

STEAK! Six can't-go-wrong recipes

#204

go!

EASTERN CAPE

Have you heard of the Orange-Fish River Tunnel?

LITTLE KAROO

All (gravel) roads lead to Vanwyksdorp

6 Great stayovers

WATERVAL BOVEN

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FEBRUARY – MARCH 2026

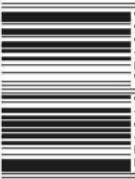
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FOR THE FAM Take the kids to Cradle Moon
INSIDER INFO Your guide to Joburg's quirky side
AMAZON A wild journey to the jungle's furthest reaches

The logo for FVELDT, featuring a stylized white triangle 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 nearby. A small table with food and drink is in the center. A green tent is visible in the foreground.

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February – March 2026

go!
#204

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"Pedalling back to the cottage, the nervous rush quickly subsided. Suddenly it all seemed very funny. I was imagining that photo of me and Cleo plastered up in the local copshop, the library, the PEP store, on the refuse bins and in the bush pub, and, worse, the headline in the local rag: *'Ouma goes AWOL on road to nowhere.'*"

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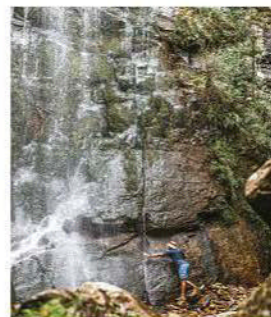
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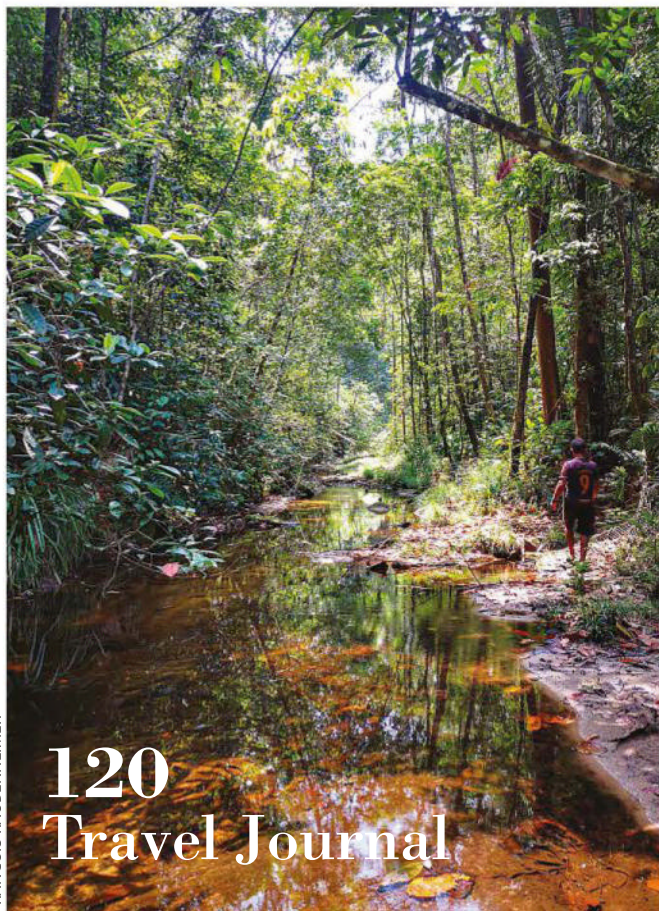


COVER PICTURE
WILLEM VAN DER BERG
A waterfall on the Amatola Trail.

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SHELLEY CHRISTIANS



FRANCOIS RAUBENHEIMER

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130 AFRICA AT ITS BEST



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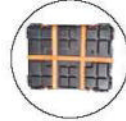
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Eyes on the horizon

As a young journalist who loathed thinking too far into the future, I loved working as a hard news reporter for a daily newspaper. I'd bang out three or four stories a shift on a variety of topics, governed by a 24-hour news cycle with relentless deadlines set in stone. Every day was an exciting fresh start, with little – if any – carry-over from the day before. If you'd asked me what I'd be doing two days from now, I wouldn't have been able to tell you. I didn't need to plan anything – news happened and I would cover it. Simple as that.

Fast forward almost 40 years and – oh my word – how things have changed! I still bang away at my keyboard like it's a typewriter (the one old habit that won't die), but now the gnarled, older and wiser me knows that planning and preparation are key to longevity and success. Especially in the storytelling and travel space.

So, as we ease into 2026, we have our eyes on a horizon that stretches well into 2027 and beyond. A giant Excel spreadsheet – known since the dawn of *go!* as “The Matrix” – maps out every destination and story assigned to specific writers.

We don't have a black-clad Trinity controlling our Matrix – as in the movie

version – we have the equally formidable Esma Marnewick. The partner to “The Matrix” is “The Production Schedule” (I know, it needs a better name) – another huge spreadsheet that sets out all the deadlines for advertising, editorial, printing and distribution, for all our magazines for the next 12 months.

Since you're getting a sneak peek behind our curtain, I'll pull it back even further and give you the scoop on what you can look forward to this year. In addition to our six regular issues, we'll also be publishing updated travel guides to Namibia, the West Coast, Karoo and Botswana (with bonus routes in Zambia and Zimbabwe) and we're hard at work compiling an exciting new travel guide called *go! Garden Route* to help you plan your next holiday (or even a semigration!) to this beautiful part of the country.

There's so much to look forward too – thanks for coming along for the ride!

Pierre

PIERRE STEYN

PSteyn@media24.com

DON'T MISS OUR NEXT ISSUE!

The April/May magazine will be on sale at retailers from 20 March 2026.

BEHIND THE SCENES

You were a regular contributor to go! in the early days. What have you been up to since then?

At home, mostly – raising four kids to adulthood and (hopefully) self-sufficiency. I recently retired from the newsroom at the University of Cape Town, where I worked for 25 years mining stories of the people there and their extraordinary research and contributions to society.

You hint at it in the column, but what makes you want to visit the Karoo again and again?

The Karoo is a place that invites reflection. I never tire of listening to the wind from across far, ancient plains. The community we visit in Prince Albert is like a cupped hand: small and warm

in its offering gesture. Riding around on my bike invites connection: “Hallo antie!” from a child or “Môre mevrou” from the weathered *oompie* on his own trusty steed. And he always tips his hat.

Besides Prince Albert’s “road to nowhere”, where else do you enjoy riding your bike? Any lesser-travelled but easily navigable byway will do – it doesn’t take much! As long as I can work on the special cadence of slow cycling. Downhills are welcome.

What’s always in your travel bag?

Books, a journal, a headlamp, picnic wine glasses, a favourite chopping knife. And my travel partner. (It’s a tight fit.)



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COMPILED BY **MARTINETTE LOUW**

**WINNING
LETTER**



◀ As cool as a kudu

Late one afternoon in July 2024, my husband Sheldon and I set out for a quick game drive on the roads around Pretoriusskop in the Kruger Park. The sunset on the S10 was pure magic.

Suddenly, against the backdrop of a koppie, this majestic kudu bull stepped out and stood high above the landscape. It was the perfect picture and I quickly grabbed our camera. Just look at him! So elegant and calm.

My husband and I share a deep love for the Kruger and we visit as often as we can. The park is more than a holiday destination for us – it's also where we got engaged and married!

CHARLENE PATTERSON, Ermelo

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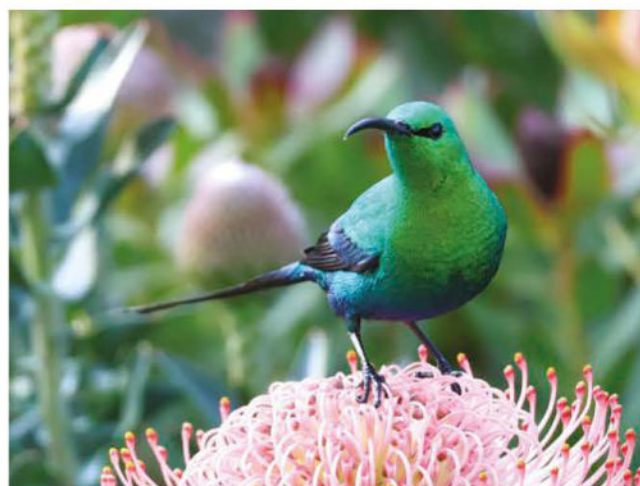
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▲ A little chat

During our visit to Augrabies Falls National Park in September 2025, we took a walk to Arrow Point early in the morning. We watched a klipspringer settle on a rock next to the escarpment. We walked closer. Suddenly a starling landed on the rock and looked at the klipspringer as if it wanted to have a chat. A bit later, two more birds landed on the rock and started grooming the klipspringer!

INGE WILDPRETT, Pforzheim, Germany



▲ Festival of fynbos

I really enjoyed Stanford in Bloom, which was held in September last year. The festival had a replica of the South African exhibition that won gold at the 2025 Chelsea Flower Show in London – it was phenomenal to see.

My parents live in Stanford. Later in their garden, this malachite sunbird came to visit. It was the cherry on top of a special fynbos day! It came for the sweet nectar of the pincushion flower and sat still long enough for me to get a photo.

HANNELIZE LAAS, Mbombela



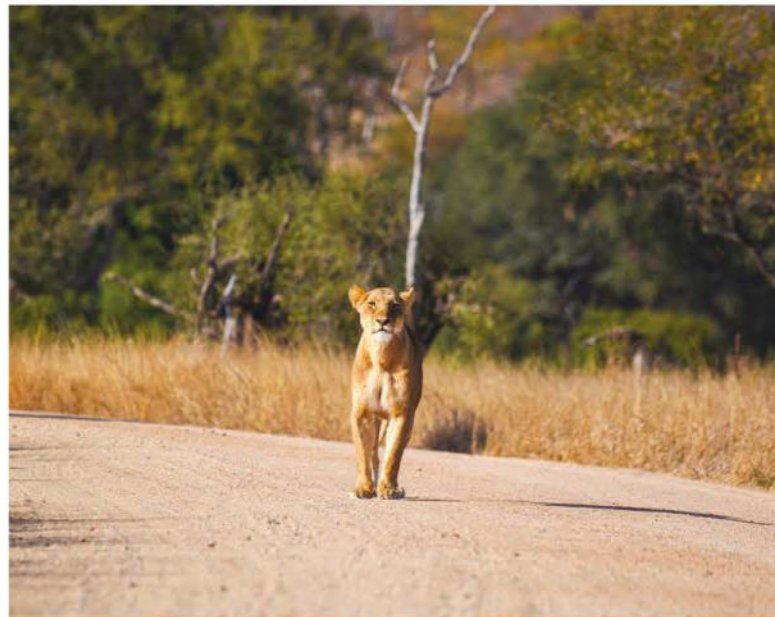
▲ Kalahari skies

Kieliekrankie is my favourite camp in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. It's not really renowned for animal sightings, but it's so atmospheric.

I took this photo of the road to the camp back in October 2019. A storm was brewing – a wind came through in advance, creating a sandstorm before a brief rainshower.

I've been to the park many times. The light is so special, and the animals against the desolate backdrop seem surreal at times. Even when the park is full, there are no more than a few cars present at the sightings. The only problem is trying to find a booking these days!

ROB DICKIE, Cape Town



▲ On the catwalk

One morning in the Kruger Park, we were driving south from Maroela satellite camp to Berg-en-Dal. We decided to take the S36 instead of the main routes. What a great idea – we saw lions three times in a 10 km stretch!

This lioness was moving across the road along with two other adults and three cubs. It was a special moment and we were the only vehicle there.

PHILNA DE VILLIERS, Villiersdorp



▲ Zambia at its best

I took this photo in the Lower Zambezi National Park in Zambia after a day of tigerfishing on the Zambezi River. The sun was setting and everything was bathed in gold. As if that wasn't enough, two elephant cows and their calves waded through the shallow water to an island. Their silhouettes against the sky looked like something from a dream. This was Africa at its wildest and most beautiful!

ELAINE NEL, Solwezi, Zambia



▲ Home is where the Fortuner is

On a recent trip to Namibia, our friends Pat and Marianne Steele stayed over for three days at Mount D'Urban Campsite near Helmeringhausen. On the second day they noticed some small stones on the bonnet of their Toyota Fortuner. Further investigation revealed that the whole of the intercooler intake was filled with little stones, sticks and leaves!

They thought it to be the work of a rat they'd seen scurrying around the campsite. It took quite an effort, including the use of tweezers, to remove all the material from the intake grid.

Within half an hour, they noticed that there was more material there, and it was not long before the actual culprit arrived. Not a rat but a familiar chat, which had also been flitting around their campsite!

They had to cover the inlet with clingwrap to keep the little chap out.

ATHOL COCKS, East London



▲ Out of the blue

I recently went paddling on the Ntafufu River near Port St Johns, searching for birds to photograph. It wasn't always easy as the birds often flew away before I could get close enough.

But sometimes the bird would be preoccupied and wouldn't see me sneaking up. I snapped this half-collared kingfisher eating a very big prawn!

I love kingfishers – they're one of my favourites to photograph.

JEAN GOLDSTONE, Jeffreys Bay



▲ Smells like trouble

I photographed this buffalo at a game farm near George called Buff and Fellow. We were driving past the farm on a dirt road and pulled over so I could take a photo through the fence. This buffalo looked right at me and sniffed the air. I quickly jumped back in the car!

ELISE OOSTHUIZEN, Middelburg

My old man and the sea

My husband Boertjie and I recently celebrated our 55th wedding anniversary in Hondeklip Bay. I took this photo of him at Spitfire Rock. I waited for the right moment when the waves shot into the air – they look like a dove's wings!

ELIZE MARAIS, Langebaan



Hot on its heels

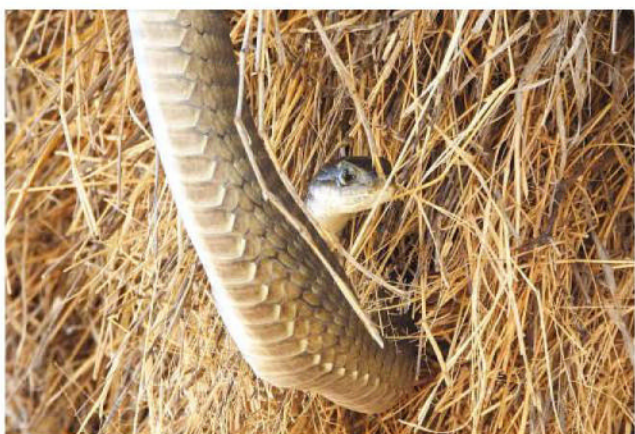
While driving along the Sweni Road (S126) in the Kruger Park, my friend Berthold Rossouw and I spotted four cheetahs lying under a tree. A herd of impalas approached, but they were wary and stopped suddenly – they must have noticed the cheetahs.

Without warning, the mother cheetah sprang into action, chasing one of the impalas, while her three cubs followed at a distance. The impala tried to escape by leaping over a log, but the cheetah stayed right on her tail, skilfully manoeuvring around the obstacle.

This was the first chase I've ever photographed – I just kept my finger on the trigger, hoping the aperture and shutter speed settings I'd selected before the chase were suitable.

They raced past us. As the impala attempted to jump over a bush, it tripped and fell. The mother cheetah quickly caught the antelope and the three cubs waited patiently until she called them over to join the meal.

KENNETH HOLDER, Pretoria



Who's there?

In October 2025, I joined a group of researchers as a volunteer to ring and number juvenile white-backed vultures on the outskirts of Kimberley. We moved from one tree to the next as we worked.

At one sociable weaver nest, a female boomslang popped out! She gave us quite a surprise. Our voices must have disturbed her and she came out to investigate.

We were relieved when she decided to go higher up the tree, and not down to join us!

LEON VENTER, Kimberley



Quick sundowner

My friend Eli Henning and I visited the Kgalagadi in September 2025 – it was our first time in the park. We soon realised it's the best place to be if you love bird photography. We enjoyed sitting at the waterholes and saw so many different species.

This secretarybird came for a drink late one afternoon at the Kwang waterhole north of Nossob. It didn't stay long – it just quenched its thirst and flew off.

KOOS DU PLESSIS, George

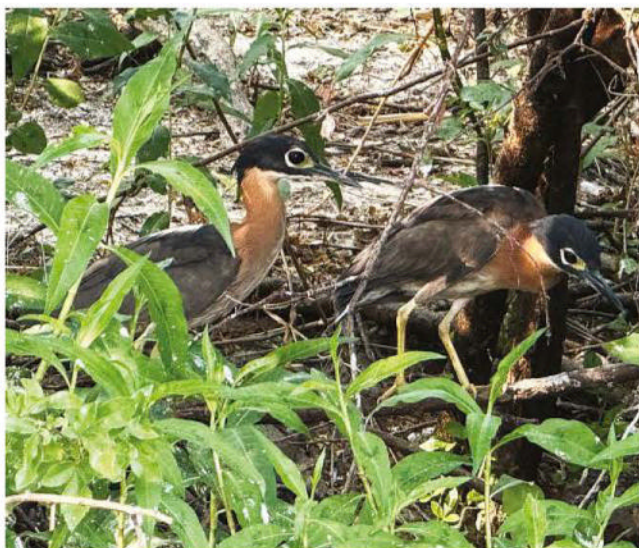


Who cares about being late?

My friend Zigi de Jager and I saw this big tusker in December 2022, in the Kruger Park just outside Olifants camp. The gate was about to close and we were nervous about getting a fine for being late, but seeing this imposing creature in the road seemed to make time stand still.

Zigi took the photo. We asked about him at the elephant museum in Letaba and found out his name is Xidudla.

ADI VAN DER WALT, Pretoria



Kavango treat

We recently took a boat ride on the Kavango River at Hakusembe River Lodge near Rundu in Namibia. There was so much birdlife in the trees on the riverbanks. We were especially excited to spot these two white-backed night herons at the water's edge. They're shy birds that are mostly active at night; I don't think many people get to see them during the day like this.

ESME DE WEERDT, Stellenbosch



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



Arms up!

ANELDA THERON from the Williston district writes: I photographed this strange-looking insect on our farm. I think it may be a praying mantis, but the colour is throwing me off. Am I correct in my identification? And what does it mean when the insect lifts its legs up in the air like this?

Entomologist DUNCAN MACFADYEN says: This is a very special find! Well done for identifying the insect as a mantis – it is indeed a giant African stick mantis, also known as a cat-eye mantis, and the adults reach an impressive size of 10 – 12 cm.

This mantis (and other species in the *Heterochaeta* genus) exhibits colour variation, typically ranging from shades of brown to greyish-brown. Other species can be green, yellow or tan. Its range covers most of South Africa.

The mantis will mimic a twig when disturbed, by holding out its forelegs. Usually, any quick movement will cause this threat display. It will open its coxa (the top segment of the leg closest to the body) horizontally and extend its forelegs with femur and tarsus together, revealing its warning colours of browns and yellow blotches, with various lines connecting the segments of the wings. Like in the photo, it opens up its wing set in a very confrontational and intimidating manner – a show to ward off would-be predators.

It's an ambush predator, but despite its large size it has a fairly light appetite compared to some other mantis species. It tends to prefer flying prey throughout its life span, and is therefore an important natural pest control agent.

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CHECK THIS

A young martial eagle with its prey (a water monitor, or leguan) on the banks of the Chobe River near Kasane, Botswana. This picture was taken on a trip with Pangolin Photo Safaris. pangolinphoto.com

PICTURE TOAST COETZER

Read more about accommodation options near Chobe National Park in our latest Botswana travel guide, available in shops or from media24shop.com



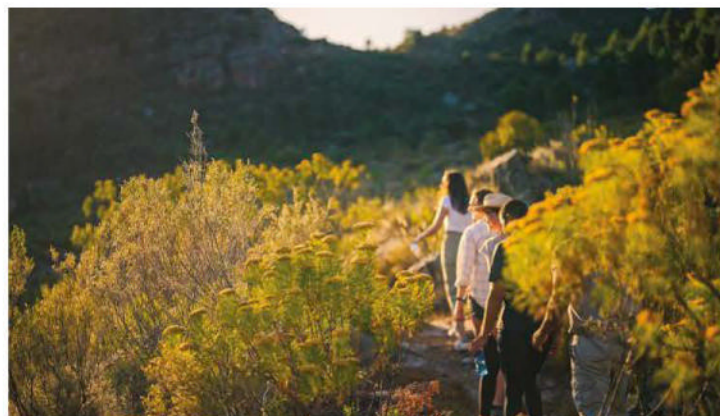
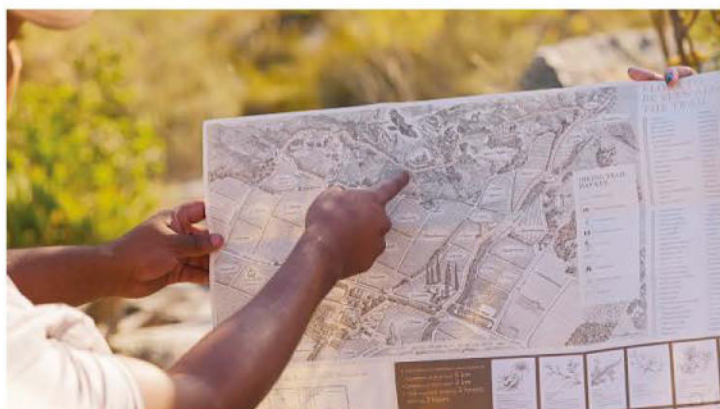


IN BRIEF

COMPILED BY VANIA JOOSTE



SUPPLIED



Go for a walk in Franschhoek

Franschhoek is famous for its fine dining and historical wine estates. One of those estates – La Motte – also offers another way to experience the valley: a 5 km circular hiking trail.

The hike starts and ends at the tasting room, where you'll be given a detailed map of the area, including check lists of the local fauna and flora. The trail begins gently along sandy vineyard paths before ascending the rocky slopes of the Franschhoek Mountain that frames the estate. Following the contour of the mountain, you'll have expansive views over the Franschhoek Valley while hiking through fynbos, aloes and trees – some labelled with stone markers. Expect a bit of climbing and scrambling; there are chains to help you.

Pause at the viewpoints to have some water and enjoy your KitKat, and take in your green surroundings before you descend. Round off the experience with a delicious breakfast or lunch at the estate's restaurant or bakery. Or how about a wine tasting after all that hard work?

Opening times: Self-guided hike Monday to Sunday from 9 am, latest departure at 2 pm. Guided hike Tuesday to Friday from 8 am to 2 pm latest. Booking is essential.

Cost: Self-guided hike R90 per person, includes water and a map. Guided hike R450 per person, including water and light snacks.

Contact: 📧 tasting@la-motte.co.za; 🌐 la-motte.com

– Marijcke Dodds

NIGHT WATCH



Outeniqua Choo Tjoe train crossing the Kaaimans River Bridge in 2007.

GALLO/GETTYIMAGES.COM

The Choo Tjoe rides again!

After an absence of two decades, tourists will be able to buy tickets for the Garden Route's beloved Outeniqua Choo Tjoe steam train later this year. This historical train, which once puffed along one of the most scenic rail routes in the world, will once again be travelling between George and Knysna.

The route will be opened in two phases: First between Knysna and Sedgefield and then between Sedgefield and George. The locomotives are being restored in Gauteng and the original carriages will be refurbished in George. Bridges along the way are currently being evaluated by engineers to ensure safety. Follow the progress at outeniquachootjoe.com

STELLARIUM



Want to see a partial solar eclipse?

If you do, then make a note in your calendar on Tuesday 17 February. In the late afternoon, a partial solar eclipse will be visible across large parts of southern Africa.

The path of totality of the eclipse will cross Antarctica, but even if you happened to be working at South Africa's research base there, you wouldn't experience a total eclipse. Rather, what will happen in February is called an "annular" eclipse.

Whether an eclipse is annular or total depends on where the moon is in its orbit around the earth. Because the orbit is elliptical, the perceived size of the moon changes as it moves closer and further from the earth. Remember, a solar eclipse occurs when the moon moves between the earth and the sun. If this happens when the moon is further from the earth, it's too small to cover the sun completely and a halo of light is still visible around the moon – this is an annular eclipse. A total eclipse is when the moon fully blocks out the sun.

But back to South Africa. As seen in the table below, and in the graphic, the closer you are to the south-eastern coast, the bigger the bite out of the sun will be – and the longer the partial eclipse will last. And if you happen to be in Mauritius on 17 February, you're in for even more of a treat. Viewed from there, 30% of the sun's surface will be obscured by the moon.

Only use eclipse glasses that are safe for solar viewing. Things like sunglasses, X-ray films, or a glass blackened with a candle will damage your eyesight! You can also use an arc welding helmet, as long as the glass has a #14 grading or higher.

– Willie Koorts

PLACE	START	MAXIMUM	END	AREA (%)
CAPE TOWN	2:01 PM	2:44 PM	3:24 PM	5%
JOHANNESBURG	2:26 PM	3:12 PM	3:54 PM	8%
BLOEMFONTEIN	2:16 PM	3:04 PM	3:49 PM	8%
GQEBERHA	1:56 PM	2:52 PM	3:44 PM	14%
EAST LONDON	2:00 PM	2:56 PM	3:49 PM	15%
DURBAN	2:10 PM	3:06 PM	3:58 PM	16%

IN BRIEF

HERE'S SOME GOOD NEWS!

GRAB YOUR PASSPORT

In 2026, three new direct flights from South Africa will be available to international travellers (so no more connecting flights). You can now fly directly from:



Johannesburg to Madrid, Spain, with Air Europa  [aireuropa.com](https://www.aireuropa.com)



Cape Town to Maputo, Mozambique, with Airlink  [flyairlink.com](https://www.flyairlink.com)



Cape Town to Germany – cities like Frankfurt and Munich – with the German airline, Condor  [condor.com](https://www.condor.com)



FIRST LEOPARD ON THE WEST COAST IN 170 YEARS!

A leopard was recently captured on a camera trap in the West Coast National Park – the first sighting in that area since the mid-1800s! Conservationists thought they were locally extinct.

While there are established leopard populations in the wilderness areas of the inland mountain chains, it's amazing to see one back in a coastal environment. The discovery is the result of a collaborative effort between the Landmark Leopard and Predator Project and SANParks, together with the University of the Western Cape, Saldanha Bay Municipality and multiple private landowners, all of whom have been working for the last few years to re-establish conservation corridors on the West Coast between Cape Town and the Berg River.



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New reserve in the Little Karoo

CapeNature has declared a new reserve in the Little Karoo: Lettas Kraal, about 30 km from Touws River and bordering on Anysberg Nature Reserve.

Lettas Kraal covers about 7 km² in the Succulent Karoo biome, which is internationally recognised as a biodiversity hotspot.

Camera traps have shown that several shy and nocturnal species are found here: brown hyena, leopard, honey badger and the critically endangered riverine rabbit. Other research has recorded nine butterfly species, seven moth species, 97 bird species, 11 lizard and skink species, one tortoise species, one terrapin species, 11 snake species, four frog species and two scorpion species. Not to mention the 814 plant species...

The reserve is named after the farm on which it is located. Lettas Kraal is not yet open to the public. Watch this space.



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REPTILES

Baviaanskloof dwarf chameleon (*Bradypodion baviaanense*)

COURTNEY HUNDERMARK

The dazzling dwarf chameleon

In August last year, my friends Adriaan Jordaan, Tyrone Ping, Ross de Bruin and I travelled to the Baviaanskloof in search of a dwarf chameleon. That's what reptile enthusiasts do over weekends – just like birders looking for lifers!

Chameleons, well known for their mastery of camouflage that stems from their colour-changing abilities, are arguably one of the world's most recognisable reptile groups. Their curling, prehensile tails and wandering, telescopic eyes are just some of their characteristic traits.

But did you know that South Africa is recognised as one of the world's greatest hotspots for chameleon diversity? We have a total of 22 distinct species, and a few isolated populations that may represent their own unique species, currently awaiting investigation from biologists. In terms of total chameleon diversity, we're only surpassed by the island of Madagascar and some countries in tropical East Africa.

We drove deep into the heart of the

Baviaanskloof Wilderness Area with steep ravines and rocky slopes around every corner. To see a dwarf chameleon, we had to reach the high peaks where they live among restios, fynbos and other plants.

Two broad categories of chameleon can be found in South Africa: the "typical" chameleons (two species in the genus *Chamaeleo*) and the dwarf chameleons (20 species in the genus *Bradypodion*). The "typical" chameleons are oviparous, meaning that they reproduce by laying eggs, which are left to incubate in a burrow, below ground; while dwarf chameleons give birth to live, squirming offspring – they're ovoviviparous, a reproductive strategy where the eggs are retained within the female's body for the duration of their development.

Dwarf chameleon diversity is largely concentrated in two regions: the fynbos and afro-temperate forests of the Greater Cape Floristic Region; and in the grasslands and sub-tropical forests of the Eastern Cape into Zululand and northern KZN.

Dwarf chameleons in these two

regions often share physical similarities, despite individual species usually being geographically separate from one another. This is the result of a process known as "convergent evolution", where different species that occupy similar habitats and experience comparable environmental conditions have developed similar suites of physical features over time, through natural selection.

For example, forest-dwelling chameleons such as the Knysna dwarf chameleon and the Ngome dwarf chameleon exhibit much longer tails than species inhabiting other biomes; an evolutionary adaptation that is useful for life in the canopy.

By now, you must be wondering if we ever saw a dwarf chameleon? We drove a hidden path from the base of the mountain to the higher slopes. Then we continued on foot, later switching on our headlamps as it grew darker. We criss-crossed the vegetation like a search party, and between the four of us found 20 of them!

– Courtney Hundermark

PIT STOP



Mashi Crafts, Kongola, Namibia

The B8 is the only tar road that transects Namibia's Kavango East and Zambezi regions (previously the Caprivi Strip) from Divundu in the west to Katima Mulilo in the east. These towns are an intimidating 310 km apart, which is why it's a great idea to take a breather around the 200 km mark at the small town of Kongola. Besides a couple of shops and a petrol station, Kongola's main attraction is Mashi Crafts.

Mashi Crafts occupies a prominent building across the road from the Shell service station. It is one of my favourite curio shops in Namibia because it almost exclusively stocks items made in the surrounding rural areas, where houses are still built the traditional way with reed and thatch, or with mopane stumps and mud bricks.

A tag on each item shows who made the specific curio, and in which village. On my most recent visit, I bought a couple of beautiful grass-woven place mats (R140 each) made by Ndungati Berrita in Masida.

The sheer volume and variety of items in Mashi Crafts can be overwhelming when you first enter the shop. But take your time, for one wooden elephant figurine isn't exactly like the one next to it. A different hand might have made it, and the more time you spend investigating each item, the more adept you become at spotting which pieces suit your taste.

How about a mini mokoro for your neighbour looking after your poodle while you're gallivanting around the bush? Wouldn't your mate just love a pocket-sized mbira? Or a key ring crafted from cattle bone?

They stock stunning baskets made from woven reed and grass, plus place mats and fruit bowls. There are traditional African masks to hang on your wall, and unusual wooden figurines like donkeys and baboons. (Don't worry, there are plenty of zebras, giraffes, elephants, lions and hippos, too!)

Once you've swiped your card, you can retire to the small coffee shop next door, where a local dog will come say hi, or maybe even a clutch of chickens. Katima Mulilo can wait, right?

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 5 pm; closed on Saturdays.

Where? In Kongola, at the T-junction where the C49 joins the B8.

— Toast Coetzer

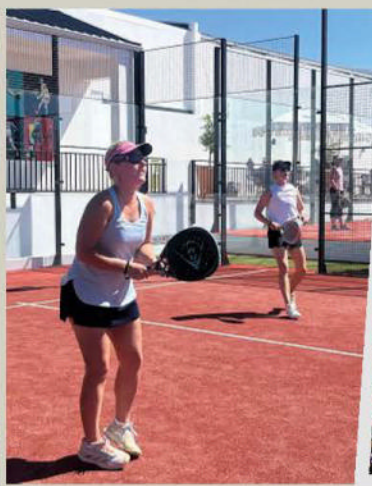


Come and relax in the **Wine Paradise**



If you want to visit Cape Town but don't fancy the hustle and bustle of the city, **Meerendal Wine Estate**, about 20 km outside the city centre, is the perfect place to stay.
Come and relax!

At Meerendal you will be treated like royalty. The luxurious wine estate has recently expanded its beautiful boutique hotel, located in the old farmstead, by adding fourteen new accommodation units. In addition to the Garden Suites located to the right of the manor – detached units that offer extra privacy – Meerendal now also offers the newly built Chapel Suites near the chapel. The Chapel Suites are luxuriously appointed, featuring extra-large king-size beds, premium Egyptian cotton bedding, elegant bathrooms, a coffee station and air conditioning. Each suite opens onto a covered stoep furnished with a side table and chairs, the perfect spot to unwind with a drink while soaking in the peaceful surroundings.



PICTURES: SUPPLIED

FUN AND GAMES

Meerendal has become a popular playground for active Capetonians over the past few years. The three scenic mountain-bike trails and three separate trails for hikers and trailrunners offer stunning views of Table Mountain. Since November, however, it has also become a sought-after destination for padel enthusiasts. Four courts have been built next to the tasting room, and can be booked from 7 am to 10 pm every day via the Playtomic app. The coffee shop in the clubhouse next to the padel courts is a vibrant, buzzing hub, while the padel shop has everything you need to upgrade your gear.

When you're done playing, don't forget to stop by the tasting room, explore the collection, pick up a bottle (or two) of bubbly and enjoy the warm, welcoming atmosphere that makes this estate so special.



For more information about Meerendal, as well as hotel reservations, visit www.meerendal.co.za
For information about the padel courts and reservations, visit www.padelnow.co.za

Quirky Joburg

Writer and photographer **Heather Mason** lives in Brixton, Johannesburg. Originally from the US, she moved to South Africa in 2010 and started a blog called 2Summers, because she experienced two consecutive summers that year. She enjoys finding unusual things to do in her new home city – a cosmopolitan place that's often overlooked as a tourist destination. Here are her favourites.



Off to the market(s)

No weekend visit to Joburg is complete without a stop at the **Rosebank Sunday Market** (rosebanksundaymarket.co.za), a sprawling affair on the top level of the Rosebank Mall parking garage. The market has dozens of stalls selling food, thrifted clothes and houseware, books, and a dizzying array of high-quality African crafts, some of which are made on site.

The **Pretoria Boeremark** (pretoria.boeremark.co.za) is a great excuse to get out of the city on a Saturday morning. Formerly a traditional farmers' market, the Boeremark has expanded to include row upon row of mostly Afrikaans foods, like *pampoenkoekies* (pumpkin fritters), *moerkoffie* served from piping hot iron kettles, and more adventurous dishes like *skilpadjies* (sheep's liver) and pap and *kaiings* (deep-fried pork fat). You can also buy fresh flowers and locally made clothing and gifts.

This is a proper farmers' market, so get there early. It opens at 6 am and winds down before 10 am.

Coffee, art and books in downtown Joburg

The Joburg CBD gets a bad rap, but there are many unexpected joys to be found there.

Troy's Café ([@troyscafe](https://www.instagram.com/troyscafe) on Instagram) on Loveday Street – a small window peeking out from the ground floor of the newly renovated

Art Deco Aegis Building – is one of downtown's newest coffee shops, selling a full menu of coffees, toasted sandwiches, shrimp rissoles, and pastéis de nata. (Troy's is affiliated with the legendary Troyeville Hotel, which serves excellent Portuguese food.)

The **Rand Club** (randclub.co.za), another historic building across the street from Troy's, is worth a pop-in for a glimpse of the longest bar in Africa; and the gallery next door, **Asisebenze** (asisebenze.com), has interesting exhibitions of local art.

From Troy's, it's a five-minute walk to **Bridge Books** (bridgebooks.co.za), Joburg's best indie bookstore, in the historic Barbican Building. Bridge Books is a joy for anyone who likes to read – with comfortable couches, a wide selection of well-curated African literature and children's books, and a small coffee bar.

Joburg style

Joburg has a vibrant fashion scene. Fashionistas flock to **44 Stanley** (44stanley.co.za) for the latest locally made looks. Originally a cluster of 1930s' industrial buildings, 44 Stanley is now one of Joburg's most well-established shopping districts, with more than two dozen stores selling everything from vintage records to high fashion. For colourful ladies' threads, check out Me&B or Lunar.

44 Stanley also has an independent cinema – **the Bioscope** – and several popular restaurants,

including the legendary **Salvation Café** known for some of the best eggs benedict, cheesecake, and carrot cake (among many other things) in town.

Wild city

Joburg has a surprising number of lovely parks, but the **Wilds Nature Reserve** (jhbcityparksandzoo.com) is by far the most dramatically beautiful and underrated of them all.

Located on the hilly edge of the CBD, the Wilds was established a century ago as an urban forest of indigenous trees and plants. Once considered a no-go zone due to crime, the Wilds is now safe and vibrant, with yoga classes, sketching groups and picnicking families scattered across the green lawns on weekends. It's also full of art, including life-sized animals by sculptor James Delaney (who lives next to the park) and colourful mosaics by the Spaza Art Gallery.

For a truly quirky outdoor day trip, head north of Pretoria to **Wonderboom Nature Reserve** (tshwane.gov.za), home to a 1 000-year-old fig tree of the species *Ficus salicifolia*. The tree, named Wonderboom ("Wonder tree") by Voortrekker Hendrik Potgieter in 1836, was once large enough to shade a thousand people and 22 ox-wagons!

Today, this remarkable tree is the size of an entire forest, with an inner circle of "mother" trees surrounded by concentric circles of "daughter" trees (all part of the same parent) expanding steadily outward. A circular wooden deck allows visitors



WONDERBOOM NATURE RESERVE



44 STANLEY

to walk around inside the tree, and beautiful stone pathways snake up the mountain to an abandoned military fort.

Big night out

Joburg is an African cultural hub and South Africa's best place to experience pan-African food and music.

For Afrophile foodies, a night out at the **Yeoville Dinner Club** (083 447 4235) is a must. Acclaimed chef Sanza Sandile has a knack for finding the tastiest ingredients from across Africa (curated mostly from the nearby Yeoville food market) and combining them into multi-course, mostly vegetarian menus that defy description. Book early and don't be afraid to catch an Uber into Yeoville.

For music lovers, the best African jazz, hip-hop and indie music happens every Tuesday night at the **Sawubona Music Jam** in Chiawelo, Soweto ("Sawubonamusicjam" on Facebook). Be warned: This is a late night. The jam only gets going after 9pm and runs into the early hours. But the music is worth it – you never know which genre you're going to get, but it's guaranteed to be great.

For those interested in spending the night in Soweto, **Lebo's Soweto Backpackers** (sowetobackpackers.com) in Orlando West has lovely rooms and authentic South African food – they organise an outing to the jam every Tuesday.

Visit 2summers.net for more of Heather's writing and photographs.



PRETORIA BOEREMARK



THE WILDS



TROY'S CAFÉ



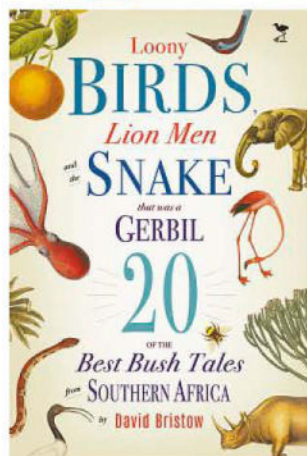
BRIDGE BOOKS



LEBO'S SOWETO BACKPACKERS



YEOVILLE DINNER CLUB



Loony Birds, Lion Men and the Snake that was a Gerbil: 20 of the Best Bush Tales from Southern Africa

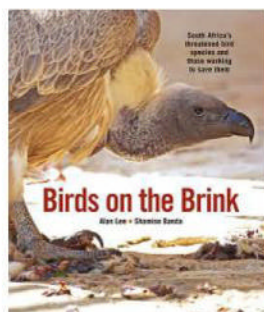
by David Bristow, Jacana Media
R295 in bookstores

David Bristow is a seasoned travelled and erstwhile editor of *Getaway* magazine. His latest book is a bit

like browsing a cabinet of curiosities – a collection of essays drawn from his four-volume *Stories from the Veld* series. He delves into quirky and overlooked people and places in South Africa's history; shares anecdotes from the bush and sprinkles in some interesting facts about the environment.

Learn about the country's first game ranger, Harry Wolhuter; the fossils and finds from the Cradle of Humankind; the battle of Isandlwana; the wonderful lives of elephants; and the tragic tale of Khoi interpreter Krotoa. You'll often find yourself going, "What? I didn't know that!"

The essays are short enough to read in a quick sitting. *Loony Birds* is a nice read to have on your bedside table for when you have a few minutes. Bristow's writing is vivid, funny and entertaining; if you don't own the *Stories from the Veld* anthology yet, this highlights reel might convince you to splurge.



Birds on the Brink

by Alan Lee & Shamiso Banda,
Struik Nature
R490 in bookstores

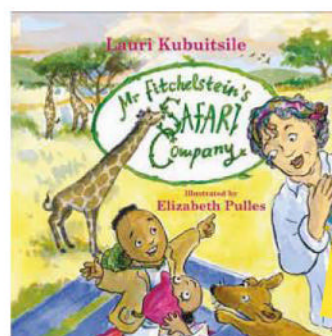
The canary in the coal mine is not the only bird that serves as an environmental indicator. When bird populations plummet, it's a clear sign that us humans should pay attention.

This guide highlights the at-risk birds in South Africa, Lesotho and eSwatini. The introduction explains the various threats to bird populations (climate change, habitat loss, human-wildlife conflict) and how conservation status is determined.

The two middle sections cover marine birds and terrestrial birds, divided by habitat. Each entry gives an overview of the bird in question – appearance, behaviour and conservation status. Specific threats to their survival are emphasized. There are also detailed distribution maps and colour photos. A stand-out feature is the behind-the-scenes accounts from scientists and guides working to save them. It adds a nice personal touch to all the facts and figures.

The last section details how you can get involved as a citizen scientist. Roll up your sleeves and save a raptor – or a penguin or a lark!

FOR THE KIDS



Mr Fitchelstein's Safari Company

(R220, Sunflower Books), by Lauri Kubuitsile and illustrated by Elizabeth Pulles, is aimed at children aged 6 and under. It tells the story of a little boy called Mr Fitchelstein, also known as Fitchy, and his toys. They want to go on safari, but they're cooped up at home. No worries! The toys turn Fitchy's playpen into a safari vehicle and everyone rides around the house looking for exciting things to see. A fun read for little ones.



Jan Braai Junior: In the Kitchen

(R250, Penguin Books) builds on Jan Braai's previous braai books for children. Now your little cooks can whip up something on the stove! The recipes are simple and use basic kitchen equipment – no complicated methods or blowtorches required... The recipes include ideas for breakfast (flapjacks, omelette, oats) and other meals (from pasta and pizza to butter chicken) and sweet treats, too.



ROAD MUSIC

Neon Grey Midnight Green

by Neko Case
US\$9 from bandcamp.com

American singer-songwriter Neko Case has one of those distinctive voices that you only have to hear once for it to stick with you for good. Depending on how you count, this is her eighth studio album and her particular brand of likeable, pop-savvy alternative country runs as wild and free as ever.

The song "Wreck" sets off at a hundred miles an hour: "Do I look like the sun to you? Do I blaze freckles onto your face? I bet, I bet, I bet I do!"

But there's no putting her in a box, and the songs – and lyrics – constantly surprise. "My hair was grey at 26, you didn't know / It's not what I chose to show you / It didn't match my bloodlust at the time," she sings on "Oh, neglect..."

Songs like "An Ice Age" and "Rusty Mountain" oscillate between dark and moving – Case's characteristic idiomatic blend.

They're good tunes for a summer holiday of couch-surfing at your friends' houses up the Garden Route, and then the Sunshine Coast, and then the Wild Coast...

– Toast Coetzer

MEET THE AUTHOR

Peter Slingsby

The beloved cartographer's most recent publication is *Cederberg – The Book*, a comprehensive guide to the region he's been visiting for 70 years. History, wildlife, conservation issues – they're all here, interspersed with experiences, funny stories and colour photos.

As a maker of maps, you've spent a lot of time in places all around South Africa. What is it about the Cederberg that compelled you to write a book about it?

Part of the reason is because I've known it for so long. I was interested in hiking, rock art and our botanical heritage from a young age. The people of the Cederberg add a haunting appeal to these mountains, which have become like a second home to me. For several years, my wife Maggie and I spent two to three months of every year in a Cederberg cottage.

The Cederberg is known for its amazing rock formations. Why do these monoliths, crevices and caves draw us in like magnets?

The sense of timelessness – there's a majesty to the rocks of the Cederberg; a scale and sense of age that humbles us. In a million years' time, those same rocks will still be there. We can imagine the rocks, but we can't imagine what the people looking at them will be like!

The San were the first people to inhabit these parts. Signs of their shelters and a vast array of rock art panels remain. How does this visual reminder of their presence shape our regard for the Cederberg? It has definitely added to the mystique. There's a familiarity to the rock paintings because we recognise what the people are doing: dancing, travelling, sitting at the fireside – just like us! We can also recognise and identify so many of the animals. But here and there we find an "entoptic", an image that's so weird that it again reminds us of the huge temporal and cultural gulf between us and them.

Unregulated tree-felling in the 1700s and 1800s led to a rapid decline in the population of the region's namesake, the Clanwilliam cedar. Now there are concerted efforts to keep the species

from becoming extinct... The work being done by Dawie Burger and his NPO, Sustainable Ceder, stands out. Also by David Nieuwoudt on the farm Dwarsrivier. I do think it's sad that the government isn't doing more for the cedars. In real terms, South Africa spends barely 70% of what it put into conservation in the 1970s. The conservation departments have to raise some of their own funds, and their time and ability to concentrate on the cedars, for example, becomes severely constrained.

One of the problems for cedars is that they're not readily accessible. The public might feel an emotional connection to a Cape leopard or a Verreux's eagle (both of which are protected by well-established NPOs), but they don't – yet! – have the same compassion for these trees, which grow in remote ravines. Another massive concern is veld fires, 75% of which are caused by people.

You've made it your mission to document colloquial place names of the Cederberg in this book, as well as on your maps of the area. Why is this important to you?

All place names carry echoes of history. They're like a language of the landscape. Printing them on maps and in this book is my attempt to honour the people who came before us, and also to keep the oral history of the region alive. The names speak of the connectedness of people to the landscapes around them. If there are no names, there's a distance, a disconnect.

Your favourite places in the Cederberg?

The Maltese Cross; the very remote *herdershuisies* in the Bakkrans concession; the wild back road from Matjiesrivier to Wupperthal; the Heuningvlei mission station and its community; the secret caves of the Agter-Pakhuis... Some of these places I will never visit again because of my health, but they will always occupy a powerful space in my memory.



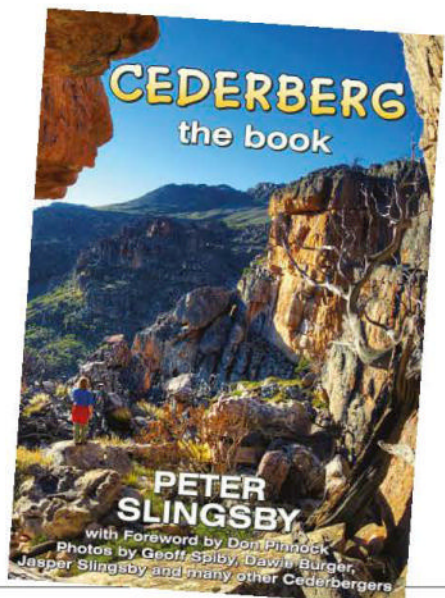
KARLI BURGER

Peter Slingsby with a young cedar tree on the farm Driehoek.

Is there anything you'd like to ask of the next generation? Conserve this place with your heart and soul. Landowners, remember that you do not own the Cederberg; you're merely the custodians. Your descendants will praise or blame you for the world as they find it. Visitors, everything that you encounter in the Cederberg is at home there. Respect that. Even the snakes and scorpions. And the rocks – it's vandalism to leave graffiti or even climbing chalk on them.

– Sophia van Taak

Cederberg – The Book is published by Tracks4Africa and costs R400 in bookstores or online at shop.tracks4africa.co.za





Missing in action

A free-spirited Karoo bicycle ride on a road to nowhere takes an unexpected turn for **Helen Fraser** – and a brush with some small-town policemen investigating a missing person case...

ILLUSTRATION **NICOLENE LOUW**

A road to nowhere. Tell me those four words don't elicit a rush of giddy joy. On a road to nowhere, I would ramble or ride; alone, unfettered and with no destination, shedding my burdens like a snake sloughs its skin.

My favourite such stretch is a corrugated dirt road threading out from Prince Albert, pitched on the vast Karoo plain and sternly watched over by the Swartberg. My husband Hamish and I visit Prince Albert annually, renting a cottage on an olive farm.

Initially, I ventured out on foot. Later, I took my sturdy all-road bike, named Cleo, along that road. Fitted

with a bell and a side mirror, Cleo is a suburban aunty, like me.

I remember the first time I set out. The wideness of land and sky elicited sighs of gratitude. I was startled to find myself singing. I had no idea that Koos Kombuis's "Lisa se Klavier" had been napping in my subconscious, waiting for this moment. The only line I could remember – "*En die hele wêreld word stil...*" – rose to an awful cacophony that sent a flock of sheep racing for the refuge of the zinc *afdakkie* shading a water trough. They turned en masse to consider me, sheepishly. What strange, warbling creature was this?

But on my most recent excursion, events were shadowed by insecurities I thought I'd left behind in the city...

As I prepared to leave the cottage aboard Cleo, Hamish decided he would drive to the local coffee shop for espresso and Wi-Fi. We hid the cottage keys in the old pepper tree shading the door before going our separate ways.

It was a still Karoo morning, with the promise of heat mirages later. I bounced down the rough road, passing the slumbering bush pub. From there, it was out onto the plain, where gravel meets the taut fencing of sheep and game farms.

And then everything changed.

In the distance, they resembled large stones. But these gradually took on human shape: two men sitting by the roadside. They had matted hair and beards, clothes ragged and stiff with

*At last came the
telltale dust plume
and the sun glinting
off a windscreen. But
the car disappeared
into a drift...*

dust. They watched me approach.

I wish it weren't so, but my Spidey Sense registered alarm. Call it the residue of living in South Africa with all its divisions and realities. Now, alone on a road to nowhere, I became acutely aware of my vulnerability.

They were unmoved by my greeting. When I glanced back in my side mirror, the two were still watching me.

I couldn't shake the thought that I'd have to return this way.

I was spooked. I stopped at what felt like a safe distance. There was only one option: summon an escort. Fishing out my cellphone, I called Hamish.

The reception was poor, but eventually I reached him. I quickly explained my dilemma. "Drive until you find me," I said as the connection cut.

I felt a sense of shame. But years of urban living had primed me to be wary. And in my head, I heard my children saying, "Please be careful." I had to honour my promise.

Eventually, my water bottle empty, I stopped on a rise to wait for Hamish. The smell of baked earth rose from the pores of the land. At last came the telltale dust plume and the sun glinting off a windscreen. But the car disappeared into a drift. When it emerged, it was travelling in the other direction.

No! Hamish! Come back!

The dust settled slowly as my escort headed back to town.

There was nothing else for it. I'd have to go it alone. Adrenaline carried me until I reached the bush pub. I was drenched and parched. The men were gone. I kept a vigilant look out on the way back but it seemed they'd melted back into the landscape like the heat mirages.

Closer to town, I noticed a police van rumbling slowly down the road towards me, but thought little of it. Eager to get home and chastise Hamish for abandoning me, I took a left at the intersection. The van followed and, unexpectedly, drew up alongside me.

Surely, I wasn't going to be booked for failing to stop or use a hand signal! The passenger window descended

to reveal two policemen.

They were looking at me intently.

"*Het u nou net uitgery?*" asked the sergeant. The two-way radio crackled loudly.

I had the first inkling something was amiss – and it wasn't my road etiquette.

"*Is daar 'n probleem, meneer?*"

"*Daar's 'n man by die polisieestasie. Ons dink dis jou man.*"

I blanched. What on earth had Hamish been up to? Bolted without paying the bill? Assaulted the barista? Neither was likely.

"He came in to report his wife as a missing person," said the sergeant, switching language to emphasize the emergency.

Missing? Which wife? Not me!

But the image that Hamish had shared with them was unmistakable. Me and Cleo. He'd taken that picture the previous year. I was wearing the same lurid turquoise cycling top.

I tried to make light of my explanation.

"*Hy't nie ver genoeg gery nie,*" I joked in an aggrieved wife tone. "*Ek het vir hom gesê hy moet ry totdat hy my kry.*"

They were unmoved. The driver craned to get another look at me. And I read the rebuke in his eyes. Silly old woman. Going out on her own.

He got on the radio.

"*Ons het haar gekry,*" he said tersely, and put the van into gear.

Pedalling back to the cottage, the nervous rush quickly subsided. Suddenly it all seemed very funny. I was imagining that photo of me and Cleo plastered up

in the local copshop, the library, the PEP store, on the refuse bins and in the bush pub, and, worse, the headline in the local rag: "*Ouma goes AWOL on road to nowhere.*"

When Hamish arrived at the cottage, I went out to meet him. I'd thought of hamming it up, pretending to be a hitchhiker. But when I saw his face, I thought better of it. He looked stricken.

"I didn't know what else to do," he said as I opened the door. "I didn't think you'd ridden *that* far. When I couldn't find you, I imagined you lying in the veld somewhere. And I didn't know which of the kids I should call first."

Ouch, ouch – and ouch!

Inside, I put the kettle on. (My late father called tea the answer to world tension. He was right.) As the water boiled, I mused. Was this the end of my wanderings? Why had I been so spooked?

It struck me later that among my holiday reading was *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* by Kerri Andrews. It traces the "walking history" of 10 renowned women through the ages, from Dorothy Wordsworth to Cheryl Strayed. I'd gobbled it up.

But the darker leitmotif in almost all the women's accounts came in the form of stranger danger; the lone man lurking at the forest edge, on the trail at night, along a lonely byway.

I am now a (willing) prisoner to a phone app that tells my family where I am, 24/7. It's worth it, just for the thrill of "riding out".

We're visiting the Karoo cottage again soon. Cleo has been serviced by Abdurrahman at our local bike shop in Cape Town, her tyres polished to a sooty lustre. Abdurrahman's last words as he helped me lift Cleo onto the bike rack were: "Be safe out there."

The lesson has been learnt. Hamish and I will make very firm contingency plans to ensure I am not tempted to go AWOL again. My son has given me pepper spray. But the biggest deterrent? I'm preparing to spice up my on-the-road song list. Don't tell the sheep, but I've been mastering *Salmadairachd*, or Gaelic psalm singing. What a treat they're in for!



The awful, astonishing Amatola

The six-day Amatola Trail near Hogsback in the Eastern Cape has a reputation as one of the hardest multi-day hikes in the country. Take up the challenge and you'll soon remember what it feels like to be alive.

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**



On the Amatola Trail you hike through beautiful forests and past interesting rock formations. This big hanging rock is one of the highlights in Waterfall Forest.



The name “Waterfall Forest” sounds magical, like something from a fairytale; a place where supernatural things can happen. But right now, I’m not feeling very supernatural. I can’t wave a wand and banish the pain shooting through my right knee every time I take step. My backpack feels like a sack of bricks, and the path is only getting steeper.

It’s not like we weren’t warned. When offered a choice of two routes, the one through Waterfall Forest came with a difficulty disclaimer. That’s why our hiking group split up earlier: Herman and Kenzo took the easier route through a pine plantation; Maryke, Benedikt and I chose the forest. It’s not like we haven’t seen enough forests already! After three days on the six-day Amatola Trail, we’d already trekked through Pirie, Dontsa, Galarta, Mount Thomas, Ndloveni...

It’s 5.30pm and the mountains are shrouded in brooding clouds. We’re almost there. By now, surely, Herman and Kenzo will have lit the donkey boiler at Cata Hut for a hot shower.

But when we finally see the hut, there’s no welcoming plume of smoke curling from the chimney; nobody waving from the deck. We push the door open with a creak. It’s quiet inside. Outside, the sky cracks with lightning. I turn on my phone and see a message that

Herman sent half an hour ago: *Where are you? We can’t find the hut.*

It starts to rain. And then it starts to hail. Through blinding flashes of lightning and booming thunder, I remember something trail manager Adi Meintjes told us before we set off: “It’s the Amatola. It’s dangerous. And you can die if you’re not careful...”

Our little group travelled to Hogsback from all over, to take on one of the hardest multi-day hikes in South Africa. Herman Makatla and I drove from Bloemfontein; Kenzo Pule from Joburg; Maryke Steynvaart and Benedikt Wittman from Mbombela.

Three of the days on the 100 km Amatola exceed 20 km, and nothing is flat. “The climbs are rough and the descents are steep,” Adi said as we all gathered around a big map of the trail. “You’ll be hiking all day, so start early. So many people are ready to give up on Day 2 already, because they arrive at the hut late and exhausted, and they realise the worst is yet to come. The most important rule is to stick together: Keep the group together and send a message every evening when everyone has arrived at the hut safely. Otherwise I’ll have to send a helicopter to look for you, and that’s very expensive...”

Why on earth did we split up? The storm lashes the hut and the panic starts to rise.

Mist clings to the slopes of the mountains, as it does most mornings and evenings. The weather on the trail can be unpredictable, so pack accordingly.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: This trail involves lots of climbing so a trekking pole will become your best friend. Away with the Fairies sells wooden poles that work well and generate income for the local community. They also sell a guidebook on mushrooms so you can identify the different types in the forest. Take care when you cross some of the little bridges en route: They're narrow and not always stable. They can also be slippery. One of the views in Waterfall Forest. The Amatola is a challenging multi-day adventure, but the streams, pools and waterfalls also make it a stunning hike.

DAY 1

Maden Dam to Gwiligwili: 12km

Four vacuum-packed sosaties, a big steak, two potatoes, one bottle of wine... I mentally list the items I want to chuck into the forest after only a kilometre on the trail. My legs buckle under the weight of my stupidly heavy pack.

I give myself a little pep talk: "Everything in life can't be easy, Willem."

And, barring this horrible path that climbs ever higher, the Amatola has been special so far. From the start, you vanish into shadowy groves of yellowwood, white stinkwood and black ironwood trees. It feels like a different world. Less light, but more air. The wind ruffles the canopy but it's quiet on the ground. Everything is green – so many greens – with occasional mushrooms in splashes of red, blue and white.

After about 6 km, we reach a spot where a stream bubbles from dark rock. The water tastes like the inside of a mountain.

By the time we summit the last hill and reach Gwiligwili Hut, the sun is as low as our energy levels.

I light a braai and the donkey boiler. Now I'm very glad I didn't throw out my steak and potatoes... The donkey does its thing and we all take hot showers.

Later, tucked into my sleeping bag, scrubbed clean and belly full, I think: "What's everyone moaning about? The Amatola isn't *that* hard..."

DAY 2

Gwiligwili to Dontsa: 19km

We depart at dawn. The sun is hidden behind clouds and it's cool on the trail between the Abapazi and Mangamesi forests. Benedikt takes the lead, pushing through all the freshly spun spiderwebs. Cape parrots screech and Knysna turacos float from yellowwood to knob thorn like green ghosts.

Fine rain sifts through the odd opening in the canopy. I feel like I'm not breathing on my own – it's like the forest is breathing for me. I'm a droplet on a tree; I'm deep green moss; wet stones in black soil.

"This is what's wrong with humans," Herman says. "We think we're no longer part of nature. We think we're more important. We judge everything by its

differences. Each other, too."

That's why hiking is important. On a trail like this, everyone is the same. Nobody owns more than a backpack. Nobody is more important than the mountains, the forest, the rivers.

Late in the afternoon, misty clouds push against the slopes. The forest is even darker, even wetter. We carry on for two hours to the Dontsa Hut.

The firewood is also wet and we have to huff and puff to get the flames going. But finally the water in the donkey boiler gets hot enough and the sosaties and potatoes get cooked. Tomorrow, my backpack will be lighter.

DAY 3

Dontsa to Cata: 20km

It's Kenzo's birthday today, but she's not having a good time. It's only 10am but we've already been slogging away for three hours, through a forest called Mount Thomas. Now we're making coffee on a cliff where a small waterfall spills down the rockface.

Kenzo is exhausted. Her hip and knee are sore. Last night, she slept in a wet sleeping bag after something leaked in her backpack. To add insult to injury, her cooking pot just tumbled away into the oblivion of the kloof below. Herman and I pack her heaviest items into our backpacks in a bid to improve her day.

Then comes the Waterfall Forest/detour decision. Herman and Kenzo take the easier route and the rest of us carry on. We arrive at the hut in the hailstorm. It's dark and wild out there, but Benedikt bravely sets out back along the trail to look for the lost hikers. Adi and I try to judge where they might be on Google Maps and send directions via WhatsApp.

Finally, the three emerge from the maelstrom, soaked, bruised by hailstones and jumpy from lightning scare after lightning scare. It's after 8pm and pitch dark.

We light a big fire and get the donkey going. Kenzo eventually stops shivering. "I almost cried," she says, and then, with a healthy dollop of sarcasm: "What an adventure – I'm actually looking forward to tomorrow..."



AMATOLA TRAIL

Clockwise from top left: High above the Eastern Cape on Geju Peak. Kenzo takes a quick nap on the soft forest floor. Of the many pools in the Wolf River, Eden is the prettiest. The big rocks are good places to warm up after the cold swim. Spend the extra money to have pizza and beer delivered to the Zingcuka Hut. You've earned it. The Madonna and Child Waterfall is probably the last one you'll see on the Amatola.

DAY 4

Cata to Mnyameni: 15 km

The Amatola has no mercy. The day starts clean and fresh, but ahead of us is a nonstop 5 km climb to Geju Peak (1880m), the highest point on the route. To the west, the Hogsback Mountains stand proud against the blue sky. Two Verreaux's eagles soar past, circling a few times before disappearing into the glare of the rising sun.

That sun beats down. We're in grassland now – nothing grows higher than our knees to provide any sort of shade.

Eventually we reach a pine plantation and unpack our lunch, about 1,5 km after Geju Peak and nearly 200 m lower. The pine needles on the ground offer a comfy bed for a quick nap.

From here, it's 6 km of descending on grassy slopes (with a 700m drop in elevation), then we stamp through another forest – called the Malan Forest – to the overnight hut.

But “downhill” doesn't mean “easy”. Gravity and knees don't always get along. At times, the slope is so steep that I have to hang onto bushes to stay upright.

For the final two-and-a-half hours, the route follows a stream through the forest, past waterfalls and secret glades, and finally to a clearing where the Mnyameni Hut awaits.

DAY 5

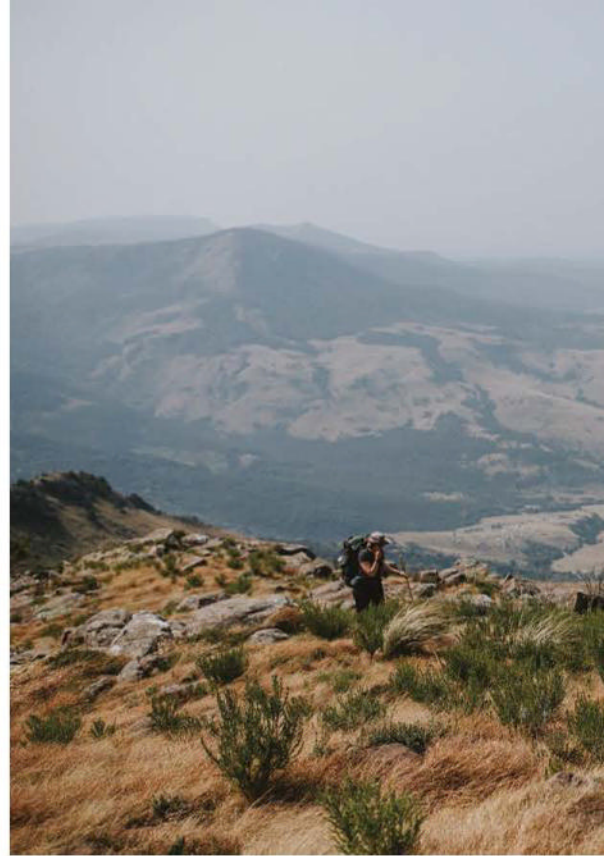
Mnyameni to Zingcuka: 19 km

The group stretches apart a bit and I walk ahead, alone with my thoughts. The morning light twinkles in the trees like Christmas decorations. Except for the chatter of birds, the only sound is the squeak of my backpack harness with every step. My footsteps are quiet on the forest floor.

After 6 km of climbing, we reach a neck at the bottom of Mnyameni Peak and descend into a valley. We follow the course of the Wolf River for the next 6 km, past one perfect swimming spot after the next. (I stop counting at ten.) We jump into the icy cold water, which breathes new life into tired muscles and rickety knees.

Early afternoon, we exit the Wolf River Valley, climb over a few rocky hills and walk through pine plantations to another steep descent into another dark, dense forest.

This one is called the Schwarzwald Forest and we thread our way through until we reach the Zingcuka Hut, where Adi and Luca de Vos



greet us with pizza and beer. They offer this service on the last night of the hike. After Kenzo's disastrous birthday, we felt the extra cost was well worth it. Melted cheese has never tasted so good!

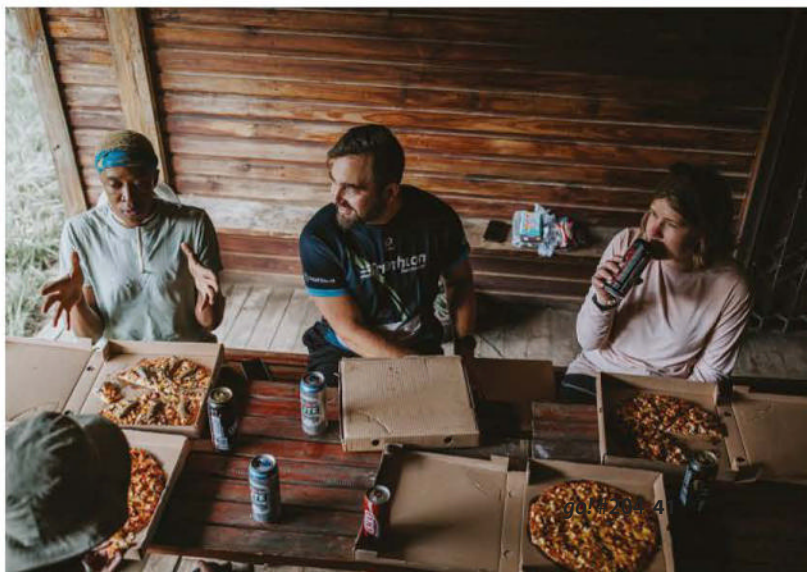
DAY 6

Zingcuka to Hogsback: 14 km

After an easy 3 km through the Schwarzwald Forest again, the group has to decide: Either hike back to Hogsback along a 10 km dirt road, or add another 7 km and go via the Hogsback Mountains. A day or two ago, we were determined to do the tougher route, but we don't want to be irresponsible and separate the group again.

Still, one last detour is hard to resist. About 3 km from town we turn off the road for a 4 km meander through Auckland Forest, past the famous Madonna and Child Waterfall, and past a monstrous yellowwood estimated to be at least 800 years old. From the big tree, it's only 1,5 km to the end point of the trail at Away with the Fairies Backpackers.

The closer we get to the end, the more anxious I become. I hate to think of all the stuff that's waiting for us outside the forest. What's that? A turn-off to Swallowtail Falls? The climb looks steep and tough, but I don't mind. I really don't want to say goodbye to this place yet...



AMATOLA TRAIL

MNYAMENI HUT



HERMAN, MARYKE, KENZO, BENEDIKT
AND WILLEM.



IN OTHER WORDS

Kenzo Pule, Johannesburg

Often, we had to feel our way along when we couldn't really see the path in the tall grass. It reminded me of how important it is to be where you are – be present, look around, pay attention. Also, how deeply satisfying it is to be in close communion with nature.

Maryke Steynvaart & Benedikt Wittman, Mbombela

The Amatola is a beautiful exercise in tenacity. It forced us to walk in complete mindfulness of our surroundings. The rewards were abundant: stunning views, wonderful forests and sparkling waterfalls.

Herman Makatla, Bloemfontein

This was my second time on the Amatola Trail. Yet again, it tested me physically and spiritually. The trail teaches you that endurance depends as much on willpower as it does on muscle power. I'll hike this trail every year.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How does it work? The six-day Amatola Trail (100 km) is managed by Away with the Fairies Backpackers in Hogsback. The trail starts and ends there. The hiking rate includes transport to the trailhead at Maden Dam, about 80 km south-east of town, plus dormitory accommodation before and after the hike. There's space for a maximum of 24 hikers and a minimum of four.

Is there a slackpacking option? You can arrange to have food or anything else dropped off at the huts, but it's expensive because the roads to the huts are long and rugged.

Prices range from R750 to R2 500 per hut per group. (This is also the rescue fee if you want to stop hiking and they have to come pick you up...) If you want pizza and drinks at the Zingcuka Hut on the last night, the delivery fee is R750.

What are the huts like? There has been much discussion about the poor condition of the huts, but we found them in an acceptable state. The mattresses were replaced a year or so ago and were in good condition. Hikers are asked to clean before they depart and leave the hut in a state they'd like to find it in. Each hut has a braai, firewood and a donkey boiler for hot water. Most of the bathrooms are fairly wrecked. Some of the huts have flush toilets, others have pit toilets. But you do get a hot shower every night.

Water? The huts usually have drinking water and there are plenty of streams on the trail. Take enough bottles and bladders to carry about two to three litres per person.

How fit do I need to be? The fitter you are, the more you'll enjoy the hike. Expect to walk for about 10 hours every day. You don't have to be Gerda Steyn, but you should be comfortable carrying a heavy backpack over rough terrain.

Best time to hike? Autumn and spring. Summer is the rainy season and it can snow in winter. The weather is unpredictable year-round, so always carry appropriate jackets and thermal layers.

Cost: R2 825 per person.

Contact: 📞 amatolatrails.co.za

A full-page photograph of two hikers standing on a rugged, rocky ridge. The hiker on the left is wearing a blue shirt and a white hat, while the hiker on the right is wearing a dark shirt and a white hat. Both are carrying large backpacks and using trekking poles. The ridge is composed of large, dark, craggy rocks. In the background, a vast, open landscape stretches out under a sky filled with soft, white clouds. The overall scene conveys a sense of adventure and solitude in nature.

“The sun beats down. We’re in grassland now – nothing grows higher than our knees to provide any sort of shade.”

Don't attempt to climb Geju Peak on a misty day. The drop-offs are very dangerous. Take the short cut past the summit instead.



On the 3,5 km Stone Circle loop at Tegwaan Country Getaway, you'll be treated to this view of the Elands Valley escarpment.



Find bliss in 'Boven

The Mpumalanga town of Emgwenya – previously Waterval Boven – may be past its prime, but the surrounding escarpment, dropping into deep valleys, remains as pristine as ever. Here are six stayovers for all tastes and budgets.

WORDS **HANCU LOUW** PICTURES **MIA LOUW**

“**Y**ou don’t come to ‘Boven for coffee and curio shops,” says Gustav Janse van Rensburg of Waterval Boven, now called Emgwenya. With its empty shopfronts and crumbling main street, ‘Boven as the locals call it, is a far cry from the bustling hub it once was. About 11 km further along the N4, Waterval Onder – a handful of houses and a single gravel road – is easily overlooked as you make your way through the Elands Valley.

But don’t judge a book by its cover.

“What you will find here is unspoiled nature and extraordinary views,” says Gustav, who first visited the valley three decades ago and never really left. In 1999, he moved here permanently and opened his business, Roc’n Rope Adventures, in the centre of town.

Dominated by red sandstone cliffs that separate the escarpment from the Elands Valley, the landscape is defined by the interplay between open grassland and dense subtropical woodland.

“In less than an hour, you can go from the top of the escarpment to the bottom of the valley through an ever-changing environment that’s not overrun with people,” says Balthazar de Brouwer, who settled here in 2017. He and his wife Renia are the owners of Tegwaan Country Getaway, a couple of kilometres outside town. Here, hundreds of crags – some of the best rock climbing in the world – and dozens of rock pools lie waiting. More than 20 trails to hidden waterfalls and secluded picnic spots wind their way along the escarpment and into the valley below. Trout dams cater to the needs of every type of angler, and twitchers can spend days searching for specials like Rudd’s lark and southern bald ibis.

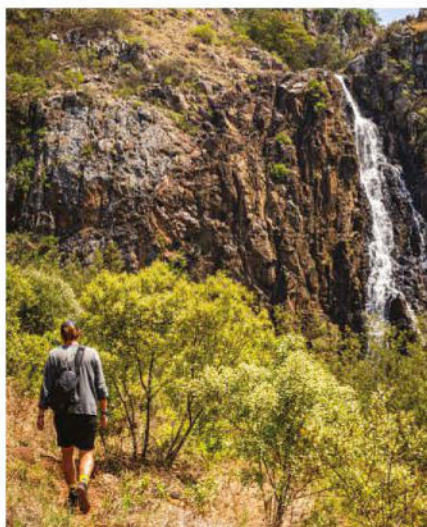
Whether you’re looking for a convenient stopover on your way to the Kruger Park or Mozambique, or a place to spend an action-packed weekend, ‘Boven delivers. Here’s our pick of lodges and guest farms.



THE KINGFISHER COUNTRY LODGE



ROCKY DRIFT PRIVATE NATURE RESERVE



FAMILY FUN

◀ *The Kingfisher Country Lodge*

The regular swish of a fly-fisherman's line is the only intrusion on the tranquillity you'll experience here. Squat stone cottages clinging to the escarpment beneath tall pines lend this family lodge a touch of alpine charm.

"Trout fishing is top of the list, but we're far more than that – we're a holiday retreat. This is the place where dad can be fishing, the kids playing by the pool, while mom enjoys a walk or does some birding," says owner Gary Roberts.

Jungle gyms and a splash pool for younger children, plus a foosball table and volleyball court, are surefire ways to cut screen time. A large communal pool offers a calm spot to finish your holiday novel, or you can walk or mountain-bike about 7 km to Kingfisher Falls for a swim in the natural pool beneath the waterfall.

Four trout dams are available for fly-fishing, and guests can also try the "wild dam" just 200 m away. "That's where we allow the guys to *gooi pap* for carp and the *laaities* to get their bearings," Gary chuckles.

To balance the needs of fishermen and families, Gary offers accommodation to suit a range of tastes. Campers can choose from 15 sites, each with private ablutions and basic kitchen facilities. Ten self-catering chalets dot the escarpment, all named after well-known flies. Some sit right on the dam edge; others overlook the valley. And if you prefer hassle-free bed and breakfast, the six converted stables offer simple en suite rooms for bikers and backpackers.

Where? 20 km north of Emgwenya on the R36.

Rates: Camping R650 per night for up to six people. Chalets from R950 per night for two people. Stables from R1 350 per night for two, breakfast included. Minimum booking of two nights for all accommodation.

Contact: ☎ 082 926 8773; 🌐 thekingfisherlodge.co.za

What else? There's a restaurant on the property and an honesty bar for all guests. A small convenience store has basics like snacks, drinks, soap and fishing tackle. The chalets and camping are pet-friendly – the rates include two pets (plus R50 per additional pet). Daily fishing fee R100 per person; rod hire R50 per day.



SECLUDED RIVER VIEWS

⬆️ *Rocky Drift Private Nature Reserve*

Seated on your patio as the Joubertspruit gurgles by, it's easy to forget the N4 is barely a kilometre away. Rocky Drift is a 257 ha property within the Elands River Valley Conservancy and has been Hans and Sheryll Ammon's labour of love for two decades; their commitment evident in every amenity.

A large deck wrapped around the communal pool plus a children's play area with a jungle gym and trampoline make Rocky Drift ideal for families. You can dip in the river beside the restaurant or explore the waterway and surrounding escarpment via four hiking trails. "The 3 km Otter Trail is an easy stroll for families with young children," Sheryll says. "Or do the 10 km Boven Vista Trail – there's a steep climb but the view from the top makes it worthwhile."

There are also 13 campsites along the Joubertspruit or tucked against the valley walls, with shared ablutions and the pool a short walk away. A single glamping tent sits in the shade of the valley wall with an outdoor shower, patio and private braai. "If you're after a rustic romantic evening, that's the spot," Sheryll adds.

Five cottages of varying sizes carry Hans and Sheryll's thoughtful touch. For a peaceful weekend beside the water, book Mills or Spence Cottage; for a family summer holiday, the three-bedroom Webster Cottage fits the bill. All cottages have fireplaces for chilly winters – and Reed Cottage has a wood-fired hot tub.

Where? 10 km east of Emgwenya on the N4 towards Mbombela.

Rates: Camping R350 per person, max four people. Cottages from R1 500 per night for two people. Glamping tent from R1 475 per night for two.

Contact: 📞 072 245 4961; 🌐 rockydrift.co.za

What else? All accommodation is pet-friendly. A restaurant and bar offers a selection of freshly prepared meals (book in advance). Day visitors are welcome (R120 per adult; R60 per child aged 8–12; free for kids under 8; book in advance).

FOR THRILLSEEKERS

⬆️ *Tranquilitas Adventure Farm*

If your holiday plans lean toward outdoor adventure, this mountain retreat delivers. "This is one of the biggest privately owned rock-climbing areas in the world," says owner Ruth Behr, of the farm's more than 600 bolted routes. Runners, hikers and mountain bikers also have 80 km of trails to explore – everything from gentle family walks to waterfalls, to longer, more technical routes for those keen to earn their dinner.

A range of accommodation options, suited to different budgets, is scattered along the escarpment among hardy, windswept trees. The campsite, centred around a large pool dominated by a giant boulder fitted with climbing holds, has no demarcated sites. Spots closer to reception offer more shelter, while those on the escarpment boast the best sunrise views. Campers share fire pits, an undercover braai area and a kitchen.

Six permanent tents tucked along a stand of wattles suit travellers after a simple overnight stop, each with a small patio and kitchenette. There are also four rustic self-catering chalets, spaced about 60 m apart. Each offers an en suite double room plus two single beds in an open-plan lounge and kitchen, with a covered patio for summer braais and an indoor fireplace for winter.

Two "max tents" – large permanent canvas structures with self-catering facilities – sit on a rise away from the campsite, offering privacy and views of the escarpment. Larger groups can book the self-catering Farmhouse, 2 km from the campsite on a hill overlooking the farm.

Where? 7 km south-east of Emgwenya on the Slaaihoek road.

Rates: Camping R140 per person. Permanent tents from R580 per night for two people. Chalets from R1 300 per night for four. Max tents from R1 420 per night for four. Farmhouse R3 600 per night for up to six people, plus R500 per extra person (max 12).

Contact: 📞 082 388 0100; 🌐 tranquilitas.com

What else? Day visitors are welcome – climbing and trail permits are available at reception (R60 per person). Pets are also welcome (R60 per pet per day).

ALOES COUNTRY INN



ARTY FARMSTAY

◀ *Tegwaan Country Getaway*

Here, in the shade of mature trees, you can enjoy a farmstay without bleating sheep or the whiff of manure. "We see ourselves as custodians of this farm. Our mission is to preserve this space so we can share it with fellow nature lovers," says Balthazar de Brouwer (pictured bottom left), gesturing towards the sprawling homestead. Guests are encouraged to harvest herbs from the garden and collect eggs from the Tegwaan chickens, which roost in a large coop at the heart of the property.

Balthazar, a Belgian, met his American wife Renia in 'Boven in 2010 and they settled at Tegwaan in 2017. "The freedom to live a healthy outdoor lifestyle led us here," he says of the property, which enjoys access to hundreds of climbing routes via a mix of private and public trails. After a long day outdoors, you can cool off in the spring-fed pool overlooking Emgwenya and Waterval Onder.

Tegwaan offers a variety of artfully decorated accommodation options. Families can opt for the Stone Cottage with views of a pecan orchard, comfy couches and a fireplace in a generous lounge.

For something more adventurous, try the tiny but beautifully finished 12 m² Acorn Tiny House, with ablutions 30 m away.

The Secret Garden glamping tent, built inside the ruins of a century-old stone enclosure, features a reclaimed-materials kitchen and a private outdoor lounge.

The riverside tipi sits beside a small trout dam, slightly apart from the homestead.

Campers can choose from six shaded sites with water and electricity, sharing a barn with a kitchen, lounge, indoor braai and fireplace.

Where? 3 km south of Emgwenya on the Slaaihoek road.

Rates: Cottages from R2 030; The Studio from R1 220; glamping from R1 220; Acorn Tiny House from R1 010; tipi from R830. All formal accommodation rates are per night for two people. Camping R220 per person.

Contact: ☎ 078 800 0897; 🌐 tegwaan.co.za

What else? All the accommodation is pet-friendly. R60 per pet per night for the cottages and R30 per pet per night for camping.

PUB GRUB AND A QUICK STOPOVER

◀ *Aloes Country Inn*

Driving along the N4, look for the faded red 1980s Honda Interceptor motorbike next to the road and turn in under the tall jacarandas on the southern bank of the Elands River.

"Aloes" offers guests unpretentious country hospitality. "We wanted to create a place for people travelling to or from the Kruger Park – or Mozambique – to stop over and recharge before continuing on their journeys," says Lorna Swartz, who, with her husband Dave McAllister, has welcomed guests at the Inn and Hillbilly Bar for more than two decades.

Despite being close to the highway, the restaurant and rooms feel tucked away, sheltered by flourishing gardens and big trees. Four self-catering units and four standard rooms have views of the Elands River just metres away. Each unit has a balcony divided by a low wall, plus individual braai spots along the riverbank.

"We're the only restaurant in the valley open to the public without bookings, so customers keep us on our toes. Truckers and couriers often phone ahead for takeaway pizzas," Lorna says of the menu's bestseller.

The Hillbilly Bar, adorned with caps, motorcycle badges, drinks coasters and old photos, is Dave's homage to biker culture – and the drinks are always ice cold, "just like the sign on the road promises," Lorna says with a laugh.

Where? 10 km east of Emgwenya on the N4, towards Ngodwana and Mbombela.

Rates: Self-catering units from R800 per night for two people. Standard rooms from R650 per night for two.

Contact: ☎ 073 600 0991; 🌐 aloescountryinn.co.za

What else? All accommodation is pet-friendly. "We allow people to fish in the river – for trout and Bushveld smallscale yellowfish – but they need to bring their own rods and tackle," Lorna says.

FOR HISTORY BUFFS (AND HIKERS)

▼ *Zongororo Mountain Lodge*

If you're interested in the history of trade in this part of the world, spend a weekend at Zongororo, where you can stroll along a century-old coach road, trace the tracks of the Nederlandsche Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg-Maatschappij (NZASM) railway, or attend a service in a 100-year-old chapel.

Set on a shady, south-facing slope about 2 km from the N4, sturdy wooden cabins hide out under tall jacarandas. "The name refers to millipede in Shona, but also to the railway running through the farm, which is called the 'steel zongororo,'" explains manager Tamlyn Dell. Indeed, the property sits along the historic trade route between the old Transvaal and Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique), with history dating back over a century.

A historic tea house once offered rest to Voortrekker transport riders (you can see the ruins about 100 m from the main building), and the old coach road is visible along one of the hikes up the escarpment. A clay-brick chapel from the late 1800s still hosts Sunday services and occasional weddings.

There are four self-catering cottages and a bigger hikers' cabin. "The views from Jan Wintervogel and The Shack cottages are favourites," says Tamlyn.

Hiking is the main activity on offer, with trails ranging from 5 – 10 km. We can recommend the 7 km Blue Route, along the old coach road to a sheltered waterfall.

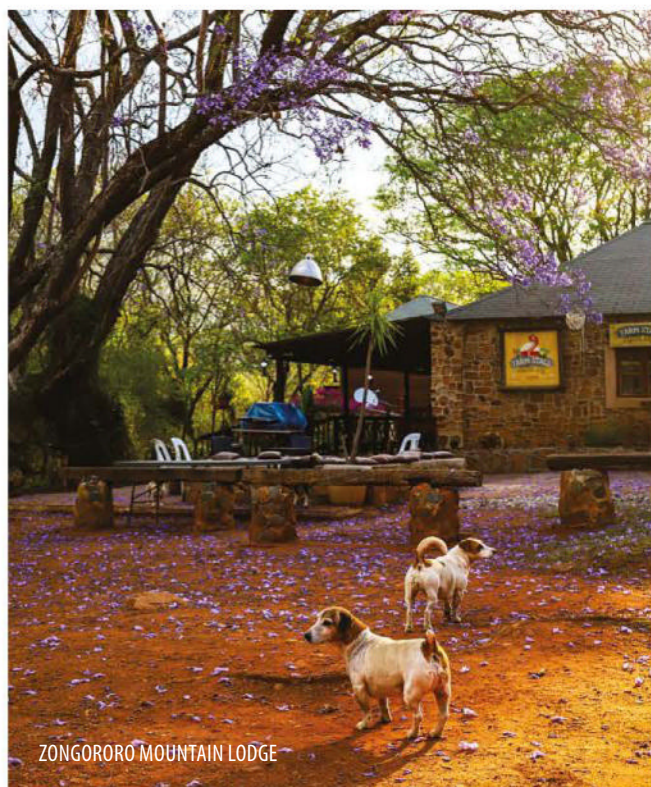
Farm-style meals are served at the coffee shop, and the farm stall offers preserves, fresh vegetables, and the Dells' homemade chilli beetroot chutney.

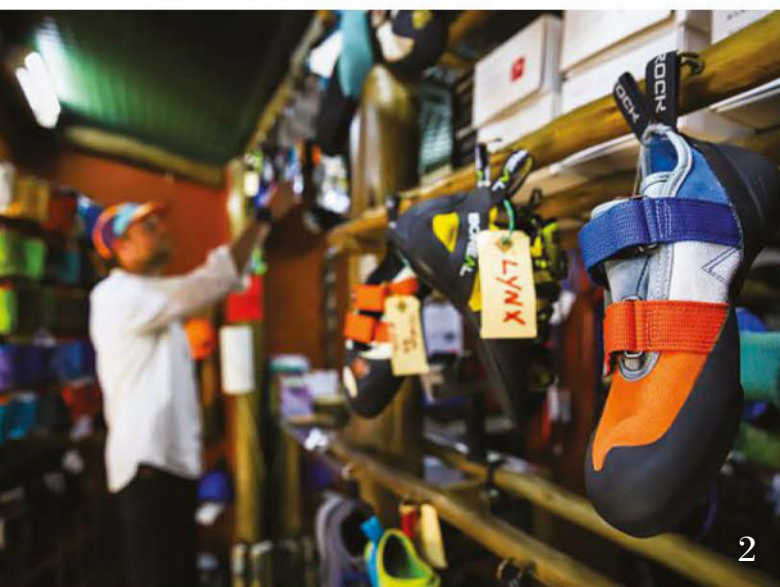
Where? 10 km east of Emgwenya, on the N4 towards Mbombela.

Rates: Self-catering cabins from R860 per night for two people.

Contact: ☎ 083 762 4100; 🌐 zongororo.co.za

What else? All accommodation is pet-friendly at no extra charge. The Ubuntu hikers' cabin can accommodate up to 24 people. Hikers have access to a communal outdoor bush kitchen and shared ablution facilities. Linen is provided. Rates for Ubuntu on request.





1. Explore on horseback

For the past 20 years, Sue Steynberg has guided visitors on horseback along the escarpment and into the valley. With a stud of well-trained horses and ponies at BBK Trails, she accommodates all ages and skill levels. Trails range from a 30-minute ride for young children to a two-hour scenic route. Private sundowner and champagne breakfast rides are also popular, offering couples a romantic horseback experience.

Where? 10 km from Emgwenya, on the R36 towards Mbombela.

Cost: Pony ride or half-hour horse trail R200 per person; other trails from R250 per person.

Contact: 📞 082 853 3993; 🌐 bbktrails.co.za

2. Climb a cliff

The cliffs surrounding 'Boven have been a climbing hotspot since the early 1990s, offering more than a thousand routes that draw local and international climbers alike. Gustav Janse van Rensburg and Alex Gaudin run Roc'n Rope Adventures in the centre of Emgwenya, providing equipment sales and rentals, guidebooks, and local climbing advice. They offer half-day climbing sessions, weekend workshops and a guided abseil down Elands Falls for all skill levels.

The Climber's Lodge on the premises is the local climbing hub. It has three dorms and four double rooms with shared ablutions, plus a communal kitchen, braai area and a balcony overlooking the town.

Where? 53 Third Avenue, Emgwenya

Cost: Accommodation at the lodge from R125 per person. Introduction to rock climbing course from R2 250 per person in a group of three or more. No climbing permits are required for any of the routes around town, excluding those on Tranquilas Adventure Farm (R60 per person for day visitors).

Contact: 📞 082 944 5800; 🌐 rocrope.com

3. Take a step back in time

Krugerhof, in Waterval Onder, was the final South African residence of Paul Kruger, president of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) from 1883 to 1900.

In the winter of 1900, the 74-year-old Kruger used the small cottage as a refuge from advancing British forces, conducting state affairs for two months before retreating further east after the Boer defeat at Dalmanutha.

The house is now the Krugerhof Museum, displaying reproduced photographs, newspaper clippings, and information panels detailing Kruger's life, his role in establishing the ZAR, and the Anglo-Boer War, offering visitors a glimpse into this pivotal chapter of South African history.

Where? In Waterval Onder, right next to the N4.

Cost: Entrance is free.

4. Glide down the valley

Descending 212 vertical metres to the valley floor, the Mountain Strings Zipline has unmatched views of Waterval Onder and the Elands River. A three-hour guided tour takes guests on a drive up the mountain and a zig-zag journey along seven individual ziplines, measuring a total of 1,7 km.

Look for the resident Verreaux's eagles circling above the valley as you navigate the short trails between the lines.

Tours are limited to a maximum of 16 guests and there are tandem options for kids under 10 or anyone lighter than 35 kg.

Where? 15 km east of Waterval Onder, on the N4 toward Ngodwana and Mbombela.

Cost: R650 per person, including water and a snack, and a filled pancake and drink afterwards. Operating times: Tuesday to Sunday from 8 am to 4 pm. Booking is essential.

Contact: 📞 076 030 2097; 🌐 mountainstrings.com



IN OTHER WORDS



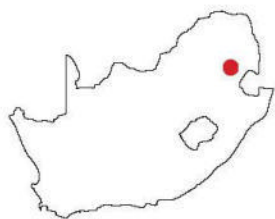
Sue Steynberg, owner of BBK Trails

Visit the stone circle at Incwala Lodge (📍 incwalalodge.com). There are many sites with stone circles in the area, but the scale and level of preservation of the one at Incwala is awesome to behold. It offers a fascinating perspective into the lives of the Bakoni people who lived in this area hundreds of years ago.



Janet Marais, owner of Mountain Strings Zipline

When guests ask me to recommend self-catering accommodation close to the zipline, I suggest they stay at Marlothi Chalets (📍 anvieventures.co.za). There are two hikes on the property, one of which leads to a lovely rock pool, which is perfect for cooling off in summer."



SHOP HERE

BOVEN BUTCHERY

Leave your supermarket meat at home and stop here before heading to your accommodation. Oom Piet van Eeden has been supplying the residents of 'Boven and surrounds with meat for more than three decades. Most days you'll find him and his son Piet Jnr behind the glass counter, ready to share advice on the best fresh cuts on offer.

Where? Corner of Third Ave and Third Street, Emgwenya.

Contact: 📞 071 456 0397

THE TICKLED TROUT

This the only shop in Waterval Onder. Browse sculptures made by owner Desmond Cohen, or top up your supply of homemade jam, rusks and geelvet biltong. Try the apple-and-ginger jam.

Where? Waterval Onder, right next to the N4.

Contact: 📞 082 771 3112



SIFISO SHABANGU



TEGWAAN COUNTRY GETAWAY



ZONGORORO MOUNTAIN LODGE



TRANQUILITAS ADVENTURE FARM



FOR THE HIKERS

There are more than 20 hiking trails to choose from between Emgwenya and Waterval Onder, most of which are on private land. Some of the trails on Tranquilitas, Tegwaan and Rocky Drift are linked.

TRANQUILITAS ADVENTURE FARM

This is the place to go if you're looking for distance and technical trails – 7 km south-east of Emgwenya on the Slaaihoek road. R60 per person for hiking and mountain biking.

☎ 082 388 0100; 🌐 tranquilitas.com

TEGWAAN COUNTRY GETAWAY

Easy to moderate hikes along the escarpment and into the valleys around Emgwenya. The 8 km hike to the Rock Fairies Waterfall and back is a favourite – 3 km south of Emgwenya on the Slaaihoek road. R50 per person for hiking (booking required). ☎ 078 800 0897

📧 tegwaan.getaway@gmail.com

ROCKY DRIFT PRIVATE NATURE RESERVE

A great place for families to spend a day noodling along the banks of the Joubertspruit – 10 km east of Emgwenya, on the N4 towards

Mbombela. Day visitors are welcome: R120 per adult; R60 per child aged 8–12; booking required.

☎ 072 245 4961; 🌐 rockydrift.co.za

ZONGORORO MOUNTAIN LODGE

Stroll along the historic NZASM railway line, or climb up and along the escarpment – 10 km east of Emgwenya on the N4 towards Mbombela. R85 per person.

☎ 083 762 4100; 🌐 zongororo.co.za

For safety reasons, all landowners advise that people hike in groups and limit their adventures to daylight hours.

ORANGE-FISH RIVER TUNNEL



This is the inlet tower and start of the Orange-Fish River Tunnel at Oviston on the southern bank of the Gariep Dam. Opposite page: When it eventually leaves the tunnel, the water is channelled along a canal until it reaches Tēebus Spruit roughly 3 km further.

The Karoo's unknown artery

Have you heard of the Orange-Fish River Tunnel? This feat of engineering stretches 85 km from the Gariep Dam to its outflow, and it forever changed the landscape of the Eastern Cape. We went underground to find out more.

WORDS & PICTURES **HANCU LOUW**



ORANGE-FISH RIVER TUNNEL

Esté Liebenberg grew up in Venterstad during the construction of the Orange-Fish River Tunnel. “The town changed overnight,” she says. “Suddenly there were foreign kids in our school; our Boer ears had to get used to English, French, Italian...”

The tunnel transports water from the Gariep Dam to the Great Fish and Sundays rivers. It's a lifeline for millions of residents and farmers in the Eastern Cape. At 82,5 km, it's still one of the longest continuous aqueducts in the southern hemisphere.

I'm on a weeklong motorbike tour with my dad, Albertus, and we're chatting to Esté in her backyard in Oviston – a small town 11 km north of Venterstad, on the banks of the Gariep Dam. Our plan from here is to follow the tunnel on the R390 south to Steynsburg, and then travel a few kilometres south-west along the R56 to its outlet near the famous Teebus koppie.

In 1928, a plan was hatched to supply the drought-stricken Eastern Cape with water from the Orange River using tunnels and canals. Surveys only started in 1944 and it took another two decades before work began on the so-called “Orange River Project”, which also included the construction of the dam – originally named after Hendrik Verwoerd, the apartheid prime minister at the time.

“To get water for the tunnel, they first had to build the dam wall,” says 77-year-old Schalk van der Walt the next morning. He's been living on the farm Gelykfontein, about 10 km west of Venterstad, since childhood.

“It didn't always look this way,” he says. “Before the dam, there were big farms, deep valleys and high koppies. Now it's all underwater.”

This part of the country, between Venterstad and Steynsburg, is called the Suurberg Plateau. To build a tunnel here, at depths of up to 400 m, required engineering capacity that wasn't available

in South Africa at the time. So, the government divided the project into three contracts – each for a 27-odd kilometre section of tunnel – and awarded them to a French company, a South African company and an Italian company.

“There was a population boom between 1965 and 1975,” Schalk remembers. “Many French and Italian people moved here, plus a few Englishmen and Americans.”

At the height of the project, about 5 000 extra souls were accommodated at work camps along the course of the tunnel – at Oviston, Midshaft and Teebus. Tar roads arrived, as did electricity, water and sewage plants, and also schools, swimming pools, and tennis clubs. “There were movie nights and dance parties in the town hall,” Schalk remembers. “For several years, we had enough men in Venterstad for two full rugby teams.”

The tunnel came into service in 1976, and with it, the exodus of the foreign workforce. “I can't tell you exactly how long it took, but to those of us who stayed behind, it felt like the people went home overnight.”

The next morning, my dad and I walk along a ridge near the dam in Oviston, where we run into 92-year-old Sue Houston and her son John.

Sue tells us about the name Oviston: “The O stands for Oranje, Vis for Visrivier and Ton for Tonnel: O-Vis-Ton.”

When John hears that we're on the hunt for stories about the town and its people, he invites us for a sundowner.

Sue moved here in 1978, from Tsumeb in Namibia. “My late husband, Stan, saw an advertisement in the *Sunday Times* for property here. He'd always wanted a house next to a dam.”

When they saw the view of the water – from what is now Sue's back stoep – it was a done deal.

The move from Tsumeb was a risky one because Sue and Stan might have been buying into a town on the decline.

The tunnel had just been completed and the foreigners were leaving in droves, but the municipality took over management from the water department and started marketing it as a holiday destination. Oviston got a second wind.

“It was like a resort back then,” she remembers. “There was a dance in the town hall almost every weekend, and the caravan park was full during the holidays. People came from Johannesburg and Pretoria with their boats – dozens of them would criss-cross the dam in front of my house.”

These days, however, like many other towns in the district, Oviston is forlorn and neglected. The tar roads are disintegrating and municipal buildings have been stripped and vandalised.

But despite the deterioration, about 200 residents remain – mostly retirees – living among the herds of cattle and sheep that graze the streets.

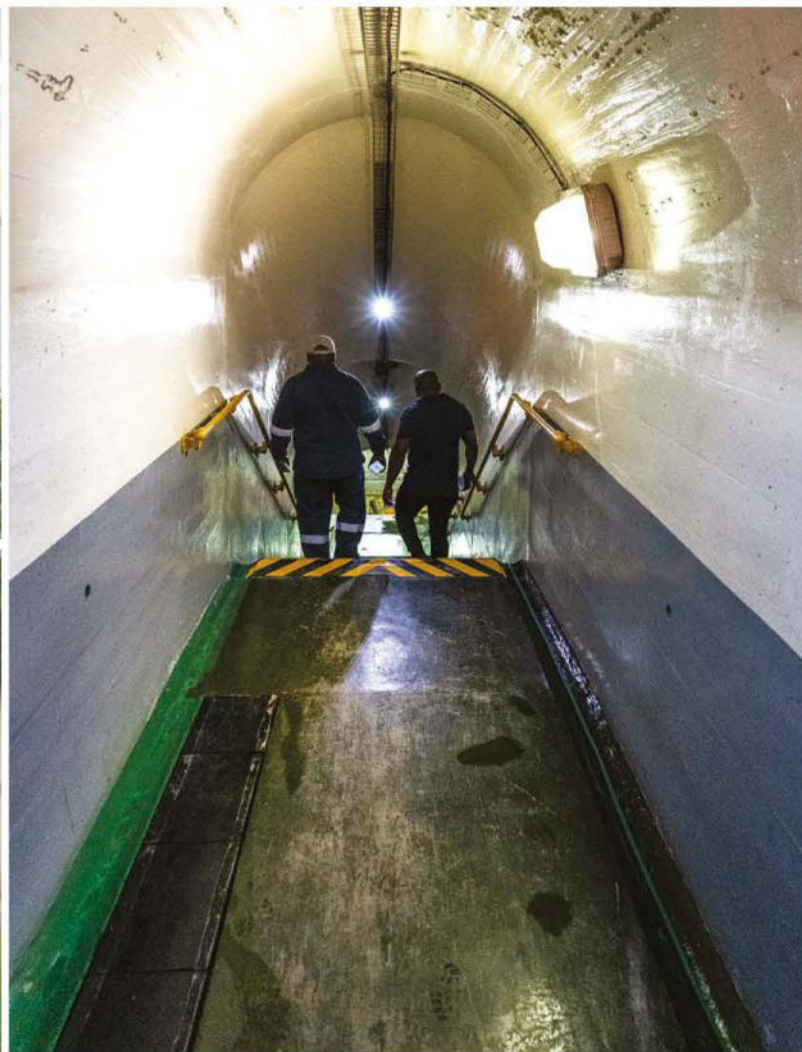
“There aren't many of us left,” John says as he pours a cold shandy on the back stoep. He moved here in 2022 to live closer to his mom – he owns the house next door – and to escape the noise and bustle of Stellenbosch. “Some of the residents aren't very well off, but most of us are willing to lend a hand when needed.”

Fifty years young

“Look, it was built to last,” says Steve van der Westhuizen, the acting area manager and control engineering technician for the National Department of Water and Sanitation the next day. Steve and a team of four department employees are showing us the inner workings of the tunnel.

We've just entered a gate on the outskirts of Oviston. From here, a nearly hundred-metre access bridge – an engineering feat in itself – stretches to the intake tower. In the centre of the tower, a stairway leads to a cave-like interior where masses of water quietly flow through four intake valves. Surrounded by 50-year-old hydraulic

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: From the inlet tower at Oviston you have a good view of the Gariep Dam. Into the depths: A steep set of stairs lead to the tunnel control room at Teebus, 80 m below the surface. Schalk van der Walt and one of his thoroughbred stallions. The Van der Walt family have been raising thoroughbred horses on their farm Gelykfontein since 1935. John and his mom Sue Houston, in Sue's back garden in Oviston, which overlooks the dam.



ORANGE-FISH RIVER TUNNEL

machinery and control panels, it feels like the concrete walls have somehow stopped the passage of time.

"Nearly everything is original and still in use," Steve says.

About 5 km south of Oviston, at the turn-off to Steynsburg on the R390, you'll see a few corrugated iron buildings next to an enormous earth wall. Here, behind a gate and under an awning, is the first of seven shafts that were sunk along the tunnel, at 11 km intervals. These shafts were used during construction to remove rubble using lifts; now they're used for ventilation and overflow, to regulate the water pressure in the tunnel. This is also how Steve and his team can get access to the tunnel to do maintenance work.

At Shaft 1, the tunnel is 75 m underground. To reach it, Steve and his team need to use a second, 400m-long tunnel, which is barely wide enough to fit a bakkie.

For five to six weeks of the year, usually between April and May when the demand for water is at its lowest, the tunnel is bled dry and inspected to repair any damage.

"Shaft 2 is about 11 km south of here and visible from the R390, but shafts 3 to 6 are hidden between koppies on the plateau," Steve says.

Still further south, about 40 km away, is a hill dotted with weeping boer-bean trees. This is where you'll find the last remnants of a settlement called Midshaft. As the name suggests, it was the centre of the tunnel project for nearly a decade.

"I drove by here for years without realising what it was," says Steve as he points out the turn-off.

During construction, teams dug south from Midshaft to Teebus, and north to Oviston via Shaft 4. But now the only visitors are sheep and gemsbok grazing among the crumbling foundations.

Another 35 km further, past Steynsburg on the R56 to Middelburg, two koppies rise from the landscape: Teebus and Koffiebus. Squint a bit and you can see how they got their names: teapot and coffee pot.

The sign indicating the turn-off to the nearly-forgotten Teebus railway

station, and to Bulhoek and Hopewell, is the only proof that there was once a thriving community of tunnel builders and engineers living here. Yes, all that remains of the Teebus settlement is the odd broken streetlight and an empty swimming pool baking in the Karoo sun.

"It's sad to see it this way – what a waste! Can you imagine what it was like when it was still a functioning town?" says Refuwe Phofi as he peeks through the window of one of the wrecked houses. Refuwe is a production tradesman for the Department of Water and Sanitation in the Eastern Cape. He and six colleagues live in the Orangeville settlement, which was once part of the greater Teebus community, and they're responsible for the management and maintenance of the Orange-Fish River Tunnel.

"This job is not for everyone..." he says.

A stone's throw from Orangeville, behind a high fence, a small red-brick building keeps watch over the dark entrance of another smaller tunnel that leads to a control room. "This is the way to my office," Refuwe says. "Please get into one of the bakkies – we'll take you down. Motorbikes aren't allowed down there!"

A steep concrete track takes us 400 m into the darkness, to the control room 80 m below the surface. A deafening roar greets us as we step out of the vehicles. The coolness offers some relief from the summer sun, despite the fishy smell in the air.

"The team controls the entire system from here," says Steve as he walks us down a set of stairs to a second, even bigger, underground chamber.

The control room vibrates with the sound of water flowing through the tunnel. The noise is caused by six identical "pepper pot valves" – they have holes like a pepper pot – which were designed for the tunnel. "The valves allow us to control the volume of water released to the Eastern Cape," says Refuwe. "On average between 10 cubic metres and 20 cubic metres per second. There are six valves but we usually use no more than two at a time. The rest are backups."

Steve chips in: "The system is automated, but we have to keep an eye on it to make sure nothing goes wrong, because that could be catastrophic."

Later that morning, we meet the department's deputy director for operations in the Eastern Cape region, Koos Viljoen. Koos is responsible for the management of the water as it leaves the tunnel and flows into Teebus Spruit a few kilometres away.

"The tunnel is critically important for the farmers and the millions of residents in the Eastern Cape," he says from behind the wheel of his bakkie. We're on our way to the tunnel portal, about 3 km from Teebus, where the water – somewhat tempered by the pepper pot valves – returns to the surface.

A reservoir, slightly bigger than an Olympic-sized swimming pool but much deeper, diverts the water from the tunnel to a canal that goes into the spruit, and from there all the way to Darlington Dam in Addo Elephant National Park, serving an irrigation area of more than 32 000 hectares.

Willemien Gibbons is one of the farmers that depends on the water. She lives on a merino sheep farm called Fonteintjie Plaas, about 25 km west of Steynsburg, close to where the tunnel empties into Teebus Spruit.

"Without the water, none of the farmers in this district would be able to farm on the scale we do currently," she says. "Look at satellite images and you'll see clusters of green irrigation fields all along the spruit and the Great Brak River, and later the Great Fish River, to the dairies and citrus orchards near the coast."

We say goodbye the next morning, over a mug of coffee, admiring one of Willemien's centre pivots that only exists thanks to the Orange-Fish River Tunnel.

An hour and a half later, on the R390 to Bethulie, I get one last look at the intake tower at Oviston, where our journey started. I remember something Esté Liebenberg told me: "The tunnel not only brought water to the farmers; its construction was a special time for the people of these small towns, when Venterstad was the cosmopolitan heart of the Great Karoo."



Clockwise from top left: This is all that remains of the once bustling town of Midshaft, halfway between Oviston and Teebus. Lunga Mkafane, a control technician for the Department of Water and Sanitation, at the tunnel outlet a couple of kilometres from Teebus. Willemien Gibbons's farm is near the characteristic Teebus koppie – visible behind her. Thomas Shabalala, a water control technician, next to one of the four sluice gates at Shaft 7.

ORANGE-FISH RIVER TUNNEL



Want to see the tunnel up close?

The Department of Water and Sanitation offers tours on request to the intake tower in Oviston, and to the control room and outlet at Teebus. E-mail avasaw@dws.gov.za. Your request can take up to two months to be approved. [012 336 8264](tel:0123368264)

By the numbers

82,45 Length in kilometres
1:2000 Average fall gradient
2,42 million Measured volume of excavation, in cubic metres
740 000 Volume of concrete used during construction, in cubic metres
77,7 Height in metres of intake tower above the foundation

Clockwise from top left: The view of the Ruigte Valley from the patio at Ruigtevallei Lodge. Carina and Meyer van der Walt on their farm, Schalkwyskraal. Breakfast at Driekwartblou Guesthouse. Kick back in the shade of Siloam Village's campsite. Enjoy the cheerful succulent garden at Gannabos Guesthouse. The stoep at Fonteintjie Guesthouse is cast in the shadow of Teebus koppie.

Bottom right: The two favourites on the menu at Willem se Kampie Farm Stall: curry mince and kudu roosterkoek.

STAY HERE

Lakeview Guesthouse

Experience the glory days of Oviston and spend a night or two in the former clubhouse of the Oviston Resort. The spacious prefabricated house on the shore of the dam still looks like it did when the tunnel builders lived here. There are six double rooms – three are en suite – and a communal kitchen, dining and living area. Meals available on request, and there's a small cash bar. Pets are welcome.

Where? 1 Main Road, Oviston

Rates: From R1 300 per night for two people.

Contact: [062 968 9048](tel:0629689048)

Siloam Village Gariep

This resort is on the grounds of the old primary school. You don't have a view of the dam, but there are two swimming pools and an obstacle course that make it ideal for families with kids. There are several self-catering options, and the only campsite in Oviston.

Where? 2 Msasa Road, Oviston

Rates: Camping from R400 per night for two people. Self-catering from R500 per night for two people.

Contact: [082 465 9826](tel:0824659826)

siloamvillage.co.za

Ruigtevallei Lodge

There are eight comfortable units here that sleep three to five people. Ruigtevallei is only 15 km from the N1 and 5 km from the wall of the Gariep Dam. The big swimming pool has a view of the valley. Guests share a communal kitchen, braai and living area.

Where? 10 km south of Gariep Dam (the town) on the R58.

Rates: From R980 per night for two people.

Contact: [076 676 3427](tel:0766763427)

"Ruigtevallei Lodge" on Facebook

Driekwartblou Guesthouse

The name will make sense when you see the view: three quarters of it is blue!

Two of the four luxury self-catering units overlook the dam. Go for a walk or sit on the stoep and watch sheep and blue cranes graze in the foreground. Breakfast and dinner on request.

Where? 17 km west of Venterstad on the R58.

Rates: From R1 250 per night for two people.

Contact: [082 578 7622](tel:0825787622)

"Driekwartblou Gastehuis & Venue" on Facebook

Gannabos Guesthouse

You might see a wildebeest or springbok from your window on this game farm. There are two self-catering units that sleep six or eight people, and two double rooms. Guests can relax in the communal living area or outside in the lapa. (Take note: The farm is used for hunting in winter.) Lunch and dinner on request.

Where? 18 km south of Venterstad on the R390 to Steynsburg.

Rates: From R1 400 per night for two people, with breakfast.

Contact: [076 693 3477](tel:0766933477)

gariepecoreserve.co.za

Fonteintjie Guesthouse

Light a fire in the shadow of Teebus koppie while merino sheep bleat in the background. The self-catering farmhouse sleeps eight in three rooms. There are two bathrooms. The rooms can be booked separately or you can hire the whole house. There's a spacious living room with a fireplace and indoor braai. The outlet of the Orange-Fish Tunnel is 3 km from the farmhouse next to a dirt road – you can walk there. The farmyard is fenced and pets are welcome. Homemade droëwors and lamb products to order.

Where? 20 km south of Steynsburg next to the R56.

Rates: From R920 per night for two people.

Contact: [072 996 7150](tel:0729967150)

fonteintjiegastehuis.co.za





EAT HERE

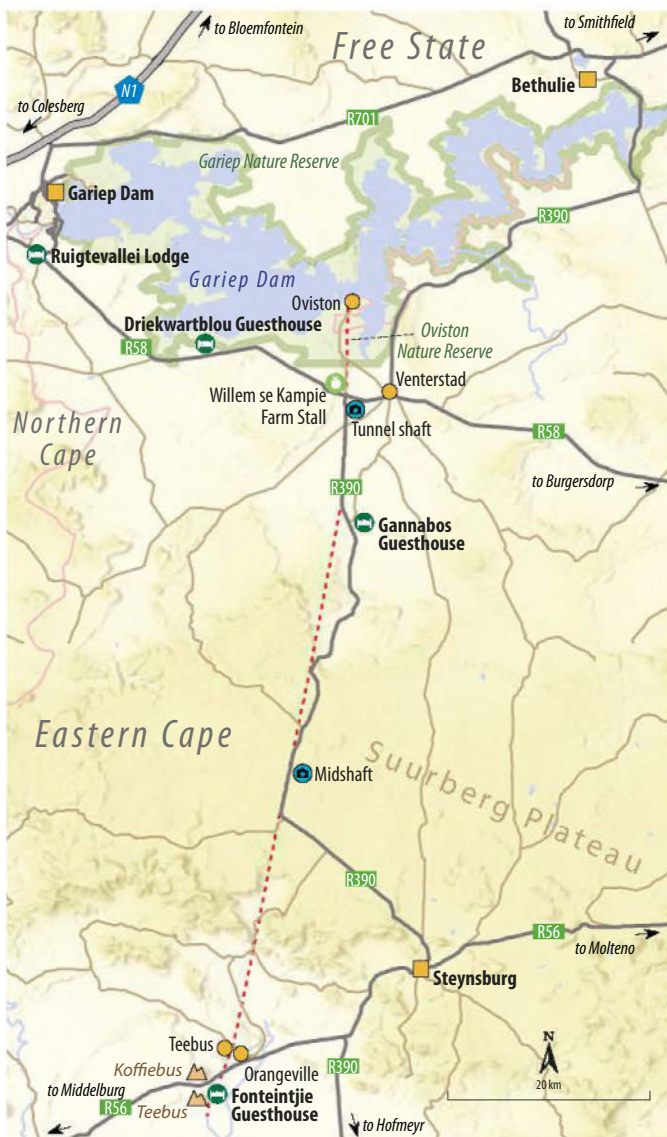
Willem se Kampie Farm Stall

Stop for a traditional farm breakfast or fresh roosterkoek – the kudu roosterkoek is a favourite. Save space for a milk tart jaffle. You can also get a beer, a cooldrink, good coffee and variety of other homemade products like quince jam and kombucha.

Where? 5 km outside Venterstad on the R58 to Gariep Dam.

Contact: 082 578 7466

willmsekampie@gmail.com



DO THIS

Oviston Nature Reserve

This sizable reserve (160 km²) on the southern shore of the Gariep Dam has buffalo, gemsbok and big herds of springbok. There's a small picnic site with basic ablution facilities and fossils in the koppies – arrange beforehand if you want to go on a tour. The reserve is closed to day visitors from May to September during the hunting season.

Accommodation: The reserve has a basic hunting hut, Komweer Lodge, and a small campsite, but the facilities have all seen better days. Komweer Lodge from R784 per night for four people. Camping from R237 per night for two people.

Where? The reserve office is at 1 Kiepersol Road in Oviston.

Cost: Conservation fee R17 per person; day visitor fee for hikers, birders and anglers R18 per person. If you want to explore in your vehicle, entrance costs R141 per person.

Contact: 043 492 0881; visiteasterncape.co.za



TAKE YOUR PIC

Share your most magical photographic moments with us!

Toast Coetzer

reviews a batch of our best reader photos in every issue.

> SAM J BASCH

Canon EOS 5D Mk III

Canon EF 180mm macro lens

IG: @koisan_consult

SAM WRITES: I photographed this insect in the Leeuwkloof Valley Conservancy, about 50 km north-east of Pretoria. We were staying in Kohandé Camp and the bigger animals were absent, so I made the best of the opportunities for macro photography around our tent.

At first, I mistook this chap for a yellowed leaf. To get a good shot, I had to lie down on my stomach and try out different angles. The background was a bit distracting, but I couldn't blur it entirely because I had to use an aperture of f18 to make sure the insect's legs were sharp.

My shutter speed was 1/160 second at ISO 640.

TOAST SAYS: What a fascinating bug! It probably wouldn't win a beauty contest, but there's no doubt it makes for a great subject. According to the entomologist



**WINNING
PHOTO**

Jo Balmer, this is likely a species of leaf-footed bug called *Pephrus paradoxus*. It's clear where the family name of "leaf-footed bug" comes from – this guy looks like a ragged autumn leaf that has been roughed up by the lawnmower...

I totally get Sam's dilemma with regard to the f-stop. It would be easy to use a wide aperture like f5.6

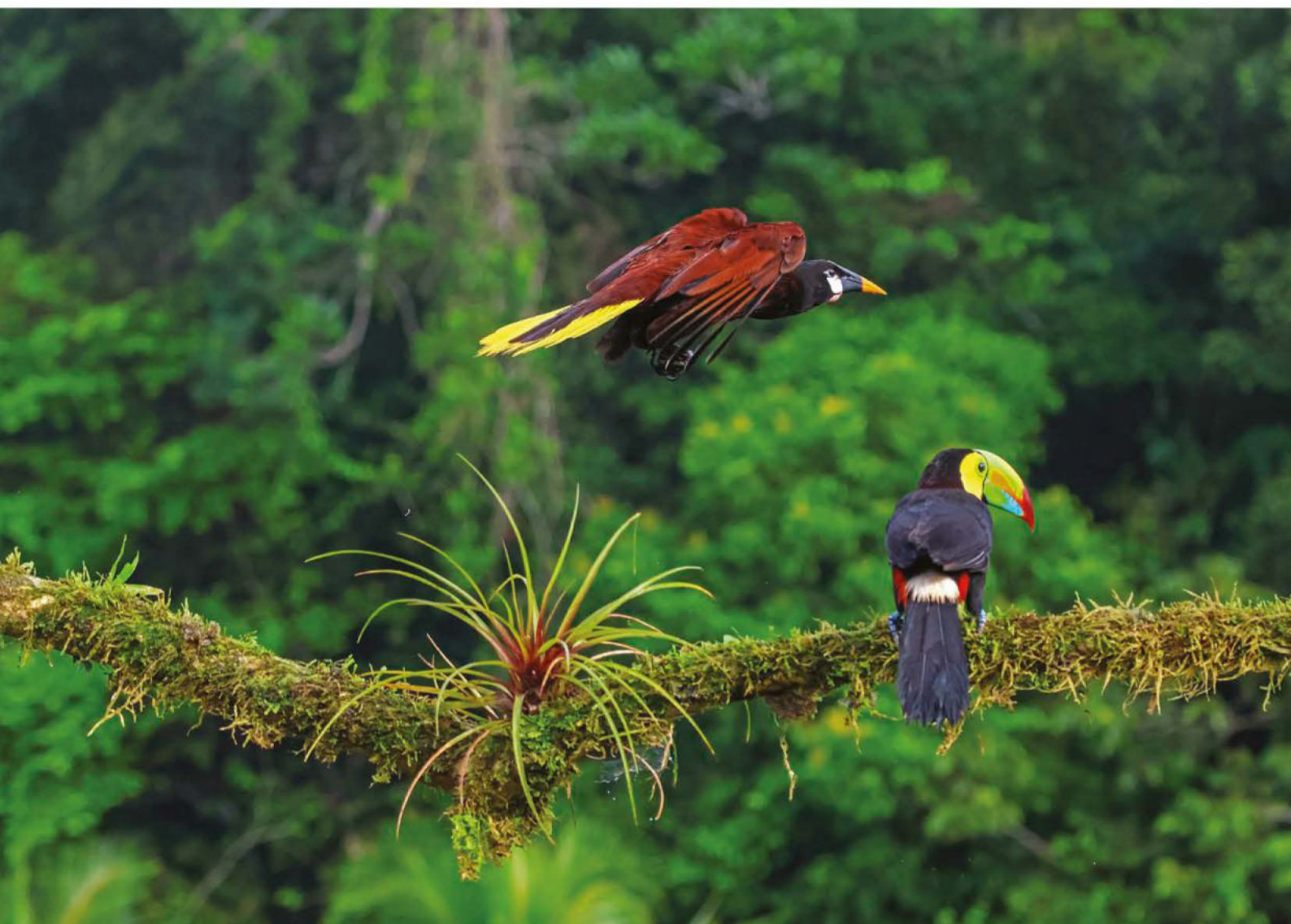
and throw the background out of focus completely. But if you do that, you compromise the focal depth around your main subject.

A common mistake with insect photography is to have a pin-sharp head or upper body, with the rest of the insect quickly fading out of focus. Personally, I prefer the whole bug sharp, even if that means some

detail in the background is retained.

By grinding it out at f18, Sam has ensured a wide enough depth of field for the legs (or most of them) to be reasonably sharp. The result is that we get to enjoy the footloose leaf-footed bug in all its glory!

Congrats Sam, the camera bag is yours!



ANIL LALLOO

Canon EOS R7

Canon 100 – 500mm lens

ANIL WRITES: I'm an amateur bird photographer from Cape Town. My dream was always to visit Costa Rica and photograph toucans! My dream came true in May 2025: I stayed at Laguna del Lagarto Eco-Lodge, in the middle of the Costa Rican jungle, about 150 km north of the capital, San José. Over the course of nine days at the lodge, I went on several guided tours with a local guide.

I took this photo on a cloudy day, shortly after a sudden downpour that made the scene extra moody.

Where possible, I like to include two or more species in my photographs. I saw this colourful Montezuma oropendola (the bird at the top) getting ready to take off and timed my shot as it passed a keel-billed toucan perched on a branch.

My shutter speed was 1/2 000 second at f5 and ISO 1 600.

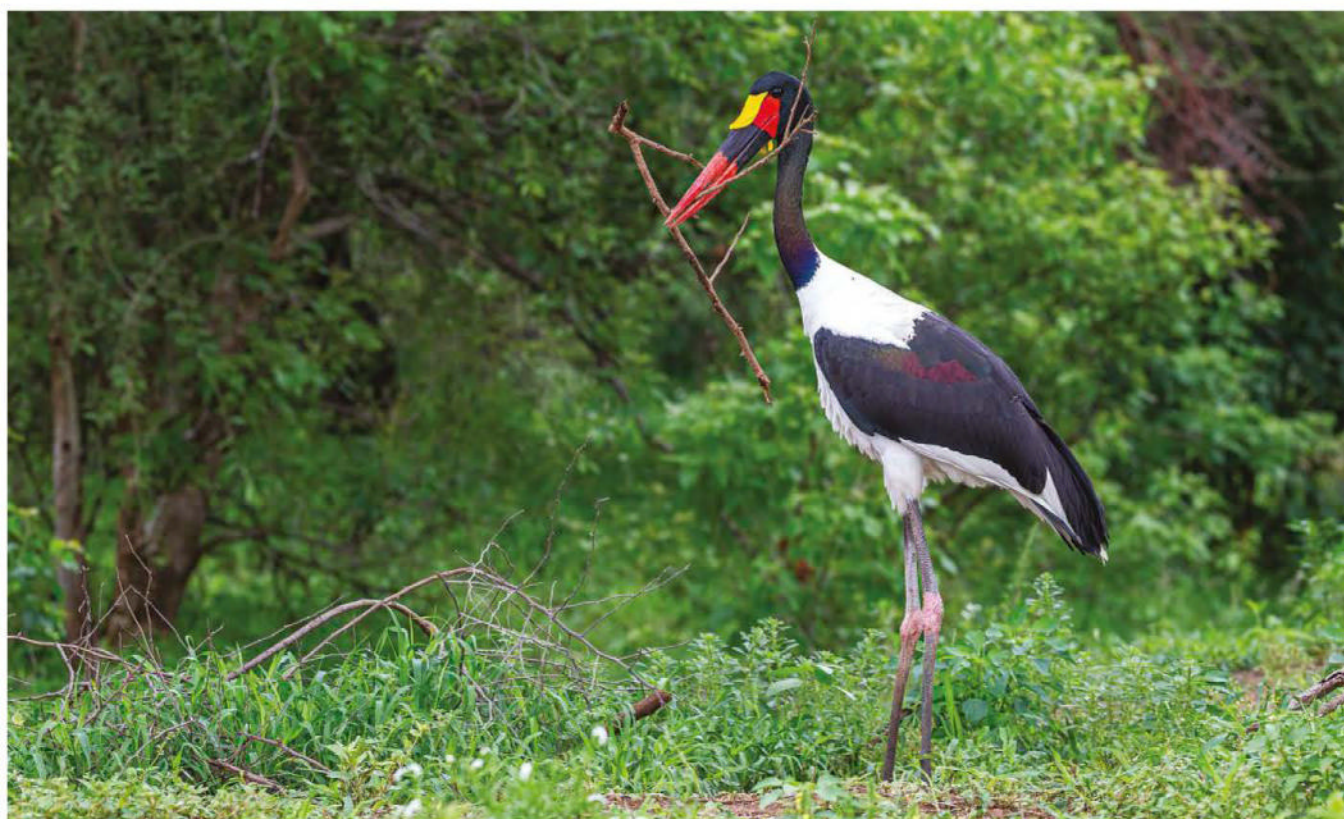
TOAST SAYS: How much difference does a burst of colour make? South Africa might have vibrant forest dwellers like the Knysna turaco and narina trogon, but the tropical rainforests of South and Central America have some real show-offs.

Most of us are probably familiar with toucans since they often feature in nature doccies and the odd animated movie, but an oropendola? These guys make nests similar to weavers, only much bigger!

I like the fact that Anil tries to capture more than one species in his shots. Doing so immediately makes a photo more intriguing and it increases the chance for interaction between subjects. Try it out next time when you're sitting at a waterhole in Etosha or the Kruger – give yourself an assignment to capture three or more animal species in the same frame.

The branch that stretches from left to right is interesting because it breaks certain photographic "rules". Usually, you'd want some sort of "conclusion" to the branch – either you'd want to see it join a bigger branch, or you'd want to see the tip. But I like Anil's branch. Because it "floats", it gives a heightened sense of space. It feels as if the birds are really high up in the canopy, and that the forest stretches out endlessly in the background.

The best part of the photo is that hint of interaction between the birds. The toucan is looking over its shoulder at the oropendola as if to say, "Where you off to, pal?"



STU BOWIE

Canon EOS 1D Mk IV
Canon 300 mm lens

STU WRITES: We stayed at Shingwedzi during a recent visit to the Kruger Park. One morning, we came across this male saddle-billed stork, right next to the road.

A few seconds earlier, we'd seen the female fly into a tree not too far away. They were busy building a nest and the male seemed very picky about what nesting material he wanted. He'd gather some small branches, drop them, and choose others.

When you're taking photos with a prime lens – like the Canon 300 mm I was using – you have to be careful with your composition. You can't zoom in or out, so you have to frame selectively and think about what's happening where. I tried to give the stork some breathing room; to ensure it was looking into space.

My shutter speed was 1/250 second, aperture f8, at ISO 500.

TOAST SAYS: An easy way to tell a male saddle-billed stork from a female is to look at the eyes – the female has yellow eyes and the male has black. The male also has short yellow wattles (visible in Stu's photo), which the female lacks.

Stu explains his approach brilliantly – the composition is classic, roughly following the rule of thirds. The bird now has all that space to the left to "move" into, which simply makes it a more pleasing photo to look at.

Saddle-bills are spectacular birds to photograph, even when they're just standing around, but Stu managed to capture some interesting behaviour, too. I love the stick, which juts off at funny angles (it's not just a single line), which creates extra interest as it interacts with the lines created by the bird's bill, and even the black-white colour split on its body. If you use your imagination a bit, the twig resembles a "stick man" impression of the bird itself.

Cool, right?



> NADINE LEONARD

Canon EOS 800D

Sigma 150–600 mm lens

IG: @nswildlife_photography

NADINE WRITES: I took this photo in Mountain Zebra National Park. These cute meerkats had a den next to Link Road, which connects the Rooiplaat plateau part of the park with the Karoo plains section. We made sure to drive past there every morning and afternoon to watch them doing their thing.

One afternoon around 5 pm, they gave us a proper show. This mom had three babies and they each took turns to suckle.

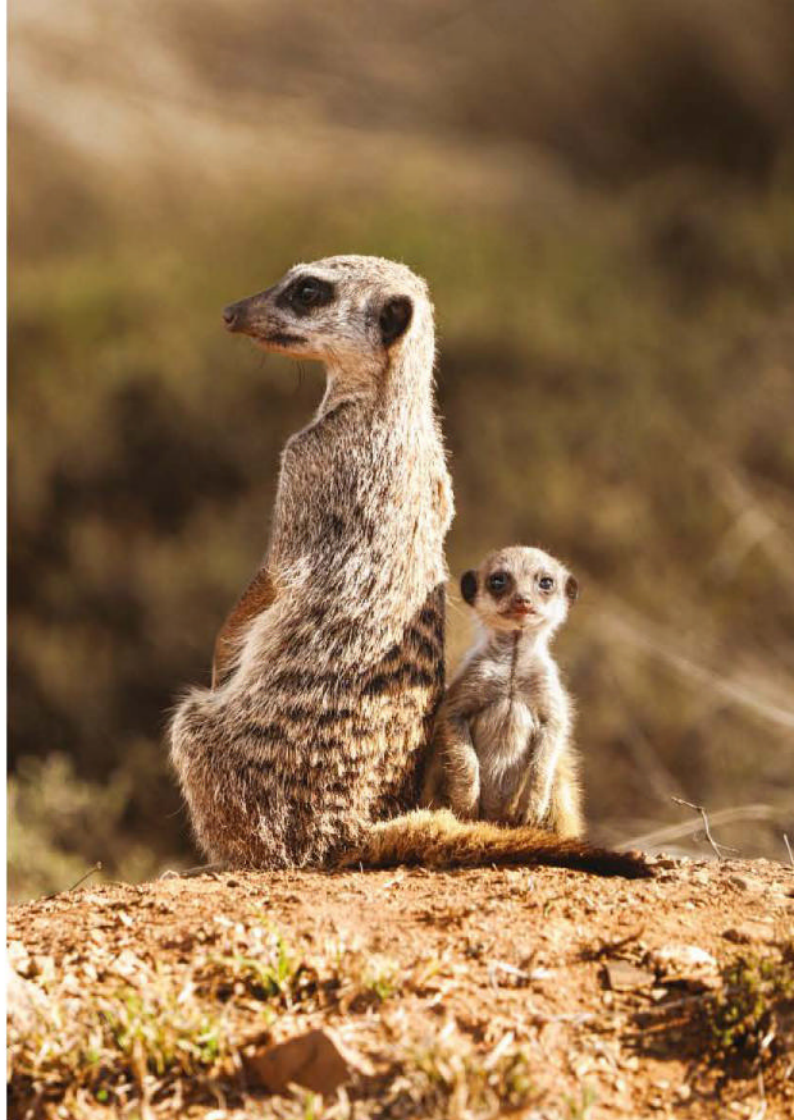
The mother was very aware of her surrounds and constantly scanned around for any signs of danger. The sun fell on the two of them from one side, which ensured that they stood out well against the dark background. The youngster seemed to “help” mom with her guarding duties.

My settings: shutter speed 1/320 second, aperture f6.3, ISO 200.

TOAST SAYS: A meerkat colony is bang for photographic buck. Watching them is like tuning in to a reality TV programme about the entwined lives of an eccentric extended family, from the bossy aunt to the clumsy uncle to the cousins who are always up to mischief. And in the middle of it all, someone has to keep an eye out for approaching danger! Hallmark family moments can dissolve into *gat-oor-kop* panic the second someone spots the deathly shadow of a martial eagle gliding along the ground...

I like how Nadine isolated these two meerkats from the rest. It's also possible to have too many meerkats in your frame, each distracting you from what the other one is doing. Nadine avoided that by focusing on these two, giving us the space to appreciate the bond between mother and pup, and the “I’m doing what mom is doing” attitude of the little one, who also wants to be on guard duty.

Thanks for sharing, Nadine!



< RIAAN WOLHUTER

Nikon Z7 II

Nikon 70–200 mm lens

RIAAN WRITES: We visited Namibia in August 2025 and we were driving south along the D707 near Betta. We’ve driven this scenic road many times before, but this time the weather was very different. We hit an easterly wind – or, rather, the easterly wind hit us!

Oosweer, as the locals call it, is never pleasant. The force of the wind can sandblast the paint off your car! Dust clouds came billowing over the Namib dunes and there were real clouds in the sky, too. The latter caused dark and light streaks to shift across the landscape.

Conditions were not ideal for taking photos, but it was such a unique sight that I tried my best

to capture something of the scene. Who knows, I might never see it again! I could hardly stay on my feet outside the car, and setting up a tripod was out of the question...

I managed to stabilise myself against a corner fence post and pushed up my shutter speed to 1/2 000 second to negate any camera shake.

TOAST SAYS: *Ja-nee*, *Oosweer* doesn’t mess around. If the weather forecast says it’s coming your way, you might as well pack up your tent and head straight for the nearest lodge. And you won’t be braaiing outside either, because an extra seasoning of sand will be added to your chops – never mind

your lettuce leaves, which will set sail the moment you remove the Glad wrap from the salad bowl!

The colours and textures of Riaan’s photo are mesmerizing. Sometimes, less is more. Sure, we can all imagine how nice a gemsbok would look on that grassy desert plain, or maybe a trio of Hartmann’s mountain zebra, but minimalism also has its place, and this landscape doesn’t need any Hollywood stars. (That’s you, gemsbok.)

The secret weapon here is the dust. Like mist, dust can take a simple landscape up a notch. In this case, it makes the scene extra mysterious. It’s one of nature’s special effects... And the Oscar goes to: *Oosweer*!



TAKE YOUR PIC



▲ GERHARDT KOORTS

Canon EOS 90D

Canon EF100–400 mm lens

IG: @gerhardtkoorts

GERHARDT SAYS: How desolate can you get? This ostrich looks like the only survivor left on a post-apocalyptic planet!

I took this photo one afternoon while driving around and looking for wildlife in the Puros Conservancy in north-western Namibia. Animal encounters are often fleeting here since they're not accustomed to people.

TOAST SAYS: The desert plains of the Kaokoveld are as harsh a habitat as you'll find anywhere on earth. To survive here, you have to have your wits about you – or an airconditioned 4x4 with a stocked Engel fridge... It's quite incredible that large mammals like elephant and giraffe also live here – and likewise, ostriches. Ostriches are survival masters, thriving in arid climates where your regular guineafowl might say *aikona*, I'm out of here!

The colour palette in Gerhardt's photo is sparse indeed. The gentle brown hues would also do well in black and white – it's worth converting this shot just to see the effect. My guess is that stripping away the colour might enhance the sense of desolation.

The composition is effective in a workmanlike fashion. It gets the job done. Look at how the ostrich anchors the bottom third of the frame, leaving the remaining two thirds to be filled by the gravelly plains and the hazy mountains, just visible in the distance.

Good stuff, Gerhardt!



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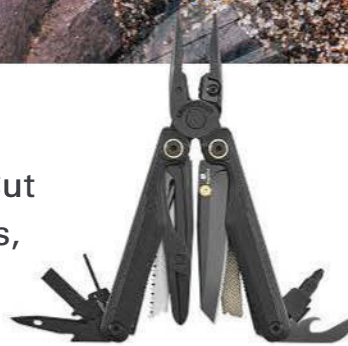
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The power of persistence

COMPILED BY **LYNNE FRASER**

“It took me 10 years to finally get this one single image of a brown hyena, in the most perfect frame imaginable,” says South African photographer Wim van den Heever, about this ghostly Kolmanskop shot. “I knew there were brown hyenas in that area; I could see the droppings and every now and again I could see their tracks coming through. It always stuck in the back of my mind: ‘You’ve got to try and photograph this.’”

He pulled it off, and in October last year he was announced as the Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2025.

Wim’s image – and the other overall and category winners – were selected from a record-breaking 60 636 entries from 113 countries and territories around the world.

The competition is run by the Natural History Museum in London and the exhibition is open until July 2026. Or visit the online gallery: nhm.ac.uk/wpy

◀ Ghost town visitor

Wim van den Heever, South Africa

Highlighting how nature interacts with urban spaces in often unusual ways, Wim’s photograph is a haunting view of a brown hyena visiting the remains of the long-abandoned diamond mining town of Kolmanskop, near Lüderitz in Namibia.

With fog rolling in from the Atlantic Ocean, Wim finally got his camera trap shot after 10 years of trying.

The rarest hyena species in the world, brown hyenas are nocturnal and mostly solitary. They’re known to pass through Kolmanskop on their way to hunt Cape fur seal pups or scavenge for carrion along the coast, but they’re very seldom seen.

Wim was the overall winner of the competition as well as the winner of the “Urban Wildlife” category.

HOW? Nikon D810; 17 – 35 mm lens at 17 mm; shutter speed 15 seconds; aperture f2.8; ISO 3 200; with two Nikon SB-800 flashes and a Camtraptions motion sensor.





◀ Cat among the flamingos

Dennis Stogsdill, USA

Dennis captured this extraordinary scene in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park. He had been keeping an eye out for wild cats such as servals for several days when a call came over the radio: one had been seen at Lake Ndutu. But it wasn't a serval – it was a caracal, hunting lesser flamingos in the shallows.

Caracals have a varied diet, from insects to small antelope, and are renowned for their acrobatic leaps to snatch birds from the air. But there are few, if any, records of them hunting flamingos!

Dennis's photo was the winner in the "Behaviour: Mammals" category.

HOW? Canon EOS-1D X Mark II; 600 mm lens; shutter speed 1/1 600 second; aperture f5.6; ISO 2 500.



📌 The feast

Audun Rikardsen, Norway

Audun photographed this chaotic scene of gulls attempting to catch fish trapped by purse seine nets during a polar night in Kvænangen Fjord, Norway. The gulls have learnt to follow the sound of the boats to find a herring feast, but many drown in or around the nets each year. Various fisheries and researchers are trialling solutions, including sinking the nets more quickly to make them less accessible to the birds.

Audun was the winner in the "Oceans: The Bigger Picture" category, for the powerful way in which this image dramatically draws attention to the ongoing conflict between seabirds and the fishing industry.

HOW? Canon EOS R5; 15 – 35 mm lens; shutter speed 1/200 second; aperture f4.5; ISO 10 000; with a Canon Speedlite 600EX II flash and LED torch.







▶ Vanishing pond

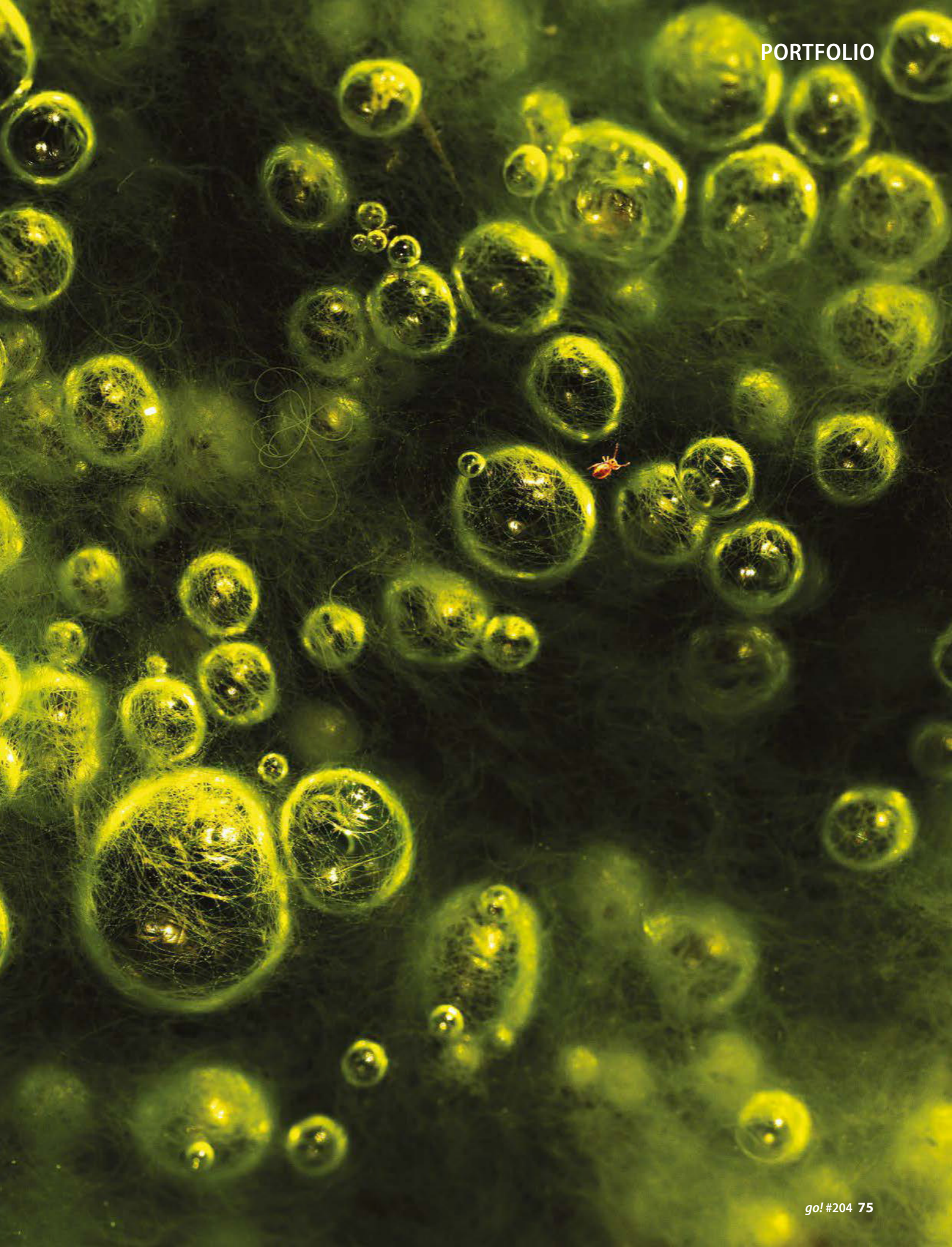
Sebastian Frölich, Germany

Abstract artwork or detailed image of a fast-disappearing ecosystem? Sebastian's shot is unfortunately the latter... Look to the right of the frame and you'll see a tiny springtail – an insect-like arthropod – navigating its way across escaping air bubbles rising from the algae of a peat bog in Platztal, one of the last intact high moorlands in the Austrian Alps.

Austria has lost 90% of its peat bogs, and only 10% of those that remain are in good condition.

Sebastian's mesmerizing photo draws our attention to the vital role these diminishing peat bogs play in capturing and storing carbon. He was the winner in the "Wetlands: The Bigger Picture" category.

How? Nikon Z7; 105 mm lens; shutter speed 1/800; aperture f9; ISO 400.





Raise the steaks

Over the coals, in the pan or even in the air fryer
– these steak recipes are quick to make,
but full of flavour.

RECIPES & STYLING JOHANÉ NEILSON
PICTURES SHELLEY CHRISTIANS & ER LOMBARD

Rump steak kebabs with
herbs and garlic



Steak and creamy prego prawns



Lentil salad with biltong steak, avocado and strawberries

Rump steak kebabs with herbs and garlic

Serves 4

Preparation time 20 minutes,
plus 1 hour to marinate

Cooking time 6–8 minutes

You need

- 2 thick rump steaks, 800 g in total
- 3 cloves of garlic, chopped
- 1 teaspoon coriander seeds
- 3 bay leaves, chopped
- sprig of rosemary, leaves stripped
- 1 teaspoon sea salt flakes
- ½ cup olive oil

Here's how

1 Cut any excess fat off the meat – chop it up and set it aside for later. Cut each steak into 8 even-sized pieces. (Buy long, thin steaks of the

same size to make it easier to cut them up.)

2 Crush the garlic, herbs and salt with a mortar and pestle. Add the oil and rub the mixture into the meat.

3 Thread the meat onto 4 wooden skewers soaked in water. For more flavour, use bay leaf or rosemary stalks after you've stripped off the leaves. (Optional: Thread the bay leaves between the pieces of meat.) Marinate the meat for an hour.

4 Braai the kebabs 10 cm above a layer of hot coals or in a hot griddle pan until cooked to your liking. If you braai the kebabs directly over the coals, turn them often so the meat will be browned evenly without burning. Drizzle

with extra marinade.

5 Fry the pieces of fat in a cast iron pan to make crackling. Season with salt. When you remove the meat from the grid, drizzle the hot, rendered fat over for flavour and set aside for a few minutes before you serve.

Steak and creamy prego prawns

Serves 4

Preparation time 25 minutes

Cooking time 20 minutes

You need

- 4 T-bone or club steaks
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 12 big prawns in their shells, cleaned
- 1 teaspoon each olive oil and butter
- 3 tablespoons of your favourite prego sauce (I used Fabrica Do Prego)
- ½ cup cream
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley or coriander (optional)

Here's how

1 Season the steak with salt and freshly ground black pepper and set aside while you prepare hot coals.

2 Braai the steak close to the coals (with some flame) until cooked to your liking. Or fry the steak in a griddle pan – just remember to sear the fat side too! Set the meat aside to rest while you cook the prawns.

3 Heat a cast iron pan over the coals until hot. Add the olive oil and butter and fry the prawns until pink but not cooked all the way through. Add the prego sauce and cook for a minute until fragrant. Add the cream and a pinch of salt and cook for a few more minutes until the prawns are done and the sauce has thickened slightly.

4 Scatter the herbs over the creamy prawns and add a pat of butter to the steaks. Serve this rich

surf-and-turf dish with rice or a French loaf to mop up the sauce.

Lentil salad with biltong steak, avocado and strawberries

Serves 4

Preparation time 30 minutes

Cooking time 15–20 minutes

You need

- 1 big biltong steak (350 g)
- sprigs of thyme or rosemary (optional)
- 1 tin (400 g) brown lentils, drained
- 2 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley
- ½ red onion, very finely chopped
- handful of rocket
- 1 head of baby gem lettuce, leaves separated and washed
- 100 g soft cheese or creamy feta
- 2 ripe avocados, sliced
- 200 g strawberries, in thin slices
- 3 tablespoons roasted nuts or seeds

FOR THE VINAIGRETTE

- ¾ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- lemon juice, to taste
- sprigs of thyme or rosemary
- pinch of chilli flakes
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar

Here's how

1 Cut the fat off the meat and cut it into pieces. Add the fat to a cold pan and render it over a low heat. Remove the crispy bits and set aside – retain the fat in the pan.

2 Heat the pan until very hot and sear the steak. When the meat has browned, add a few sprigs of thyme or rosemary. Continue to fry the meat and baste it with the warm fat until cooked to your liking. Transfer the meat to a chopping board and rest for a few minutes before you cut it into thin slices.

3 Add the vinaigrette ingredients to a jar with a lid and shake to mix. Taste and season with salt and

pepper. Stir half of the vinaigrette into the lentils, followed by the parsley and red onion.

4 To assemble the salad, mix the rocket and lettuce leaves with a spoonful of vinaigrette and arrange them on a serving platter. Spoon the lentils onto the leaves and add the sliced meat, cheese, avocado and strawberries on top. Scatter over the nuts or seeds and serve with the extra vinaigrette on the side. (You can scatter over the crisp crackling if you're eating the salad straight away. I don't enjoy the fat when cold.)

TIP *Biltong steak is sirloin seasoned with biltong spices and wind dried to form a crust – it's delicious! If you can't find it at your local butchery, use sliced wet biltong or plain steak.*

Sirloin with green peppercorn sauce

Serves 4

Preparation time 30 minutes

Cooking time 20 minutes

You need

- 2 sirloins (500 g each)
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- grated zest of 1 lemon
- 1 tablespoon butter
- sprigs of rosemary and thyme

FOR THE SAUCE

- 1 small white onion or 2 shallots, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 cloves of garlic, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons green peppercorns in brine (look in the deli section of your local grocery store)
- a shot of brandy
- 1 cup beef stock
- 1 cup cream
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped parsley

Here's how

1 Brush the sirloin with olive oil and season with salt, freshly



Sirloin with green peppercorn sauce

ground black pepper and lemon zest.

2 Heat a cast iron pan over hot coals (or a gas stove) and sear the steaks fatty side first, then on both sides until golden brown with a crust. Add the butter and herbs to the pan and fry the steak – turning it regularly – until cooked to your preference. Brush with some of the butter as you cook the steak. You can also put the

browned steak in your air fryer for 2–6 minutes at 200°C while you prepare the sauce. Let the meat rest for 5 minutes before you slice it.

3 Add the onions to the fat remaining in the pan. (You can remove and discard any herbs that are too brown.) Add a bit of water and cook the onions until dry. Add a glug of olive oil, the garlic and green peppercorns to the

pan and fry for a minute or two until flavoursome.

4 Add the brandy and let it evaporate almost completely. Add the stock and cream and reduce the sauce until slightly thickened. (If you're in a hurry, you can thicken it with a spoonful of flour.)

5 Scatter over the parsley and check the seasoning. Serve the steak with the sauce, potato wedges and steamed green beans.



Steak-and-mushroom pies

Steak-and-mushroom pies

Makes 6 pies

Preparation time 30 minutes

Baking time 20 minutes

You need

- 600 g steak, without fat
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 tablespoon each olive oil and butter
- 200 g mushrooms, sliced
- pinch of chilli flakes
- 1 roll (400 g) puff pastry, thawed
- 1 egg, beaten
- 200 g baby spinach, blanched
- 100 g medium-fat cream cheese or 6 Kiri cream cheese blocks

Here's how

1 Season the steak with salt and pepper. Heat the olive oil and butter together until the butter starts to foam. Fry the meat until both sides are brown, but the inside is still rare. (The steak will cook in the pies as well.) Let it cool down and cut it into 6 pieces.

2 Fry the mushrooms in the same pan until cooked and brown. Season with salt, pepper and chilli flakes. Cook until all the liquid has been reduced.

3 Preheat the oven to 200 °C on the fan setting. Cut the pastry into six even-sized pieces and

use a rolling pin to slightly flatten each piece. Brush the edges with egg. Put a layer of spinach, some cheese, a portion of meat and a spoonful of mushrooms on each piece of pastry. Bring the edges of the pastry together over the filling and pinch the pastry closed. Turn the pies over so the seams face down and place them on a greased cooling rack on top of a baking sheet. Make sure the bottom of the pie also gets heat and doesn't become soggy.

4 Brush the top of the pies with egg and bake for 15 to 20 minutes or until the pastry is golden brown

and cooked. Serve hot. The meat should still be a little pink.

TIP If you like your steak well done, this is a great way to turn the leftover medium-rare steak from yesterday's braai into a new dish.

Gochujang steak rolls

Serves 4

Preparation time 25 minutes

Cooking time 30 minutes

You need

- 4 thin steaks (I used Holland steak from Checkers)
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 tablespoons gochujang sauce (I like the sauce by Flaming Thai)
- 4 fresh bread rolls or roosterkoek
- ½ cup rainbow or green coleslaw
- 2 spring onions, chopped
- 3 tablespoons sushi mayo
- 1 small cucumber, thinly sliced
- 4 fried eggs

Here's how

1 Brush the steak with the olive oil and season with salt and freshly ground black pepper on both sides. Heat a heavy-based pan until very hot and sear the steak until brown on one side. Turn and sear for a minute on the other side. Brush with the gochujang sauce and continue frying and turning until glossy. Remove from the heat so the meat is still pink on the inside and set aside to rest on a chopping board.

2 Cut open the rolls. Mix the coleslaw and spring onions with the mayo and divide it between the rolls along with the cucumber. Cut the steaks into slices at a 45-degree angle and arrange them on top of the salad. Put an egg on top, followed by the other half of the roll and serve. Add kimchi if you like a bit of a bite.

TIP You can also butter and toast the rolls for a crispier version.



Gochujang steak rolls

Where form meets function

Sweden is a “cool” place. Climatically, but also in a design sense: renowned for groundbreaking architecture, the world’s safest cars and even lethal fighter jets. It’s also home to Thule – the outdoor gear company. Every two years, they throw a big bash called THEX. We went along to see what they’ve planned for the future.

BY PIERRE STEYN





Hillerstorp is a small town in the forests of southern Sweden, about 250 km north of Malmö, the city where the Thule Group has its global headquarters. But Hillerstorp is where the company was founded in 1942; it's where the Thule factory is located; and it's quite literally where you can hear the brand's heartbeat.

The steady "thump, thump, thump" that vibrates through the building every second is the sound of a huge, 400-tonne stamping press turning sheet metal into roof racks – 3 000 parts per hour, 55 million parts per year.

"It does sound like a heartbeat, doesn't it?" says Daniel Larson, Thule's senior vice president of commercial sales. Then he laughs. "As we say here, this is also the sound of money being made!"

For a gear geek like me, and someone who has used Thule's luggage, backpacks and bicycle racks for the last 20 years, a visit to Hillerstorp is a dream come true. This is where all its global products are designed and tested, ranging from rooftop tents to baby strollers and dog carriers.

A state-of-the-art crash laboratory, similar to one used by automotive manufacturers, conducts tests on those roof racks, and also on car seats for infants and toddlers, and increasingly on pet carriers (as per the most recent legislation in the European Union).

As we walk through the "Dynamic Testing Area", rooftop tents are being blasted in wind tunnels, luggage is dropped from a height 15 times in a row at different angles to see if the

contents remain undamaged, and handles are pulled up and down thousands of times to fatigue-test them. A rooftop cargo carrier is mounted on a hydraulic shaker table for 35 hours to simulate a rough road trip twice around the globe, and fully loaded baby strollers are subjected to treadmills and obstacle courses.

This rigorous testing is one of the reasons Thule can claim that its products are reliable, easy to use and built to last.

"Not exactly Temu quality..." I think to myself.

THEX, which is short the Thule Experience, was held in 2023 for the first time, with the purpose of getting the company's engineers, designers and brand ambassadors to showcase their work and products to buyers, clients and media from all over the world.

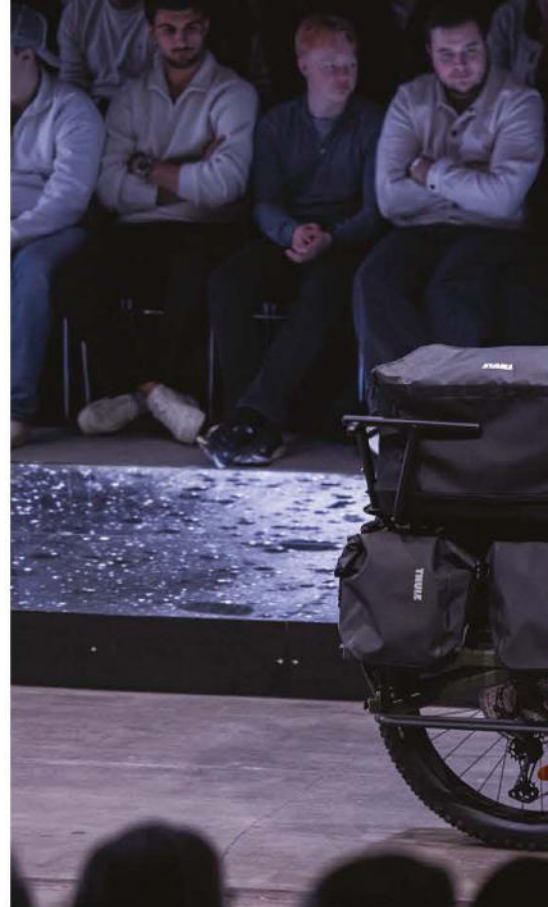
In 2025, the event occurred over three days and included the visit to the test centre and talks with experts about future trends in the outdoor market. It culminated in a massive "fashion show" in an abandoned warehouse close to the Malmö waterfront, where 59 global brand ambassadors (legendary big wave surfers like Garrett McNamara, mountain bikers and rock climbers, among others) walked the runway with the latest Thule products.

Bags like the new **Thule Aion Wheeled Duffel 95 L** (R10 999) and the range of **Subterra backpacks** (R3 999 – R5 499), rooftop cargo carriers like the **Force 3** (R19 999 for size large), the **EasyFold 3 bicycle rack** for two and three bikes (from R24 999) and the **Urban Glide 4-wheel stroller** (R19 999) all caught my eye and will continue to sell well in South Africa. (Go to thulestore.co.za to see what's new.)

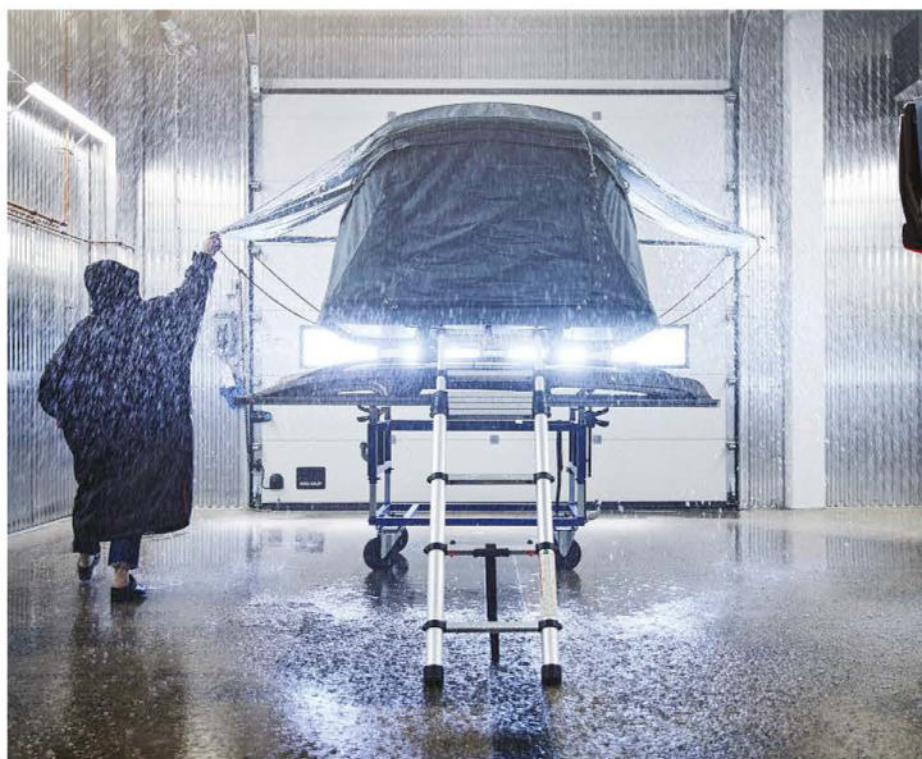
I also loved the new range of rooftop- and towbar-mounted tents, especially the **Outset** (R64 999), which will fit perfectly on my Suzuki Jimny's towbar! Towbar-mounted cargo carriers seem to be all the rage in Europe now and there are several options for sale locally, ranging in price from R24 999 to R36 999.

With European cities rapidly moving away from cars and becoming far more bicycle-oriented, the range of cycling accessories at THEX – from panniers to baby carriages and even dog carriers – was simply staggering.

If only our South African cities could follow suit!



THE OUTSET





SUBTERRA BACKPACK

AION WHEELED DUFFEL 95 L



URBAN GLIDE 4-WHEEL STROLLER



EASYFOLD 3 BICYCLE RACK

WHEELS

The last hurrah



VIEW OVER THE FISH RIVER CANYON

Toyota will launch a new Hilux this year.

To celebrate the outgoing model, a special edition – the Legend 55 – was released at the end of 2025.

We had our own party by driving one 4 000 km through Namibia.

WORDS **PIERRE STEYN** PICTURES **RONEL STEYN**

Namibians know their bakkies, and specifically their Hiluxes. “This is a really good-looking bakkie,” the customs officer says approvingly as he searches my cooler box for beer and biltong. Carrying beer and biltong all the way from Stellenbosch to Namibia is dumber than carrying coals to Newcastle, so there’s nothing to worry about there...

I’m at the Noordoewer border post and a second officer walks up. “What colour is this Hilux?” he asks. “I’ve never seen it before.”

Indeed, the colour of our double-cab Legend 55 has been a point of contention between my wife, Ronel, and I since we passed Garies hours ago. “She says it’s turquoise. I say it’s green. She says I’m colour blind.

“Toyota says it’s dark green mica metallic,” I tell the officer, hoping for some support. And I get it. “It looks green to me, too,” he says with a laugh and waves us on our way.

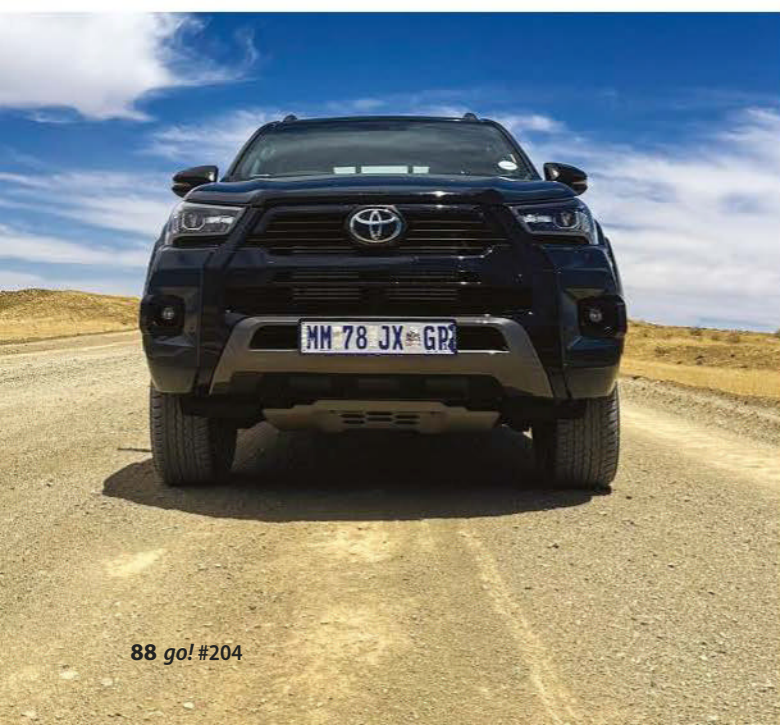
There are few things as satisfying as a road trip in Namibia with a good bakkie under your backside: hardly any people, even less traffic, open horizons and excellent dirt roads with welcoming places to stay. Reason enough to drive to Windhoek rather than fly, which is why Ronel and I turned what is supposed to be a work visit into a road trip holiday. What better way to celebrate our 32nd wedding anniversary!

The fact that Namibian hospitality giant Gondwana is offering South Africans a 50% discount at all its lodges and campsites (except Klein-Aus Vista) until the end of April 2026 was all the extra motivation we needed.

(Check out the “Hello Neighbour” special at gondwana-collection.com and start planning your own holiday, with our annual Namibia guide as a travel companion, of course.)

The Legend 55 has a lockable roller shutter and a rubberized load box, so we’re able to store all our hard luggage safely in the back. Camera equipment, the Stanley filled with coffee and a cooler box with padkos go on the back seat. The Hilux’s behaviour on tarmac (on the N7 in South Africa and the B1 in Namibia) is excellent, but it comes into its own on Namibia’s endless dirt roads.

About half an hour’s drive north-east of Noordoewer, we turn onto the D316 towards Ai-Ais and our first overnight spot at Gondwana’s Canyon Lodge near the Fish River Canyon. I switch to 4x4 high range on the fly and aim down the arrow-straight gravel road at 100 km/h, with



the rev counter barely touching 2 000 rpm. The 2.8-litre turbo-diesel engine hardly feels like it's working. We devour the kilometres and only see one other bakkie approaching from the front.

The next morning, we drive to the viewpoint over the canyon. It's my first time here and I'm blown away. I gain new respect for the hikers who clamber all the way to the bottom before they even start the iconic multi-day hike along the canyon floor. I promise myself that I'll come back one day to do it.

On the way to Windhoek, we sleep at Kalahari Anib Lodge near Mariental. We park the bakkie in Windhoek for a few days, then start our return loop through central and southern Namibia, via Gondwana's Namib Desert Lodge near Sossusvlei and the Canyon Roadhouse. Our average fuel consumption over almost 4 000 km on varied terrain is less than 10.3 ℓ/100 km.

Every day, Ronel and I drive four to seven hours on mostly gravel roads, with our music and podcasts playing through the bakkie's eight-inch touchscreen multimedia system. It's above 30 °C out there, but the air conditioning keeps us cool and awake, and the Legend 55's sport seats are especially comfortable. By the time we arrive at our overnight spot at roughly 3 pm every afternoon, ready for a Hansa draught and a dip in the pool, we're not exhausted like we've been on other road trips.

At R936 000, the Legend 55 is the last hurrah for the current Hilux (still South Africa's best-selling bakkie) before it's replaced in a few months. And except for some technological upgrades like a more advanced touchscreen and charging slots for USB-C cables, it will be interesting to see how this stalwart can be improved. Watch this space...

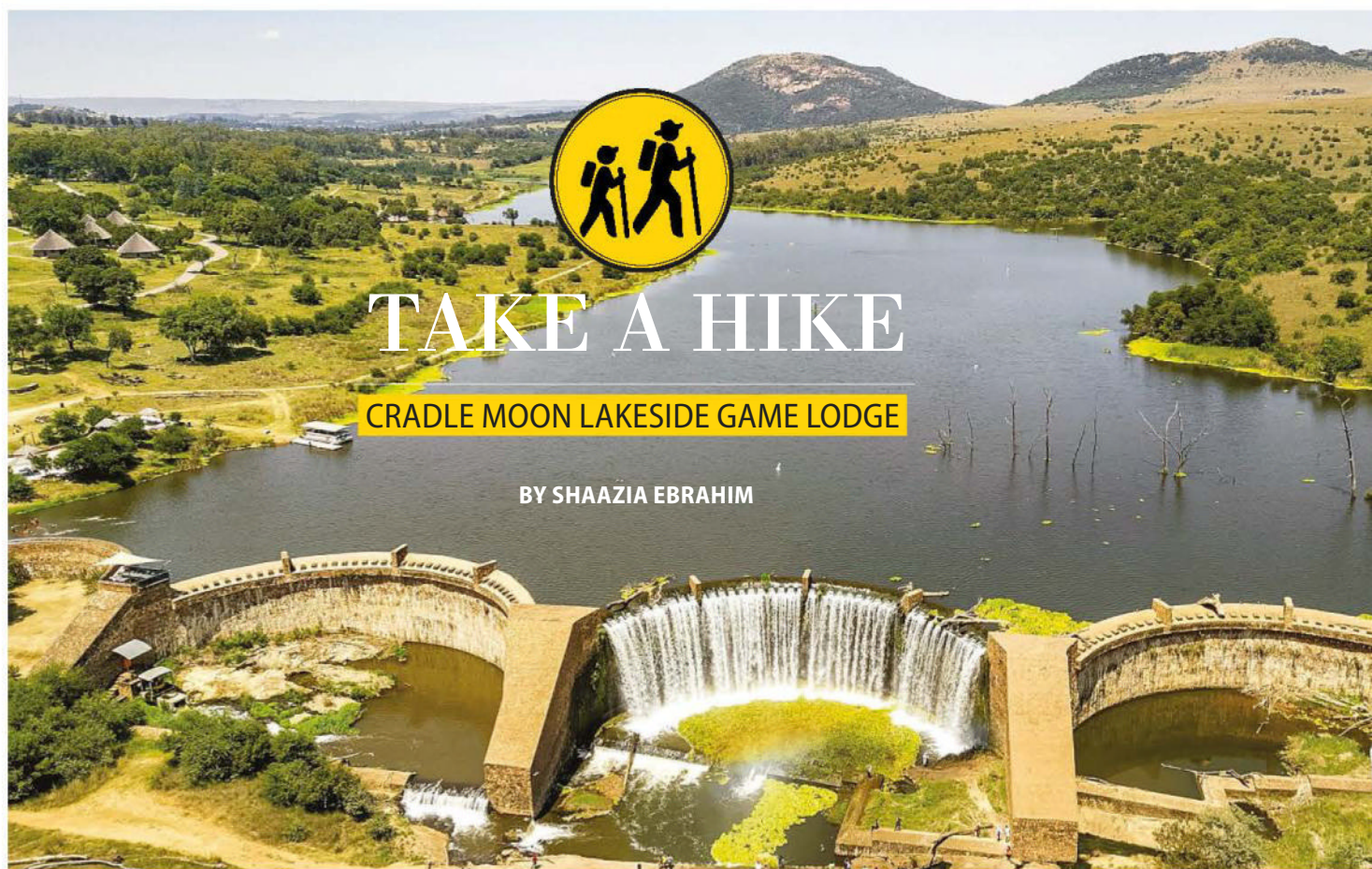
ROCKET AT THE ROOI DAK PADSTAL ON THE D1275





GONDWANA CANYON LODGE





TAKE A HIKE

CRADLE MOON LAKESIDE GAME LODGE

BY SHAAZIA EBRAHIM

Hiking at Cradle Moon is one of those outings that feels like a genuine break without requiring a full day's commitment. It's roughly a 45-minute drive from Joburg, close enough for an early start but far enough that the city feels distant once you're on the trail. Set within the Cradle of Humankind, it's an accessible, well-managed route with plenty to see, even if you're not a seasoned hiker.

We arrived on a summer Sunday while the air still carried a hint of the night's rain. The entrance is easy to spot and there's enough parking, even on busy weekends. You pay the conservation fee at a small shop near the lot, then walk through reception, past some lodge buildings, and down a short paved path that drops you right at the edge of Lake Heritage, which is actually a dam. (More about that in the sidebar.) That first view of open water instantly reorients you – lodge lawns to the left, the restaurant perched above a broad waterfall to the right, and the trailhead just beyond it.

Even near the lodge, wildlife appears quickly. We passed a few impala grazing, barely glancing

up as we walked by. The lawns were already filling with cyclists, families heading out for short strolls and groups getting ready for runs. Once you start the loop and follow the shoreline away from the lodge, the background activity drops away and the bushveld takes over.

The route circles the entire lake in a wide loop. Most of it is gently undulating, with a few short climbs and descents but nothing that demands serious fitness. The terrain ranges from firm gravel to occasional muddy patches, depending on recent rain, so shoes with decent grip make the walk more comfortable. Much of the early section is exposed, so bring sunblock and a hat, especially in summer.

The lake accompanies you almost the whole way, and the sound of moving water becomes part of the walk. In summer, the edges of the trail are thick with green growth, insects hum through the grass and there's a good chance of spotting animals. We saw zebra, eland and, best of all, a fish-eagle circling and then gliding low over the water.

Cradle Moon offers various water-based activities: The lake has marked swimming areas and is well known among open-water swimmers,

hosting events like the Rockman Ultra Triathlon and Midmar Mile qualifiers. If you want to swim, pack accordingly. Canoeing, paddling and short boat cruises are also available, and you'll see a mix of people drifting past as you follow the path.

The last stretch of the loop moves over slightly rockier ground and skirts small hills. These gentle rises give you more views of the conservancy – water, woodland and the lodge tucked into the landscape. We paused here more than once, partly to rest, partly because the scenery invites you to slow down. At one point we caught sight of a large, dark shape across the water. There's a resident hippo family here – maybe it was one of them?

The trail finishes where it began, at the base of the waterfall. As you stand in the welcome mist, you'll remember moments along the trail that made the outing feel personal: a wooden swing near the water, a shaded patch that's perfect for a breather, a sudden view that stops you mid-stride. None of it is dramatic, but together they give the walk its easy rhythm. For a simple few hours outdoors, close to the city but not defined by it, the Cradle Moon loop is an uncomplicated pleasure.



WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH THE WATERFALL?

The impressive “waterfall” at the lodge is actually a dam wall built entirely from stone taken from the site. It's 20 m high, 300 m wide and almost 10 m thick! Thirty-two hectares of water sit behind it, forming part of the 1 600 ha conservancy.

Look for the walkway that gives you a view of the wall and the lake below. The central section spills constantly; the ones on the sides only flow after heavy rain.



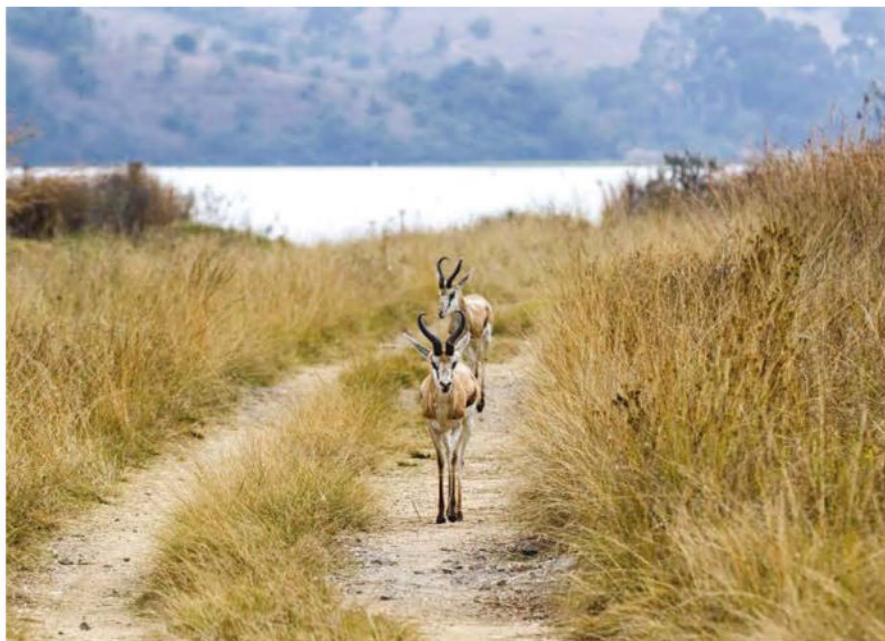
How does it work? There are trails of various distances, all clearly marked by colour. (Same with the mountain-bike trails.) I did the popular 5 km Pink Trail – a scenic loop around Lake Heritage. We stopped often to take photos and look for game, so it took us about 90 minutes. The Green Trail is about 9 km and adds another hour (at least) to your route.

How to get there: Cradle Moon Lakeside Game Lodge is in Muldersdrift near Lanseria Airport, north-west of Joburg. It's about 30 km from Sandton and 50 km from Pretoria. Access via the M5.

Permits and fees: Daily fee to hike: R100 per person. Mountain bikers pay the same. Rates for all their other activities are on the website. Note that you're not allowed to bring food or drinks onto the property. Luckily there's a shop that's well stocked with any provisions you might need for your walk, and there are also two restaurants on site – reward yourself with a post-hike pizza!

More info: ☎ 011 919 5000; 🌐 cradlemoon.co.za

JAHAN KAJEE (LEFT) WITH SHAAZIA EBRAHIM





GREY GHOST LODGE, CRADOCK, EASTERN CAPE

It's summer in the Karoo and the air is filled with the intoxicating smell of sweet thorn flowers. The sky is deep blue – for now. With a bit of luck, thunder clouds will start stacking up around midday. Should those clouds become heavy enough and burst, releasing fat raindrops that splat into the dust, the best place to watch the spectacle is from a sheltered farm stoep, with a cup of coffee in hand.

For many South Africans, the Karoo is just a place to rush through on the way to the coast. But in recent years, more discerning travellers have come to appreciate it as a summer destination, far from the madding crowds.

Louwrence and Jeanette Lombard live on the farm Waterval, south of Cradock (new name: Nxuba). To reach the farm, you follow the wide Fish River valley. You can either follow the N10 tar road on the eastern side of the river, and then cross to the western side at the small farming community of Mortimer; or you can follow a gravel road that runs parallel to the river on the western side, all the way from Cradock.

Whichever route you choose, once they meet up at Mortimer, you begin climbing a mountain pass. Stop near the top and look back over the fertile irrigated lands of the valley behind you.

Waterval and Grey Ghost Lodge are in these mountains. The name of the lodge is a reference to the kudu – the iconic antelope of the Eastern Cape – which rules these shaded kloofs. You might see other game too, like mountain reedbuck, black wildebeest, blesbok, warthog, sable and waterbuck.

Grey Ghost Lodge hosts hunting groups in winter, but during the summer months it's a perfect farm getaway for families looking for something different. The house has plenty of spaces to relax – in the living room, braai room, kitchen or on the stoep, watching that thunderstorm gain momentum. If the clouds stay away and the heat gets too much, have a swim in the nearby farm dam.

Chat to Louwrence and Jeanette about where to hike or ride your mountain bike – there are also farm roads where you can put your 4x4 through its paces. You can do a day visit to Mountain Zebra National Park, which is about an hour away.

Birders come to the farm to tick sentinel rock-thrush and Knysna woodpecker. Scan the skies for the resident breeding pair of Verreaux's eagles. Jackal buzzards are common around the lodge.

Rates: The house sleeps 17 in total and can be booked out by a big group. Otherwise the rooms are rented on a self-catering, per-night basis: double room from R900 per night; five-sleeper family room R2000 per night. If you stay longer than two nights meals can be arranged – enquire about rates.

Where? About 50 km south of Cradock. (Note: All road signs have recently been changed to the new name, Nxuba.) Part of this distance is gravel, but you should manage in any 4x2 with decent ground clearance. Ask about the state of the road when you book.

Contact: 082 434 7341 (Louwrence); greyghostlodge@gmail.com

greyghostlodge.com

– Toast Coetzer



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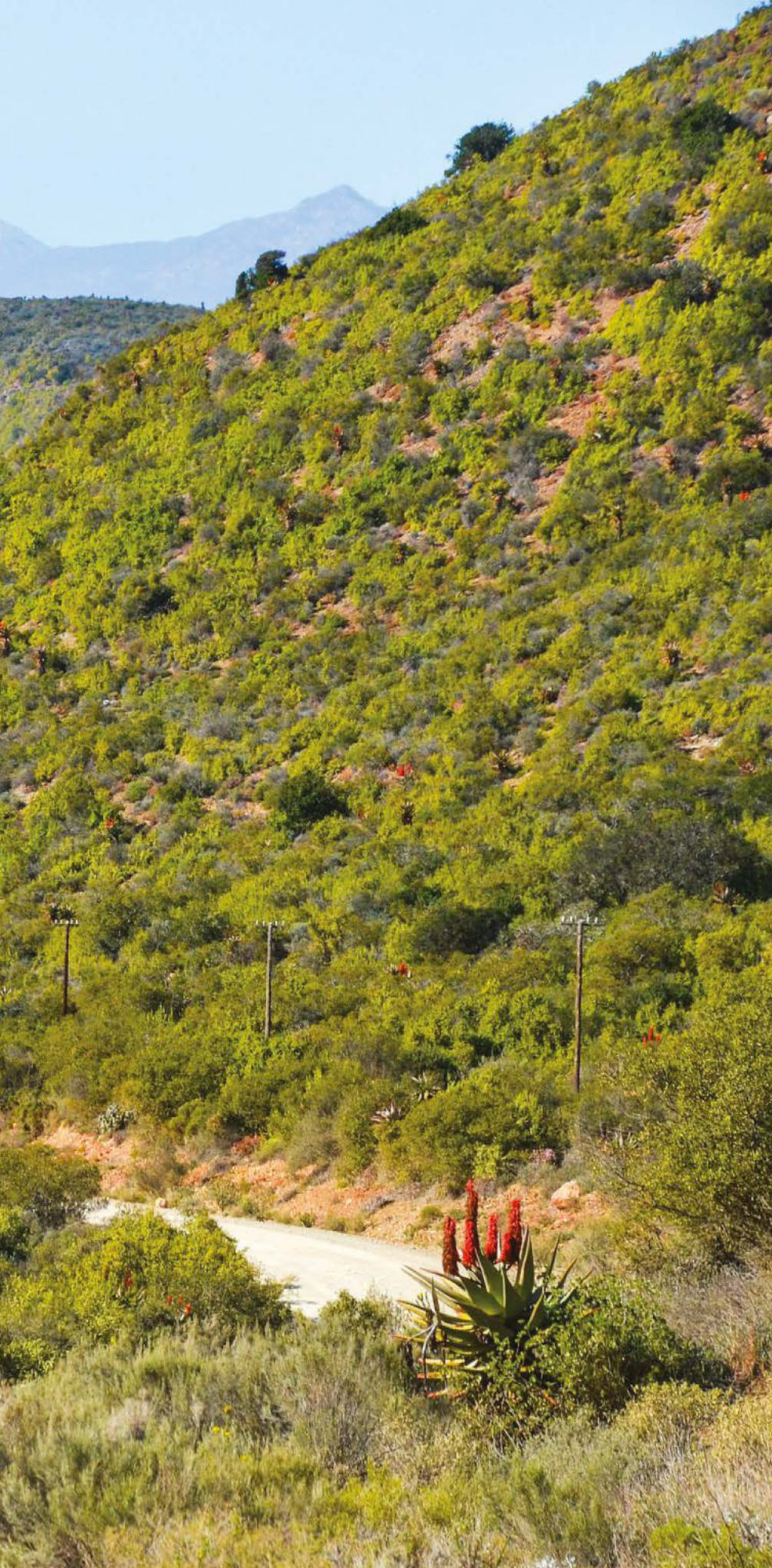
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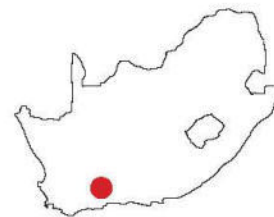
A wide-angle photograph of a dirt road winding through a lush, green valley. The road starts in the foreground, curves to the left, and then continues into the distance. The valley is filled with dense, green vegetation, including many aloe plants with red flower spikes. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a clear blue sky. The text 'The Little Karoo's biggest secret' is overlaid in a large, white, serif font.

The Little Karoo's biggest secret

You can only reach Vanwyksdorp via
a dirt road, but that's the appeal...



TOWN



Take the turn-off to Vanwyksdorp and discover an unpretentious town full of stars, silence and creative souls. Here's everything you need to know.

WORDS & PICTURES
MARCHELLE VAN ZYL

There's a turn-off from the R62 onto the R327 dirt road. I've driven past it plenty of times but I've never taken it. Until now.

The R327 leads to Vanwyksdorp, which is about 30 km away, between the Swartberg and the Langeberg mountain ranges. Every now and again there's a rumour that the R327 will be tarred, but the residents laugh when I ask, because the local municipality is not exactly known for its efficiency.

"That story has been circulating for a long time," says Nick Koornhof, a former politician who bought a property here three years ago. He was an MP for this constituency in the 1980s and visited Vanwyksdorp twice a year. Even back then, he was always greeted by a delegation of residents who wanted to know when the road would be tarred.

Decades later and there's still no tar. But it's actually better this way. It's one of the things that attracts people to Vanwyksdorp.

"This place has an earthiness," Nick muses. "When you turn onto that dirt road, it's as if your soul follows the dust trail."

Vanwyksdorp doesn't have any big shops. There are a few well-stocked cafés, a liquor store or two, and the Vanwyksdorp Mall – a tongue-in-cheek name for an entire shopping centre in a few rooms: clothing store, hardware store, estate agent, coffee shop, *tuisnywerheid*, post office, gift shop, general dealer... All they need is a liquor licence.

Owners Heidi de Kock and Almon Horne, originally from the Winelands, bought the property over e-mail without setting foot here. Three months later, they decided to come and have a look at their purchase. Heidi's initial reaction was: "O hel, what have we gotten ourselves into?"

But they came back again and again, and eventually fell in love with that earthiness. "It's safe and the gravel roads definitely have their charm," she says. "And there's nothing better than a Karoo thunderstorm."

They're rare, sadly – this is a region that knows more about drought than downpours. Vanwyksdorp once had a thriving farming community, but a decade-long drought caused many farmers to sell their land to developers. The result? New spekboom projects, a cannabis farm, a pomegranate and apricot farm, and many game and guest farms.

Vanwyksdorp has about 1 300 residents and a huge Dutch Reformed church that can seat half of them – an optimistic planning decision by the town founders when the building was commissioned in 1906. These days, Dominee Bertus Joubert still drives over Rooiberg Pass from Calitzdorp every Sunday to deliver the sermon – and to attend the annual bazaar, which is a highlight on the town calendar that draws visitors from all over.

Blanche van Rensburg bakes legendary koeksisters and pies for the occasion. "Last time, I baked 360 pies and they sold out in 10 minutes," she says.

Blanche lives opposite the Twaksak shop on the corner of Voortrekker and Vlei streets. You'll probably see her sitting on the stoep under the blue gum tree. That's where I find her on a quiet afternoon. She's just taken some pizzas out of the oven – she also makes those to order.

When you live far from big shops and restaurants, you have to be self-sufficient. People trade, donate and share what grows in their gardens. "I buy milk from people down the street," Blanche says. "They have two cows – R10 a litre. Warm, fresh milk that's full of cream."

Vegan festivals and rugby matches

Author and teacher Matty Strydom is my tour guide – she picks me up the next morning and we head into town to the Saturday market.

When I chatted to Dawn Berry, chairperson of Vanwyksdorp Tourism, on WhatsApp later, she listed all the things to do in the area. "Scratch around a bit and you'll discover a treasure," she said.

I learn about local chef Sue Lenferna, who hosts long-table events, and about the artist Retha Buitendach, who sometimes offers Friday movie nights at the Buffelfontein Gallery. And about Ricky's Drift, a farming community and animal sanctuary that hosts vegan festivals.

"We create our own social events," says another artist, Sue Stein. "Some of the local artists gather for lunch on Sundays. We do pottery on Wednesdays. It's a busy little town. I thought I came here to retire!"

Sue is one of the artists who helped paint murals around town last year.

Vanwyksdorp received funds from Lottoland's *Help 'n dorp* project, and the money was used to build the Saamspeel Market and the multi-purpose sports court next door, where residents can play tennis, netball and basketball.

In a small town like Vanwyksdorp, everyone helps to make a difference. Matty also introduces me to Brian Saffrey from Oasis Community Projects, and to André Britz from Jobs for Carbon.

Like most rural towns in South Africa, Vanwyksdorp is a tale of two neighbourhoods. After the market, Matty and I head to an area called Die Blok, where we meet Surika Festus, principal of the Sonstraal Early Childhood Development Centre. She started the centre in a corrugated iron shed; now it's in the old Lutheran school, with 60 pupils.

"I don't sit around and wait for things

to happen," she says. "If we wait, we wait a long time."

With support from various donors, Surika has created a safe place for the local children to learn and thrive.

"Vanwyksdorp is a small community with big hearts," she says.

Later that afternoon, Matty and I go back to Die Blok to watch a rugby match: the Vanwyksdorp team, the Black Birds, are playing The Marlins from Mossel Bay. The Black Birds are the pride of the town and came second in the league last year. Few people miss a home game.

Between bouts of cheering, I chat to Jacques van Staden – he's on the Black Birds management team and used to coach. "Sport keeps the guys from going down the wrong path," he says. "We have our challenges, though. In winter, practising is difficult because we don't have lights and by the time the men get home from work, it's already dark. But we can go for a run. If you're fit enough, you can do anything."

As if to underline his point, the Black Birds score another try.

After the rugby, I drive back to Rooiberg Lodge. In the sunset light, the flowering aloes burn like flames in the dusk.

I remember something that Tamantha Williams said to me at the market this morning: "The energy of this place is just different. Every day, it gives you a gift. Every day, I see something that makes me say, wow!"

You're right, Tamantha. As I drive out of Vanwyksdorp the next morning, with one of Blanche's pizzas on the passenger seat, I feel a sudden pang. I was only in town for a couple of days but I'm already missing a lifestyle I didn't know I wanted – and the people I met who wear their hearts on their sleeves.

But I can come back. I just need to turn onto that dirt road.

Clockwise from top left: Blanche van Rensburg is one of the town's legendary bakers. The Dutch Reformed church in Vanwyksdorp can seat about half the town. Mihan and Jessica Louw, with dogs Jimmy and Jemma, wait for help to arrive after getting two flat tyres. When the Black Birds rugby team plays a home game, everyone comes to watch. The dirt roads and smallholdings have charmed a few people into staying. One day, a couple of hippies came to camp here – and never left. Surika Festus is the principal of the Sonstraal Early Childhood Development Centre. Matty Strydom is an author and teacher.





From top left: Don't miss the Saturday morning market. Learn more about this town on the historical walking trail, which starts opposite the Vanwyksdorp Mall. Saamspeel Park caters to ball sports fans.

5 Things to do

1 Walk through town

Vanwyksdorp was founded on the farm Buffelsfontein in 1897. In 1904, the church council chose the name because more than 200 locals were Van Wyks!

The town thrived during the ostrich-feather boom, but declined when the new railway line bypassed it.

You can discover these and other stories on a historical walking tour that begins opposite the Vanwyksdorp Mall in Voortrekker Street. Scan the QR code on the information sign and an audio guide will lead you to sites such as the Dutch Reformed church, the school and Anglo-Boer War graves. Blue numbers on buildings mark the 17 stops on the route.

2 Go to the Saamspeel Market and Park

Come meet the locals and buy treats like blueberry pies, sourdough bread, marmalade and fresh vegetables. The sports court next door is open for activities – bring your tennis racket if you want to play.

Where? Corner of Church and Hoog streets.

When? Every Saturday at 10 am.

3 Drive mountain passes

You can do four mountain passes in a single day if you really want to, but why rush? Spend a few days in Vanwyksdorp and drive (or cycle) a different pass each day.

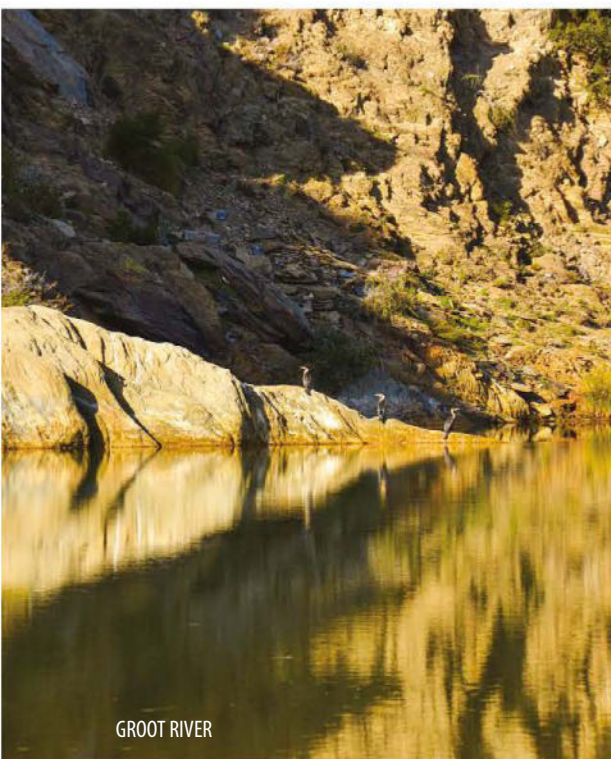
Rooiberg Pass is north of town and connects Vanwyksdorp to Calitzdorp (51 km away). Or you can head seawards on the Jan Muller, Cloete and Du Plessis passes to Mossel Bay (119 km).

If you want a beautiful drive on tar, make your way to Garcia's Pass (R323) over the Langeberg to Riversdale (66 km).

4 Buy pomegranate products

Ever wondered what you can do with a pomegranate? Go chat to Jack Lewis, who





GROOT RIVER

lives outside town and grows pomegranates and apricots. He makes a variety of pomegranate products – juice, dried arils and a thick syrup – and sells them on the farm.

Where? West of town, next to the R327.

☎ 082 467 1621 (call beforehand); 🌐 klapperbos.co.za

5 Explore the Karoo

Rooiberg Lodge is in the Assegaay Bosch Nature Reserve (65 km²), which is chock-full of mountains and kloofs with fresh streams. Believe me, you didn't know the Little Karoo could be so scenic!

The reserve has game and a variety of birds – we saw a rare black stork. Day visitors are welcome; the lodge has a restaurant, spa, swimming pool and activities including hiking, fishing and stargazing.

Speaking of hiking... If you're fit, you can tackle the 16 km Fynbos Trail that takes you to a viewpoint overlooking the plains and the Langeberg in the distance. If you're adventurous, you can join a guide and go kloofing in Assegaay Kloof. It costs R250 per person for a full day. There are MTB trails, too, and you can fish in the Groot River. Get a map at the reception office.

Foodies can join a guide on an olive tour at nearby Mont Rouge Olive Estate – one of the biggest olive farms in the country. The tour costs R250 per person (weekdays only; book beforehand).

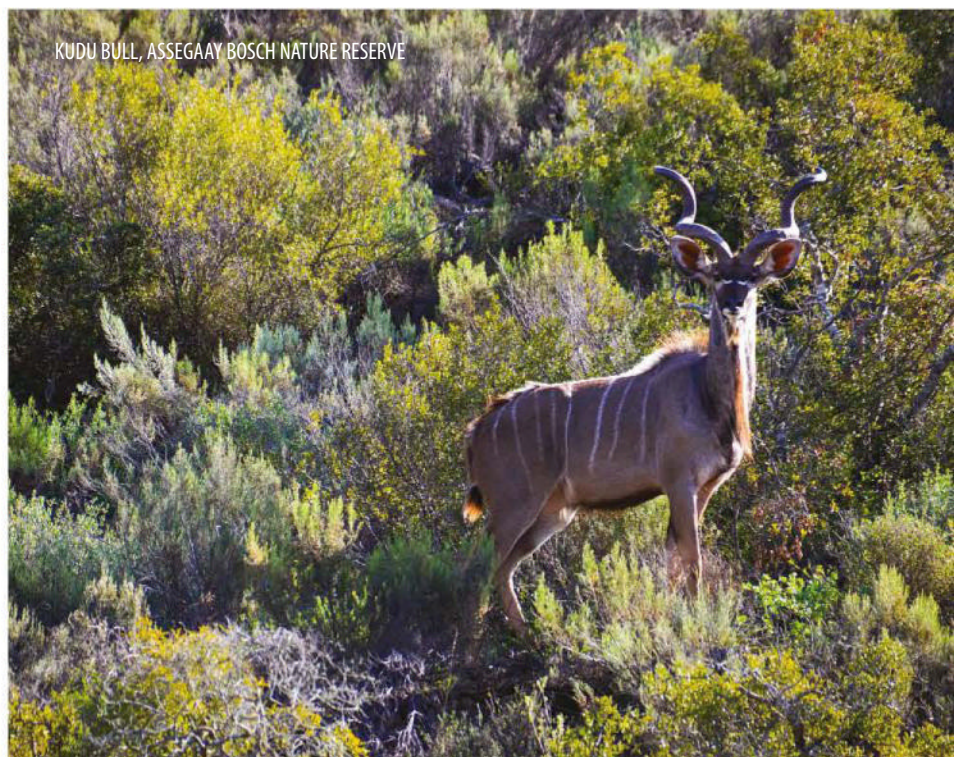
Where? About 12 km east of Vanwyksdorp on the P1661 to Calitzdorp.

☎ 028 0500 152; ☎ 071 496 8245 (WhatsApp)

🌐 rooiberglodge.co.za



R327 BETWEEN THE R62 AND VANWYKSDORP



KUDU BULL, ASSEGAAY BOSCH NATURE RESERVE

TOWN

EAT HERE

VANWYKSDORP MALL

Stop here for a milkshake so thick your straw will stand upright. They serve fresh fruit smoothies, breakfast and light meals. You can buy almost anything, from homemade rusks to a tap for your bathroom.

Where? 45 Voortrekker Street

Opening times: Monday to Friday from 8 am to 5 pm; Saturday and Sunday from 9 am to 1 pm (kitchen closes at noon).

☎ 082 978 4863 (Heidi)

DUSTY DOG

A good place to watch rugby. They serve light meals, and a “pensioner’s breakfast” every Thursday (R50). Buy treats made by the town’s best bakers: Tannie Rika’s carrot cake or Tannie Anna’s chocolate cake. On Friday nights, they light a fire and you can join the braai. They sell braai packs, salad and roosterkoek, and you might even be treated to live music.

Where? 1 Voortrekker Street

Opening times: Wednesday to Saturday from 9 am to 10 pm; Sunday from 9 am to 3 pm.

☎ 065 895 7067 (Gillian); “Dusty Dog” on Facebook

OTHER PLACES TO EAT

Many guesthouses and guest farms in and around town offer meals on request. Rooiberg Lodge has a great restaurant.

Also keep an eye out for pop-up dinner evenings – follow the Vanwyksdorp page on Facebook, ask your host, or contact Vanwyksdorp Tourism (☎ 076 990 3972).





ROOIBERG LODGE

STAY HERE

KAROO BUSH CAMP

The neat camp is on terraces next to the Groot River. Most of the stands have shade and privacy, and some of them have private bathrooms. There's a communal splash pool and lapa.

Where? South of town – turn off the R327.

Rates: From R350 per night for two adults; plus R100 per child.

📞 079 166 4449

🌐 bushwakka.africa

WATERMILL FARM

This farm at the foot of the Rooiberg had the first watermill in the district, in service from 1880 to 1960. Swim in the dam, which is fed by mountain streams. The four self-catering cottages each have Wi-Fi, solar power and braai facilities.

Rates: From R500 per person – the cottages sleep two to four people.

📞 072 468 0495

🌐 watermillfarm.co.za

RICKY'S DRIFT

On this fully vegan guest farm, you can stay in a safari tent with a communal kitchen and living area.

If you can't imagine a weekend without a braai, stay in one of the non-vegan options: Boshuis sleeps two people with a braai and an outdoor bathtub. Faraway House sleeps four – two in the main house and two in the private annex, each with its own bathroom. There's a braai area and a private garden so you can bring Socks along.

They serve cake and tea and vegan dishes at their farm shop – book beforehand.

Rates: Tents from R330 per person (no animal products allowed); self-catering houses from R1 000 per night for two people.

📞 072 751 7176; 🌐 rickysdrift.co.za

ROOIBERG LODGE

Rooiberg has accommodation options for every budget, from dorm-style loft rooms with

communal bathrooms to luxury suites for couples. The campsite has communal ablution facilities and 16 stands close together next to a waterhole, where zebras and nyalas hang out. Each stand has power and a braai.

There are also eight self-catering units around the waterhole that sleep two or four people. The en suite double rooms are on a koppie with scenic views.

The lodge restaurant is open every day – day visitors are welcome.

Rates: Camping R350 for two people; plus R175 per extra person. Loft rooms with communal facilities from R580 per night for two people. Suites from R1 750 per night for two people (breakfast included). Self-catering unit from R2 250 per night for two people.

📞 028 0500 152; 📞 071 496 8245

(WhatsApp)

🌐 rooiberglodge.co.za

WHAT ELSE?

- There's no fuel available in Vanwyksdorp – the nearest filling station is in Ladismith, about 45 km away.

- Bring cash because there are no ATMs in town and you might need it for the Saturday market. In case of emergency, you can ask Savers Lane in Voortrekker Street if the "bank" has cash.

- Make a note in your diary: There will be a church bazaar on 28 March 2026 and 26 September 2026. Contact Alta Lourens for more info: 📞 084 618 1763.

- Visit 🌐 vanwyksdorptourism.com or WhatsApp 📞 076 990 3972 for more information.



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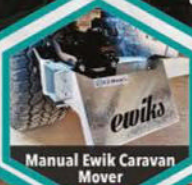


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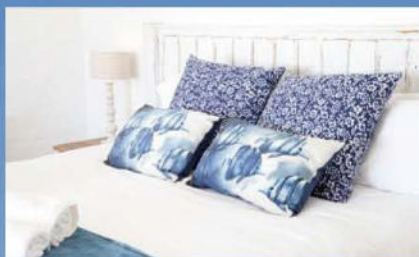
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Wamakersvlei Beach Farm

West Coast off the Beaten Track

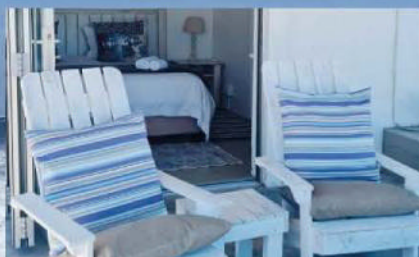
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- Local information and things to do.

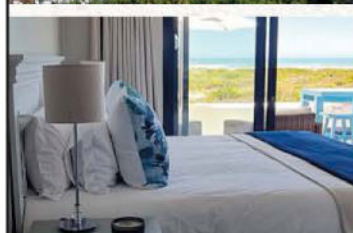


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Casa del Mar

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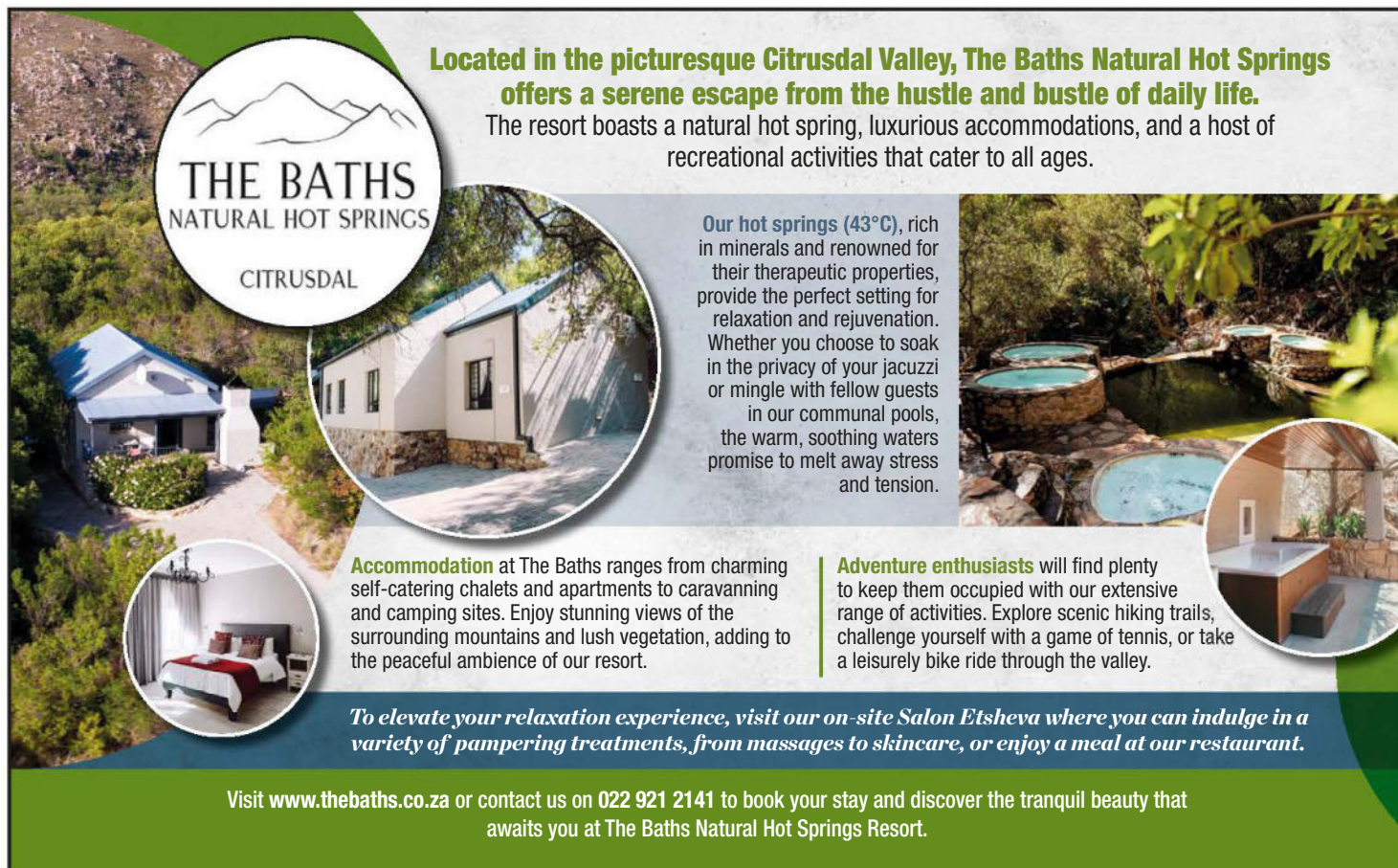
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Located in the picturesque Citrusdal Valley, The Baths Natural Hot Springs offers a serene escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life.

The resort boasts a natural hot spring, luxurious accommodations, and a host of recreational activities that cater to all ages.

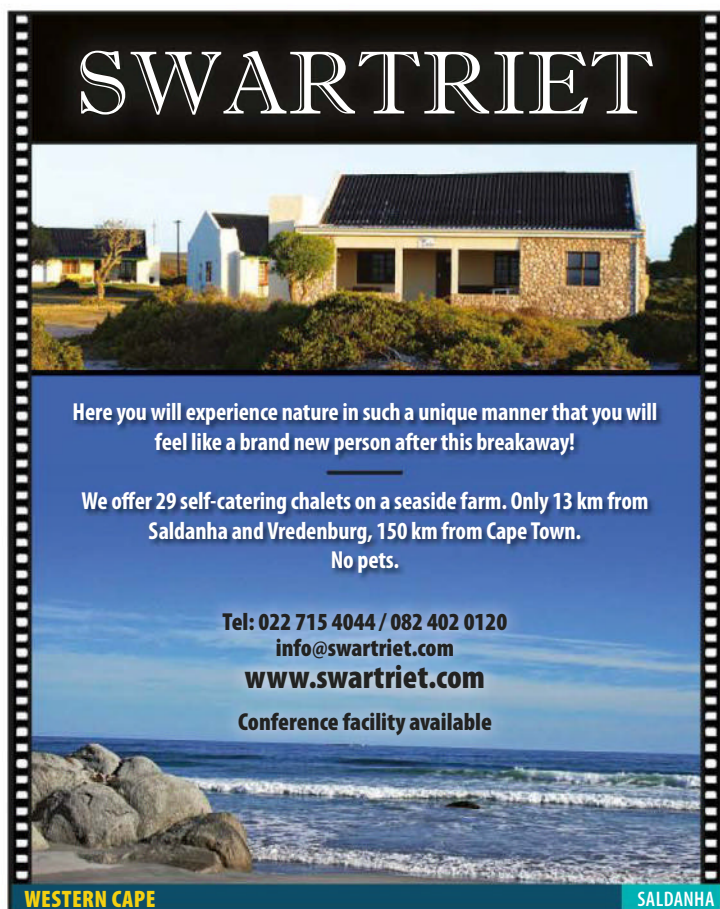
Our hot springs (43°C), rich in minerals and renowned for their therapeutic properties, provide the perfect setting for relaxation and rejuvenation. Whether you choose to soak in the privacy of your jacuzzi or mingle with fellow guests in our communal pools, the warm, soothing waters promise to melt away stress and tension.

Accommodation at The Baths ranges from charming self-catering chalets and apartments to caravanning and camping sites. Enjoy stunning views of the surrounding mountains and lush vegetation, adding to the peaceful ambience of our resort.

Adventure enthusiasts will find plenty to keep them occupied with our extensive range of activities. Explore scenic hiking trails, challenge yourself with a game of tennis, or take a leisurely bike ride through the valley.

To elevate your relaxation experience, visit our on-site Salon Etsheva where you can indulge in a variety of pampering treatments, from massages to skincare, or enjoy a meal at our restaurant.

Visit www.thebaths.co.za or contact us on 022 921 2141 to book your stay and discover the tranquil beauty that awaits you at The Baths Natural Hot Springs Resort.



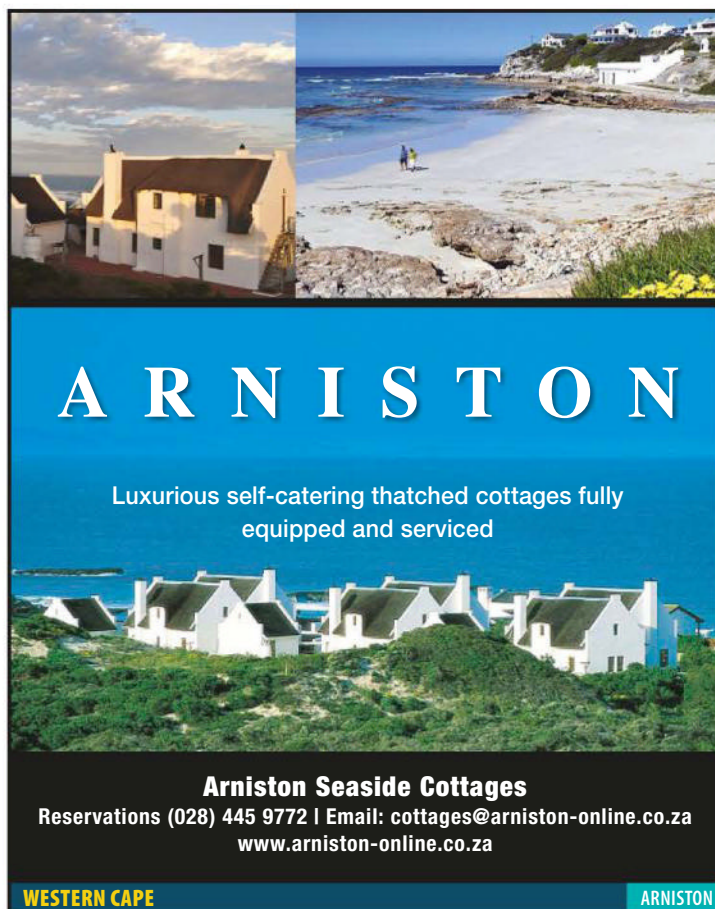
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WESTERN CAPE SALDANHA



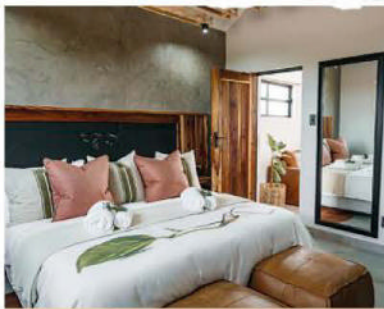
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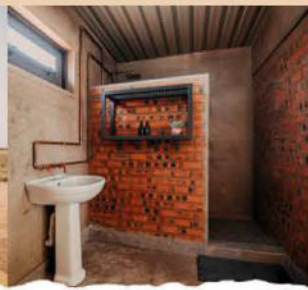
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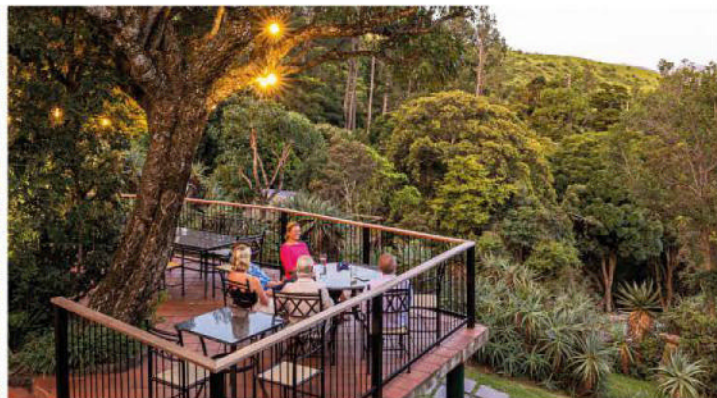
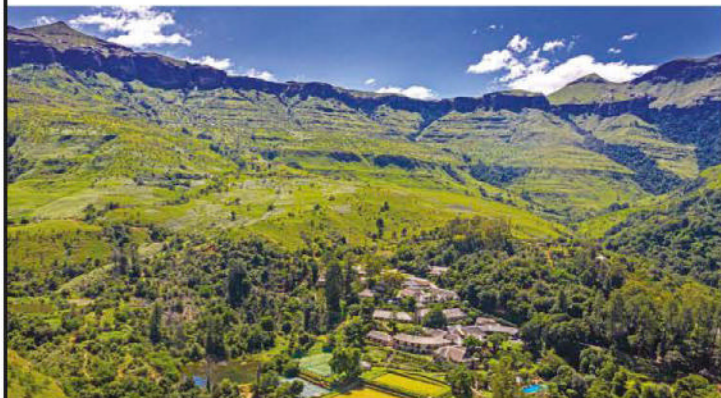

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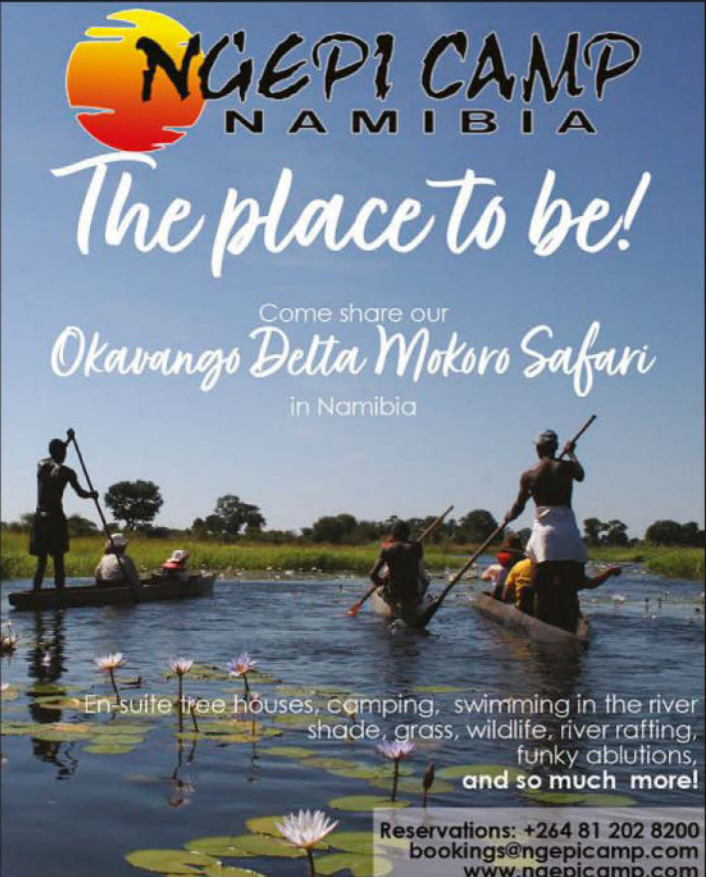
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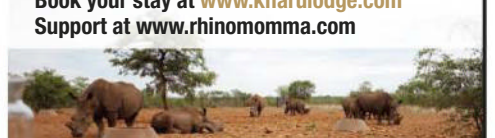
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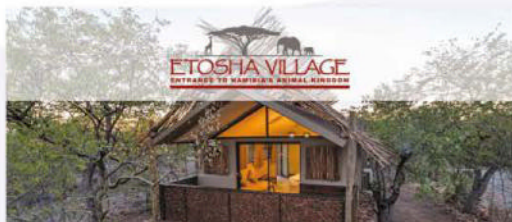
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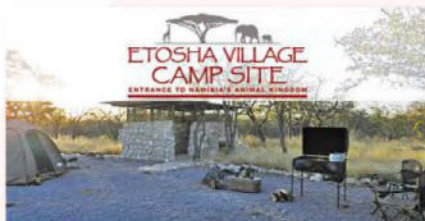
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Weird, weirder, octopus!

Its arms grow out of its head, its blood is blue, it has three hearts and nine brains! Is it an alien from outer space? No, it's the strange and wonderful octopus!

COMPILED BY **SOPHIA VAN TAAK**

The octopus is one of the most interesting creatures on earth. There are about 300 different species in the world; the one we most often see in our rock pools is the common octopus.

The octopus hunts fish, crabs, crayfish, mussels and jellyfish. It catches its prey with its arms and bites it to death with a hard, sharp beak (almost like a parrot's) on the underside of its head. Its stomach is also inside its head, which means that when an octopus swallows food, it moves straight through its brain! Well, one of its brains. There's also a "brain" in each of its eight arms, which ensures the arm can swim, feel and grip on its own.

The octopus has three hearts. One heart circulates blood through the body while the other two pump blood through the gills to get oxygen. Humans have iron in our blood; the octopus has copper. This metal helps it to survive in cold, oxygen-poor water, and it's what gives octopus blood its blue tinge.



A short life

Octopuses grow very fast and reach adulthood within six months to a year. Soon after the male and female have mated, the male ages quickly and dies. The female lays thousands of tiny eggs in a sheltered area and looks after them. As soon as the babies have hatched, the female dies, too.



Did you know?

The octopus is a very smart animal – it's as intelligent as a domestic cat. In experiments, they've learnt to identify colours and shapes, and even solve puzzles, like how to open the screw lid of a jar.

The octopus has glands that release an inky liquid when the animal feels threatened. The ink cloud obscures the predator's vision, makes its eyes burn and hampers its sense of smell.

The octopus is great at camouflage. It can also change the texture of its skin to look like a piece of driftwood, kelp or coral. Sometimes they hide inside a seashell or a floating coconut.

Is octopus the same as calamari?

Not quite. Calamari – the food – is usually squid. The octopus is from the same family as these creatures, but there are some differences:

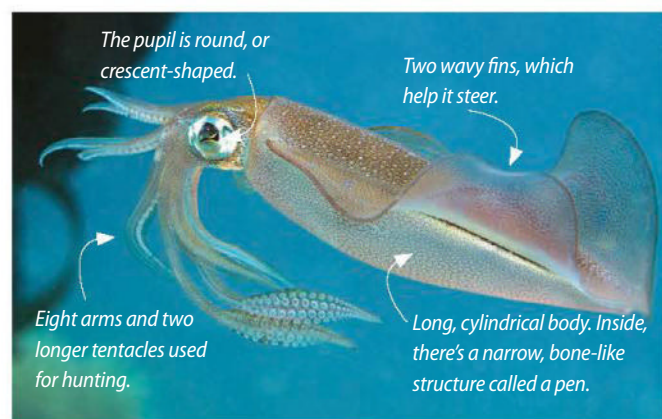
Cuttlefish

The cuttlefish is a slow swimmer. It has one spongy bone or shell inside its body – called a cuttlebone. Maybe you've picked up a cuttlebone on the beach before: It looks like a small, white surfboard.



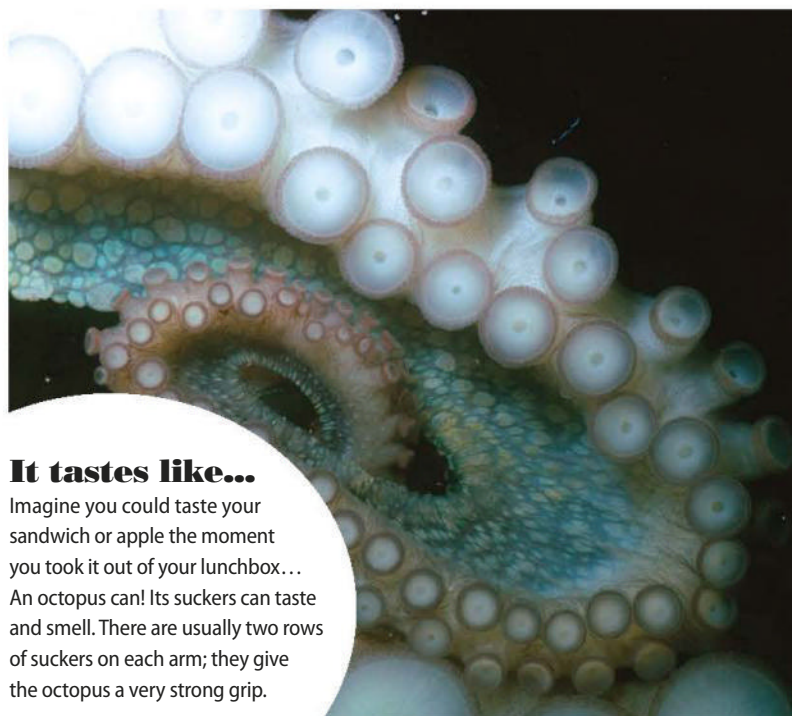
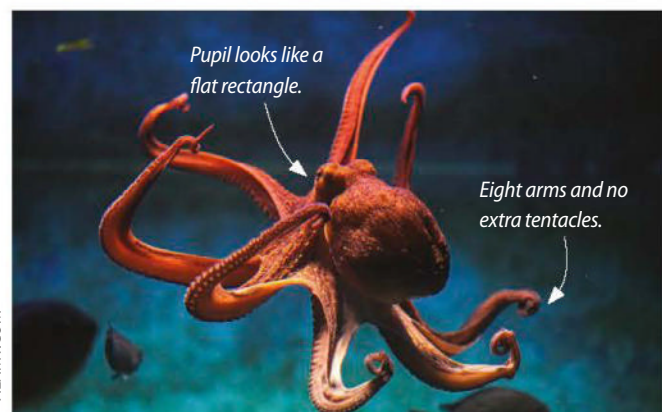
Squid

The squid is a great swimmer. It propels itself forward by sucking water into its body cavity and forcing it out again in a strong stream – like a water gun!



Octopus

The octopus has no bones in its body, so it can flatten itself to wriggle through tight spaces.

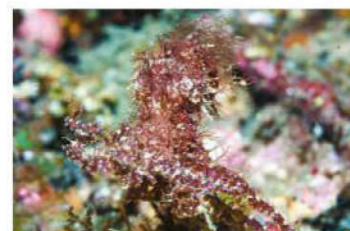


It tastes like...

Imagine you could taste your sandwich or apple the moment you took it out of your lunchbox... An octopus can! Its suckers can taste and smell. There are usually two rows of suckers on each arm; they give the octopus a very strong grip.

INTERESTING SPECIES

> The hairy octopus is small, about the size of a paperclip. It's covered in thin skin flaps to blend in with its surroundings. It looks like seagrass!



> The blue-ringed octopus is beautiful but venomous. Octopuses seldom bite humans, but if this one did, it would be deadly. Fortunately, we don't get them in South Africa.



> The wunderpus has long, striped arms and its eyes are on stalks high on its head.



> The giant pacific octopus is the biggest in the world. Adults usually weigh around 15 kg, but one individual was nearly 200 kg with a nine-metre tentacle span.



Sources: aquarium.co.za; seadocsociety.org; outforia.com; shedd Aquarium.org; octonation.com



A zoom lens lets you see surprising things... When **Milan Francis** (19) from Mokopane stopped next to a game-viewing vehicle in the Kruger, she could never have guessed what was happening on a koppie in the distance!

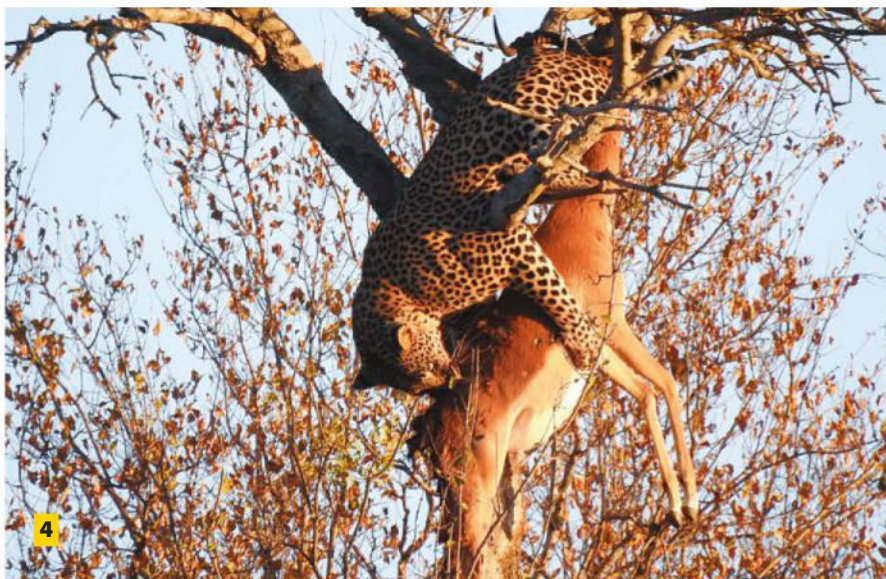
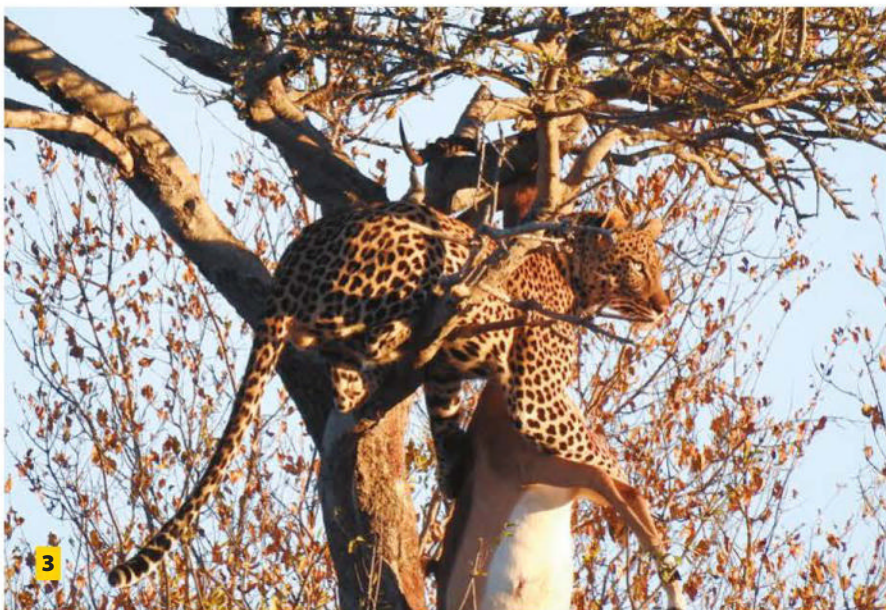
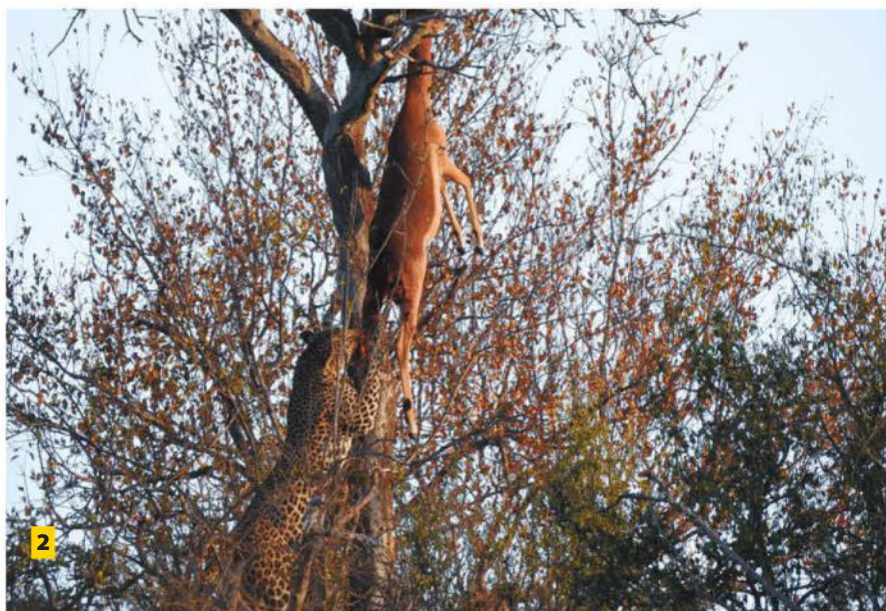
I visited the Kruger Park with my family in July 2024 – we stayed at Letaba. One day, we decided to drive to Satara for lunch. We didn't see many animals on the road there, but on the way back, about 5 km from the turn-off to Olifants on the H1-5, we came across a game-viewing vehicle and the guide waved us to a stop. He only had one guest – an American tourist – and asked if we had a pair of binoculars because they'd seen a leopard in the distance. They pointed to a koppie **1** about 400 m from the road.

We couldn't see anything with the naked eye, but my dad's binos soon revealed a big leopard that had dragged an impala ram into a tree (**2 & 3**) where it hung from its horns. Before long the leopard started to feed. **4**

We passed the binos around and I also watched the action through the 83x zoom lens of my Nikon Coolpix P900 camera. Unfortunately it was getting late and the camp gates at Letaba were going to close if we didn't hustle – we still had a long way to drive. I would have loved to stay longer to see if any other predators like hyenas showed up.

We went back to the koppie the next day, but there was no sign of the leopard, only the half-eaten carcass in the tree.

It was one of the most amazing sightings we've had in the park. I'm grateful my camera showed us so much more of the scene than we would have been able to see otherwise.



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BIRDS

BY FAANSIE PEACOCK

LORDS OF THE RING

and processed at a camping table under a tree.

The most important part is the permanent but lightweight metal ring that's attached to one of the bird's legs and marked with a unique number. In some studies where individual birds need to be recognised, researchers may add different colour combinations of plastic rings, too. Then a plethora of measurements are taken, accurate to the decimal millimetre. Researchers assess wing moult, they weigh the bird, blow on belly feathers to check for a brood patch, and generally gather as much critical data as they can. Then the bird is released unharmed, sporting its shiny new bling.

These nets can't be put up by any Tom, Dick or Harry. It takes years of training to qualify as a ringer, and the whole process is governed by strict regulations and permits.

What's the point of the ring? If anyone captures this bird again, or finds it dead, they can contact the relevant coordinator (SAFRING, in South Africa) and quote the ring number. Immediately, we'll know how far the bird moved and how old it is. These rare recapture moments are what ringers live for. That bird may have been ringed last weekend in the next tree over; or it might be a trans-equatorial migrant that was first ringed in Siberian Russia in 1982. Each ring connects birders across continents and decades – one more line in a never-ending novel.

Indeed. Bird ringing has been fundamental in figuring out how birds migrate. Before ringing, there was simply no way to know. In 1822, Baron von Bothmer found a white stork on his estate in northern Germany. This bird had somehow survived being impaled by a spear and had miraculously completed its migration. But the baron recognised that the spear was of African origin, and the idea that individual birds can move across the planet finally clicked. Before then, the dominant theories about where European birds disappeared to in winter ranged from hibernating underwater to turning into different species.

Nowadays, fancy little GPS gadgets attached to certain birds can give us real-time data about their location, but the old-school ringing method still plays a vital role in our understanding of birds. Give your local bird club a call to find out when they're planning their next ringing adventure – visitors are always welcome!

Just be careful of those sharp beaks...

There are two stressful parts to giving a birding talk (or any public speaking for that matter): the first three minutes, when you're still finding your voice; and the Q&A afterwards. At the end, if people start fidgeting and glancing at the exit, I know the talk was too long or too boring; but if a forest of hands springs into the air, I know the audience loved the talk – they want to engage and know more.

After speaking in dozens of lecture halls, conference rooms, university classes, church auditoriums and even the occasional living room, I can anticipate and answer most questions easily enough. But there's one subset of audience members that always throws a spanner in the works: kids. Because children view the world from a completely different angle, their questions are so creative, random and insightful that they often catch me off guard. I love it!

To give you an example, one recent question from a youngster was, "Which

bird's bite is the most painful?" Not exactly the sort of information you'd find referenced in your trusted copy of *Roberts*. But I had an answer for her: the thick-billed weaver. That's something I knew from personal experience, and I still have a small scar to prove it.

To be fair, the weaver in question thought it was fighting for its life. From its perspective, a giant bipedal monster had captured it using magic and was now pulling open its wings and blowing air on its belly. But I knew I was going to release it unharmed in a second, if only it would let go of my finger.

What am I talking about? Bird ringing, of course, or "banding" to our American colleagues. Ornithologists capture birds using almost invisible "mist nets". These are erected before dawn across strategic flyways. Then you sit back and wait. And pray that a dung beetle doesn't fly into the net and turn the whole thing into a giant tangled ball. The plan is that a bird collides with the net and gets its feet tangled in the nylon mesh. It is then carefully extracted, put in a cloth bag to minimise stress

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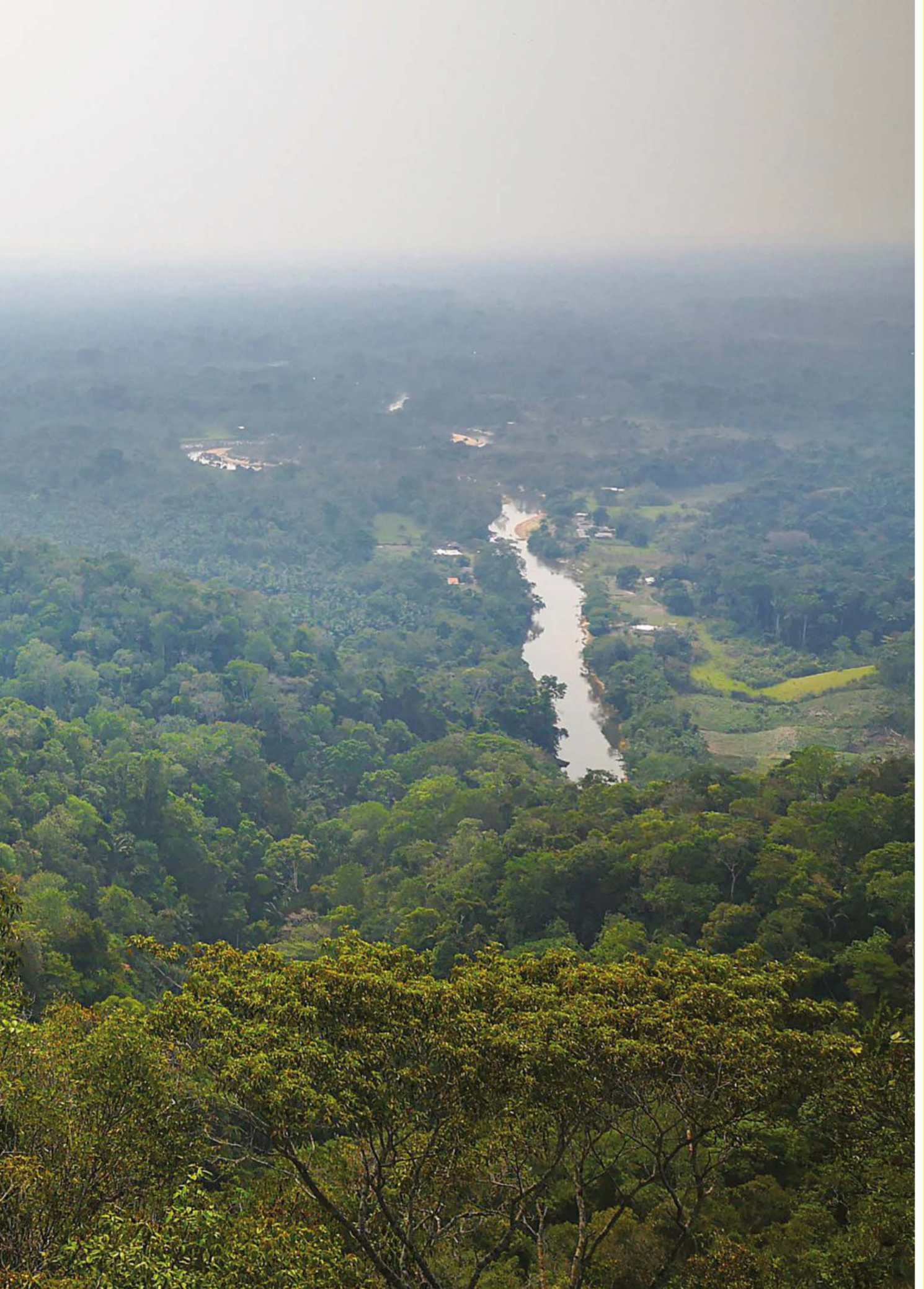
smartwomen.fairlady.com



The Amazon's wild west

The Amazon is one of those wilderness areas that rewards you the deeper you venture, and haunts you long after you've said goodbye. **Francois Raubenheimer** went in search of the soul of the rainforest.

The Brazilian jungle surrounding the Mõa River, as seen from a viewpoint in the Serra do Divisor National Park. The haze was caused by forest fires. The hostel where Francois stayed, called Pousada do Miro, is on the first sandbank.



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Public transport in Iquitos, a city on the banks of the Amazon River, consists of these “motocars”. A *peke-peke* (flat-bottomed boat) travels up a very low stream near Iquitos. It’s easy to be dwarfed by a giant kapok tree. Search long enough and you’ll find almost anything at the enormous Belén market in Iquitos.

Boats of all descriptions anchor at the Iquitos “harbour”. Each season the water level shifts many metres. Five months later, this whole scene was under water!

While mountains represent life’s challenges, I find energy in forests. I feel alive surrounded by thousands of plants. For this reason, the Amazon – the rainforest and the river – has always been a bucket list destination.

After two months of travelling through the Andes in the winter of 2024 (*see issue #203*. – Ed) it was time to change tack. From the mountain city of Huaraz in Peru, I returned to the capital of Lima on the coast. From there, I flew about 1 000 km north-east, to the city of Iquitos on the banks of the Amazon River. To prepare for the jungle heat, I shaved off my beard, which had been nice and cosy in the cold. Like my face, Iquitos was also something new – it felt like an oven when I stepped off the aeroplane!

Years ago, I met a Brazilian man called Guga in South Africa. He gave me lots of advice about visiting his home continent and had met me in São Paulo when I first arrived. His work involves uplifting the indigenous people of Brazil, and he had an assignment planned – either to a site near Belém on the Amazonian coast, or deep inland in the state of Acre. We’d stayed in contact, hoping to meet up at either of those destinations.

I’ve long dreamt of taking a slow boat along the Amazon River. The journey from Iquitos in Peru to the harbour city of Belém in Brazil, where the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean, takes two weeks and covers nearly 3 000 km. These slow boats are cargo ships that also accept passengers – you sleep in hammocks on the two top decks. The nature of the journey is unpredictable. I hoped things would work out.

Nice to meet you, Amazon

Iquitos can only be reached by boat or aeroplane. It’s a busy trading centre with few facilities for tourists. Luckily I found a good hostel and the young, English-speaking Peruvian owner was very helpful.

My plan was to book my boat ride straight away, but I realised I first had to acclimatise. After almost two months in the mountains, I was conditioned to the cold. Now I was sweating. All the time. It felt like I was flowing out of my body. The heat and humidity was overwhelming.

Iquitos had some public transport, like scooters, motocars (a cross between a motorbike and a tuk-tuk) and unique “truck buses”, which I used to explore. Unfortunately, you don’t see much of the rainforest in Iquitos itself, even though I was surrounded by hundreds of kilometres of it in all directions. So I bought a package for a forest tour (which included all transport, accommodation, meals and outings) at a travel agency before continuing my search for a boat downriver.

Shortly before I’d arrived in Iquitos, Guga informed me that he’d be going to Acre, not Belém; he’d be there later in the week. As the condor flies, this remote province of Brazil is near Iquitos, but with no quick transport routes available, I’d have to take a complex detour to get there, via the central city of Manaus. I had to put all my travel skills to the test – a fun challenge!

But first, it was time to experience the rainforest. The travel agent transported our group of eight tourists to a village called Nauta, about 100 km



upstream. Nauta is close to the confluence of the Marañón and Ucayali rivers – from which point the river is called the Amazon. Yup, this is where the mightiest river on earth begins. Despite a relatively low water level, it was still hundreds of metres wide at that point. We travelled up the Ucayali to the place we were staying. Now I was really in the jungle!

Once we unpacked, we took a *peke-peke* (a flat-bottomed boat with benches wide enough for two people) to go look for the shy Amazon River dolphin. We waited patiently while the guide whistled tunes to lure them closer, but we only glimpsed them a few times. The sightings were too brief to take photos, but long enough to confirm that this highly endangered species really does occur here. They're pink or grey, with a short dorsal fin, and grow to about 2,5 m in length.

That night, we went for a walk in the dark forest with torches, with strange night sounds all around. The expert guide pointed out all kinds of plants and animals. A sloth hung high in the canopy. There were enormous pink-toe tarantulas and even bigger *Amblypygi* whip spiders – the largest one's whip-like legs were about 30 cm in length!

Early the next morning, I experienced the forest again on a longer outing. There were a surprising number of palm trees, very different to the other rainforests I'd seen elsewhere in the world. There was a thick carpet of leaves on the ground – compost to help keep the forest dense. There were several monkey species on the ground and in the trees, like cute squirrel monkeys and common woolly monkeys, which use their thick tails like a fifth limb to climb.

The highlight for me was seeing giant kapok trees – some of the biggest trees in the jungle. The tallest were nearly 60 m high, with buttress roots up to 15 m above ground. Known locally as *samauma*, kapok trees are considered sacred by the indigenous people. While other trees are felled, kapok trees remain, towering over the surrounding canopy. Each *samauma* is an ecosystem, with plants and animals living on the trunk and branches. I wished I could climb to the top of a *samauma* to see the jungle from there.

The long road to Cruzeiro do Sul

My next destination was Cruzeiro do Sul, in Acre. Had I been able to fly, Cruzeiro do Sul would have been an easy 430 km glide south from Iquitos. But no such direct route exists, so I had to take a 3 000 km detour. . .

I put my slow-boat dream on the backburner and used a few (fast) ferries to fit in with my friend's schedule. The first ferry was the *Zoe Alexa*. It carried us east from Iquitos to the Brazilian border at Santa Rosa – a 360 km journey that took 18 hours.

My trip to the Amazon in 2024 coincided with a record-breaking drought. Thousands of fires burnt and



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Grab a seat on the *Zoe Alexa* ferry. Cool jungle evenings make for lively gatherings – just like here in the border town of Leticia, Colombia. Morning traffic on the Croa River. Cintia, who owns a hostel on the Croa River, prepared delicious food like this tambaqui cooked in banana leaves. The dark-coloured water of the Rio Negro and the lighter Amazon River flow next to each other without mixing. Large murals decorate entire buildings in Manaus, a big city in the middle of the jungle.

Colourful butterflies darted around. One as big as my hand landed on my coffee cup.

smoke hung over the landscape. About 30 000 km² of rainforest was destroyed – almost the size of Lesotho.

Still, I was happy to spend time on the river. The mighty Amazon was no longer just a blue line on a map.

Peru, Brazil and Colombia meet in an area called Tres Fronteras, which means “three borders”. After you’ve had your passport stamped by the country you’re exiting and by the one you’re going to, you can roam the three neighbouring towns (Santa Rosa in Peru, Tabatinga in Brazil and Leticia in Colombia) freely. Border towns are usually a bit chaotic, but here – with three of them in close proximity – the chaos was amplified. I went across to Leticia to find overnight accommodation – my only visit to Colombia.

Early the next morning, I boarded the *Lancha Crystal I* in Tabatinga, a bigger, faster ferry than the *Zoe Alexa*. Meals were served, there was air conditioning, and I could stand in the open-air section in the back and watch as the river grew wider. We arrived in Manaus, a big city in the middle of the rainforest, late the next evening.

I had the rest of the following day to explore Manaus because my flight was only at midnight. What I wanted to see most was the confluence of two massive rivers: the Rio Negro from Colombia (with dark water coloured by tannins) and the Amazon River from Peru (lighter, muddy water). I took a small boat to the confluence and shot photos hundreds of metres from the banks on either side. (This, despite the Amazon reaching its lowest level in 120 years only two weeks later.) The water of the two rivers differs so much that the dark and light streams flow next to each other for kilometres without really mixing.

Later, back in the city centre, I had frozen açaí (the fruit of a certain palm tree, served like ice cream) which helped me cool down. I was on the city square next to the opera house and saw a group of musicians playing samba. This was the first time I’d heard this Brazilian music style with its African influences in person.

I made my way to the airport late in the evening to catch my flight to the city of Rio Branco in the state of Acre. Landing in Rio Branco, the air was thick with the smoke of forest fires. I had to wait for a bus at the open-air station for three hours. I lay down on a bench on top of my luggage and tried to catch my breath, wondering if this detour was worth the effort! Slightly dizzy, I got on the bus in the early morning for a bumpy 12-hour drive to Cruzeiro do Sul, 570 km to the north-east. I was exhausted and slept most of the way.

It was a relief to see Guga’s friendly face that evening at the bus station in Cruzeiro do Sul. Finally, I could have a conversation in English again, after weeks of relying on translations on my phone. We

had dinner on the town square, where I told him everything about my travels since I’d last seen him in São Paulo months before. Now I could start planning my adventures in Acre...

Deep in the forest

Brazilians joke that Acre doesn’t really exist and that people imagine it. That’s how far away it is from the rest of the country. Cruzeiro do Sul is even more remote – it’s more than 3 300 km from São Paulo!

Cruzeiro do Sul (it means “Southern Cross”) is a tranquil place, next to the Juruá River. Foreign tourists are rare, except for a few adventurers and scientists searching for new birds, beasts, plants and fungi.

Ironically, Guga was much busier with work than we’d hoped and he couldn’t travel with me. But he gave me advice and introduced me to some of his contacts. This was extremely helpful, not only because almost no one spoke English, but also because information for tourists was so scarce. Without them, I would have wandered around aimlessly.

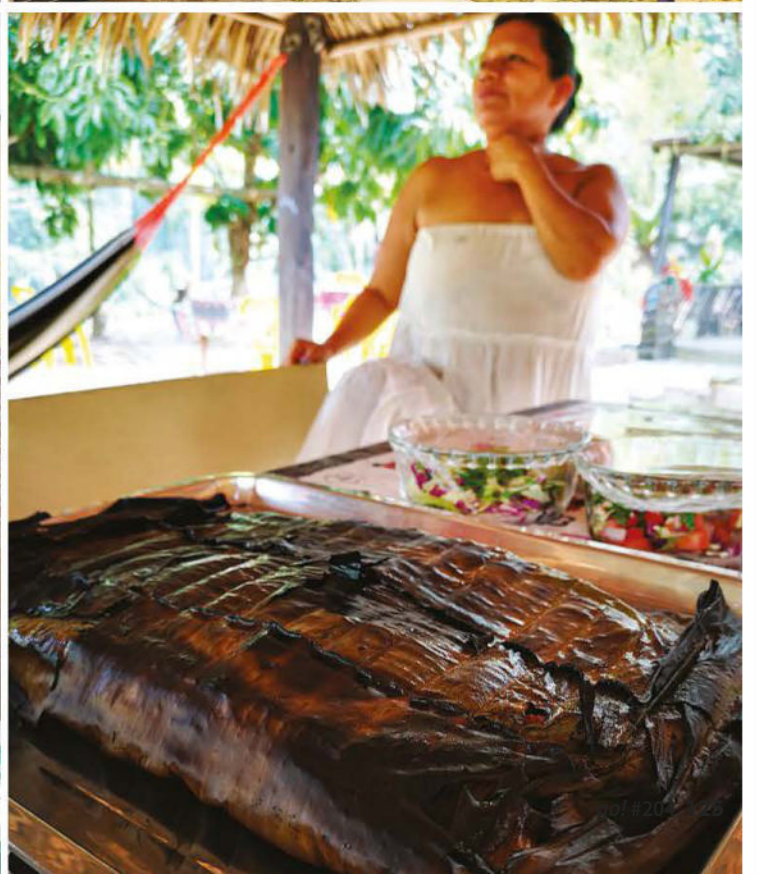
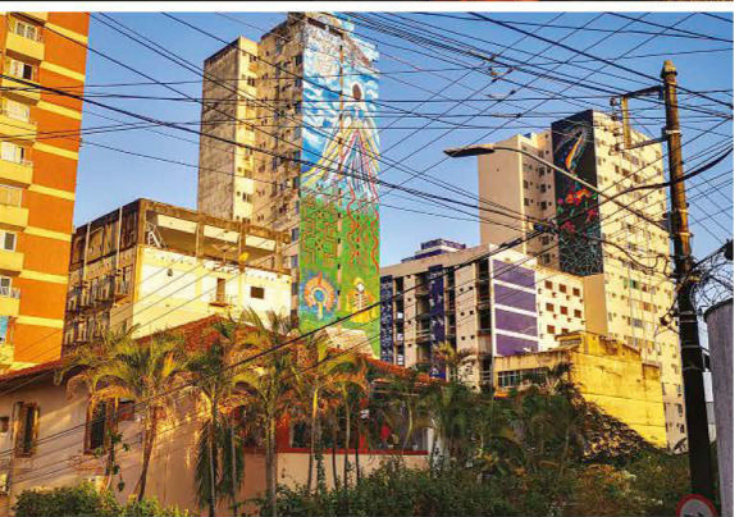
The Croa River is about 20 km south-east of Cruzeiro do Sul and offers some accommodation options for tourists. Guga suggested a *pousada* (hostel) called Canto Encanto Janaína. I spent three days there. The owner, Cintia, was a friendly hostess with a boisterous laugh. Although communication was difficult, she made things easy with delicious food like fresh salad (a rarity in Brazil), fish, fruit, the leaves of indigenous plants and freshly pressed açaí juice.

Aside from boat rides on (and swimming in) the Croa, there were footpaths in the surrounding jungle, some of which led to enormous kapok trees.

At the *pousada*’s restaurant I had some of the best fish I’ve ever eaten – huge tambaqui with bones as big as those in a lamb chop! These endemic freshwater fish can grow to a metre in length and weigh nearly 40 kg. Cintia cooked the fish in banana leaves with spices. For a moment, I gave up being vegetarian. No regrets!

Colourful butterflies darted around. One as big as my hand landed on my coffee cup. Despite the smoke in the air, nature felt healthy and alive.

Before Guga returned to São Paulo, he helped me arrange my last adventure in Acre. The Croa River was fun, but I wanted something wilder. So, I headed even further west to Pousada do Miro, a hostel on the edge of the Serra do Divisor National Park. I had arranged for a week-long trip, booked through a travel agent, with accommodation and meals included. There were no other facilities where I was going. I also had to get an official permit to visit the park because it borders Peru. (Miro, the owner of Pousada do Miro, helped me with this.)





Rudimentary bridges are often used to cross streams deep inside the Serra do Divisor National Park.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Miro, who owns Pousada do Miro, with his young son and Francois. The camp kitchen on an overnight hike, deep inside the rainforest. When you travel through the jungle surrounding the Mõa River, it feels as if there's no end to the trees.

From Mâncio Lima, about 35 km from Cruzeiro do Sul, five other tourists and I cruised along the Mõa River for eight hours on a small boat. If you drew a line on the map, it would measure 87 km, but in reality we travelled much further because of all the bends in the river. The longest straight stretch was only a few hundred metres.

The water level was so low at times that we had to inch over thousands of tree trunks on the riverbed. The sun burnt down, but the breeze made it bearable. I leant back and took in the scenery, like I was in a movie.

By late afternoon, mountains lifted the forest up in front of us. Exhausted, we trudged ashore at the *pousada*. I stayed in my own cottage and all our meals were served in a communal, open-air dining area. Now I was properly in the bundus!

One last light show

Over the next few days, we went up the Mõa River by boat every day, deeper into the park, visiting waterfalls along the tributaries. We swam to cool down. Everything felt pristine. It was easy to imagine how tribes could live here, isolated from the outside world. (Apparently there are still about 10 of these so-called "uncontacted" tribes in Acre.) It was a privilege to be in such an untouched part of the forest. All the trees were bigger and healthier and every part of the forest was filled with life – everything was growing up, up, up!

One morning, we climbed a hill to a viewpoint. There are just a handful of places in the entire Brazilian Amazon where you can get perspective on the landscape, because the forest is surprisingly flat. (Cruzeiro do Sul is only 180 m above sea level.) It felt like we were surrounded by a green ocean, and it made me realise that I am just one living being on this planet, among billions of others.

The other tourists went home after four days, but I departed on a 12 km guided hike deeper into the forest, with Miro's son, Paulo. I was joined by a few locals – woodcutters who went along to clear vegetation around the bush camp where we'd be staying overnight.

Paulo and I hiked to the furthest waterfall. We mostly walked in a small stream – the fresh jaguar tracks in the sand were proof of how wild things were here!

Shortly after we'd arrived at the waterfall – only 4 km from the border with Peru – the heavens opened. After the rain shower, our pathway – the stream – was in flood. It was a chaotic swimming/hiking adventure back to the camp, mostly half submerged in the water.

That night, several kinds of fireflies put on a show – each species had its own unique colour and flash rate. But the highlight was the bioluminescent fungi. Once my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, the ground shone with a faint glow.

After my trip deep into the rainforest, I took one final boat ride up the Mõa, to the furthest point that tourists can go. I wondered if there were indigenous people watching us, taking aim with their darts. . . Here, on the very edge of "civilisation", I took a last few photos. Beyond this point, the river becomes impassable.

Miro, Paulo and I headed back to Mâncio Lima in a small boat – another eight-hour trip on the Mõa. Civilisation felt impossibly ugly and busy after the beauty and tranquillity of the jungle.

Now I was able to tell people that Acre not only exists, it's also very special.

In the final instalment: the state of Bahia, on the coast of Brazil.



MEET THE AUTHOR

Francois Raubenheimer is a software developer. When he's not travelling and working remotely, he lives in Observatory, Cape Town. He has a passion for art and nature – and an endless curiosity about everything that's unfamiliar and different. Since 2019, he's been on the road extensively in Africa, Europe and South America, following his life motto: "Home is where I am."



VISAS

- **Brazil:** free, upon arrival.
- **Peru:** free, upon arrival.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

This list gives a general idea of what accommodation cost during Francois's visit. He mostly used [booking.com](#) and some travel agencies, which we've listed.

IKITOS

- **Accommodation:** Hostel Iquitos Coliving, US\$8 per person (Note: this hostel is currently closed).
- **Tour operator:** Lupana Jungle Tours
- [lupunajunglelodge.com](#). The Jungle Tour cost about R1 500.

CRUZEIRO DO SUL

- **Accommodation:** Swamy Hotel, about R800 per person.
- 00 55 68 3322 6166

CROA RIVER

- **Accommodation:** Pousada Canto Encanto Janaína, about R600 per person (meals included). 00 55 68 9912 3364 (Jonathan); Instagram: @pousadajanaina_croa

MÔA RIVER

- **Accommodation:** Pousada do Miro, about R4 800 for the seven-day package (meals and transport included). 00 55 68 9971 2127 (Miro); Instagram: @pousadadomiro
- **Travel agency:** Viagem Belo Destino 00 55 68 9927 8938 (Narjara)

BOAT RIDES AND TRANSPORT:

- *Zoe Alexa* ferry, from Iquitos to the Santa Rosa border post: R700 per person.
- *Lancha Crystal I* ferry, from Tabatinga to Manaus: R3 000 per person.
- Long detour to Cruzeiro do Sul (two boat rides, one flight, one full day on the bus): about R8 000 in total.



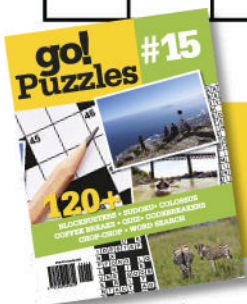
CROSSWORD PUZZLE

BY GERDA ENGELBRECHT

SOLUTION ON PAGE 104

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ESMA MARNEWICK; JAC KRITZINGER



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Park off in a camping chair in Zambia's Kafue National Park and a sense of zen will soon wash over you, writes **Toast Coetzer**.

A squadron of trumpeter hornbills cross over the Kafue River, ploughing the muggy air with their heavy wings like swimmers doing butterfly in the sky. Closer, hidden in the bush, I hear the tittering of guineafowl. Mayukuyuku is one of the more established campsites in Kafue National Park, but last night I was the only guest here. It's late February and few tourists visit at this time of year – it's too hot and rainy.

The caretaker came to light my campfire at 6 pm and asked if he could fetch me something from the bar at the lodge. Two Mosi Lagers would be great, I said, and he strolled off.

Once the beers arrived, I popped one open and started a veggie stir-fry on the Cadac. Dusk fell quickly. Before it was pitch dark, hippos sloshed out of the river like chunky amphibious military vehicles. They started grazing on the campsite lawn, so I nixed the idea of walking to the ablution block for a shower.

Now, a trio of pied kingfishers pause for a moment on a branch over the river. A Goliath heron flies upstream. A band of babblers start up a chat; a black-collared barbet calls; and in the background I can make out the mournful *hoo-hoo* of an emerald-spotted wood-dove. The longer you listen, the more you hear.

Two nights ago, I stayed at Kasabushi Camp on the western side of the Kafue River. (Mayukuyuku is on the eastern side.) This was after a very long day on the road – the 560km drive from Sioma took me all day because of a particularly bad 80km patch of completely disintegrated tar somewhere between Mongu and the entrance to Kafue.

When I arrived at Kasabushi, I felt sheer relief. I was welcomed by owners Quintin and Tessa Smit, who passed me a cold beer right away. Quintin is a keen cook and made pasta with pepper steak strips. He's an ex-South African who met

Tessa in the Netherlands – her home country. In 2022, the couple visited Quintin's parents, who were living in Lusaka at the time. They came to Kafue for a visit and got engaged at Kasabushi – on a rock in the Kafue River. During their stay, they heard that Kasabushi was for sale and they thought, why not? They said goodbye to their life in the Netherlands and moved to Zambia to take up the reins at Kasabushi, which has a campsite and a couple of luxury chalets. The camp is in a great location, surrounded by sausage trees, waterberries, baobabs and African star-chestnut trees. In the river, you constantly hear hippos cavorting about.

When I left there the next morning, I drove the 45 km of gravel back to the Chunga gate as slowly as possible, stretching out the experience to almost three hours. (At Chunga, you rejoin the east-west tar road that cuts through the centre of the park.) I revelled in the peace and quiet of the bush, and I didn't see a single other vehicle. This sense of isolation is something that sets Kafue apart from other, often crowded, African super-parks like the Kruger, Chobe and Serengeti.

I'm in a complete state of camping zen here at Mayukuyuku. I'm sitting under a thatched gazebo with my laptop on a small table. The morning sun has risen enough to fall on the bonnet of the Mahindra bakkie I'm driving. Like the river, the bakkie is a stormy grey colour, and it blends in nicely with the muted colours of the bush. Only my blue Cadac gas bottle and pink Tentco ammo crate add splashes of colour to the scene.

I guess it's time to wash the dishes, pack up my tent and take a quick cold shower before I leave this peaceful place. My destination today is the capital, Lusaka. Once I'm gone, the vervet monkeys will no doubt come scrounging for morsels I dropped around the Cadac last night. And one of those hippos will come and mow the now slightly longer lawn where my tent stood for the night.

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If there's one area in the Kruger Park where you're almost guaranteed a lion sighting, it's around the Crocodile Bridge rest camp.

Sometimes, lions surprise everyone with an action-packed hunt, but most times you get lots of lying around and yawning.

Two lionesses were lounging next to the S28 dirt road. There were a few vehicles at the scene and we patiently waited our turn. After an hour of creeping closer, the only action we got was this moment, when one of the lionesses looked at us as if to say, "What did you expect? Us supermodels need our beauty sleep!"

PICTURE **ESMA MARNEWICK**



Sleeping or awake, it's always special to see a lion in the Kruger. Find out where to look for them in our latest travel guide, available in stores or at media24shop.com (R145). Get a copy before they're gone!

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