m, is the next highest, but it doesn't have as distinctive a peak, and it's deep within the mountain range so you'll only see it from some positions. In winter, it also wears a telltale skullcap of snow.

High summer in the mountains

We're headed for the core of the Sneeu Berg with our friend, Gavin Holmes. He wants to check on the cattle grazing land he rents on a farm called Petrusdal.

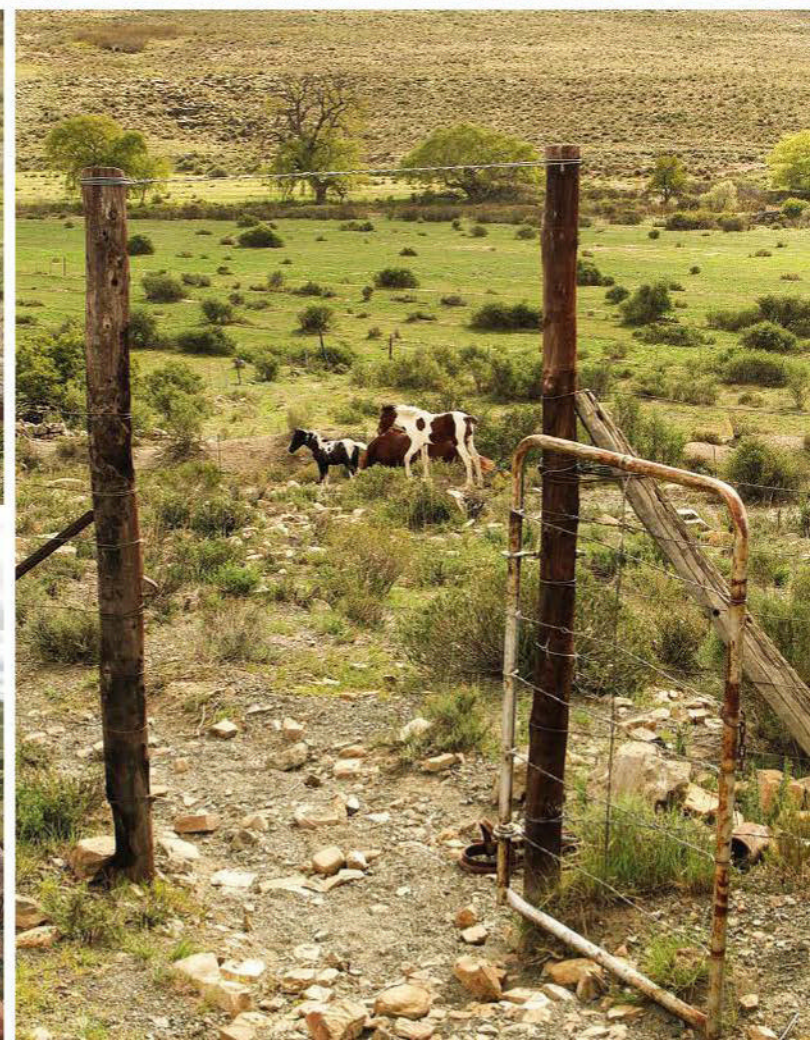
From Cradock, where Chris and I live, we drive west on the R61, towards Wapadsberg Pass. This road, which links Cradock with Nieu-Bethesda and Graaff-Reinet, traverses a landscape full of sheep farms, craggy hills and the odd abandoned farmhouse.

Locals know the R61 as one of the cheapest game-drive routes in the country. It passes the entrance to Mountain Zebra National Park, and further on there are several private game farms where you might see anything from springbok to gemsbok and even the odd exotic like waterbuck and lechwe.

We pass the turn-off to Samenkomst and turn left onto the Kwaggashoek gravel road, which takes us deep into the heart of the Sneeu Berg.

At first it doesn't feel like we're gaining any serious altitude, but we're climbing all the time, from one green valley to the next. Each seems to have its own spring – water bubbling straight from the earth. Whatever the temperature is in Cradock,

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Two thousand sheep, 18 irked alpacas, a man and his dog, with the sunbaked krantzies of the Sneeu Berg behind them. Farming in these mountains and hills is impossible without horses that can go where vehicles can't. Julianne with Gavin Holmes and his wife Lesley. From this high up, you can see forever and the grasses are always waving in the wind. Here and there you'll find an abandoned old wagon slowly becoming one with the earth.



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Americans Edie Miller and Mark Hansen with Julianne on a medicinal plant walk with guide Henry "Punky" Witbooi from Ganora Guest Farm. Compassberg rises in the background. A jackal tries to hide in the long grass. Lions have been introduced to the Mountain Zebra National Park and they're thriving. Rolie Kroon is one of the farmers in this area who is restoring the land using regenerative farming methods.

it's at least 6 °C cooler up here.

Now and then, we see an old wagon left to slump into the earth. There are abandoned farmhouses and beautiful old kraals made from packed stone. Some pear trees have grown into giants, while the peach trees have become wizened.

It even smells different up here. We started in Karoo shrubland, with its fresh fragrance of wild rosemary. Now we're moving into grassland and even fynbos, with its scents of lavender and citrus.

In summer, this is heaven for livestock. Winter is another story, Gavin tells us, echoing James Brodie. When the first frost comes, you move your animals down to milder temperatures, or you risk losing them.

Tales of the Sneeu Berg

There's no easy or direct access through the middle of these mountains. The only way through from east to west is literally by foot, hoof or mountain bike.

Spending a few nights on a farm is one of the best ways to experience the Sneeu Berg. One such farm is Petrusdal.

Owner Anton Olivier is a natural storyteller and has gleaned many tales from other farmers, living and dead.

"Some of the passes are so narrow that when the first trekboers came through, they had to dismantle the wagons, then cut the horns of the cattle and lead them through the kloofs one by one, with their heads turned sideways," he says.

He knows where the Boers hid a remount station so their horses were always fresh and rested before raids and skirmishes against the British during the Anglo-Boer War; and he can tell you about the umpteen times when he and his farmworkers had to go out and find their sheep, which were hidden under thick snowdrifts. The only way they could find them was by looking for steam rising from breathing holes.

Anton and James are among 200 landowners who have signed up to be part of an ambitious conservation effort in the Sneeu Berg: the Great Karoo Wilderness. In 2012, the Wilderness Foundation, working on behalf of SANParks, kicked off an effort to link the Mountain Zebra and Camdeboo national parks by creating a biodiversity corridor. Between the two parks is a mosaic of working

farms and private game reserves. The idea was to protect the river catchments and the area's endemic plant life. Over time, the concept grew and today the Great Karoo Wilderness spans a million hectares – or 10 000 km² – about half the size of the Kruger Park.

Project manager Ulrich Schutte has huge admiration for the landowners. "They're great custodians," he says. "Some of the farmland is in a better condition than many nature reserves. There are farming families that have been here for seven or even eight generations."

Well-managed grassland can sequester millions of tonnes of carbon in the soil. Ulrich explains: "By being good custodians and adopting regenerative farming principles, many of the Great Karoo Wilderness landowners now have the opportunity to be paid for carbon credits, through an international organisation called TASC. It's a great reward for farming with nature."

For the love of the land

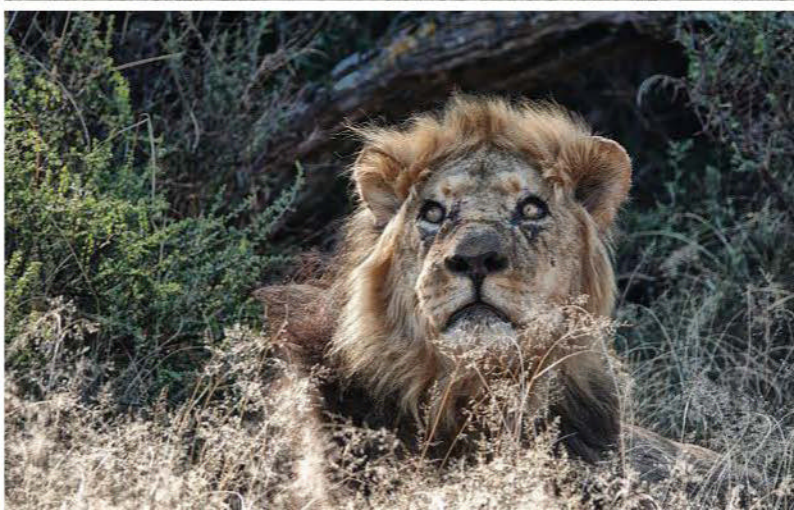
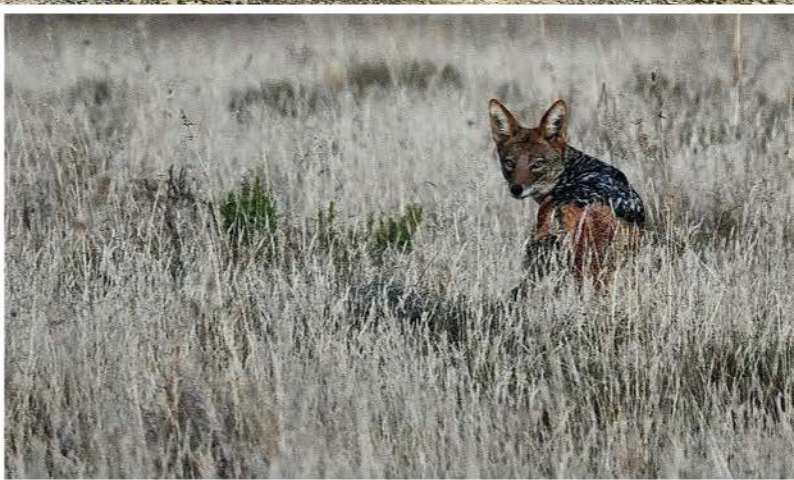
Rolie Kroon, another signatory, farms on Excelsior in the shadow of Nardousberg. Like James Brodie, Rolie uses a method of intensive grazing interspersed with long periods of recovery. In fact, the Kroon family were the pioneers of this method in the region.

Rolie takes us to a valley that was once bare and exposed, the soil hard as rock. Now, a herd of cows grazes, surrounded by thick grass, near a small dam of gin-clear water.

"About ten years ago, if we had as little as 10 or 20 mm of rain, it would run off and form washaways and floods. If you leave veld bare, more than 87% of the water runs off. You have to stop a raindrop where it falls. If it moves, it takes soil with it.

"My children and I came out here recently and counted all the different plant species in an area we could span with our arms. Each of us identified around 18 species."

Around a campfire that night, with the stars shining bright above the ridges, James Brodie finds the perfect words for what's happening in the Great Karoo Wilderness: "With land, you must put in more than you take. But what you put in, you'll get back tenfold. It's an amazing thing, learning to love your land. And what's even more incredible is when your land starts loving you back."





7 great places to stay

The best way to experience the landscapes of the Sneeu Berg region is to stay on a working farm. You can walk in the veld, ride your mountain bike, breathe the wide-open spaces and settle into the quiet rhythm of Karoo life.

1 Ganora Guest Farm

Ganora is about 8 km from Nieu-Bethesda, with splendid views of Compassberg. There are 10 en suite rooms, all elegantly furnished, of varying sizes. Breakfast is included in the rate; you can order dinner in advance.

Then there's Khoisan Cottage, which overlooks the farmstead, sleeps six and is kitted out for self-catering; and a campsite where you can pitch your own tent.

Do a fossil tour (R80 per person), a Bushman artefact tour (R120) or a medicinal plant walk (R140).

Rates: R700 per person in a standard room; R895 in a bigger room. Khoisan Cottage R2 600 per night. Camping R220 per person. Free Wi-Fi.

More info: Hester Steynberg ☎ 082 698 0029

📍 ganora.co.za

2 Wheatlands Farm

You can book the whole farmhouse at Wheatlands, between Graaff-Reinet and Jansenville. It sleeps 12 in total and you can either cater for yourself or request delicious meals made by Kirsten Short. The dining room and lounge have fireplaces for cosy winter evenings. There's Wi-Fi, too – you should definitely request the pin for their "Karoo Sundowner Spot".

If the local teams are playing a cricket match on the farm, don't miss it...

Rates: Base rate R3 000 per night for up to six people. For seven and more, it's an additional R400 per person (self-catering rates).

More info: Kirsten Short ☎ 072 251 9022

📍 wheatlands.co.za

3 Petrusdal Farmstay

Hosts Anton and Andalet Olivier have three en suite guest units. Two units sleep four people (for families); the last unit is better suited to a couple. There's a communal lounge with a fireplace, a dining room, a covered braai area and a garden for guests to enjoy. There are also rugged camping facilities (with a shower and toilet).

The farm is about an hour's drive west from Cradock, on the Kwaggashoek Road from the R61.

Rates: Camping R150 per person. Four-sleeper room R1 800 a night; R1 200 for the double room. Breakfast R80 per person; lunch R100 per person; dinner (or braai) R200 per person.

More info: Andalet Olivier ☎ 083 491 5770

(WhatsApp); 📧 andalet.olivier@gmail.com

4 Roode Bloem Farm House

This is an historic old house with six en suite bedrooms, about 10 km north of Graaff-Reinet off the N9. Your hosts are Tim and Liza Murray.

One of the rooms has four beds – good for a family. Guests share the fully equipped kitchen, lounge, dining room, spacious stoep and yard.

Rates: R430 per person sharing (R600 for a single person). Hire the entire house for R6 000 per night.

More info: Tim Murray ☎ 082 632 3103 (WhatsApp)

📍 rbd@intekom.co.za

5 Grootklip Getaway

This farm is 31 km from Nieu-Bethesda – it's great for a big family or a small group of friends yearning for peace and silence. It has three bedrooms and three bathrooms, sleeping eight in total. There's Wi-Fi and the kitchen is well equipped for self-catering, including a coffee machine and even a washing machine. There's a fireplace in the lounge. But the real treasure is outside: You can walk, hike or ride your mountain bike to your heart's content, and see only mountains and Nguni cattle.

Rate: R2 300 per night.

More info: Lisa Watermeyer ☎ 082 047 3220

📧 grootklip.co.za

6 Hillston Farmstay

From this farm, you can see the distinctive peaks of Teebus and Koffiebus – landmarks in this part of the Karoo.

Hillston offers two different farmhouses for guests. Northmead Country House is off-grid, sleeps eight, has beautiful wooden floors and high ceilings, with a lovely kitchen with a wood-burning stove.

A smaller ironstone cottage – Hillston Cottage – sleeps six, is fully equipped for self-catering and offers a great stoep for dreamy sundowners.

Rates: R450 per person (self-catering). Minimum stay two nights.

More info: Riana Southey ☎ 082 322 4403

📧 hillstonfarm.co.za

7 Allendale Farm Cottage

Allendale is between Graaff-Reinet and Nieu-Bethesda, on a dirt road off the N9. Their spacious self-catering cottage is near the farmhouse – the main bedroom is en suite and there's enough space in the lounge to comfortably sleep two or even three more people.

Brenda Murray offers delicious homemade dinners for R200 per person (typically lamb or chicken with rice and two veg, with something sweet for dessert), or a braai pack for two with salad and roosterkoek at the same price.

Rates: R900 for the first two people; plus R300 per additional person (max five people).

More info: Brenda Murray ☎ 084 682 9235

(WhatsApp); 📧 allendalefarm.wordpress.com



Four must-do activities

Sip Karoo spirits

Tim Murray from Roode Bloem Farm just north of Graaff-Reinet is probably the most knowledgeable man in the entire Karoo when it comes to tequila, mezcal and the other strong spirits that can be made from agave plants. Set aside an intoxicating hour or two to find out more.

Cost: There's a minimum set-up fee of R500 for two people. After that, it costs R100 per head, for a maximum of 12 people.

More info: Tim Murray 📞 082 632 3103 (WhatsApp)

✉️ rbd@intekom.co.za

Fish for trout

Some of the rivers and streams that rise in the Sneeuberg are home to enormous trout and yellowfish. Alan Hobson from Somerset East (new name KwaNojoli) knows how and where to find them. He can take you out for a full- or half-day trip. If you left your gear at home, you can hire everything from Alan.

Cost: From R2 500, plus R1 000 per fisherman, for a half-day mission.

More info: Alan Hobson 📞 082 442 2884; Annabelle Hobson

📞 082 375 4720; 🐦 wildflyfishinginthekaroo.co.za

Climb Compassberg

If you're reasonably fit and can scramble up a few rough sections, you'll probably be able to reach the peak of the spectacular Compassberg. It takes about two hours to get to the top and another two hours down. The wind tends to pick up during the heat of the day, so rather start early.

The trailhead is on Compassberg Farm, which is about an hour's drive from Nieu-Bethesda or Middelburg. Permit fee: R70 per climber.

More info: Brenda James 📞 082 596 6475 (WhatsApp)

✉️ brendajames@icon.co.za

Go with a guide: If the idea of going alone is too daunting, contact Graaff-Reinet local Dawid de Wet, who runs a tourism business called Karoo360. He'll give you advice on how best to arrange a guided climb. 🐦 karoo360.co.za

Ride a rapid

Just south of Middelburg, the Brak and Fish rivers merge and form some exciting rapids. At Karoo River Rafting, James and Delina Jordaan offer rafting, abseiling and other team-building activities. There's accommodation in tents and wooden cabins.

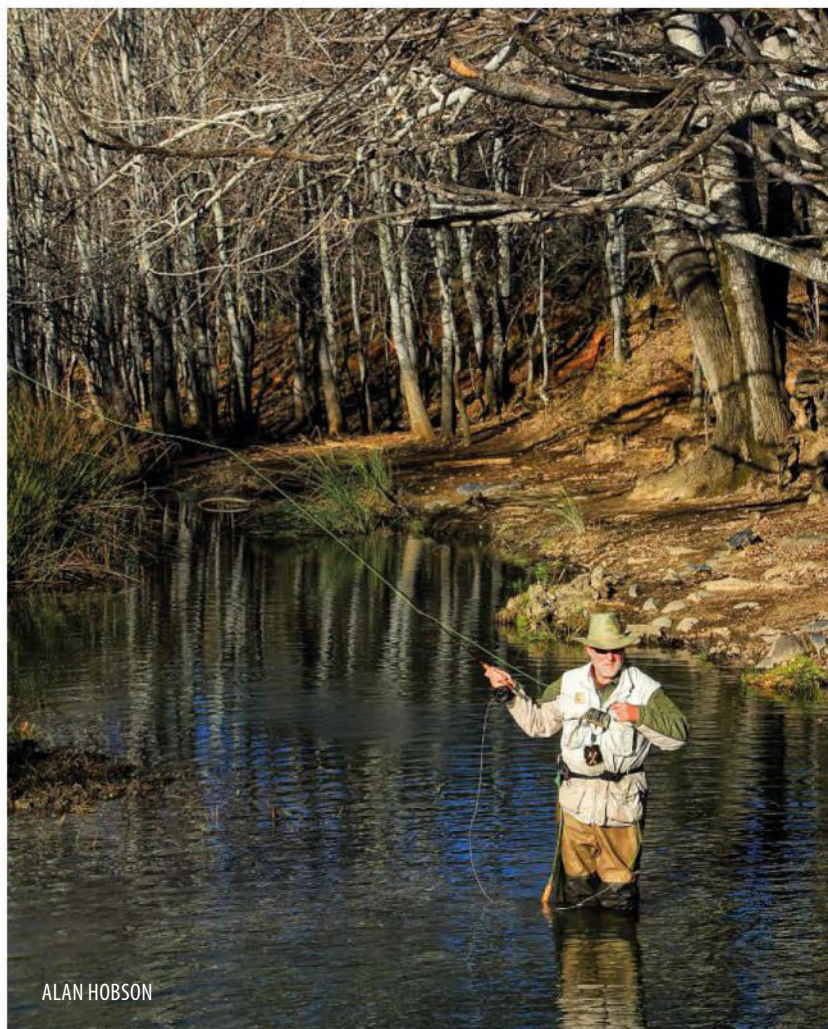
Cost: A three- to four-hour guided rafting trip in inflatable canoes, travelling about 16 km downstream, costs R1 000 per person.

See the website for other rates.

More info: James Jordaan 📞 084 429 9944; 🐦 karoo-river-rafting.co.za



COMPASSBERG



ALAN HOBSON

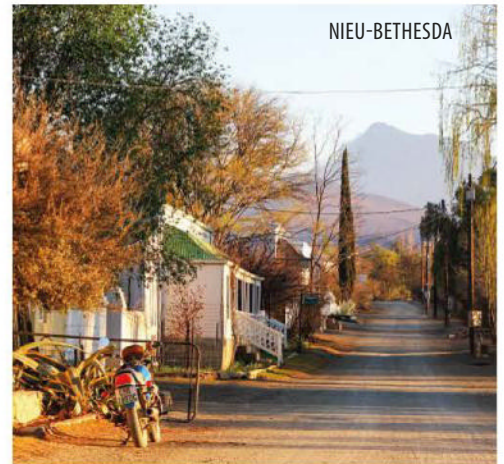


In winter, the Sneeuberg lives up to its name.



The towns around the Sneeuberg include Graaff-Reinet, Nieu-Bethesda, Middelburg, Cradock, Hofmeyr, Somerset East, Pearston and Aberdeen. They're marketed as tourism destinations under the name Karoo Heartland. Visit karooheartland.com for info about activities and accommodation.

For more information about the Great Karoo Wilderness, visit: mzcp.co.za



NIEU-BETHESDA



TIM MURRAY, ROODE BLOEM FARM



The Kruger and you

Do you want a completely different Kruger Park experience?
The Kruger Trail traverses the entire park from north to south,
covering 650 km over six stages. Come disappear into the mopane
with us, somewhere between Olifants and Satara...

WORDS & PICTURES **TOAST COETZER**





On the Kruger Trail you carry everything you need for six days in the bush. This includes cooking kit, water purification filter and a tent – the latter is compulsory. It's also recommended you carry a light camping chair to make lounging around at camp more comfortable.

Without warning, our guides ram bullets into the chambers of their rifles. The head guide, Justin van Breda, tells us quietly to walk away from the buffalo. “They need to see us leaving their area,” he says, as I quickly snap a photograph.

Thanks to that photo, I can attempt to calculate later how many of them came charging towards us. At least 50 – enough to kick up a big cloud of dust.

Right now, nobody is counting. Justin is in front and the other guide, Pete Wilson, is hot on his heels. Following him is Johan van der Vyver from Pretoria, then me, and three hikers behind us. I don’t turn to look at the buffalo again. How far off were they? A hundred metres? Less? Although I feel remarkably calm, that sound of the guns being loaded has twisted my stomach in a knot. My first thought is that there aren’t enough .458 bullets in the two rifles – not for 50 buffalo with murder on their minds!

Another thought: There are no climbable trees close by.

Thinus Hofsink comes rushing past me from behind. He has figured out one of the most important laws of survival: Put more of your friends (!) between yourself and the dangerous animals.

“They just wanted to ‘mob’ us,” Justin explains, when we finally pause to look back. The buffalo have kept their distance, happy we’re not intruding on their turf. Now they just look like a herd of ruminating black cattle, like Drakensbergers. But buffalo are not Drakensbergers. They are the epitome of wildness.

We don’t pause for long, just long enough to recalibrate our heart rates. “Let’s keep moving,” Justin says.

A kilometre or two further, we reach a pretty spot under some Kalahari apple-leaf trees. This will be our campsite for the night. It’s day four of our six-day hike and we’re in the bush somewhere north-east of Satara. The nearby stream, where we collect our water for the night, is called the Mavumbye, a tributary of the Nwanetsi River.

“Let’s name this campsite Buffalo Park,” Thinus suggests when we gather on a comfy log next to a towering leadwood to enjoy the sunset together.

Last night’s campsite was close to the Timbavati picnic site. At first, we thought we’d name it after the huge tamboti trees

we pitched our tents under, but then a leopard barked nearby, loud enough to make the water in our buckets tremble. We settled on Leopard Creek – and zipped up our tents extra tight.

The first night we camped in a dry riverbed where a wandering hippo walked right up to our laager in the early evening. On our log at Buffalo Park, we name that spot Seekoeistraat. Thinus also came up with a name for our second night’s camping spot: Hollow Cove, which came complete with an overhang drooping with aloes and euphorbia roots. (We don’t know it yet, but our final night in the veld will be spent at Savannah Plains, in a Serengeti-like area next to the Nwanetsi.)

The Kruger Trail (see page 61 for an overview) takes you to places like these. You won’t find them on any map of the park, but they will exist in your mind forever.

Although the trail does cross the odd public road, and you pass some well-known tourist spots (we pulled in at the Timbavati picnic site one afternoon for a beer), the whole point of the trail is to allow you to see parts of the Kruger you’ll never see in a vehicle. When we did encounter other tourists, it was fun to look at their stunned expressions when they realised we were calmly strolling around in lion country.

In part, the Kruger Trail is the brainchild of guide and honorary ranger Louis Lemmer. (Day job: dominee from Pretoria.) He was pleasantly surprised by the level of support he received from SANParks, who rubber-stamped his mad idea of opening up a wilderness hike along the entire length of the Kruger.

In recent years, the trail – sometimes abbreviated to TKT – has become a thing of legend. A growing number of people have now hiked the full 650 km route – they’re all part of a very special club.

The trail consists of six legs, spread out over three years of hiking (two per year). We hiked section four, which started at Olifants and finished near the Sweni bird hide at the foot of the Lebombo Mountains.

Louis and many others work hard to keep the Kruger Trail going. Thanks to them, we can sit here under the apple-leaf tree, gathered in a circle around a small fire, prepping our evening meal. Just regular people with some blisters to tend to – and a fresh buffalo story to share when we get home.

There’s some nervous laughter when a hyena calls in the distance, and we look over our shoulders into the night. But how lucky are we to be here, right?



Louis Lemmer
*Honorary ranger and
co-ordinator of the Kruger Trail,
Pretoria*

“Back in 2017, when we first started walking sections of the route, we were still in the recce phase. Since then, we’ve worked out which routes work best.

“The biggest change over the years has been the growing public awareness created by the hike.

People have come to understand the value of a wilderness experience like this. We live in a world where we want to tame everything – and mine the rest. By spending alone time in the veld, people begin to appreciate how important it is to conserve what we have.

“I’m a dominee and my love for nature is closely linked to my respect for God. Nature is a space for rest and reflection; it’s a precious heritage that we must pass on to our grandchildren one day.”



Section four of the Kruger Trail starts at Olifants rest camp and finishes near the Sweni bird hide close to the Lebombo Mountains, about 110 km away.



HIKING MEALS

All my meals for this hike came from Hoedspruit-based The Trail Food Company. I ordered their Lightweight Pack, which consists of three segments – one with breakfasts, another with midday meals and snacks, and the final one with dinners. It turned out to be way too much food – I finished some of it at home later! Here's an overview of the meals I enjoyed.

Breakfast

For the sake of variety, I chose some packets of instant Oatso Easy, plus ProNutro and Futurelife. I allocated one Ouma rusk to each morning. Instant coffee sachets and teabags also came from The Trail Food Co. As a luxury, I carried my own filter coffee and an AeroPress, just to ensure I had some personality before noon.

Snacks and lunches

The Trail Food Co. specialises in nuts and dried fruit. (My fave: pineapple.) Also included: two wheels of Laughing Cow cheese wedges, Provita snack packs, tuna in sachets, biltong, droëwors, hummus (just add water) and cute packets of mini tortillas. The USN energy drink sachets were life-savers when I needed an electrolyte boost.

Dinners

The Trail Food Co. is renowned for their legendary dehydrated meals. I ordered the Large portions, but had to share my food most evenings since I couldn't finish it. Rather order Medium if you're only catering for yourself. You simply add boiling water to your meal pack, seal it for 20 minutes and enjoy. Say toodles to noodles every night. My favourites were Chilli Con Carne, Beef & Barley, Chicken & Rice, and Mushroom Risotto.

How do I order? You can order their meals separately or outsource your entire hike by ordering a Lightweight Pack (or a Gourmet Pack). There's a drop-down menu on their website – pick and choose what you like. My six-day meal order cost about R2000. 📞 trailfood.co.za

Thanks to Trish and her team at The Trail Food Company for sponsoring me with a Lightweight Pack.

58 go! #202





Clockwise from the top: If you're lucky, the animals – like these giraffe – will stop and stare for a while as you approach. The guides carry a satellite phone for emergencies. The group enjoys the sunset from under a leadwood tree near the wild campsite they dubbed Buffalo Park. Each camp is made near a river so you have access to water, but you have to filter your drinking water before use. The guides each carry a .458 calibre rifle like this one.



Pete Wilson
Trails guide, Barberton

"I started leading other Kruger backpack trails in 2016, like the Mphongolo, Olifants and Lonely Bull trails – I did 53 of them! I've also done 27 sections of the Kruger Trail, or TKT as we call it.

"TKT is different from the usual Kruger backpack hikes because we're traversing the park so we can't always follow game trails. Sometimes we have to go where there are no paths, through long grass, thick bush, and over rocky terrain. As the years have gone by, the guides have significantly improved the route choice, making it safer and easier for everyone.

"It's a great responsibility to get our guests safely to the end of a trail. If I start overthinking this aspect, I'd stop guiding tomorrow... Luckily, when we're actually out there walking, that responsibility comes naturally – if a situation arises, us guides just have to act quickly, calmly and decisively.

"For guests, the Kruger Trail offers the opportunity to hike with different guides over your six legs and three years. Each guide presents their passion and knowledge in a different way, so you get a broad experience of the Kruger wilderness."



Johan van der Vyver
Retired, Pretoria

"My pack was too heavy. I struggled with the weight for the first three days, but after that it became easier. I'm not used to hiking 20 km per day over uneven terrain. At times, we bundu-bashed through dense stands of mopane, and missioned through loose sand in dry riverbeds.

"But the awesome natural environment made up for it – even just breathing in the smell of the grass was intoxicating. We stopped often to rest, almost every hour, and this really helped. The guides suggested we remove our shoes when we rested, which eased the risk of blisters.

"I recently had the privilege of spending a whole month driving around the Kruger. In your car, you enjoy luxuries like aircon – and you see plenty of game. But when you walk, your senses are tuned in on another level. You're more alert and you experience the veld in all its glory."



Wian Gelderblom
Civil engineer, Pretoria

"Day three on the trail was my favourite, especially that stretch when we walked along a shallow valley with elephants, zebras, impalas and giraffes streaming into the scene all the time, in front and behind us. And that view over the Piet Grobler Dam, where we stopped for lunch..."

"The hike was a relaxing experience for me. You get to focus on aspects of nature that you'd miss if you were driving around in your car. It's about the changing landscapes, the animal tracks next to your own spoor, and the sounds of the night when you're in your tent. You learn so much: I remember how Pete taught us how to identify aardvark droppings, for example.

"Next time, I'll bring a foldable bucket – very useful when you need water in camp. A bigger power bank is also essential – you'll need to charge your phone for photos and videos."

KRUGER TRAIL

Clockwise from the top: The group saw klipspringers on this rocky ridge near the Timbavati River. Guide Justin van Breda leads the group, followed by Pete Wilson – the two guides are always at the front of the line of hikers. Day three's campsite was under large tamboti trees. Pete Wilson shows how you can identify cud chewed by a hippo. You're allowed to light a campfire at night, but you must rehabilitate the site the next morning – there should be no trace left.



Thinus Hofsink
Senior lab technician, Pretoria

"My best day was day three, when we mostly walked along the Timbavati River. Our breakfast and lunch spots had epic views. We reached the Timbavati picnic site in the early afternoon, where we'd arranged for a friend to bring us some cold beers. Those beers went down a treat on what was quite a hot day.

"Another classic moment was when Justin suddenly stopped to warn us about the possibility of snakes in the long grass we were wading through at the time. His words were barely out of his mouth when he almost stepped on a puff adder!

"The hike is a really intimate way to enjoy the Kruger. You literally feel how the terrain changes under your feet. Something Justin said has stayed with me: 'Life is all about perspective.' When you spend six days in the bush – and you really deep-dive into the wilderness – it reveals how shallow the daily grind can be back home."

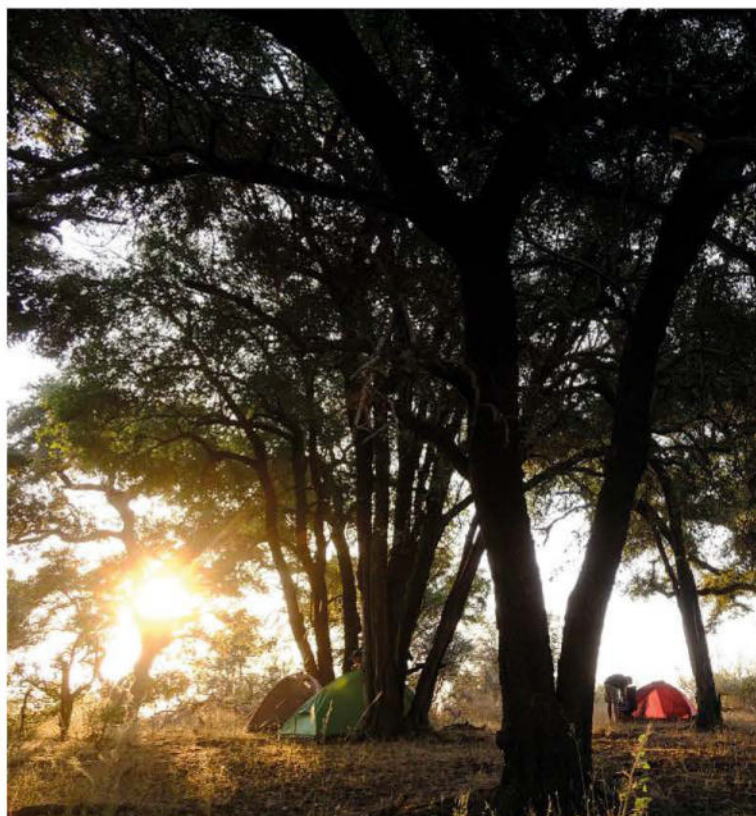


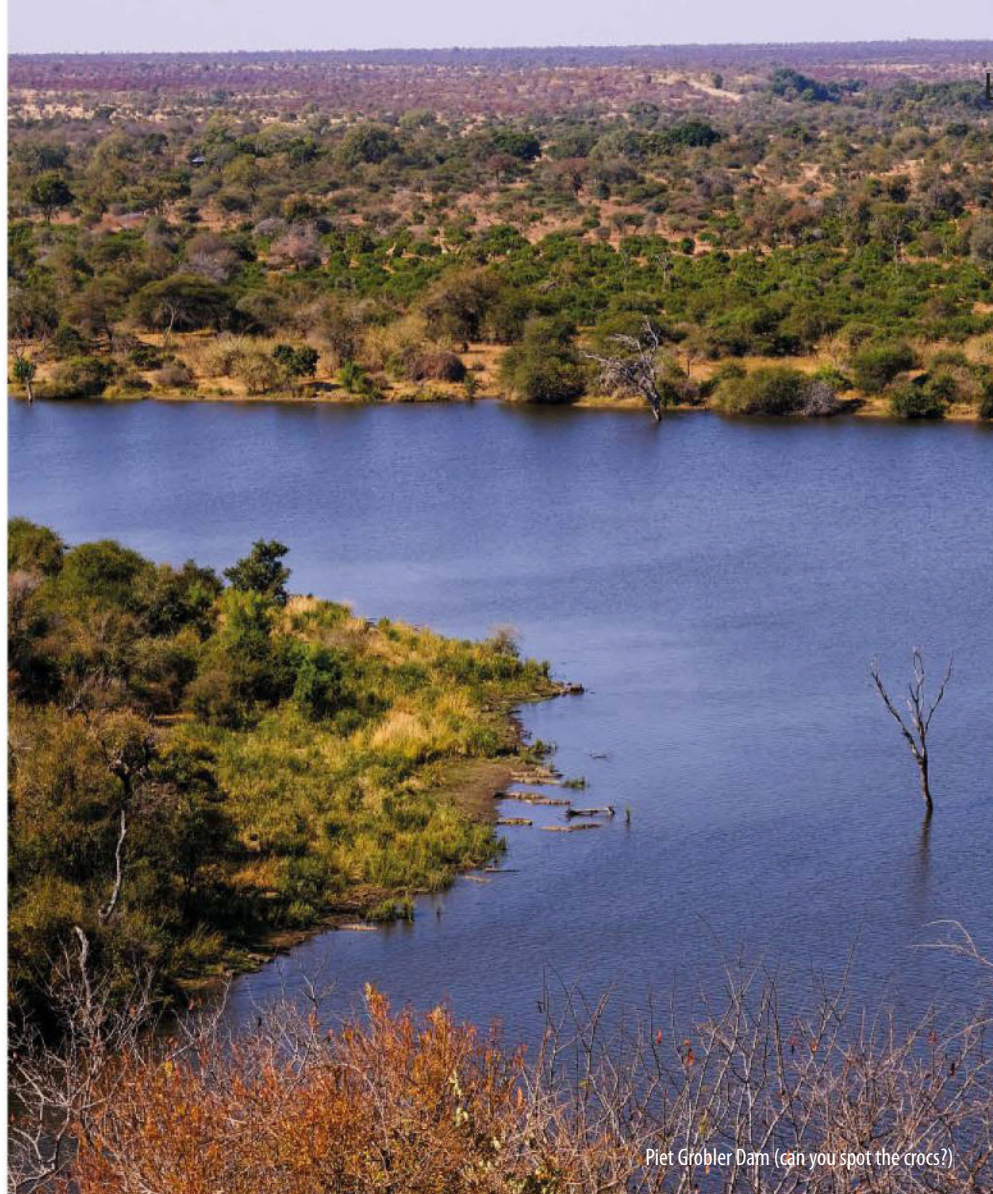
Hanco Lerm
Farmer, Pienaarsrivier

"The guides were full of interesting facts and they had plenty of stories from their past experiences in the bush. They also ensured that we always felt safe.

"After this, I'll look at the Kruger through different eyes. You're so used to the view from your car, and you think you're familiar with the park, but when you see it on foot, a new world opens up.

"I had a thought towards the end of the hike: Even though we were following the physical tracks of others – both animals and human – it's the spiritual impressions that will remain with us forever."





Piet Grobler Dam (can you spot the crocs?)



SIGN ME UP!

How does it work? The Kruger Trail isn't like the Otter Trail – you can't just make a booking. It's a fund-raising project for the SANParks Honorary Rangers and spaces are auctioned to the highest bidders. This format is deliberate – it allows the honorary rangers to collect as much money as they can, which is used for all sorts of conservation and security projects in the park.

During the annual auction, five full Kruger Trail hikes, each accommodating a maximum of eight people, are made available. The value of the winning bid is highly variable. (In recent years, it has been in the region of R240 000.) This fee buys your group the right to do the Kruger Trail; after that – from

section two onward – it costs an additional R75 000 per leg. There are six sections, which are hiked over three years (two per year – you'll be provided with fixed dates). Time to start making friends with people in high places!

When is the next auction?

On 23 October 2025, for hikes starting in 2026. It's an online auction – register in advance by sending an e-mail to 📧auction@thekrugertail.co.za

What must I carry? Everything. It's compulsory to sleep in a tent (for safety reasons) and you'll need your usual hiking bedding and cooking gear. You must also carry a water purification system. (I used a Sawyer

Mini from [📦filtershop.co.za](https://www.filtershop.co.za).) You'll need food for six days, but pack light – you only need one spare change of clothes.

How long is the trail? Each section is six days long and you'll walk a total of 100 – 110 km. You spend five nights sleeping in the bush but you'll also need to book accommodation at a regular rest camp near the start and end points.

More info: 📧thekrugertail.com
For information about the Kruger's regular three-day wilderness trails, see 📧sanparks.org

Shout out to my cousin, Reint Dykema, who sponsored me for this hike!

Have you always wanted to show off your photos in print? Give it a shot! Send your best wildlife, travel, landscape and macro pics to **Toast Coetzer** at takeyourpic@gomag.co.za.



**WINNING
PHOTO**

DIETER WELP

Nikon Z6 III
Nikon Z 400 mm lens

DIETER WRITES: During a visit to the Berry Islands in the Bahamas, I noticed some activity in one part of the bay where birds were diving for fish. Tracking the gulls was difficult – it was a hit-and-miss affair.

After a few attempts, the gull I was tracking dived, emerged from the water and took off almost immediately. A second or two later, it seemed to shake off the remaining

water on its wings – that was the moment when I got my shot.

TOAST SAYS: I love the energy in this photo! The bird – it looks more like a tern than a gull to me – seems to have its body in a twist. At first you think it's flying upside down, because you can see its eye on the "wrong" side of its head, but then you look at the legs and feet and they seem to be on the right side.

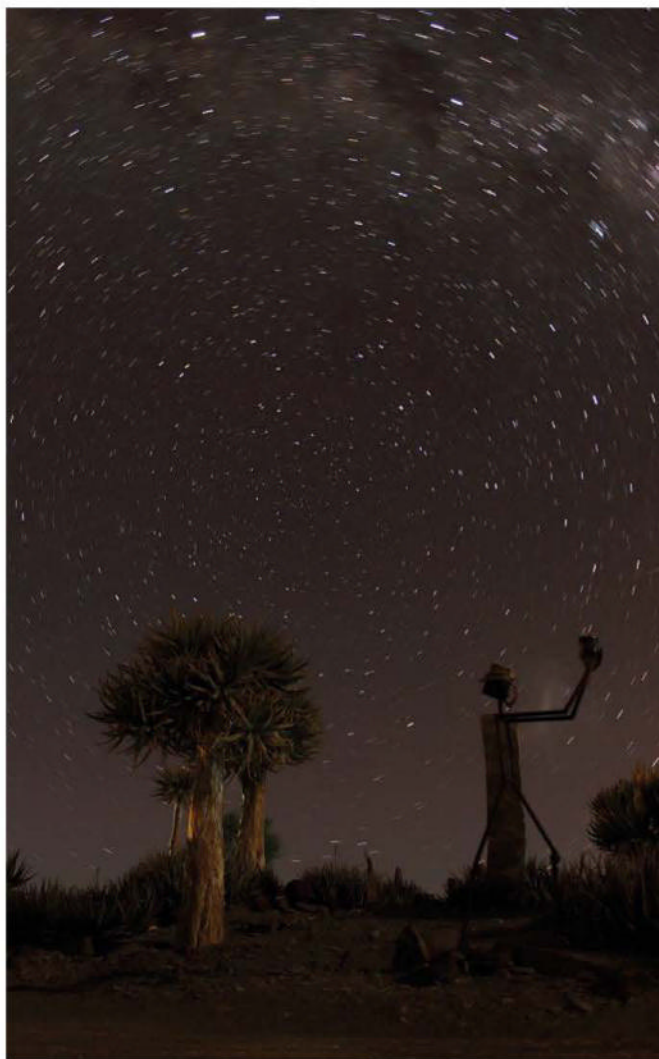
It must have been twisting or shaking its neck and head at the instant Dieter took his photo.

Dieter used a very fast shutter speed (1/6 400 of a second), which he achieved by using a high ISO of 3 200. A fast shutter speed is key to successful bird photography, especially when you're photographing a bird in flight. And unless the light is super bright, you'll generally have to increase

the ISO to accommodate the faster shutter speed.

The droplets are frozen in place thanks to the snappy shutter speed – they almost form a net around the bird. The only thing I would change is the composition. Dieter could easily re-crop so the bird isn't slap-bang in the middle. A little to the left of the frame would work better.

Congratulations, Dieter, you win the camera bag this time around!



▲ HEINDRICH ALBERTYN

Canon EOS 600D

Canon 18–55 mm lens

HEINDRICH WRITES: We visited Namibia in July this year. I took this photo at the Quiver Tree Forest just outside Keetmanshoop. We spent one night there. After braaiing in the early evening, I took some night shots before going to bed.

The shutter speed was 17 seconds, with the camera on a tripod, at aperture f11 and ISO 200. The f11 aperture allowed me to get the foreground and the stars in focus.

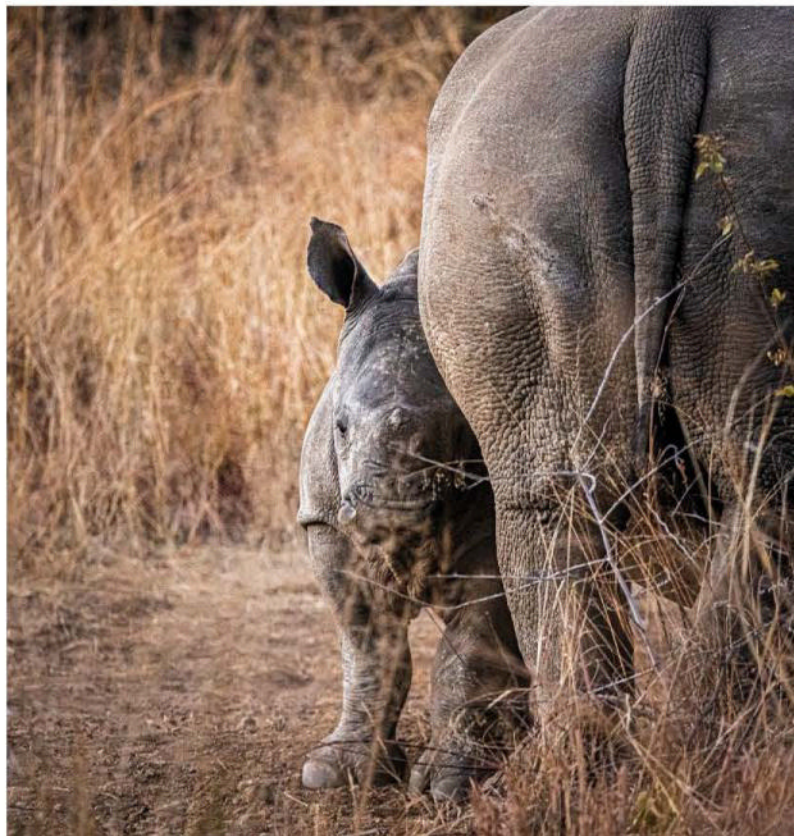
TOAST SAYS: You can't go wrong with a sneaky overnight stay at the Quiver Tree Forest. And you can't go wrong with a photo of a quiver tree, for that matter. They're iconic; as

instantly recognisable as a giraffe or an elephant.

Heindrich's stunning night shot brings an extra touch of drama, and the metal statue on the right adds interest.

One thing that bothers me a little is that the two bigger trees (the main subjects of this shot) stand slightly in front of the other. I would have preferred if they were apart from each other so that they "read" as separate plants. At first glance, they look like a single tree, which is a bit confusing.

But who cares, really, when your tummy is full of *braaivleis* and the stars are holding hands and doing a little dance, just for you?



▲ CAROLINE ROWBOTTOM

Canon EOS R5

Canon RF 100–500 mm lens

CAROLINE WRITES: A young rhino calf, born after a gestation period of 15–16 months, will stay with its mother for up to three years. This little one had plenty of energy, running around and kicking up dust. It paused for just a moment before taking off again.

TOAST SAYS: There's something so tender and fragile in this beautiful shot of Caroline's. It's such an intimate portrait of the little white rhino – its cute face looking inquisitively at the camera, while staying close to the safety of its mother.

When I zoomed in on my laptop, I noticed a small focus error: The eye and face of the rhino is ever so slightly soft, while the leg and buttock of the mother is pin sharp. You'll hardly notice at the size the shot is published here, so it doesn't really matter.

It's an easy mistake to make, and most times you won't realise until you check your images at home later. Experiment with the focus modes on your camera. Some photographers prefer a single-point mode, where you choose exactly where you want the camera to focus; others rely on "intelligent" modes that try to lock onto eyes and faces. Practise using the mode of your choice and try to take a few shots in the moment, so you have a backup option in case the focus slips. Check by bringing the shot up on your camera screen and zooming in on the focal point.

I really like how Caroline's photo highlights the textures of the adult rhino's skin. The wrinkly, knobby skin looks like a strange landscape. With the extreme crop – cutting off the back of the adult rhino, and the other leg to the right of the frame – she has used mom rhino to give a sense of scale, without distracting from the cute baby.

TAKE YOUR PIC



> LEVI BASS

Canon EOS R50

Canon EF 500 mm lens

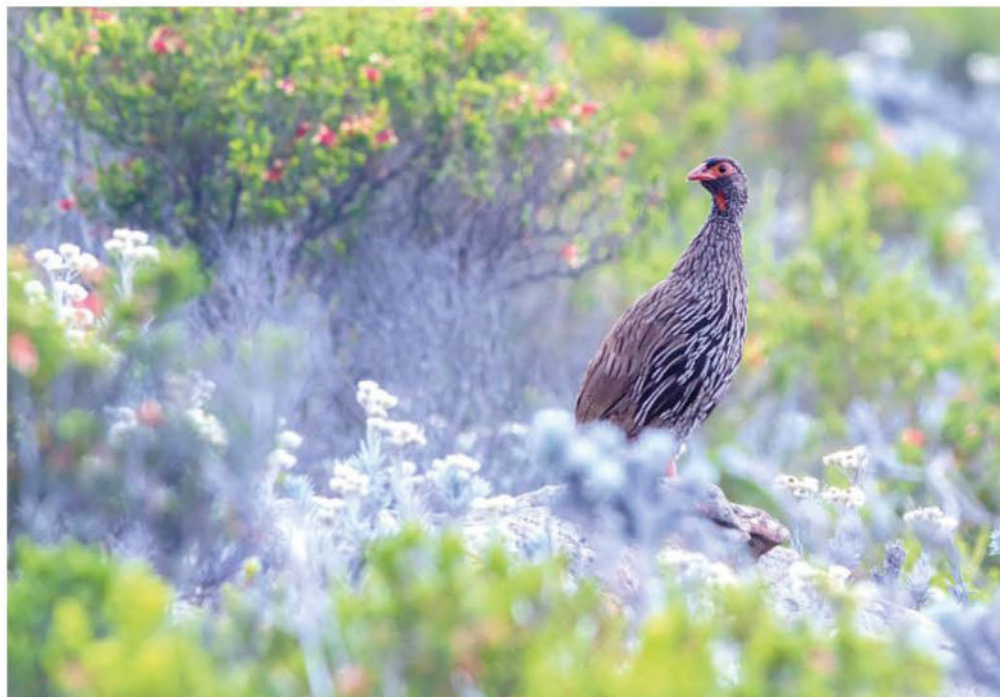
LEVI WRITES: I photographed this red-necked spurfowl in Robberg Nature Reserve outside Plettenberg Bay. I spotted him posing on a rock and spent about 30 seconds taking photos before he disappeared into the fynbos again.

I used a shutter speed of 1/1 000 second at aperture f8. I used auto ISO mode; the camera chose a setting of ISO 1 000.

TOAST SAYS: This stunning photo has been drifting around my Take Your Pic folders for months now; I'm glad we've finally published it!

I like the simple but dynamic composition. Notice how the bird's body is turned to the right, but its head is looking back into the frame towards the left. This posture is always more interesting than just a "straight" shot of the animal looking in the direction its body is facing.

The exposure on the spurfowl



is good, but the white flowers (they look like everlastings, or *sewejaartjies*) – and the light-coloured plants around the bird's feet – are a bit blown out and overexposed. Darkening that area slightly would improve the frame,

Levi, if you want to play with the RAW file.

My favourite bit? Those reddish blotches in the background – out-of-focus flowers – that complement the red on the face, throat and legs of the spurfowl.

◀ JOHN BILLINGTON

Canon EOS 1DX

Canon 500 mm lens with
1.4x converter

JOHN WRITES: In May, we spent two weeks in the Kruger Park. There were some challenging days for game viewing around Satara, since the grass was very tall due to recent rain. We decided to spend time at the Nsemani Dam, close to the rest camp. The dams of the Kruger are great stake-out places. You never know what will come down to the water.

On this day, there were several waterbuck, crocs and hippos around Nsemani. One waterbuck bull decided he wanted to graze on the other side of the water. He was very cautious about entering the dam and decided the best way was to jump!

My settings: shutter speed 1/6 400 second at aperture f8.

TOAST SAYS: A waterbuck that fears water! What next? A klipspringer that's scared of heights?

John submitted a sequence of three shots showing the jump. Which one do you think works best?

Each shot has its merits. The first shows the antelope in a great body position, with its feet about to leave the ground. That's probably the "classic" pose. Then there's the airborne shot, #2, where the buck looks like a sack of mielies with its legs pulled up. It doesn't look as graceful – this is definitely the quirkiest of the three frames.

I really like #3, because there's visual tension: The feet are pointing towards where the buck will land. Looking closer, however, the focus slipped a bit: Notice how the background is a bit sharper, compared to the other two shots. So maybe #1 is the best version after all...

Thanks for sharing these, John, they're great!



▲ STU BOWIE

Canon EOS 1D Mark IV

Canon 300 mm lens

STU WRITES: The S50 along the Shingwedzi River is one of my favourite roads in the north of the Kruger Park. We were heading back from there to Mopani one afternoon. As we came around a bend, we saw these elephants.

Initially, they were all bunched together, walking towards me. I had some time, so I angled the car to shoot out of the driver's window. I just fired away. Each shot was slightly different as the elephants moved all the time.

I then quickly got out the way and left them to continue their journey. What a great

feeling to encounter such a large herd head-on!

My shutter speed was 1/1 250 second, at an aperture of f8 and ISO 640.

TOAST SAYS: Getting out of the way was the most important part of this shot, Stu!

I always enjoy a scene like this – it has that "movie poster" feel. You can imagine the soundtrack... Maybe Willie Nelson's "On the road again"?

The choice of a narrow aperture (f8) was important. When you're shooting with a long lens like Stu's 300 mm, depth of field comes into play. Had he used a wider aperture like f4.5, then only the closest elephant would have been in

focus and the rest would have been slightly soft. Because this shot is about the group, not an individual, you want most of the animals in focus. It's only the elephants right at the back that begin to look out of focus, and that's fine.

It's easy to forget about the power of the f-stop in the heat of the moment. It can really make or break your shot. Bracket if you have the time – shoot three or four photos at different apertures to ensure you have a variety of options for the same scene.

But time was not on Stu's side here. Luckily he was on the money from the start, and he could skedaddle knowing he had a great shot in the bag.

TAKE YOUR PIC



▲ LEON VENTER

Nikon Coolpix 1000

LEON WRITES: We live in Kimberley, which is close to Mokala National Park. Mokala is a great place for photos of animals like buffalo, hartebeest, tsessebe, roan and springbok. The birdlife is also exceptional. If you happen to be at the Stofdam viewpoint at “rush hour”, your finger will constantly be on the shutter button.

That’s what it was like when I was last there on 11 July. It was just one of those days... There were plenty of waxbills, queleas and finches splashing in the water; I managed to get a good shot of these two black-faced waxbills.

TOAST SAYS: Thanks to its variety of habitats, Mokala is one of our most productive parks for game viewing. This is where the grassland of the Highveld meets the red sand of the Kalahari – there’s even a hint of the Karoo about the place.

I like Leon’s photo because the two waxbills – despite being the same species – are holding completely different poses. The one on the left is sitting in a “typical” position, with its face and chest clearly displayed – what you’d expect to see in a bird guide. But the one on the right is upside down, with its body stretched out and its face and chest hidden from view.

If both birds looked like this, or if both were facing forward, the composition wouldn’t have worked.

As it is, they complement each other perfectly. The one on the left is a classic ID shot, and the one on the right shows interesting behaviour, which always elevates a wildlife photo.



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The future in focus

COMPILED BY **LYNNE FRASER**

The Young Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition is one of the world's most prestigious platforms for budding nature photographers under 17. Run by the Natural History Museum in London, under the Wildlife Photographer of the Year umbrella, it celebrates creativity, technical skill and a deep connection to the natural world.

Young entrants submit their best wildlife images across various categories, with strict ethical guidelines ensuring that animals are never harmed or manipulated for a shot. Judges assess entries on originality, composition and storytelling power, and the winning photos are showcased in an international exhibition, featured in magazines – like this one! – and shared online.

In an age of biodiversity loss and climate change, the competition is more relevant than ever. It not only nurtures photographic talent but also fosters conservation awareness among the future custodians of the planet.

These are our favourite shots from the 2024 competition. For a full gallery and details about the next competition, visit nhm.ac.uk/wpy

Entries for the 2026 competition open on 20 October and will close on 4 December 2025.



◀ In the spotlight

Shreyovi Mehta, India

Shreyovi comes from a family of wildlife professionals – she’s travelled extensively with her parents to various national parks since the age of two.

During a visit to Keoladeo National Park in Rajasthan, she was walking in the forest with her parents when she noticed this photo opportunity. She ran back to her dad, who was carrying the cameras, then got down to ground level to take her shot.

As she did so, a female nilgai antelope stepped into the frame, as if it had been waiting in the wings of a stage. Also present are two Indian peafowl – year-round residents of the park, which is renowned for its variety of birdlife.

Shreyovi’s photo was highly commended in the “10 Years and Under” category.

HOW: Canon EOS R5, 100 – 500 mm lens, shutter speed 1/800 second, aperture f10, ISO 1 600

➤ Leaving the nest

Sasha Jumanca, Germany

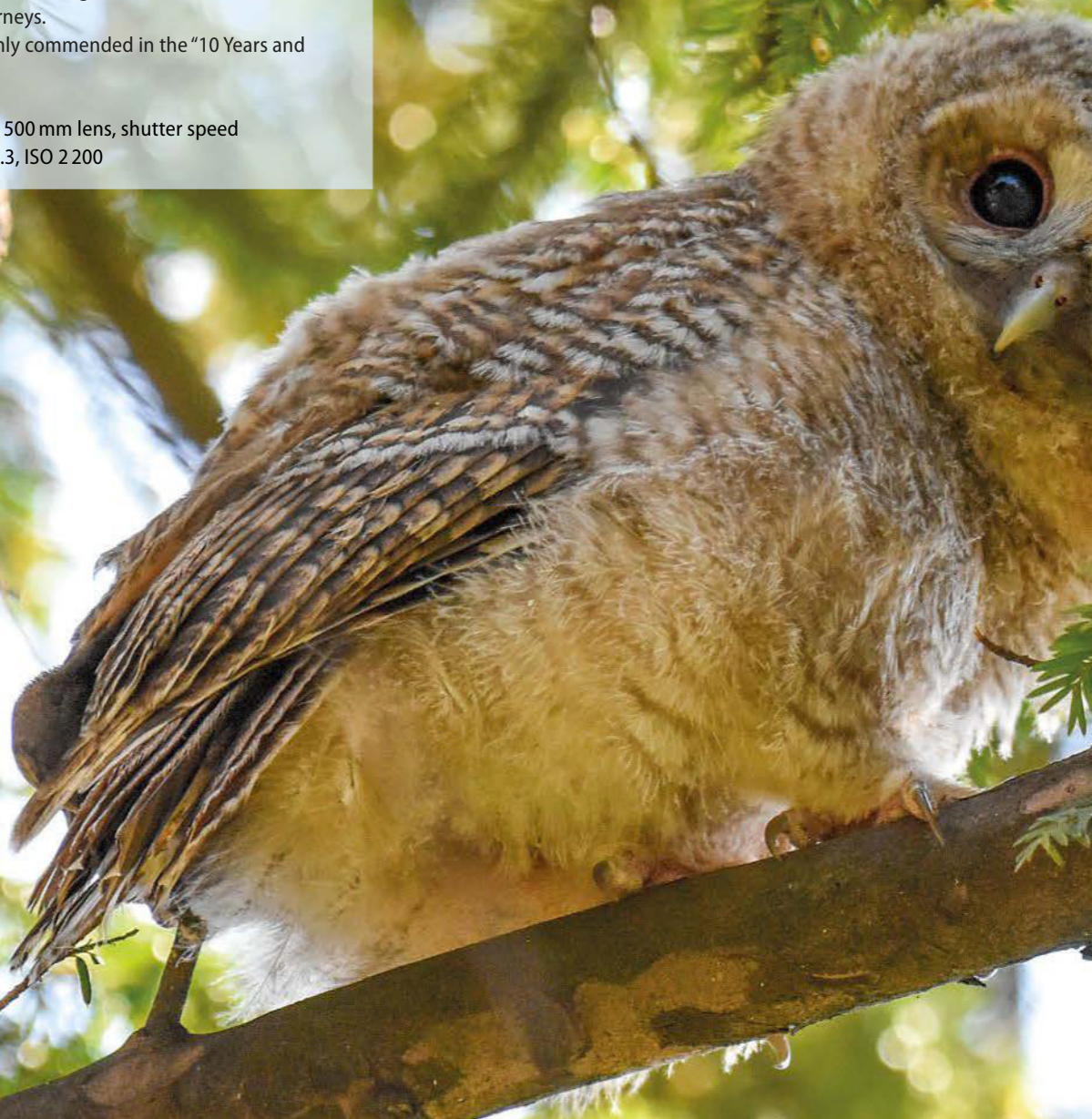
Sasha discovered a love for bird photography when he was seven years old, after visiting Nymphenburg Park in Munich and seeing a kingfisher for the first time.

He found these tawny owlets in another park near his home, and watched them for several days. They were losing their fluffy down feathers and he wanted to capture this time of transition, still young and vulnerable together, but soon to fly away.

The fledgling phase for owlets is called “branching” – they jump, flutter and climb around in the branches of nearby trees, while begging for food from their parents. This lasts for several weeks before they eventually grow their flight muscles and feathers and head off on their own journeys.

Sasha's photo was highly commended in the “10 Years and Under” category.

HOW: Nikon D7200, 200 – 500 mm lens, shutter speed 1/500 second, aperture f6.3, ISO 2 200









◀ Sparring godwits

Liam O'Donnell, Ireland

Liam's passion for wildlife photography started when he was eight years old. Since then, he's spent a long time watching and studying birds and is able to identify nearly every bird found in Ireland, and many more. His dream is to become a professional wildlife photographer.

One day, at Broadmeadow Estuary north of Dublin, while photographing various waders and wildfowl feeding along the mudflats, he noticed this pair of black-tailed godwits engaged in a territorial dispute. Such disputes can often get quite violent!

Godwits are common winter visitors to Ireland's wetlands, migrating from breeding grounds in Iceland. Liam's photo was highly commended in the "11 – 14 Years" category.

HOW: Canon EOS 90D, Sigma 150 – 600 mm lens, shutter speed 1/1 600 second, aperture f8, ISO 1 250

➤ **Free as a bird**
Alberto Román Gómez, Spain

Alberto watched this juvenile European stonechat from the window of his father's car, at the edge of the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park.

The summer light emphasized the colour harmony between the rusty metal, the bird's plumage and the dry grassland beyond.

To Alberto, the bird displayed a sense of ownership, as if it were a guardian overseeing its territory. He highlighted this through the composition of the image.

Competition judge Chien Lee comments: "Many experienced wildlife photographers often shun the idea of including human-made objects in their shot, but here they form a beautiful framework for the bird and add context to its suburban habitat."

Alberto's photo was the winner in the "10 Years and Under" category.

HOW Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark III, 100–400 mm lens, shutter speed 1/640 second, aperture f6.3



A tale of two classics

Creamy Bloody Mary pasta

Basil and tomato are a match made in culinary heaven: slight sweetness perfectly complementing peppery freshness. These recipes are all about this winning combo.

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



Caprese schnitzel



Pork steak with cherry tomato sauce

Creamy Bloody Mary pasta

Serves 4

Preparation time 30 minutes

Cooking time 20 minutes

You need

- 100 g diced bacon
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 chicken thigh fillets, each cut into 3 pieces
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 celery stalks, finely chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, thinly sliced
- 1 cup passata
- 1 shot of vodka (optional)
- ½ cup cream
- a few drops of hot sauce (like Tabasco)
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce or to taste
- 300 g pasta (we used bucatini)

- 12 basil leaves, shredded
- ⅓ cup grated parmesan

Here's how

- 1** Fry the bacon in oil until crispy. Season the fillets with salt and pepper and add them to the bacon in the pan. Fry until the chicken starts to brown.
- 2** Add the onion, celery and garlic and fry until soft. Make sure the celery is cooked through.
- 3** Add the passata, vodka and cream, then add the hot sauce and Worcestershire sauce to taste. At the same time, cook the pasta in salted water until al dente. When the pasta has been cooking for 5 minutes, add the basil and most of the cheese to the sauce.
- 4** Drain the pasta and add it to the tomato sauce. Serve with the extra cheese and more basil if you prefer.

TIP Add green olives – like the kind you use in a Bloody Mary cocktail – as an optional extra.

Caprese schnitzel

Serves 4

Preparation time 45 minutes

Cooking time about 10 minutes per batch

You need

- 4 chicken breast fillets
- about ½ cup flour
- 2 eggs
- 2 tablespoons cold water
- about 1½ cups panko breadcrumbs
- fresh thyme
- 300 g mixed tomatoes
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- handful of soft herbs (we used fennel leaves, thyme and parsley)
- 1 clove of garlic, grated
- salt and coarse pink pepper
- olive oil, for frying
- 2 teaspoons butter (optional)
- 2 balls (125 g) of burrata or soft cow's milk mozzarella (fior di latte)
- handful of fresh basil leaves
- 1 head of cos lettuce

Here's how

- 1** Butterfly the fillets without cutting all the way through. Use a meat tenderiser or rolling pin to flatten them until even.
- 2** Add the flour to a shallow bowl (big enough for a piece of chicken). Beat the eggs and water together in a second bowl and add the breadcrumbs to a third bowl. Season the flour with salt, pepper and thyme leaves. Dip each fillet in the flour, then the egg and then the crumbs. Make sure the fillets are completely covered. Put them in the fridge for 15 minutes – this step will help the crumbs stick to the chicken.
- 3** Prepare the salad: Slice the tomatoes to your preference and mix with the olive oil, vinegar, herbs and garlic. Season with salt and pepper and set aside. (You can also add chopped red onion.)

4 Heat a splash of olive oil and a pat of butter in a non-stick heavy-bottomed pan. Fry the fillets one or two at a time for a few minutes a side until golden brown and cooked through. Drain on kitchen paper and repeat the process with the rest of the fillets.

5 Tear the cheese into smaller pieces and mix with the marinated tomato salad and basil leaves just before serving. Pile a few lettuce leaves on or next to each schnitzel along with a portion of tomato salad.

TIP Burrata has a softer centre than fior di latte. Serve half a ball per portion rather than tearing them into pieces and mixing them with the tomatoes.

Pork steak with cherry tomato sauce

Serves 4

Preparation time 35 minutes

Cooking time 30 minutes

You need

- 2 big pork club steaks
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 small red onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons capers
- 300 g cherry tomatoes, halved
- ¼ cup raisins
- pinch of dried oregano
- ⅓ cup dry white wine
- ½ cup stock
- ½ cup basil leaves
- pine nuts (optional)

Here's how

- 1** Cut any excess fat off the steaks and dice. Add the diced fat to a cold pan and heat slowly to render and crisp. You can skip this step and use oil instead if you prefer.
- 2** Season the meat with salt and black pepper. Sear the steaks fatty side first (hold them upright with braai tongs) until the fat starts to brown. Repeat with the bony side. Then sear on both sides until golden brown and almost cooked. It will take about 10 minutes in

total depending on the thickness of the steak. Rest the steak while you prepare the sauce.

3 Fry the onion in the same pan until soft. Add the garlic and capers and fry for 1–2 minutes. Add the cherry tomatoes, raisins and oregano and fry until the tomato skins start to burst. Add the white wine and loosen any crispy bits stuck to the bottom of the pan. Add the stock, return the steaks to the sauce, and simmer until the meat is cooked through and the sauce thickens. Scatter over the basil and pine nuts.

4 Cut the meat off the T-bone and into strips. Stir the strips into the sauce and serve with your favourite starch, like mash or polenta.

TIP One steak is a big portion and could be enough for two people. You can also use four boneless pork neck steaks and adjust the cooking time accordingly.

Sweet potato “Margherita”

Serves 4

Preparation time 30 minutes

Cooking time 1 hour

You need

- 4 small orange sweet potatoes
- ½ cup grated parmesan
- 4 tablespoons tomato pasta sauce or 4 teaspoons sundried tomato pesto
- 1½ cups grated mozzarella
- 2 small plum tomatoes, sliced
- 8 basil leaves

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. Use a fork to prick the sweet potato all over and bake for 30 to 40 minutes or until soft. You can also use your air fryer – check if it's cooked after 30 minutes.

2 Sprinkle the parmesan in four circles on a baking sheet lined with baking paper. Put a cooked sweet potato (peel and all) on top of a parmesan circle, cover it with another sheet of baking paper and

flatten using the base of a small pan. Remove the top sheet of baking paper. Repeat the process with all four sweet potatoes. Bake for 10 minutes on the bottom rack of the oven to dry out the sweet potato a little.

3 Spread a spoonful of pasta sauce over each sweet potato and scatter over a layer of mozzarella. Bake for 10 minutes or until the cheese starts to bubble.

4 Place the raw tomato slices and basil on top and serve hot.

TIP The sweet potato won't be as crisp as a traditional pizza base and you'll have to eat it with a knife and fork. This is a delicious low-carb option and you can cook the sweet potato the day before to speed up the preparation time.

Tomato lamb shanks

Makes 4 hearty portions

Preparation time 45 minutes

Cooking time 3 hours 15 minutes

You need

- 4 lamb shanks (1,2 kg in total)
- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon mild curry powder
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 onions, peeled and cut into wedges
- 200 ml dry rosé or red wine
- 2 tins tomato purée plus a tin of water
- 2 bay leaves
- 3 cloves of garlic, bruised
- 1 pod of star anise
- 1 green chilli, seeded and chopped
- 1 thumb fresh ginger, peeled and grated
- 4 plum tomatoes, peeled, seeded and cut into cubes
- 4 large potatoes, peeled, cut into wedges and cooked
- handful each of basil leaves and flat-leaf parsley, chopped
- 1 clove of garlic, finely chopped
- grated zest of 1 lemon
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar



Italian bruschetta

Here's how

1 Preheat the oven to 170 °C. Make two deep cuts into each shank and season with salt, black pepper and curry powder. Roll the meat in the flour. Heat the oil in a big heavy-based pot and fry the meat until brown. (If all the meat won't fit in the pot, work in batches.) Add the onions and fry for a few minutes. Add the wine and deglaze the pot.

2 Stir the tomato purée, water, bay leaves, garlic, star anise, chilli and ginger into the pot. Bring to a boil and close the lid. Transfer the pot to the oven and cook covered for two hours.

3 Add the fresh tomato and cooked potatoes to the pot. (Skim any excess fat off the surface if you don't like the fat.) Roast for an hour without a lid or until the meat falls off the bone.

4 Combine the herbs, garlic, lemon zest and red wine vinegar. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve with the tomato stew.

Tomato sandwich, two ways

Serves 6 as an appetiser

You need

- 1 ciabatta
- 1 big clove of garlic, peeled
- 3–6 ripe tomatoes, seeded
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- extra-virgin olive oil
- 12 basil leaves

Spanish pan con tomate

Here's how to make Italian bruschetta

1 Cut the ciabatta into 1,5 cm-thick slices and toast them dry in a griddle pan until lightly toasted with charred lines on both sides. Rub the bread with a clove of garlic while hot. (Alternatively, toast the bread under a preheated grill element in the oven.)

2 Cut the tomatoes into small blocks. Season with salt, freshly ground pepper and a dash of olive oil. Spoon the mixture onto the ciabatta. Finish each slice with a whole basil leaf.

TIP Another option is to shred the basil and mix it with the tomatoes. Add a few drops of red wine or balsamic vinegar for additional flavour.

Here's how to make Spanish pan con tomate

1 Cut the ciabatta in half horizontally and then cut the halves into 2 cm-thick slices. Arrange the slices on a baking sheet, baste them with olive oil and toast under a preheated grill element until crisp with golden edges. Rub the hot slices with a clove of garlic.

2 Coarsely grate the tomatoes. Start with the cut-open side of the tomato against the grater so the skin remains – discard the skin.

3 Stack the basil leaves on top of each other, roll them up and use a sharp knife to cut them into thin slices. Mix the basil with the tomatoes, season with salt and pepper and spoon onto the bread. Add a few drops of olive oil for a richer taste. Serve immediately. It's messy to eat, but one of the best ways to enjoy ripe tomatoes.

The logo for FVELDT, featuring a stylized white triangle icon to the left of the brand name in a bold, sans-serif font.A family of four is camping on a rocky beach. A man in a tan jacket and grey beanie is pouring from a silver thermos. A woman in a tan jacket and grey scarf is holding a silver mug. Two children in green jackets and grey beanies are standing near a small table with food. A small green tent is in the foreground. The background shows a rocky coastline and the ocean.

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INJISUTHI CAMPSITE, DRAKENSBERG

NICOLE RICHOUX

I keep returning to Injisuthi in the central Drakensberg, drawn by its quiet magnetism. As you drive deeper into the mountains, the road turns to gravel, the cell reception drops, and the modern world slips away. Don't even ask for the Wi-Fi password – there isn't one. Your phone is essentially a camera now – but rejoice, because the only thing grabbing your attention is the incredible view.

Unlike some of the busier corners of the Berg, Injisuthi feels like a secret – where solitude is a privilege and the biggest decision you're faced with is where to pitch your tent in the campsite. Three and a half hours from Durban, or five and a half hours from Joburg, Injisuthi is well worth the trek. The stands are grassy and level, with views of the mountains in all directions. A nearby river is just audible from the camp and leads to a fantastic swimming spot a short walk away.

If you're not in the mood to set up camp, you can stay in one of the canvas safari tents. These come kitted with two single beds, lights (but no plug points), a table and a pair of camp chairs.

The campsite has everything you need to get back to basics: a convenient dishwashing area and hot showers in the neat ablution block.

I always treat my visits as a kind of digital detox; a health spa for R150 per night where you can even get a no-nonsense cold plunge in a fresh mountain stream. With tech distractions at bay, you can practise being present, immersing yourself in the wild spaces that we're so privileged to have access to in South Africa. Slowing the sensory stimulation helps the nervous system regulate; as does swapping dopamine spikes from social media for hiking and swimming. You'll soon feel like the best version of yourself again.

Speaking of hiking and swimming... One of the most popular day hikes from the campsite is to Marble Baths, where the Injisuthi River has carved out marble-smooth swimming holes in the bedrock. It's a fairly challenging 16 km out-and-back route, but so worth it. If you leave early, you'll have plenty of time to picnic at the pools and swim to your heart's content.

Evenings at Injisuthi spool out slowly. The glow of the campfire illuminates happy faces as the last hints of sunset cling to the peaks. With phones forgotten at the bottom of bags, conversation flows easily. Life seems distilled to what matters most.

Until next time, Injisuthi.

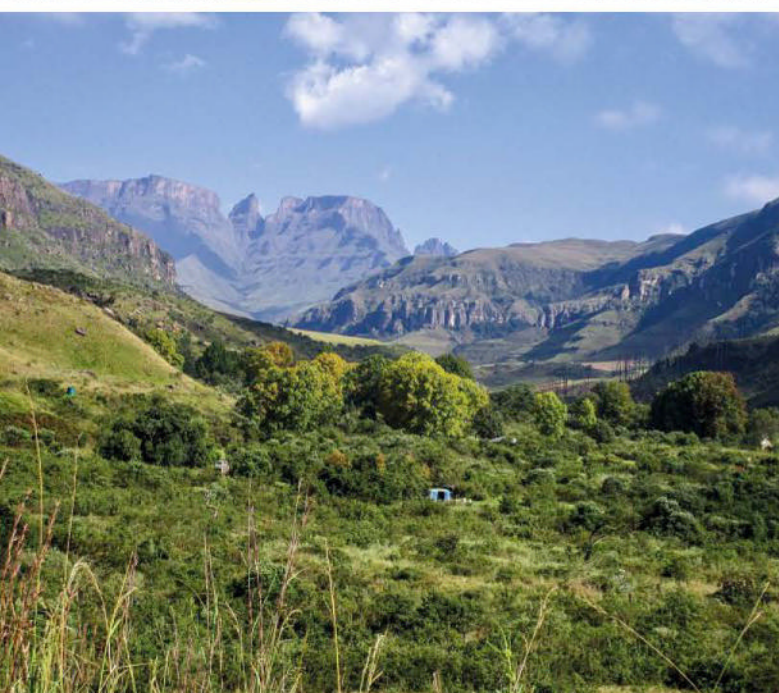
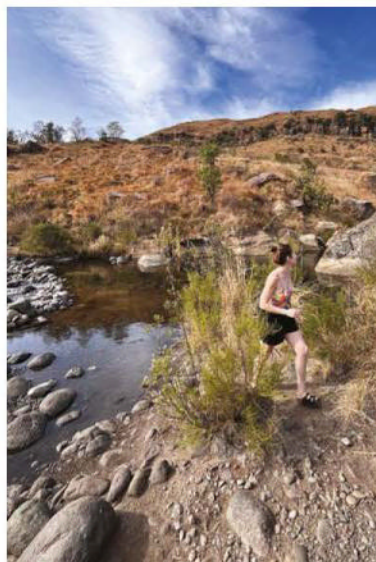
– Philippa Crooks

Rates: Camping from R150 per person; twin-sleeper safari tent from R570 per night. A bag of firewood costs R55 from the office/shop.

How to get there: Injisuthi is 250 km from Durban and 460 km from Joburg. Take exit 179 from the N3 toward Estcourt/Giants Castle and continue for 23 km. Turn left onto Thamela Road and continue for 31 km. You can reach the camp in a normal car, but a high-clearance vehicle is recommended. The road might be rough after rain.

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HOW TO ENTER

SMS THULE, your full name, phone number, postal address, and e-mail address to 35695. Each SMS costs R1,50. Free SMSes do not apply. Competition closes: 20 November 2025

THE PRIZE

Thule WingBar Evo Roof Racks valued at R7 499 and the **Thule Force 3 Large Roof Box** valued at R19 999.

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COMPETITION RULES, TERMS AND CONDITIONS: The competition runs from 26 September 2025 until 5 pm on 20 November 2025. 1. Competitions and giveaways are open to permanent residents of South Africa over the age of 18. 2. Staff members of the respective prize sponsors and Media24, as well as their advertisers, PR and digital agencies, and their immediate family members may not enter. 3. The judges' decision is final, and no correspondence will be entered into. 4. Prizes are not transferable and may not be converted into cash. 5. By providing your contact details you give us permission to communicate with you via these channels.

Back to the future

With the launch of two large SUVs costing north of a million rand, **Hyundai** and **Kia** aren't looking in the rear-view mirror at the host of budget-friendly Chinese vehicles breathing down their necks. Instead, the Koreans have the luxury German brands in their sights...

BY PIERRE STEYN

The new Kia Sorento and Hyundai Santa Fe might share the same platform; they might both have seven seats and all-wheel drive and cost more than R1,2 million, but that's where the familial similarities end. Because these cousins have taken different forks in the road in their mutual quest to compete with BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Audi.

The styling of each vehicle is radically different, but the biggest differentiator is under the bonnet. Kia has equipped the Sorento with a tried-and-trusted 2.2-litre turbo-diesel engine with lots of torque and a smooth, eight-speed, dual-clutch transmission.

Hyundai has taken a leap of faith and introduced the Santa Fe as the company's first hybrid electric vehicle to be sold in South Africa. It has a 1.6-litre turbo-charged petrol engine with a 44 kW electric motor on the front axle and a six-speed automatic transmission.

We drove both cars at a launch in the Western Cape during winter, so let's start with the elephant in the room... the Santa Fe.

Hyundai is clearly not afraid to push the boundaries of car design (the futuristic Staria van is a prime example) and the Santa Fe is unlike any other SUV on our roads. At first glance, you're not even sure it is an SUV! The squared-off, boxy design, massive tailgate and acres of interior space reminds me more of a minivan. It also shuns any pretensions of being an off-roader by having only 177 mm of ground clearance – 29 mm less than its predecessor. You'll either love or hate the LED configuration of the light clusters front and rear, but there's no doubt that they make an impression.

The same is true of the luxurious, space-age interior. The gear shifter is on the steering column, which frees up space for dual wireless charging pads

and cup holders between the front seats, with a big storage box that can also be reached from the back. Leg- and headroom at the back is exemplary, with cup holders and USB-C charging ports for passengers. By folding the second and third row of seats flat, you can increase the boot space from 413 litres to a gargantuan 1 148 litres.

The drive is hard to fault, too. Comfort has been prioritised over dynamics, which is a fair call. There's very little road noise in the well-insulated cabin; enough power to overtake with the added boost of the hybrid motor; and frugal consumption of about 7 litres per 100 km.

This isn't far off the 6,5 litres per 100 km we managed on our test drive of Kia's most premium vehicle. The Sorento is a handsome car in the traditional sense of the word. The front and rear LED clusters have been extensively restyled, so has the bonnet and grille, and both tweaks have improved its sharp looks.

You'll want for nothing in the flagship SXL model. Think mood lighting, a head-up display, and a 12-speaker Bose sound system – on top of all the other luxuries you'll pay extra for in a German SUV.

The Sorento might be a "soft-roader", but with that torquey diesel engine (148 kW and 440 Nm), dual-clutch transmission, and settings that allow you to control the power response and suspension, it offers an exciting drive.

The cheapest Sorento is the 4x2 EX at R1 million, while the SXL, with all-wheel drive and all the bells and whistles, will set you back R1,3 million. That's R50 000 more than the one-model-only Santa Fe, at R1,25 million.

But in a first for the Santa Fe and the Sorento, the Korean cousins aren't looking to bag the same buyer...





QUICKPIC





DO THIS

Dive Africa's southernmost tropical reefs

WORDS **RACHELLE-JEAN STEENBERG**
PICTURES **RACHELLE-JEAN STEENBERG & CHANTÉ PERRING**



It's a cloudy, rainy morning when I get my gear together for my first dive at Sodwana Bay, in the far north of KZN. The weather may be moody, but my spirits are high. I've heard good stories about this place.

We launch the boat through the surf and finally I roll backwards into the ocean. As I descend towards the reef, my eyes grow wider behind my mask – there's coral everywhere! Goldies – shimmering orange fish – flit around a huge green tree coral while other corals shelter an array of creatures, from psychedelic nudibranchs to a honeycomb eel peeking curiously from its crevice.

Sodwana is just south of the Mozambican border. It's renowned for its rich marine biodiversity and world-class scuba-diving. Sodwana Bay National Park is part of the UNESCO-listed iSimangaliso Wetland Park, which protects a 220 km section of coastline from Kosi Bay on the border to Maphelane in the south.

Above the surface, dunes and coastal forest

provide refuge for a wide variety of terrestrial animals, and the beaches are nesting sites for sea turtles. Beneath the waves, an entirely different world opens up.

During my week of diving to complete my Advanced Open Water course with Coral Divers, I saw schools of fish, turtles, rays, sharks and even a pod of dolphins.

There were two dives per day. After each one, we'd return via shuttle to Coral Divers HQ, often spotting duiker, monkeys, and mongoose along the way. After a warm shower, it was time to refuel at the restaurant, rest and do it all again the next day. What a privilege!

There are various dive sites at Sodwana, including Pinnacles, 2-Mile Reef, 9-Mile Reef, Hotspot and Bikini. All have unique topography and varied reef structures, with overhangs, drop-offs, swim-throughs and underwater caves to explore. The visibility was good – at least 15 m each dive.

And the highlight? When a huge bowmouth guitarfish came cruising past!





Where? Sodwana Bay is 350 km north of Durban via the N2 and the R22.

Experience level? Sodwana has dive sites suitable for all qualification levels, from Open Water to Advanced. The deepest recreational site is Hotspot, at 40 metres, but most sites are much shallower.

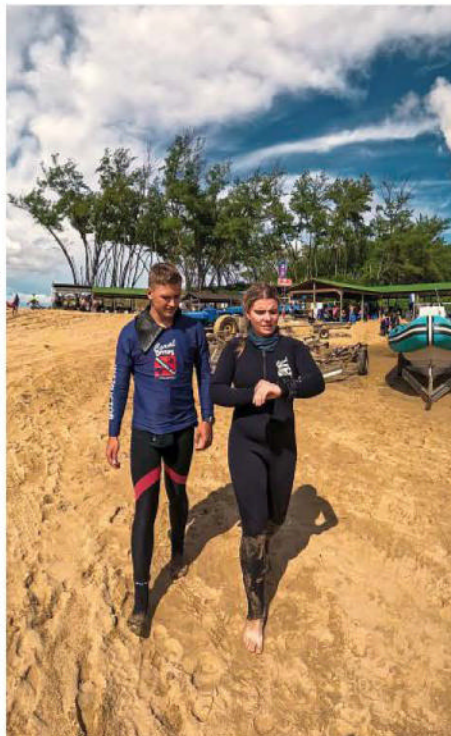
If you're not certified or if you're looking to progress further, many dive centres offer courses. The PADI Advanced Open Water course that I did with Coral Divers starts at R4 550 in low season (May to September), including gear rental and four nights' accommodation in a safari tent.

What about snorkelling? Several operators, including Coral Divers and Pisces Diving Sodwana Bay, offer snorkelling trips. To ensure everything is well organised and enjoyable for both divers and snorkellers, it's best to confirm the available options with your operator ahead of time.

Where to stay? I stayed at Coral Divers (coraldivers.co.za) in one of their en suite cabins. They also have other accommodation options for most budgets. The dive centre has a restaurant, swimming pool, braai area and self-catering kitchen. You can opt for day dives or choose a multi-day package. Gear rental from R405 per day.

Other good dive centres in the area include Pisces Diving (piscesdiving.co.za), Big Blue Diving Centre (bigblue-dive.com) and the scuba centre at Sodwana Bay Lodge (sodwanadiving.co.za).

Note: Internet in Sodwana can be patchy. During the first few days of my trip, heavy rains left everyone with no signal at all. Something to consider if you're planning to mix work with diving!



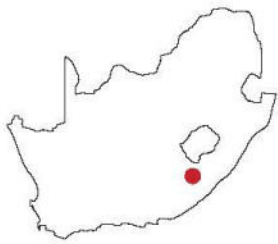
The dirt road to heaven

No matter which direction you approach from, you have to drive a dirt road to get to the village of Rhodes in the Eastern Cape Drakensberg. Here's why it's worth the trek.

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**

Each season in Rhodes has its own colour: from the greens of summer and autumn's yellow to winter's white and spring's pink blush.





Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Desebo Ramakheta works in the shop next to the Rhodes Hotel. The hotel is a popular gathering spot. Kitty Kamut is ready to welcome you at Studio Café. Dave Walker is the unofficial mayor of the town. Since he moved here in the 1990s, he's worked hard to promote Rhodes as a tourism destination. The post office is no longer in use, but the beautiful old sandstone building is still worth a look. Oom Hardus Human exchanged his farm near Addo for a stoep in Rhodes.

The last time I visited Rhodes was a few years ago, but everything still looks the same. The gin-clear Bell River murmurs past and there are still more sheep than vehicles in the dusty streets. Somewhere you'll have to hit the brakes to avoid a chicken scratching around.

Landmarks include Walkerbouts Inn, Dave Walker's legendary guesthouse, and the old Rhodes Hotel, where the door to the bar is always open. The barman is new and can't check me in. Look for the owner, Sandra Reeders, he says.

Sandra is nowhere to be found, but Oom Hardus Human comes walking down the dim hallway. "We're always looking for Sandra," he says with a laugh. Sandra is his daughter. Hardus recently moved to Rhodes from his farm near Addo.

"My children thought I was too old to live alone on the farm, but I liked living alone. I could wander around and do things. What on earth would I do in Rhodes? But I enjoy it here. The landscape is so beautiful and the people are friendly. I haven't met one rude person."

He reckons Sandra might be in the shop next to the hotel. I walk across and find Desebo Ramakheta tidying the shelves. On the old timber counter, sweets are displayed behind glass windows.

No, Desebo says, Sandra isn't here. Maybe she's busy behind the hotel? She walks back with me. "I came to Rhodes a few years ago with my father, after he found a job here," Desebo says. "He has passed away, but I got attached to the village and the people. Everyone knows everyone – you basically become part of a big family."

Her relatives live just across the border in Lesotho. "It's a steep climb up the mountain, but it's quicker than if I had to go in a vehicle to the nearest border post," she says.

We locate Sandra behind the hotel where she's pruning wild rose bushes. "They're actually an invasive species," she says. "But the oil in the fruit and seeds is so healthy. We use it to make all kinds of products – there's even some job-creation potential. Interesting, isn't it? Nothing in nature is purely a pest."

Sandra finds stillness – and energy – in nature. "When I feel down, I go paint in the veld. The negativity evaporates. Just look at this place. Where in the world will you find fresher air?"

She loves her village, which is why she and her husband Henri bought the hotel in 2020

after it had been closed for a few years.

"We live on a farm about 10km away, but it affects the entire community when the village is going through a tough time. Without the hotel, there was no heartbeat. Fewer tourists came here and fewer people had jobs. That's a heavy blow for a small place. The hotel keeps me busy. Our kids are out of the house – they left a sudden silence and made me wonder what's next."

She especially enjoys cooking for guests. "Henri is the one who chats to people and tells stories," she says. "I'd rather make a potato bake than make small talk."

Opposite the hotel is the Studio Café, where cooking is also high on the agenda.

Owner Nohline Geyer and manager René Sutherland both left Joburg to come live here. Nohline and her husband Lucas spent holidays in Rhodes and bought a house in 2014. "We came to live here during Covid. It was good for us and we realised we could do it permanently. Lucas can work online and I created a studio for local artwork and started to think about a restaurant," she says.

The pandemic also inspired René, a financial advisor, to head into the mountains. "My sister passed away and I visited Rhodes to get away from everything," she says. "It was my first time here and I fell in love with the mountains. I didn't want to go back. At first I thought I'd miss the convenience of living in a city, but the support network of a small community makes things easier. Everyone helps each other and there's a great bartering system."

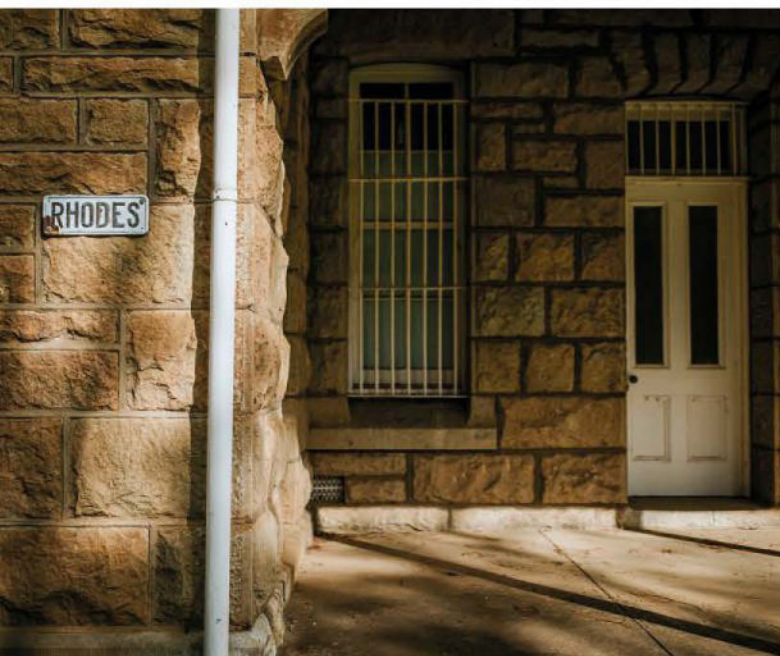
Almost everyone grows a few vegetables in their garden, which are traded in the community, says Nohline. "You make friends with people you otherwise wouldn't have spoken to."

Dave Walker says most people who visit Rhodes like the place. "But if you're really crazy, you move here," he says. Like he did, in the early 1990s.

"I came to visit a friend in Rhodes in 1978. I always thought the place was scenic and great, but I had to make a living."

Farm attacks in the Ficksburg area – where Dave worked on an asparagus farm – made him look for a quieter and safer life. In 1995, he opened Walkerbouts in the village.

"I looked at the numbers the other day. Close to 37 000 people have stayed here since 1999," he says.



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Farmers Donie Naudé and Willem Nel reckon there's no place more beautiful, or better, than Rhodes. You're just as likely to encounter sheep in the streets as people. Sandra Reeders in the De Weydeman bar at the hotel.

Many guests have returned again and again, because Dave, his inn, the Thanksjalot bar, and the pizzas have all become legendary.

"I'm in my shedding phase now," he says. "It's time to get rid of things." Yes, the legendary Walkerbouts is up for sale... "I'm 73 years old. I want to do nothing for a change. I want to read proper books and travel, especially to the Northern Cape."

He's not planning to move, though. "I don't have the energy to get to know new neighbours, and I'm used to the cold here. And where else will I find a place as beautiful?"

Don't pass it up

Drive north from Barkly East and the dirt road goes ever deeper into the Drakensberg. By the time you get to Rhodes, it feels like you're at the end of your journey.

This was true in the early years. In the late 1800s, this road was the only route to the village. The dirt road (now the R396) came to a dead end.

This posed a challenge to the Naudé brothers, Stephanus and Gabriël, who farmed in the area. They had the chance to buy good land to the east of Rhodes and expand their farming business, but there was the small matter of a mountain range between them and their opportunity. The brothers scouted a route on horseback and named the highest point Naudé's Nek.

The rugged footpath they'd trod already had a name, though: Lehana's Pass, which was the official name until 1894 when the government got involved to improve the road, widening the section to the top to 12 feet. (There's a small mountain pass to the north-east of Naudé's Nek, and a footpath near Tenahead Lodge, both still called Lehana.) And in 1906, it seems that the local branch of the Afrikanerbond convinced the government to extend the road to the town of Maclear.

Today, Naudé's Nek is one of the highest (2 590 m), longest (33 km) and most spectacular passes in South Africa – and an important route that has linked farmers to their land on both sides of the mountains for years.

The descendants of Stephanus Naudé still farm in the area – Donie and Stephanus are his great-grandsons.

"Naudé brothers like to farm together," Donie says. "We've done it for generations. Sometimes we disagree, but there's always a mountain between us, so if you're angry,

you first have to drive over the pass to have a conversation. By the time you get to the other side, you've cooled off."

Another person who knows the mountains like the back of his hand is Oom Willem Nel, who farms on the slopes of Naudé's Nek. Rhodes is not only known for its mountains and clear streams, but also for its snow. Willem has lived through many winters – he says the worst snowfall he can remember was around 1965.

"The snow was so thick in places that you couldn't see the fences," he says. "You could drive over the fences. We had to dig the sheep out and we had to feed all the animals because the veld was buried under snow for days."

Naudé's Nek is often covered in snow. Normally, it's Donie and Stephanus who clear the road with their tractors. Donie once got stuck in snow on the pass.

"I had to sleep in my bakkie," he remembers. "I ran the engine all night with the heater on. The bakkie was under snow the next morning; I had to crawl out the window."

"Ja-nee, these mountains are special," Willem says. "One of the farmers asked my dad if he believed that God did indeed create the earth in six days. 'Of course,' my dad said. 'Why do you ask?' Because it looks like God spent all six days perfecting this place."

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE BEN 10 ECO CHALLENGE?

In addition to Naudé's Nek, there are many other gravel passes you can tackle in your 4x4 or on your motorbike.

The Ben 10 Eco Challenge, which linked the 10 highest passes in the area, was stopped after the Ben MacDhui Pass to Tiffindell was closed. But you can still drive the other passes.

Visit mountainpasses.southafrica.co.za for a list of passes in the Eastern Cape Highlands.

THROW A SNOWBALL!

It often snows in Rhodes in winter, but it's difficult to predict when this will happen. This year, it snowed heavily in May; in 2024 it snowed in August and September. Keep an eye on "Snow Report SA" on Facebook.





"People come to Rhodes without realising there's no Pick 'n Pay here," says Xolelwa Yaleko (pictured above), who runs the information office. "We don't want tourists to go hungry, so they can buy eggs, bread, cheese, jam and meat here. Everything is fresh from our kitchens, or from farms in the area."

The office has a wide range of handmade products by local residents, and you can also buy blankets, slippers and beanies if it's cold. But the best part is Xolelwa – she's a fount of information about the area, the activities on offer and the best places to stay.

Contact: 📞 045 971 9003; 📞 073 797 2003; 📧 rhodesinfo.co.za

XOLELWA'S FAVOURITE ACTIVITIES

See wildflowers. The mountains around Rhodes bloom in late summer. In March, on the high plateaus near Tenahead, you can see various flowers, like blushing bride satyrium, pepper-and-salt flowers and *moraea albicuspia*, a whitetip *uintjie*.

Drive a loop around heaven. From Rhodes, travel up Carlislehoekspruit Pass to Tiffindell. At the top, follow the jeep track along the Lesotho border to Tenahead Lodge. This is called the Tiffindell-Tenahead Traverse and it's 4x4 only. From Tenahead, you return to Rhodes via Naudé's Nek Pass. It's a circular route of about 100 km, which will keep you busy all day if you take it slow.

Fish for trout. The streams around Rhodes are some of the best fly-fishing destinations in the country. You can spend an entire day outside, surrounded by the freshest water and air. Get your permits at the information centre.



If you only do one drive while visiting Rhodes, make sure you go up Naudé's Nek Pass.





ALPINE SWIFT

NOHLINE GEYER AND RENÉ SUTHERLAND
FROM STUDIO CAFÉ

STAY HERE

Rhodes Hotel

This hotel has been a popular gathering place since 1888. The bar, called De Weydeman, is named after an ox that pulled the mail coach between Rhodes and Barkly East. The beast apparently perished in front of the hotel and its horns were hung in the bar. Dinner costs R250 per person. There's a braai most Friday nights.

Rate: Accommodation from R700 per person, breakfast included.

Contact: 📞 065 651 3837; 🌐 rhodeshotel.co.za

Walkerbouts Inn

The guesthouse has en suite rooms that sleep up to four people. The pub is cosy and the food is good. Walkerbouts is known for their choose-your-own-topping pizzas.

Rate: Accommodation from R700 per person, breakfast included.

Contact: 📞 079 875 2009; 🌐 walkerbouts.co.za

Alpine Swift

This guest farm is 4 km outside Rhodes on the Naudé's Nek Road. It's popular among athletes and mountain bikers who want to train at high altitude. There are several trails for running and riding, and a big swimming pool. The farm has a campsite, self-catering units and guest rooms. Or you can pitch your tent right next to the Bell River.

Rates: Camping from R175 per person; other accommodation from R300 per person.

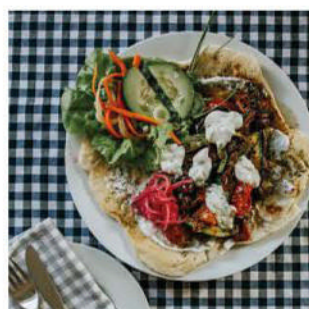
Contact: 📞 072 529 2747; 🌐 alpinewiftrails.co.za

Tenahead Lodge

In winter, this luxury lodge at the top of Naudé's Nek Pass is often surrounded by snow. There are views for days, plus a restaurant and spa. It's pricey but worth the money if you want a special experience. Day visitors are welcome to have lunch at the restaurant.

Rate: Luxury double room from R4 080 per night, breakfast included.

Contact: 📞 045 971 8901; 🌐 riverhotels.com



EAT HERE

Studio Café

This is the kind of eatery you wish was just around the corner from your house and not off in the mountains. But it gives you another reason to drive to Rhodes! The menu has a Mediterranean influence: flatbread, lamb, tzatziki, fresh salad... Or you can order a burger or pasta. The menu changes constantly because they only use fresh produce from the garden and local farms.

Opening times: Wednesday to Saturday from 10 am to 4 pm. Lunch served from noon. Dinner is served on Friday nights. The hours change during the holidays; keep an eye on their Facebook page.

Contact: 📞 076 082 0398; "Studio House" on Facebook

FOR YOUR DIARY

VILLAGE MARKET. On the first Saturday of every month, there's a market in the Studio House garden. They sell fresh produce from the surrounding farms, homemade bread, local art and antiques.

STOEPSITFEES. The next festival will take place on 20 – 22 February 2026. Come hang out on the stoeps in the village, where the residents set up fun activities and foodie events. You can also help knit a woollen blanket to raise funds for the local animal welfare project. 🌐 rhodesinfo.co.za

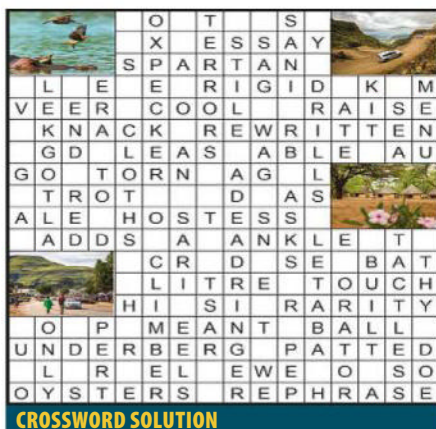
DIRT ROAD WILD TROUT

FESTIVAL. Four days – from 17 to 21 March 2026 – of serious trout fishing. At night, everyone gathers at Walkerbouts Inn to talk about the adventures of the day. Contact Dave Walker 📞 082 475 5775 or e-mail 🌐 bookings@walkerbouts.co.za

RHODES RUN. This intense 52 km trail-run loop reaches a height of 2 680 m above sea level. The next event takes place on 11 July 2026. 🌐 rhodesrun.co.za

Join "I Love Rhodes Village" on Facebook for the latest updates.

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Montagu Crowned KFM's Best Dorpie 2025

A Town Worth Celebrating

Big cheers for Montagu, for once again taking home the Best Dorpie award in the 2025 KFM Best of the Cape Awards. Having snagged the title in 2021 too, this win truly highlights the town's ongoing passion for community spirit, tourism and local growth.

What Makes Montagu Shine?

Montagu's win reflects real pride and effort from the whole town. You can see it in the vibrant, welcoming atmosphere that locals and visitors treasure. Tourism keeps booming, with nearly 30,000 overnight guests calling Montagu their home away from home each month.

Impressive Accolades

The Montagu-Ashton Tourism Association (MATA) has earned impressive recognition, including:

- Best Tourism Office in the Cape Winelands District
- A Special Silver Mayoral Award for Contribution to Universal Accessibility
- Western Cape Winner of the Kwêla Dorp van die Jaar Awards, three times over

This latest KFM award celebrates everyone's hard work, from local businesses and tourism stakeholders to residents who make Montagu special. It's proof that when a community comes together, it creates a destination worth visiting again and again.

Adventure Tourism Destination

Nestled in the Western Cape, Montagu is fast becoming a must-visit adventure tourism hotspot. Just hours from Cape Town, it offers the perfect escape for those craving fresh air, natural beauty and adrenaline. Whether you're a serious thrill-seeker or someone who enjoys easy hikes and scenic bike rides, Montagu has something for everyone.

Adventure Activities

The incredible variety is a major draw. Cycle along gravel roads, tackle single-track routes through stunning landscapes, or hike well-maintained trails revealing the Langeberg Mountains' beauty. The area's rock climbing spots are world-renowned, offering treats for climbers of all levels. Places like Archers of Eden provide perfect archery opportunities surrounded by breathtaking scenery.



What Makes Montagu Special

Tucked within the dramatic Cape Fold Mountains, Montagu is a hidden gem full of charm and adventure. Surrounded by rugged peaks, it offers hiking, rock climbing, abseiling, and quirky tractor trips through stunning landscapes. The iconic "Hole in the Rock" at Cogmanskloof welcomes visitors into this outdoor wonderland.



Montagu's magic extends beyond its mountains. Avalon Springs' healing mineral waters have attracted visitors for generations, blending history with natural wellness. Nearly year-round sunshine nurtures the famous Montagu fruit and encourages relaxed poolside days.

Agriculture and artisan crafts flourish here, with farms and producers creating gins and local delights that blend farming and tourism. History buffs will appreciate well-preserved old buildings, Khoisan heritage sites, and the Montagu Museum.

Dried fruit lovers can enjoy the wonderful range available, while the arts come alive during the annual Art Meander and festivals. What truly makes Montagu special is its warm community—inviting visitors to connect and savour local produce at spots like Montagu Local and the Village Market. As a gateway to the Klein Karoo, Montagu blends nature, culture, and community under unforgettable starry skies.

Exciting Events

Montagu buzzes with life during the almost year-round event season. October and November highlights include the Montagu Rose Show, Montagu Hills Challenge, and Cape Classic 380 Cycle event. For slower-paced visitors, the Montagu Art Meander offers cultural experiences alongside outdoor action.

Whether you're seeking an active weekend getaway or a blend of adventure and culture, Montagu delivers. It's a landscape that invites exploration, with surprises around every bend.



Key Adventure Spots

- Montagu Trails
- Montagu Mountain Reserve
- Montagu Nature Garden
- Karoo Gravel Corridor
- Archers of Eden
- Various renowned rock climbing sites

info@montagu-ashton.info | 023 614 2728
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A 4-Star Escape in the Magnificent Karoo -

desert wind
Private guest and game farm

Just 44 km from Montagu, Desert Wind Private Guest & Game Farm offers the perfect balance of tranquillity, adventure, and comfort. With its proud 4-star rating, this Karoo gem invites guests to step away from the rush of everyday life and enjoy an unforgettable stay surrounded by breathtaking landscapes.

Accommodation is offered in six farm-styled, off-grid self-catering houses, each designed to bring you closer to nature without compromising on comfort. Every unit features its own wood-fired hot tub, creating the perfect setting for relaxation under endless Karoo skies after a day of adventure.

For families and groups of up to 30 people, the entire farm can be booked exclusively for birthdays, intimate gatherings, or special celebrations. The wide-open spaces, natural beauty, and welcoming accommodation provide a setting that makes any occasion truly memorable.

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Adventure lovers will find no shortage of activities at Desert Wind. From scenic hiking trails and thrilling 4x4 routes to guided game drives, a shooting range, and unforgettable stargazing, the farm offers something for every pace and passion. Desert Wind is also home to an incredible variety of wildlife, including gemsbok, kudu, eland, black wildebeest, zebra, and many more. Part of the magic is discovering just how many species you can spot during your stay.

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The multiple Eco-Award-winning property features an outdoor seasonal heated swimming pool and a deck which overlooks the town and valley. The seven rooms each offer a view of the garden. Two with interconnecting doors, converting into a 4-person family room.

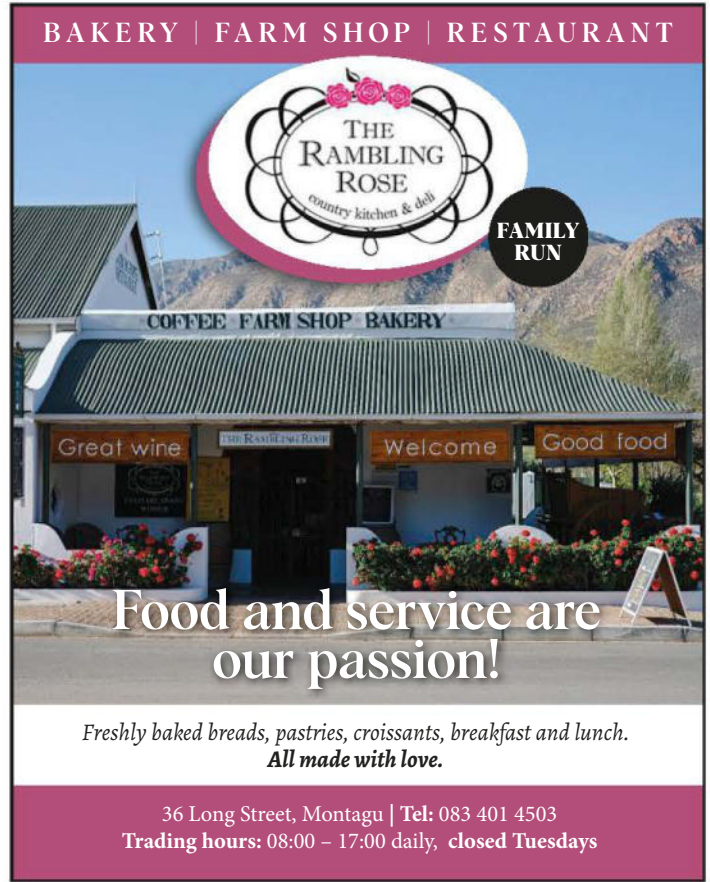
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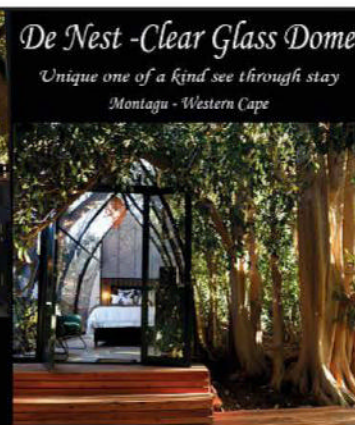


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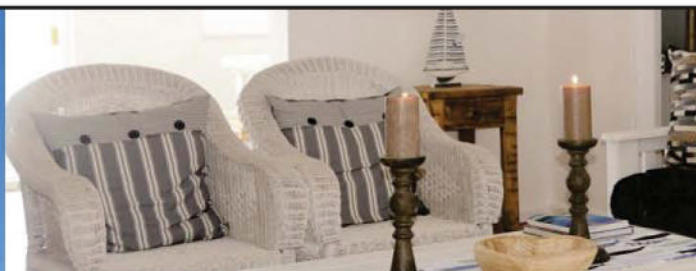


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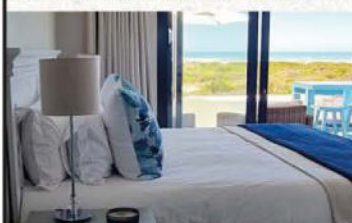
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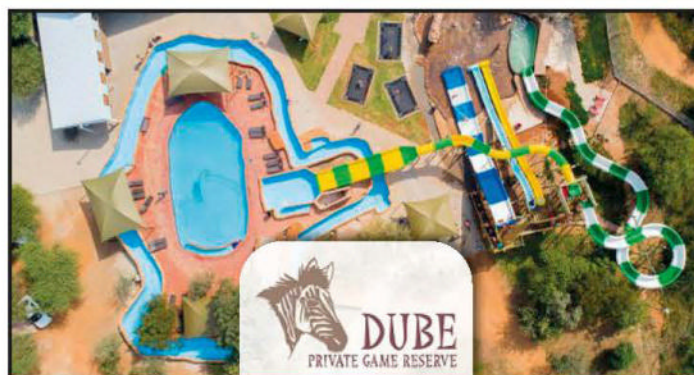
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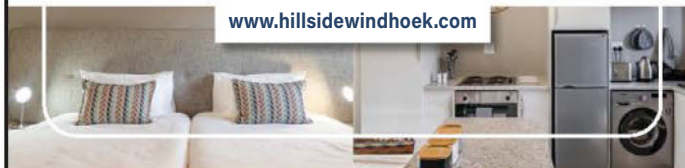
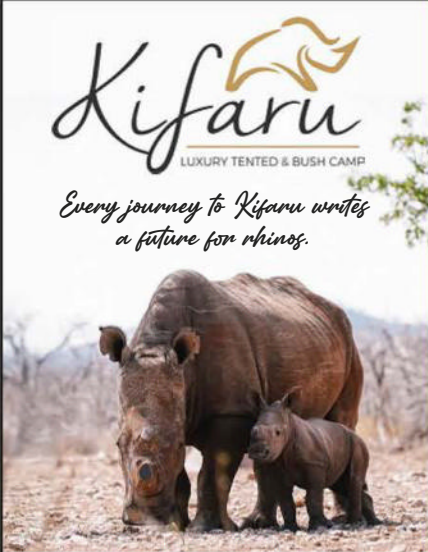
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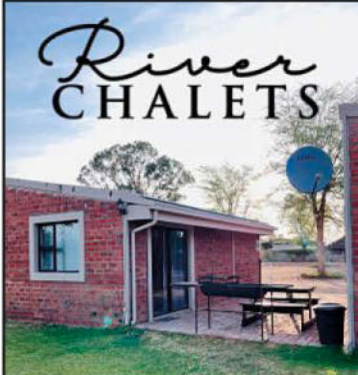
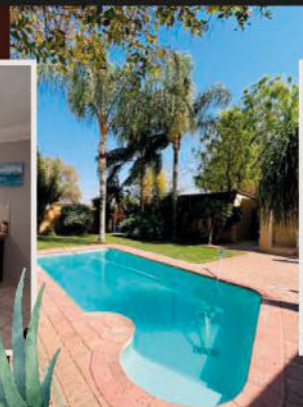
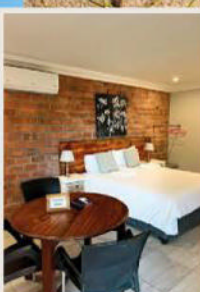
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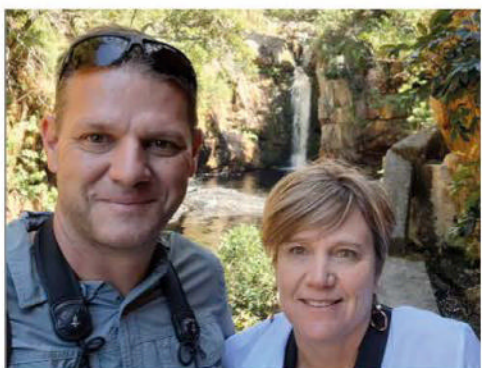
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Ard van de Wetering from Pretoria was on holiday in the Kruger Park in 2018, when he and his wife Marissa witnessed this unusual stand-off...

On the second-last afternoon of our holiday, Marissa and I decided to head out on the Red Rocks Loop (S52). It's a longish route to the south-west of Shingwedzi rest camp; on the return, you can drive along the course of the Shingwedzi River.

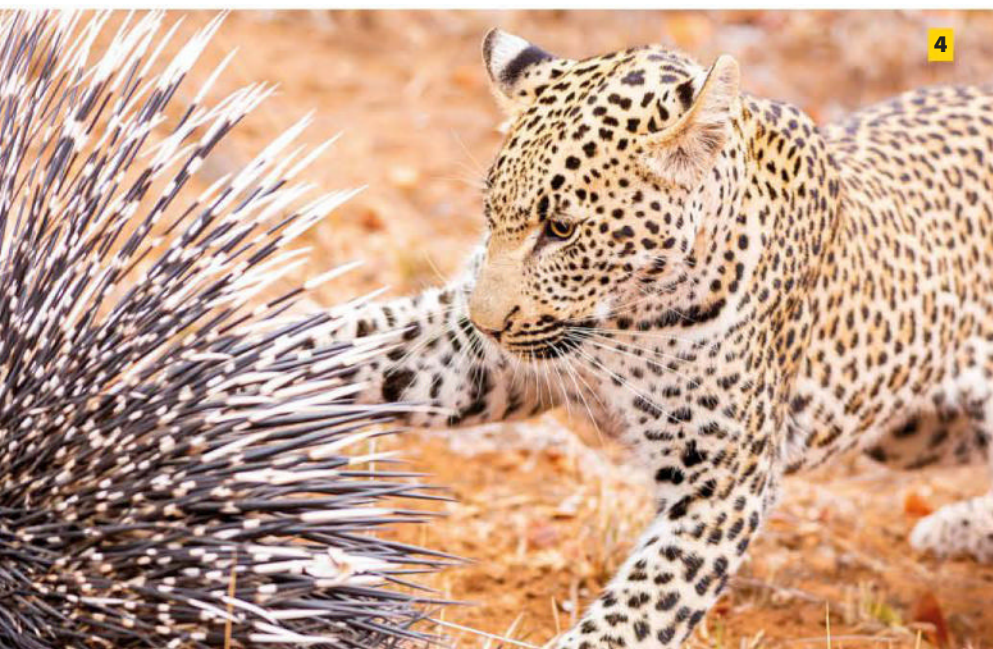
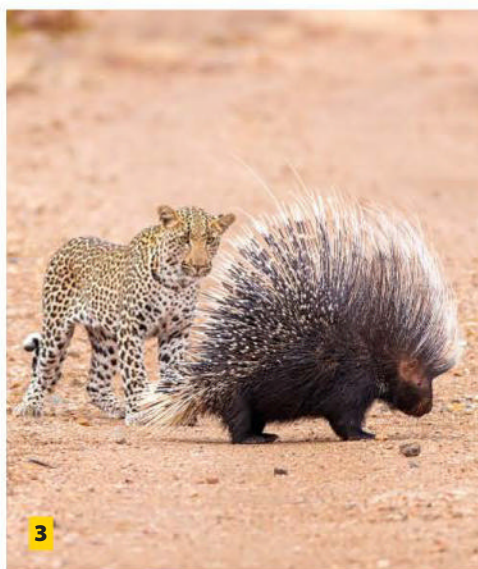
It was a cold, windy afternoon and our children chose to stay in the camp. Just past the turn-off to the Tshanga viewpoint, we came across a young leopard. We watched as it crawled into a storm water pipe under the road. The leopard had barely disappeared into the pipe when a porcupine peeled out the other side!

A game of cat and "mouse" followed for about an hour. The leopard was young and inexperienced, and the porcupine was quite big. It looked like they were doing the tango! **1, 2, 3**

The porcupine often shook its quills, which made an interesting sound. The leopard circled the porcupine for a long time, swiping with its paw. **4** At one stage, both leopard and porcupine were on their stomachs watching each other. **5** Finally, the leopard gave up and left.

We were in a quiet part of the park and we shared our sighting with only one other vehicle. Our kids were very envious when we showed them the photos and videos back at Shingwedzi!

There's a video of the sighting on YouTube – search for "silly leopard taking on porcupine". More than 45 million people have watched it over the years!



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COMPILED BY SOPHIA VAN TAAK

Did you know?

The scientific name for all large chameleons starts with *Chamaeleo*. These species lay their eggs in tunnels underground. The name for all dwarf chameleons starts with *Bradypodion* – they give birth to live young.

Most of the world's chameleons are found in Africa and on her nearby islands. Madagascar has the most species – more than a hundred! You can also find chameleons around the Mediterranean Sea, in a few locations in the Middle East, and in India and Sri Lanka. Almost all the species in South Africa are dwarf chameleons, found in localised habitats. But our two large chameleon species are more widespread...

◀ Flap-necked chameleon (*Chamaeleo dilepis*)

This is one of the biggest species of chameleon worldwide – individuals can grow to 35 cm in length. It has a beard (also called a crest) that starts at its throat and runs along its stomach. When it feels threatened, it inflates its orange gular pouch to look bigger. It also has a flap behind its neck that it can spread. Be careful of this chameleon – it will bite you!

The flap-necked chameleon is usually a light yellow or green colour, with a light stripe and a few white spots along each side. It occurs in KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Limpopo, North West and the north-eastern parts of the Northern Cape.

◀ Namaqua chameleon (*Chamaeleo namaquensis*)

This is the second-biggest species in South Africa and can grow up to 21 cm long. It has clear protrusions (called tubercles) along its back, but no crest on its throat or stomach. Its tail is short compared to its body and it's usually a dull green-grey or maroon colour. Its body is covered in spots, with four to five lighter flecks on its sides.

This chameleon lives in very arid regions and will catch anything it can swallow, from locusts to lizards and even snakes. It has a gland in its nose that excretes excess salt so it can also hunt near the sea, where everything tastes salty! This species is found in Namaqualand, Bushmanland, the Richtersveld, Great Karoo and the northern reaches of the Western Cape.

ALAMY.COM

How does a chameleon differ from other lizards?

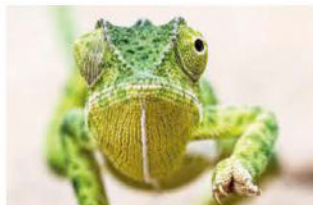


Its tail is prehensile. Like a monkey, it uses it to grasp onto branches.

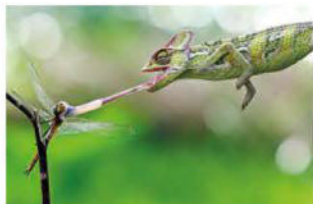
It doesn't shed its tail when it gets a fright or flees.



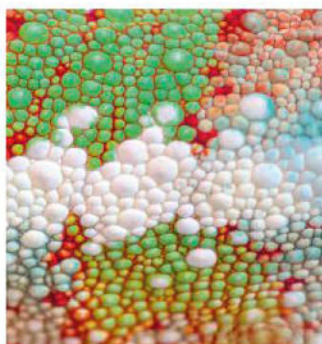
It has V-shaped feet to cling to a branch or leaf. The front feet have two toes that point outward and three that point inward. The back feet are the opposite – three toes point outward; two point inward.



The eyes can move independently of each other. A chameleon's eyes also protrude a little, while other lizards have deep-set eyes. This gives the chameleon a 360-degree view of its surroundings.



The tongue has strong muscles and is very long – it can extend to more than the chameleon's body length. Its saliva is sticky and syrupy, like honey – the chameleon uses this saliva to grip its prey like glue.



How do they change colour?

The outer layer of a chameleon's skin is transparent. There are thousands of crystals in the deeper layers of the skin, which reflect different wavelengths of light and produce different colours. They almost work like stained-glass

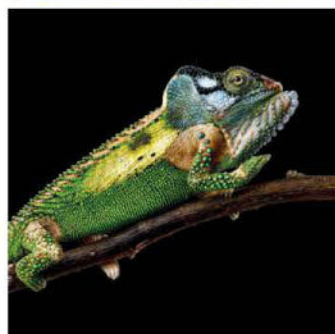
windows in a church. When a chameleon stretches its skin, these crystals are spread further from each other. When it contracts its skin, they move closer together. The slightest movement changes the way that light hits the crystals.

Chameleons change colour to blend into their environment, but also to show when they're frightened or angry. They can darken their skin when they're cold, to absorb more of the sun's heat, and lighten it on a hot day.

HERE ARE A FEW DWARF CHAMELEON SPECIES:

Cape dwarf chameleon (13 – 16 cm)

This species has a gular crest with scaly flaps. It's usually a leafy green with light blue and bright orange stripes along its sides.



Knysna dwarf chameleon (12 – 16 cm)

Look for smooth skin on its shoulders, a bigish casque and a gular crest with wide flaps.

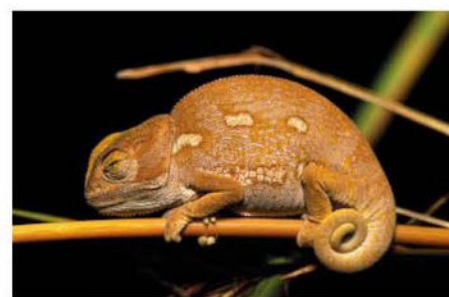
Natal Midlands dwarf chameleon (15 – 18 cm)

Also has big tubercles along its back, a big casque (a raised structure on the back of the head) and a gular crest with wide, cream-coloured scales. It's usually blue-green with a red-brown stripe along its side.



Little Karoo dwarf chameleon (9 – 11 cm)

This chameleon has a scaly body covered in tubercles, and a pointed casque. It's usually brown with a white throat.



I spy with my little eye...

It's easier to see chameleons at night. They camouflage very well by day and hide deep in the canopies of shrubs and trees. When darkness falls, they climb out to the furthest tips of branches or blades of grass and sleep there. In this position, they can feel if a predator approaches along the branch or blade of grass. If this happens, they let go and fall to the safety of a lower branch or tuft of grass.

They also turn a lighter colour by night, so it's easier to spot them with a torch.

What is ecdysis?

As a chameleon grows, it outgrows its skin – like when you outgrow your clothes. The outer layer of skin starts to peel off and a new skin forms beneath it. A baby chameleon sheds its skin almost weekly, but an older chameleon does it about once a month and later only four times a year.

Welcome!

Chameleons are hide-and-seek masters. They sit very still and often live high up in trees. This means that there are probably lots of species we haven't discovered yet! The Grootvadersbosch dwarf chameleon, for example, was only identified in its forested Overberg habitat in 2022.

GROOTVADERSBOSCH CONSERVANCY TRUST



Sources: Bill Branch's Field Guide to the Snakes and other Reptiles of Southern Africa; kids.nationalgeographic.com

africansnakebiteinstitute.com; tyroneping.co.za; reptile-database.reptarium.cz; science.org



BIRDS

BY FAANSIE PEACOCK

TRUE BLUE INDIGOBIRD



DYLAN VASAPOLLI

One of the main reasons we moved from Gauteng to the West Coast was to give our kids more freedom to roam. You know, being able to ride their bikes in the street and all that?

In the estate where we live in Langebaan, this actually happens. Every afternoon after school, the kids jump on their bikes and go riding. After a while, when they get hungry and the sun gets too hot, they head to the nearest house to watch TV. The most direct route happens to run through my office. I often work to a chorus of “*Hallo Oom*”, “*Hallo Oom*” as the kids file past my computer.

But there’s always that one *laaitie* who makes himself too comfortable. “What are you doing, *Oom*? Can you please pump my tyre? Do you want to come kick a ball with me? *Oom*, I’m hungry.”

He hangs around for hours every day.

Sometimes it gets too much and I send him home. But he’s back the next day. I always wonder where his parents are. Why aren’t *they* kicking a ball with him, or making him a sandwich? I feel sorry for him, but I also have to get work done!

I think of this little visitor as an indigobird. Like cuckoos, honeyguides and whydahs, these cheeky birds are brood parasites. What does that mean? Basically, they leave the responsibility of raising their chicks to other parents. Indigobirds don’t build nests, they don’t sit on eggs and they don’t feed hungry stomachs. They leave all parental tasks to the host. The instinct of the adoptive parent is so strong that it doesn’t realise the chick in its nest doesn’t share its DNA.

Each indigobird species has its own host species. In South Africa, firefinches are usually the target. Dusky indigobirds mislead African firefinches; village indigobirds trick red-billed

firefinches; and purple indigobirds lay their eggs in the nest of a Jameson’s firefinch.

This is a very specific kind of relationship: The parasite can’t survive without its host. They’re so specialised that even the spots and stripes on the tongue of the indigobird look like those of its stepbrothers and sisters. If not, the “mom” would kick it out of the nest.

But this strategy also poses a challenge: When a young indigobird is ready to make more indigobirds, he has to mate with a female of his own species. How does he know he’s an indigobird and not a firefinch, for example? He was raised by firefinches after all, and spent all day listening to their calls. To make it even more complicated, the indigobird species all look very similar...

The secret lies in song. Young birds learn how to sing from their fathers. But the young indigobird has never met his biological father,



and thus never learnt the species-specific tune. The best he can do is mimic the song of his adoptive father. And it works! Because the young female indigobird also memorised *her* adoptive father's song when she was a chick.

So, when her hormones kick in, she wants a mate that looks like an indigobird, but sounds like a firefinch. And not any old firefinch, her specific firefinch. Still with me?

Things are different from the male's perspective. He spends hours singing every day on a high branch. His pitch-black plumage – which has an oily, blue-purple sheen in the sunlight – draws the eye. He's not as selective as the female and will try to mate with anything in the vicinity – even a sunbird or starling!

After mating, the female indigobird will follow a breeding pair of firefinches until she finds their nest. She'll slip in and lay her eggs among theirs. Sometimes, she'll also remove one of the host's eggs. Then she'll return to the male to mate again. She'll lay several eggs in a summer. She's literally the definition of not putting all your eggs in one basket!

The safest way to identify the different species is to listen to the calls they mimic. Observant birders noticed that indigobirds in Zimbabwe don't mimic firefinches, but rather red-throated twinspots. Since each indigobird species only has one host, this must mean it's a different species?

Indeed – the Zambezi indigobird. It took me three years to tick this species off my list. I could only do it with a clear conscience once I found some old sound recordings I made in Malawi.

The latest discovery is that there are indigobirds in Zululand that mimic pink-throated twinspots – there may be another new species one of these days!

Whatever the case, the host parents don't benefit much from this situation. At least the indigobird chick doesn't kill its stepsiblings, like honeyguides and cuckoos do. But that's a gruesome story for another day.

Excuse me, I have to go make a sandwich for the neighbours' kid.



ANSWER # 7

HAMMAN PRINSLOO

Argh, come on! This LBJ could be *any* bird... Let's take it slowly and systematically.

The bird looks quite comfortable in the sand, so it's probably some kind of ground dweller and not a tree percher. And the bill? Well, it falls somewhere between the strong, triangular bill of a seed eater, and the thinner bill of an insect eater. Correct, this species eats seeds *and* insects. Its plumage also suits its orange surroundings.

What else? A few fine stripes, a long(ish) tail, a big head, a horizontal posture. Go get your bird guide and start paging.

Very few birds are as uniformly coloured as this species. And there's only one that is this rich, orange-brown: the dune lark of the Namib. This plain little bird is very special: People come from all over the world to see it since it's the only bird that's found exclusively within Namibia's borders. In other words, it's endemic. Sossusvlei, Walvis Bay, Rooibank and down to Lüderitz... That's where you'll find it.

But recently, there was a commotion when Namibia lost its only endemic bird. How so? The Barlow's lark in the Sperrgebiet was found to be the same species as the dune lark! The problem is that the Barlow's lark, named after South African businessman Charles "Punch" Barlow, also occurs on the other side of the Orange River, between Port Nolloth and Alexander Bay.

Sorry, Namibia!



Few people are as passionate about birds as Faansie Peacock is. His Firefinch app includes calls, illustrations and photos of all the birds in southern Africa. It's incredibly intuitive and fun to use. Faansie also posts new articles every week. Search the Apple App Store or on Google Play.



A full-page background image of a snowy mountain peak under a sunset sky. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene. The foreground shows a snowy, rocky landscape with some small ice patches. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds.

Running with bears

The otherworldly, icy landscapes of Greenland offer a true wilderness adventure – but how about upping the ante, and going for a run in polar bear country?

WORDS & PICTURES **JACQUES MARAIS**

Robert Marais lays fresh tracks next to Scoresby Sund, East Greenland.

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: The view of the (decidedly frozen) Sun Glacier from aboard the *Rembrandt van Rijn*. Expedition leader Jan Belger instructs the group on the use of personal flotation devices and survival suits. Robs laces up his shoes for his first run on Greenland soil. The ship's upper decks boasted spectacular views of the aurora borealis in the skies above Scoresby Sund.

I have been to Greenland a few times. Back in 2003, I was invited to cover an adventure race called the Arctic Team Challenge. It was a tough assignment, working 23-hour days to keep pace with the week-long event. I don't think I ever really recovered from that period of total immersion in Greenland's ice and snow.

It also took me a while to recover from the solid drinking session I enjoyed with then CEO of Visit Greenland (their tourism agency), Anders Stenbakken, a Dane who took a liking to me.

It was the start of a friendship that resulted in me being invited back to Ammassalik (new name: Tasiilaq) in 2005. On that occasion, I was a crash-test dummy on a two-week dog-sledding trip. The first three days involved learning how to pack our sleds and manage the team of dogs – and how *not* to pee your pants when a Greenlandic husky grabs you by the shoulder. They're big brutes. The lead dog Otsuna took umbrage at my wonky pronunciation of "Go!" in Greenlandic – the command sounded somewhere between a Viking vomiting and a leopard coughing. I thought my Afrikaans accent would do the trick, but Otsuna disagreed and I left the decision-making to him after that. This was a good move. I got my dog-sledding licence – yup, I'm officially a musher for up to 12 dogs – and my fascination with Greenland only deepened. For the next two decades, I dreamt of a return visit.

The message came late in 2024: "Do you want to sail up Scoresby Sund on a 100-year-old schooner and help us with a trail-running recce and photo shoot?" The sender of the message was Florian Piper, marketing manager for Oceanwide Expeditions. There was no answer other than, "Hell, yes!"

Even better, this gave me an opportunity to hook up with my middle child Robert, aka Robs, who was on a gap year in England. He flew out to join me for a week of surfing and exploring in Iceland (*See issue #201 – Ed*), then we both took a charter flight to Greenland.

Our excitement levels were red-lining as we headed to Keflavik International Airport outside Reykjavik. Our Iceland Air charter plane was tiny, forcing us to reduce our luggage to under 20 kg – a tough task if you're packing clothing for sub-zero conditions, plus running gear and camera equipment.

"Here's the plan," Robs said. "We wear three layers of all our heaviest Arctic gear..."

We looked like Teletubbies as we climbed aboard, but it worked! We roared into the sky above the Denmark Strait, with colossal icebergs glinting in the monochrome ocean below. About two hours later, Constable Point airstrip hove into view between intermittent squalls, hemmed in by bare brown peaks on one side and the expanse of Scoresby Sund (*sund* is the Danish word for "sound") on the other.

The tiny settlement of Constable Point is strafed by extreme weather, which cuts it off from civilisation

for months at a time. The best time to visit is summer, roughly from June to September.

After clearing customs – nothing more than an open-air, manual conveyer belt – we walked along a path through the snow for 2 km to reach our home for the next 10 days: the *Rembrandt van Rijn*. This three-masted schooner, built in 1924, is operated by Oceanwide Expeditions and had also been our base for part of our time in Iceland. The crew had made the crossing by sea in the meantime.

The *Rembrandt van Rijn* lay at anchor in the calm fjord, with sails furled. After a thorough safety briefing on land, we hopped into a zodiac inflatable and were taken to the ship, where we boarded and checked into our cabins. Ten days of Arctic adventures were about to kick off!

Someone has to do it, right?

My job over the next 10 days would be to help scout and photograph potential trail-running routes in Greenland for future Oceanwide Expeditions trips. I wasn't complaining...

Robs was there as "bear bait", as one of the on-board guides jokingly described his role. He'd head out onto the tundra as my model while I followed with my cameras to capture the action. Of the two of us, he's certainly the most fleet of foot – if anyone was going to get snacked on, it would definitely be me...

Polar bears are 500 kg-plus beasts and the undisputed apex predators of the Arctic. Accidentally bumping into one could mean a rather messy demise. They might be heavyweights, but they can also canter at speeds of up to 40 km/h through knee-deep snow. You won't outrun a polar bear. It's no wonder we needed armed guides for protection along the trails. Generally, guides use a bear banger – a big firecracker of sorts – or they'll fire a warning shot to scare off a bear that gets too curious.

The more pressing worry, however, had nothing to do with bears. Exposure to extreme weather was far more dangerous, as was falling into a crevasse or taking a nasty tumble over icy rocks.

Robs and I settled into our cabin and tried to process this unpredictable space. We pitched and rolled for most of the night, waking up intermittently as the ship groaned through the frozen slush on the ocean surface.

Just before dawn, we anchored in the lee of Sun Glacier, a few hundred metres from the actual icefall. We eyed the cobalt gloom filtering through the porthole and decided to go check out the view from the deck. We layered up in cold-weather gear and navigated the narrow passageways. We threw the bulkhead open and got sucker-punched by -10°C wind chill.

"Rookie mistake," Robs muttered. We'd forgotten our gloves and ducked back inside to grab them.

We anchored in this alien world until nightfall, drifting into fitful sleep as the low growl of the glacier rumbled among the anthracite-black peaks.

Polar bears are 500 kg-plus beasts and the undisputed apex predators of the Arctic. Accidentally bumping into one could mean a rather messy demise.



Clockwise from top left: Expedition guide Georg Hirn directs one of the zodiacs towards the shore. The group studies the tracks of an Arctic fox along one of the running routes. An end-of-world view from the Bear Islands towards the looming Greenlandic icecap. The *Rembrandt van Rijn* at anchor, silhouetted against a spectacular sunrise. Georg scouts the desolate Bear Islands landscape for polar bear or musk ox activity. These geometric basaltic dikes along the edges of Scoresby Sund were formed by volcanic outflows.

Amber-coloured ridges peeked through snowfields here and there, bristling with sparse scrub and little else.

In the light of dawn, we upped anchor and set sail for Vikingebugt. Low-level clouds veiled the world down to water level, and snowflakes cotton-wooled across the deck.

Greenland's geology shape-shifted as we drifted, morphing from ancient and brittle scree slopes into hexagonal basalt columns, then low hills. As far as the eye could see, the primal landscape of Kalaallit Nunaat (the local name for Greenland, simply meaning "The Land of the People") seemed to glower at the *Rembrandt van Rijn*, with the only signs of life coming from passing glaucous gulls and an occasional raven swooping against the washed-out sky.

On foot at last

Two days later, we got our first chance to scout the shoreline edging Scoresby Sund, which is the world's most extensive fjord system. The sound itself is 110 km long, and some inlets stretch to well over 300 km. The name Scoresby harks back to the 19th century when a Scottish whaler named William Scoresby sailed these waters.

Our passage last night to the Bear Islands (Danish: Bjørn Eøer) was lit by a gibbous moon. The Bear Islands consists of 11 tiny outcrops in a part of Scoresby Sund called Hall Bredning. The biggest island is about 7,5 km long.

Robs and I spent much of the night filming a hallucinatory display of the aurora borealis, but we did manage to grab a few hours of shuteye amidst the groan of hundreds of icebergs drifting by our mooring.

October is very much the last gasp of the Greenland cruising season. Winter was waiting impatiently in the wings. Amber-coloured ridges peeked through snowfields here and there, bristling with sparse scrub and little else.

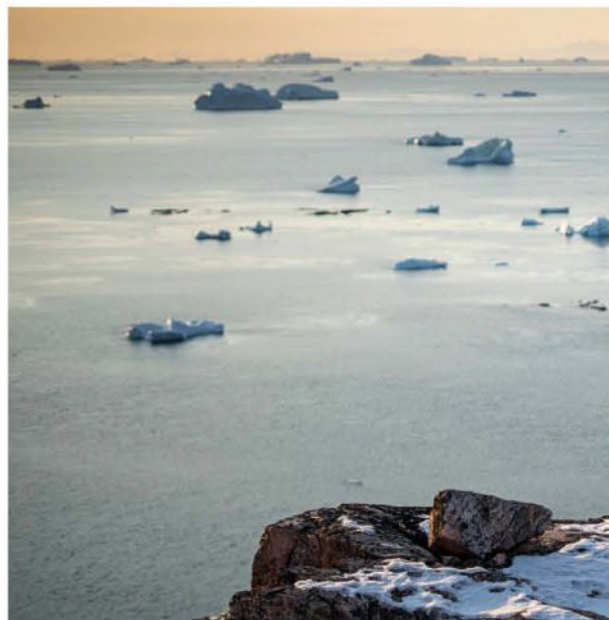
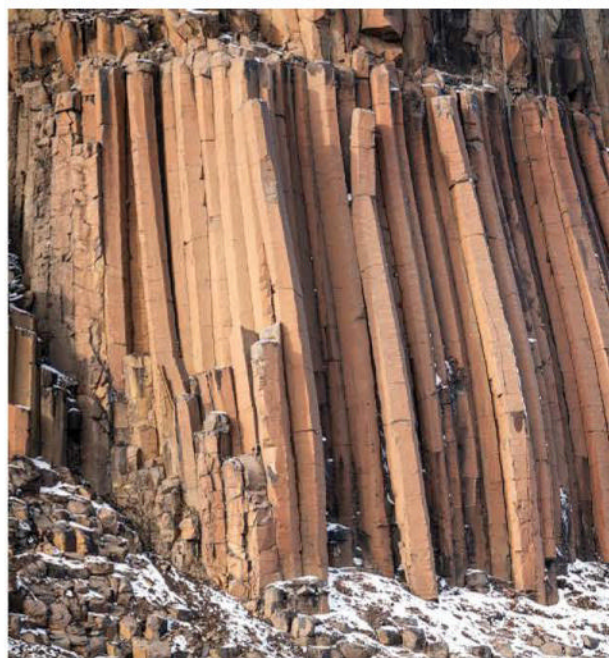
"This might get interesting," I said to Robs as we boarded the zodiacs. Still near the Bear Islands, we headed to the mainland for a "run". With the wind chill nudging towards -15 °C, it was clear this would be no easy task. . .

We fishtailed towards the shore, weaving between floating ice to make landfall on a narrow sand spit, our senses now set to hyper-aware. We sloshed through -1,8 °C water in our galoshes (the salt content allows it to drop below zero), eyeing an epic landscape backdropped by formidable peaks.

Robs and I joined up with our guides and we trudged into the white wilderness. We had spotted bears from the ship a couple of nights before, at Vikingebugt, and within minutes our guide Jan Belgers stopped and signalled that we should keep closer to him.

"Bear," he whispered, pointing at a set of fresh tracks.

My first instinct was to follow the spoor in the hope of catching a glimpse of this magnificent beast, but only until I took note of the sheer size of those paws. They





From the top: Robs cat-foots along an ice-covered ridgeline, with a musk ox skull in the foreground. Giant icebergs, some as tall as 60–80 m, break from gargantuan glaciers before drifting into Scoresby Sund. A herd of Arctic musk oxen graze on the sparse tundra vegetation.

were more than double the size of my UK9 trail shoes! Jan changed direction onto higher ground, allowing us to scan the terrain for danger.

This was a good area for us to recce and film one of the potential trail-running routes. After a last scan with the binos, Robert loped off to where the famous spire of Grundtvigskirken rose under low clouds. Grundtvigskirken (1 977 m), named after a famous church in Copenhagen, is one of Greenland's most recognisable peaks.

"Yew, I had a close call out there on a frozen pond under the snow," Robs said after we'd done half a dozen takes for a shot. And then he was off again, ranging as far and wide as Jan would allow, running through powder drifts and up rocky ridges.

Because of the hidden ice patches, we soon realised that proper winter footwear was required. I swapped his shoes for a pair with Icespikes in the soles – titanium nubs that improve traction.

The spikes helped, as did gaiters to avoid snow avalanching into his shoes, and of course a wind-proof outer layer and thick gloves as a crucial defence against the wind chill. We were okay as long as we kept moving, but every time we stopped, I could feel my body shutting down.

By lunchtime we headed back to the zodiacs and the warmth of the ship – Robert to thaw his toes, and me to download and back up my precious photographs.

Behold the primitive goat

The call came from the ship's intercom just after breakfast: musk oxen spotted, just up ahead. Within seconds, a barrage of telephoto "cannons" festooned the front deck as if to fend off a pirate boarding party.

Two of the musk oxen (or "Elon cows" as Robs called them) were near the edge of the fjord, with a calf about 50 m higher up the slope. Further up the ridge, a sizeable bull glared in our direction, giving a single derisory snort before resuming grazing. The males are much larger than the cows, with adult bulls tipping the scales at 500 kg. Sharp, scimitar-curved horns join in an oversized boss that protects their skulls during fearsome head-butting charges.

Later that afternoon, we did a second landing with Georg Hirn, our other guide, in the hope of finding the musk oxen. We learnt that they are more closely related to prehistoric sheep, despite their ox-like looks.

Musk oxen are unlikely to attack a human outright, but if you startle them or get in their way during a stampede, they can inflict proper damage.

Before we knew it, we were into our penultimate day in Greenland and Jan had kept the best adventure for our final recce run. It started with a 5 am wake-up call and a first-light zodiac cruise to the tiny island of

Ingmikertikajik, still within Scoresby Sund and near Øfjord, one of the larger fjords.

Both Jan and Georg were armed (they carried .338 and .375 calibre rifles) as we hiked inland onto a central ridge. An old musk ox skull on a rock added a mythical element to the scenery. A bone-deep cold seeped into me. We kept moving.

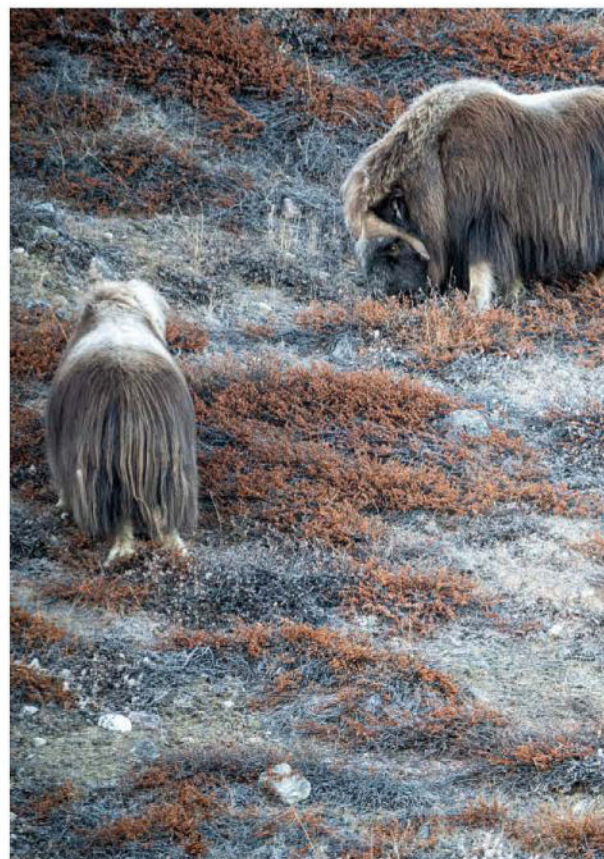
I was busy setting up my tripod when I heard Robs grunt. But it wasn't him. "Musk ox," he said nonchalantly, pointing into a gully behind us. No less than 30 m away – like an auroch from an ancient legend – stood an old bull, giving us the beady eye.

Fortunately, the Terminator Goat calmly wandered off, leaving me to tap into some of the most beautiful and pure light I'd ever seen. Early rays of sun slanted in from the east, refracting off thousands of icebergs.

A kilometre away, across Øfjord, imposing Greenlandic peaks (some in excess of 3 000 m) ripped a serrated line along the horizon. All was perfectly still; it felt as if our miniscule presence in this landscape was immaterial.

I grabbed one last wide-angle panorama. Then I put my cameras away and sat on a rock to take it all in. Robs came and sat next to me, but we didn't talk. We didn't have to, because the world was in perfect balance, just the way it should be.

No less than 30 m away – like an auroch from an ancient legend – stood an old bull, giving us the beady eye.





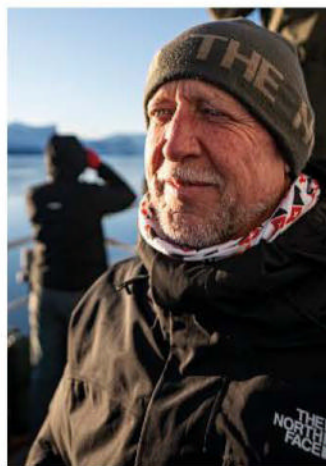
KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Who to go with: Oceanwide Expeditions offer their Arctic voyages in summer. Guests can take part in optional trail running or extended hiking activities. The company also offers kayaking trips, adventures in Norway and volcano trekking along Iceland's northern coast. 📍 oceanwide-expeditions.com

Sub-zero gear: Operators generally share a full list of apparel and gear required for any Arctic voyage. Non-negotiable items: a quality puff jacket; waterproof hooded jacket; rain trousers; thermal underwear; insulated boots; polarised sunglasses; and thick, woollen socks, gloves and beanies. Knee-high, waterproof boots are essential for the zodiac landings.

Flights: I flew from South Africa with KLM (there are cheaper options) and then connected from Schiphol Airport to Keflavik International Airport, outside Reykjavik, with Iceland Air. The charter flight from Keflavik (also Iceland Air) to Constable Point cost US\$750, one way. (We sailed back to Iceland aboard the *Rembrandt van Rijn*, and then flew back the same way we came.)

Visa requirements: I applied for a Schengen visa, as Iceland and The Netherlands were part of my itinerary. South African passport holders must apply for a Greenland Sticker Visa, which is included in the cost of a Danish Schengen visa. (Greenland is a Danish territory.) For the latter, embassy fees are about R1 850, plus another R390 or so per visa application. All applications must be done through VFS Global: 📍 vfsglobal.com



MEET THE AUTHOR

Photographer and author Jacques Marais lives in Fish Hoek and has travelled to five continents on editorial and photographic assignments. His work has been published in a dozen outdoor guides and travel books, and he regularly contributes features to premium publications in South Africa and abroad. Follow him on Instagram (@jacqmaraisphoto) or check out his website for more of his work: 📍 jacquesmarais.co.za



TOURS

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In Namibia, it often feels like you're the first person to travel through a landscape, that you've been transported to another, wilder era. If exploring the distant parts of our neighbouring country has always been on your bucket list, then this Kunene Region Photography Tour is for you.

Expert guide Douwe Vlok from Heuningland Tours will take a group of 16 people on a self-drive, 4x4 trip of the region. Toast Coetzer will act as your photography guide, offering advice and tips on how to improve your photography skills (all cameras welcome, even smartphones). You're guaranteed to take more than a few pics that will impress the people back home.

The adventure kicks off at Spitzkoppe – home of the famous Rock Arch – and from there we will traverse some of the dry riverbeds of Damaraland and the Kaokoveld in search of the elusive desert elephant. Once we reach Epupa Falls, we will follow the course of the Kunene River and then take a turn through Etosha on our way home.

This camping tour promises to be unforgettable. The team from Heuningland will ensure that you experience the area's unique natural splendour and must-see attractions, and you will get to take stunning photos along the way.



BOOK NOW!

The best way to see an unfamiliar region is with expert guides, especially if you also want to drive 4x4 routes. We have collaborated with Heuningland to offer a special photographic tour of the Kunene Region. Book your spot now!

KUNENE REGION PHOTOGRAPHY TOUR

When? 27 May – 8 June 2026
(13 days, 12 nights)

Rate: R34 800 per person.

How does it work? This is a self-drive, camping tour. (Contact Heuningland for the full itinerary.) The rate includes all meals, tents, and park and concession fees. You are responsible for fuel, camping chairs, drinks and snacks.

Don't forget your camera! Toast Coetzer will be your photography guide and he will be on hand to answer all camera-related questions. The group size is limited to 16 people to ensure an intimate experience.

What vehicle do I need? A 4x4 with good ground clearance is essential.

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

go! Take better photos

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YOU WITH THESE COMPREHENSIVE
PHOTOGRAPHY COURSES



TAKE BETTER PHOTOS

If you want to improve your photography, but don't have the time to read the camera manual and figure out all the settings, this is the course for you! It will teach you the basic principles of photography, share techniques for taking great photos, help you understand your camera, and how to choose the right equipment.

COST R950

This one-off payment gives your unlimited access to 27 lessons. You can pay with a credit card or instant EFT through Payfast.

LEARN MORE ABOUT:

- Composition and framing
- Cellphone photography
- Post-production: editing and software
- Posting your images on social media
- Tips and tricks for all modules



CAPTURE THE NIGHT SKY

Our Night Photography course is perfect for photographers who are already familiar with the basics and want to expand their knowledge to include the beautiful and elusive world of nighttime photography. In this nine-lesson course, you will learn how to shoot the moon, the Milky Way and stars, and master the techniques for capturing stunning nighttime shots.

COST R300

This one-off payment gives your unlimited access to nine lessons. You can pay with a credit card or instant EFT via Payfast.

LEARN MORE ABOUT:

- General tips and tricks
- Making the moon the hero
- The Milky Way
- PhotoPills – what's that?
- Star trails



FOR MORE INFO AND TO BUY THE COURSES:

 takebetterphotos.gomag.co.za

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course/night-photography](https://takebetterphotos.gomag.co.za/course/night-photography)



CROSSWORD PUZZLE

BY GERDA ENGELBRECHT

SOLUTION ON PAGE 96

				Redbilled ...	Fears	Entrance barrier	Sink	Pass on the Lesotho border				
				Austere	Literary composition							
Meeting (SA)		Terminate		Historic time	Stiff				Gear		List of food	
Swerve									Consumed		Ocean	
				Calm			Swing (a tail)	Lift				
				Pieces of fabric				Rubidium (symbol)				
Aptitude					Revised							
					Indefinite article							
Gadolinium (symbol)			Fields (literary)			Capable					Gold (symbol)	
			Toward			Double (1,4,6)						
		Split				Silver (symbol)		Enquires				
		Maroon										
What you are currently reading					Horse's gait	Indian garment	500 (Roman numeral)	While				
								Tin (symbol)				
			Entertainer							Camp in the Kruger		
Beer					Mountaineer		Talus			Constructed		Insensitive
Combines												Archaic pronoun
				Chromium (symbol)		Russian emperor	Southeast (abbr)		Wink (an eyelid)			
				1 000 ml					Speaker			
				Hello (inf)				Caress				
				Silicon (symbol)			Uncommon thing					
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				Intended				Vitality				
								Touched				
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						Word differently						

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go! Puzzles 15 is on sale now!

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Clipped and groomed but with some rough edges, Elgin is the perfect setting for a Deon Meyer plot, writes **Biënne Huisman**.

Velvet mountains fold around hills and orchards. There's an air of bygone history; of mystery and memories gently simmering beneath the oak leaves. The scent of apples, of soil and grit; the intrigue of generations of families living off the earth in this verdant valley.

Fans of the author Deon Meyer might recognise this as an ideal setting for one of his rollicking crime stories. Just imagine, protagonist Bennie Griessel pulling up beside the Grabouw post office in his battered sedan. He opens the car door and lowers his sunglasses to peer across patchy tarmac where two wagtails walk twitchingly, conspiratorially. His gaze sweeps over face brick and emblazoned facades, up to the wide blue sky.

Some kilometres behind him lies the Elgin Railway Market (Art Deco style). Further ahead, past a Total garage, a narrowing, tree-lined road leads to Oak Valley Estate. He's perspiring lightly, wiping pie crumbs from his stubble, paying homage to Elgin's two famous farm stalls: Peregrine and Houw Hoek, which are forever duelling to make South Africa's finest bobotie pastry.

During my own visit, my partner and I valiantly resisted the lure of that bobotie pie and instead went straight to The Table at Oak Valley for lunch – their newly opened flagship restaurant. Seated beneath an umbrella in sizzling heat, the wait staff joked about the main course being braised hadeda. Turns out it was lamb, falling off the bone. Special mention must also go to the buffalo mozzarella eggplant and zucchini parmigiana, with crisp-baked chickpeas; and to the nectarine sorbet, which we had for dessert.

We eventually managed to tear ourselves away and drove past the Houw Hoek Hotel up a winding road to Wildekrans Country House, where we found coolth in a rambling garden dotted with sculptures, at the foot of Groenlandberg.

But back to imagining plotlines and their cast. We could look to history to inspire characters, like Sir Antonie Viljoen (who

bought Oak Valley in 1898) and James Molteno (of Glen Elgin) who both helped pioneer fruit farming in the area. Both were also members of parliament and said to have championed the right of women to vote.

Activist (and beekeeper) Kathleen Murray of the Black Sash farmed here too, as did Edmond Lombardi, who founded Appletiser in 1966. Let's not forget the singer Karin Kortje, a seasonal apple picker before she won the reality TV show *Idols* back in 2005.

At present, the region's patriarch is doubtlessly Dr Paul Cluver, the Groote Schuur neurosurgeon turned winemaker and conservationist. Around these parts, "Dr Cluver" comes up a lot, uttered with hushed respect.

At Wildekrans Country House, owner Alison Green told me how counsel with Dr Cluver inspired the 60km slackpacking Green Mountain Trail, which starts in her garden. Inside the hallway of her family's gabled house, built in 1811, beneath an oil painting of Alison's great-grandfather (the mayor of Southampton, many years ago) lies a book – by Paul Cluver Wines, of course – recounting the area's legacy.

We slept in a four-poster bed in one of the home's three bed-and-breakfast rooms (there's also a cottage), amidst Alison's art collection, after savouring freshly baked carrot cake at the kitchen table.

The N2 highway cuts through Elgin's reverie, adding pulse and urgency – a sense of connection to the outside world. As does Grabouw's old agricultural steam train, albeit at a reduced pace. These could bring external pressures to our protagonist: a disgruntled colleague perhaps, or a jilted lover. Or both...

Presented with these challenges, Griessel could find respite along the languid curves of the R321 to Franschhoek. We turned off this route for a breathtaking airborne jaunt, ziplining across ravines in the Hottentots Holland Nature Reserve, courtesy of Cape Canopy Tours.

And while life isn't always neat like a novel – with story threads, conclusions and a plot – we can pretend and play. And on a weekend getaway with just the right views and some artful persuasion, why not?

*Just imagine, protagonist
Bennie Griessel pulling up beside
the Grabouw post office
in his battered sedan.*

AFRICA AT ITS BEST

The Swartberg Pass, built between 1883 and 1886, is the masterwork of road builder and engineer Thomas Bain. It connects Oudtshoorn in the Little Karoo with Prince Albert in the Great Karoo – and it's the only way to reach the access road into Gamkaskloof, or Die Hel. (You can drive the Swartberg Pass in any vehicle, but you need a 4x4 to get down into Gamkaskloof.)

This is the view looking down the pass on the Oudtshoorn side.

In the 2025 edition of *go! Karoo*, you can read all about the Gamkaskloof Trail – a slackpacking hike through the kloof – and you can travel along Route 62 with Chris Marais and Julienne du Toit, visiting some of the best guest farms and other stayovers from Montagu to De Rust.

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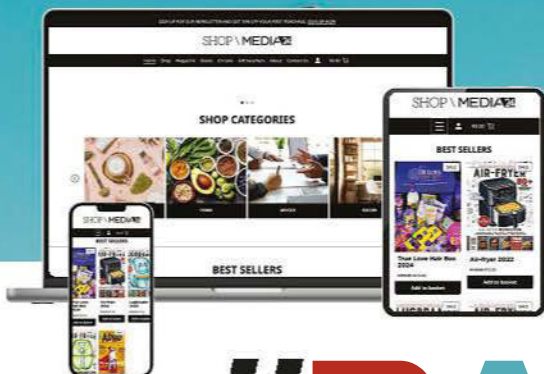
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