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#206

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June–July 2026

go!
#206

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Come for the views, stay for the adventure! Here's

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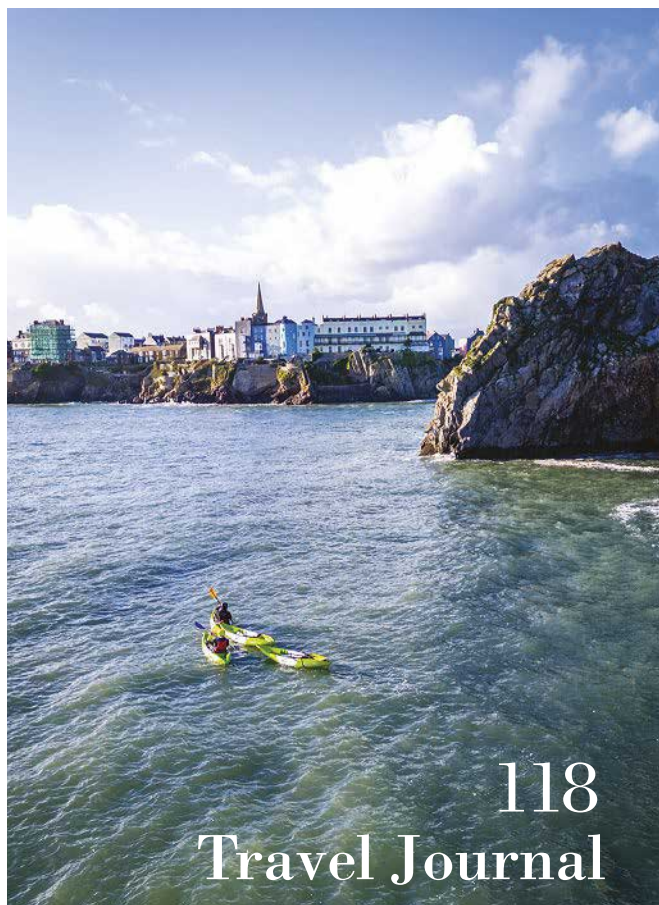
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Baviaans Canyon Trail



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JACKY SNOEP



Hiking or cycling in Jonkershoek Nature Reserve close to Stellenbosch is definitely a tangible pleasure!

Tangible pleasures

There's no doubt that the digital world has made our modern lives easier and more efficient. These days, thanks to News24 and online platforms like Magzter and Zinio, *go!* has far more digital readers and subscribers than readers who still buy the paper magazine.

In meetings with advertisers, my message is simple: I don't care *how* people engage with our stories, as long as they engage with them. That allows us to keep doing what we do, which makes me happy.

But I won't lie – I still get excited every time our printer's truck pulls up with a delivery of crisp new magazines.

The joy that one derives from something tangible should never be underestimated. Maybe it's the grain of paper that you feel with your fingertips; that new-book smell as you page through the latest issue; or that

"thud factor" when you drop it onto the coffee table. Similarly, there's a value-add to life when you listen to your favourite music on an LP instead of on Spotify; when you roast a chicken from scratch on a Sunday instead of getting a ready-made one from Woolworths; and when you drive the long way around to your holiday destination instead of waiting in the queue at the airport.

I'm deeply grateful I'm not the only one who feels this way. The highlight of my month happened the other day in my local Checkers. As usual, I was busy "rearranging" the magazine display in front of the checkout counters so that our latest issues were clearly visible, when a woman gave me a friendly but firm nudge with her elbow.

My wife says I can't call people of a certain age *oom* or *tannie* anymore, because most of them are younger than me now anyway... But I digress. The lady probably thought I'd been lounging in front of her favourite magazines for too long. With me out of the way, she snatched up the latest *go!* and *go! Namibia* from the shelf, and hurried to the cash register, almost as if she was afraid that I'd try and take her magazines away!

Our Namibia special edition is apparently so popular that I've received requests to announce the distribution dates of our other specials. So, here they are, with lots of love:

- *West Coast* will be on sale from 5 June
- *Garden Route* from 3 July
- *Karoo* from 28 August
- *Botswana* from 23 October

Note the dates in your diaries. And whether you get them digitally or on paper, it really doesn't matter!

DON'T MISS OUR NEXT ISSUE!

The Aug/Sept magazine will be on sale at retailers from 31 July 2026. To subscribe call ☎ 087 353 1300; e-mail ✉ subs@media24.com

Pierre

PIERRE STEYN

PSteyn@media24.com

BEHIND THE SCENES

In February 2026, **Esma Marnewick** was a part of the first group to hike the new Baviaans Canyon Trail (p 36), sister of the popular Leopard Trail.

How did you end up on the trail? I saw a video on social media – and I also saw that the trail was already fully booked for 2026, even though it hadn't opened yet!

I immediately told our editor Pierre Steyn that I wanted to do the hike, and I contacted the co-founder, Robin Booth, who managed to squeeze us in for the last week of February, before the trail officially opened in March.

I was nervous because February is hot, but we were blessed with great weather. In fact, the Baviaans received its first good rain in months on the first night of our visit.

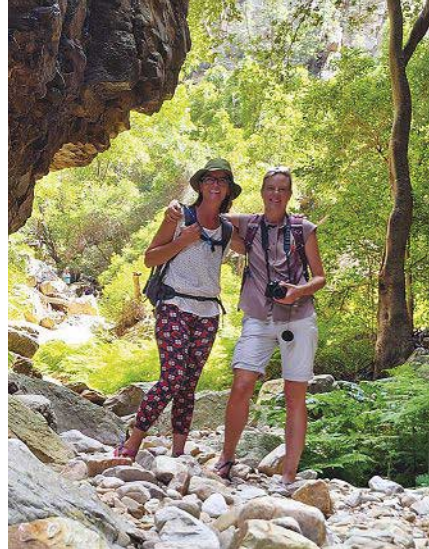
What makes the trail special? I've hiked many multi-day trails, but this was the first time I could cut the ribbon on a new route! I was inspired by the team's excitement and pride about their project – they couldn't wait to hear about our experience and our recommendations. They'd thought of everything – the tented camps are really

luxurious. There's even a brush to remove the mud from your boots!

I was often amazed at what they'd achieved. The trail builders carried all the materials they needed on foot and camped in the mountains for up to a week at times. In areas that were impossible to reach by other means, they used helicopters to drop building supplies. They wanted to make the trail as accessible as possible – for everyone, including older hikers in their 50s and 60s.

What should hikers keep in mind? The Baviaans Canyon and Leopard trails overlap in places. On the first two days, you can see the Leopard camps. I haven't hiked the Leopard yet, but you can read Willemien Janse van Rensburg's opinion on page 43. (Willemien is pictured above, with Esma on her left.)

Keep in mind that the Baviaans Canyon Trail is still new – Go Baviaans will probably adjust the route depending on feedback. They've



MARILETTE COATES

already let me know that Day 1 of Canyon will be changed to exclude Gabriel's Pool, which is also a part of Leopard.

Have you been to the Baviaanskloof before?

This was my first visit. Shocking, I know! Regardless from which direction you enter the kloof, it's a faraway place to visit. And disappearing into those mountains on foot is even more of an adventure.

The Baviaans Canyon Trail starts at the foot of Nuwekloof Pass, so it's fairly close to the western entrance to the kloof. Next on my list: the Leopard Trail, and a visit to the wilderness section of the kloof.

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COMPILED BY **MARTINETTE LOUW**



📌 Webs of wonder

I was out on a game drive with my husband Robert on the S29 near Lower Sabie in the Kruger Park. A soft mist lay over everything. All around, the grass glittered in the sunlight with thousands – maybe even millions – of spider webs, each heavy with dew. It looked like fine lacework, delicate but strong. Robert pulled over and we just sat and stared.

An elephant passed by in the distance – a dark shadow against the pale morning light. I looked at its big feet and the fragile webs on the ground. The contrast was striking.

To me, this scene tells a quiet story of hope – of recovery after rain; of small spiders building and rebuilding...

LOUISE JORDAAN, Pretoria



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⬆ Look up!

I've seen lots of photos of the bushbabies that live in Malelane satellite camp in the Kruger Park, and I've always wanted to photograph one. But they're nocturnal, so it's not easy!

One day in December 2025, I went for a walk in camp around noon. I happened to glance up at a big tree near our camping stand, and the cutest little bushbaby was looking right back at me!

KARIN VAN ZYL, Brits



⬆ Gotcha!

While the red-chested cuckoo is fairly common in South Africa – and you often hear its *piet-my-vrou* call – it's one of the most difficult birds to photograph. They're masters at hiding away, probably because they're brood parasites that lay their eggs in the nests of other birds. I took this photo on Camphill Road in Hermanus.

PHILIP HOEKSTRA, Bellville

➤ Cubs galore

In March this year, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park was beautifully lush after good rain. The park really is a special place. My wife Retha and I were very impressed with the service we received there, and elsewhere in the Northern Cape.

We came across a pride of lions at the Kwang waterhole north of Nossob. It was just after 7 pm during a sunset drive – there was one male lion, three lionesses and eight cubs! The lions were calm and the cubs played, nursed and even tried to roar. We've never been so close to so many cubs.

KARL FRENZ, Pretoria





⬆ Hello, Mr Elephant!

A herd of elephants was gathered around Mooiplaas waterhole in the Kruger Park late one afternoon – they were calm and kicked up dust as they moved around. The scene was filled with warm, golden colours.

One elephant walked into frame just as the sun started to slip behind the horizon. The windmill in the background makes this photo extra special.

MATTHYS POTGIETER, Potchefstroom



⬆ Feisty red bishop

I took this photo on a private farm road in the southern Drakensberg near Underberg. I noticed a flurry of activity in a wetland – there were a number of colourful bishops flying around trying to lure females to view their nests.

This handsome fellow sat still long enough for me to capture a shot.

RYAN NEUMANN, Pietermaritzburg



⬆ A true flower spectacle

My husband Walter and I are both in our eighties, but we still travel to Namaqualand every year to see the wildflowers. In 2025, we saw the best display ever.

We started off in Springbok, where we stayed at Liefland Cottages – there were beautiful hiking trails among the flowers on the guest farm. Goegap Nature Reserve outside Springbok was also a highlight – I took this photo of Walter with the quiver trees. We even did a 4x4 trail with our Suzuki Jimny!

From there, we drove to Skilpad rest camp in the Namaqua National Park (the chalets are great) and on to Vanrhynsdorp, where we stayed for several nights to explore the region – we even treated ourselves to one night at Letsatsi Lodge. The flower hotspot in this area is Nieuwoudtville, where the bulbinellas on Matjiesfontein Farm were the big drawcard. We highly recommend the tripe and bean stew at Matjiesfontein Farm Stall.

We also saw beautiful flowers around Vredendal, Strandfontein and Doringbaai. From there we headed to Clanwilliam, where the Biedouw Valley and Wupperthal had fields upon fields of flowers; and the Cederberg was as spectacular as always.

We always end our tour in Langebaan, where the West Coast National Park never disappoints. We love to see eland and springbok grazing among the flowers.

As long as we're healthy enough – and it rains enough – we'll probably head out again this year to see the flowers!

HALLIE LOUW, Swakopmund

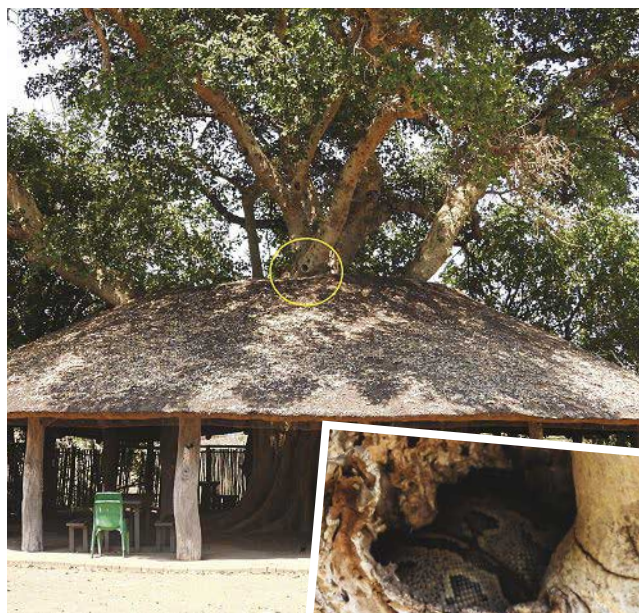


▲ Up a tree

Just look at what I captured on the S36 north of the Sweni River in the Kruger Park! It was around 11 am, but there were already lots of vehicles at the sighting. The leopard was on the ground, guarding the impala it had stashed in the tree.

When some of the vehicles departed, they startled the leopard and it raced up the tree. It was difficult to get a shot with all the branches cluttering the scene, but I set my focus on the tree trunk and managed to get a series of clear images.

ANDRÉ DREYER, George



▲ A keen eye

My parents Lynette and Kobus Coetzee are both retired and love to camp in the Kruger Park. My mom is an enthusiastic photographer and her camera is always packed first. She somehow spotted this python in a sycamore fig at the Babalala picnic site near Shingwedzi.

My mom loves trees and textures and she was studying the tree trunk, around which the thatched lapa is built, when she noticed the cavity. When she zoomed in, she saw a big python sound asleep!

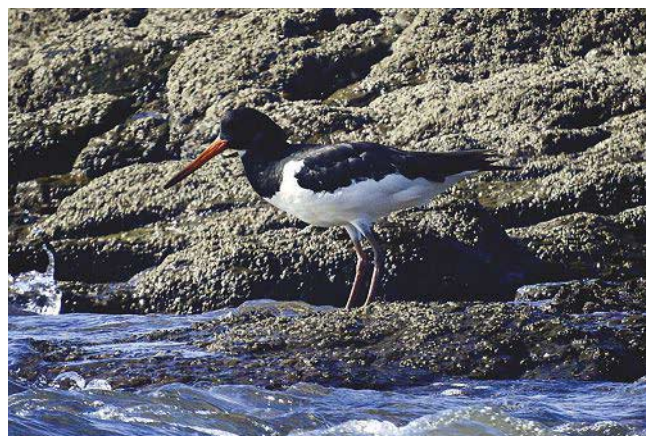
MARELIZE STANDER, Durbanville



▲ Getting to know you

The S50 in the Kruger Park runs next to the Shingwedzi River and there are always things to see. We came across a small herd of impala as we were driving south – these two young males seemed to be introducing themselves to each other. They look a bit young to start rutting so it might have just been a tender moment.

STU BOWIE, Centurion



▲ Rare but true

I struck it lucky during a visit to Kei Mouth in March 2026 – I saw a rare Eurasian oystercatcher on the rocks in front of Kei Sands Resort! The bird was very shy and the African oystercatchers were very aggressive – it often had to flee.

According to my bird guide, the Eurasian oystercatcher is a palearctic bird that migrates to our warmer climate in summer. This bird is still young judging by its colours: The white throat crescent is not fully formed and the bill is not red all over yet.

ANDRÉ OLIVIER, Klerksdorp



◀ Peek-a-boo

On a visit to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park last year, we saw some sub-adult lions with their parents at Veertiende Boorgat.

After a lazy day under a tree, they transformed into a hungry hunting pride. We watched as they positioned themselves into an ambush strategy, with the young lions taking open, visible positions. The adult male set up a position to chase the prey towards the adult lioness, who took a more concealed position.

This sub-adult was a bit more timid than the others. Unfortunately, we had to head back to camp before there was any action.

DENNIS FORSTER, Hout Bay

Q&A

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



◀ Hey, neighbour!

VANESSA DU TOIT from Cape St Francis writes: We recently had a few days of rain and we took the opportunity to explore our damp garden. I was surprised to find this frog in one of our arum lilies – can you tell me more about it?

Wildlife expert LD VAN ESSEN

says: At first glance you might want to say that it's an arum lily frog (*Hyperolius horstockii*) based on where the frog is sitting, but the characteristic prominent pale band from the snout along the flanks to the groin is absent.

It's more likely a painted reed frog (*Hyperolius marmoratus*), and given the area where the photograph was taken, it's the subspecies *verrucosus*.

One of the noteworthy features of the painted reed frog is its rounded snout that's slightly concave at the sides. The Latin word *marmoratus* means "covered in marble" and refers to the colour pattern of this species.

These frogs show a lot of variation in colour and pattern. There are three subspecies recognised in southern Africa, based on their geographic distribution. For the Cape St Francis area, the colour pattern is light spots on a dark background. The light colour of the frog here can be attributed to sun exposure, which decreases skin pigmentation to a light grey.

The frogs grow to a maximum length of 33 mm and the females are slightly larger than the males. Their preferred habitat is reeds and other vegetation types around water bodies in savannah, grassland, forests and sometimes fynbos. During the day, they can be seen in tall reeds, sedges and trees, where they often seek shelter in the axils of leaves.



▲ Magical dragonfly

SIMKIN GREYLING from Bloemfontein writes: I photographed this dragonfly in my garden on a very hot day. It was perched on a twig and sat very still so I could take photos from all angles. I think it might have wanted to cool down a bit before flying off. Can you tell me more about it?

Entomologist DUNCAN MACFADYEN says: Simkin has taken a really great shot of a difficult-to-photograph species. This is a female red-veined darter (*Sympetrum fonscolombii*), also known as a nomad because of its nomadic and often erratic distribution.

It's a relatively common, medium-sized migratory dragonfly, often found near ponds and other bodies of calm water. It's frequently spotted in southern Africa year-round.

The males are distinct with bright red bodies, red-veined wings, and blue-grey under-eyes. This species is generally about 40 mm in length. The females are yellowish brown to greyish brown, often described as having a bright yellow base colour that dulls. The eyes are brown above and blue below. Both sexes possess distinctive, wide, pale diagonal stripes on the thorax.

This active, carnivorous predator is highly territorial and feeds on various small, flying insects, including flies and mosquitoes. They hunt by perching and waiting to ambush prey mid-air, often returning to the same spot. Larvae are aquatic, feeding on aquatic invertebrates.

The individual in the photo could be a newly emerged adult, hardening before flying off. This species is exceptionally well adapted to handling heat and thrives in high-temperature environments. It's commonly known to be one of the most heat-tolerant dragonfly species.

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CHECK THIS!



On the second day of the Toktokkie Hiking Trail in the NamibRand Nature Reserve, Namibia, you reach this plain near a rocky hill called Skaapberg. In the middle of the plain is a seasonal pan where desert animals come to drink. Look closely for the gemsbok!

The 2026 edition of our *go! Namibia* guide is your ultimate travel companion. It's available now in store, or order online: media24shop.com

PICTURE EVAN NAUDÉ





IN BRIEF

COMPILED BY VANIA JOOSTE



Fill your home with lavender

Canettevallei Lavender and Wine Farm is just outside Stellenbosch – as you drive in, open the windows and enjoy the heady scent of fresh lavender. The rows upon rows of purple bushes are spectacular.

Their pick-your-own-lavender experience costs R65 per person, per bunch. You get shears and a plastic ring to guide you as to how many stalks you can cut and take home. Pre-booking online is essential as it gets busy in season, from June to mid-October.

Afterwards, enjoy a glass of wine or a coffee at the drinks kiosk. Wine tastings are also offered. The store stocks a variety of natural lavender products like soaps, essential oils, honey and cushions.

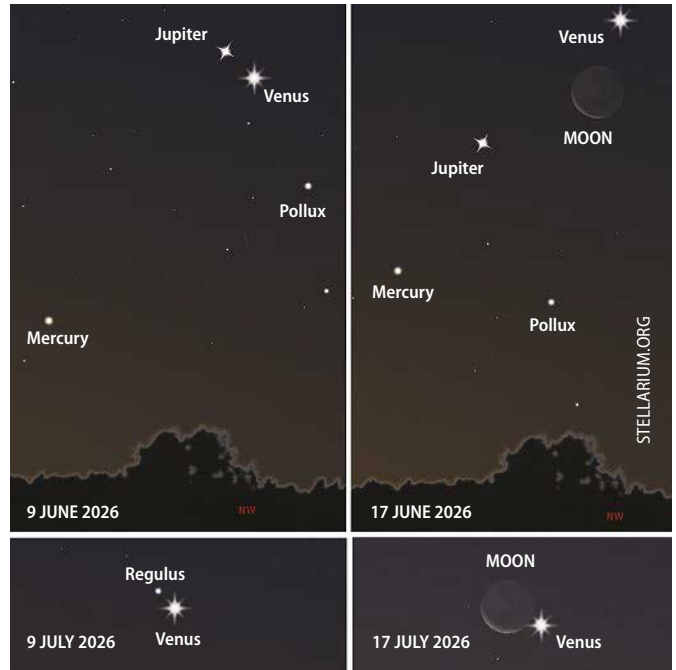
Where? About 10 km outside Stellenbosch on the Stellenboschkloof Road.

Opening times: Monday to Saturday from 10 am to 5 pm. Closed on Sundays and public holidays.

Contact: ☎ 072 730 9811; 🌐 canettevalleilavender.co.za

– Nazreen Essack

NIGHT WATCH



The dance of the planets

June and July will bring lots of early-evening activity to the north-western horizon. Best of all, two of the brightest planets will be involved!

Venus, the brightest planet, will make its appearance as the evening star, joined by Jupiter, the second-brightest planet. The fastest-moving planet, Mercury (known as the messenger of the gods) will also drop by briefly.

Venus will move higher above the horizon night after night. Jupiter will start to descend quickly towards the sun, and will disappear into its glow by early July.

Mercury will appear close to the horizon at dusk at the start of June, and will disappear again by the end of the month.

As you can see above, Venus and Jupiter will move past each other within 1.5° early in the evening of 9 June, with Pollux, one of the twin stars, nearby. Mercury starts to move closer diagonally from the bottom.

By 17 June, Mercury, Jupiter and Venus will be positioned in a row, with equal distances between them and in order of brightness, with a small crescent moon begging to be included in the photo.

Early on the evening of 9 July, Venus will move within one degree of Regulus, the brightest star in the constellation Leo. Venus repeats a similar close movement past the crescent moon, within 1.5° of it, on 17 July.

– Willie Koorts



DID YOU KNOW?

Dolphins sleep with one eye open! Their breathing is not automatic like ours – a part of their brain has to stay awake to remind them to breathe. They float near the surface of the water; when the left side of the brain is asleep, the right eye stays open and vice versa.



Mouse-free Marion gets a massive boost

Marion Island is a South African territory in the Southern Ocean, about 2 300 km from Cape Town. It's a spectacular chunk of wilderness and one of the most important breeding sites for seabirds on the planet.

But there's one problem: mice. They were brought to the island by whaling and seal-hunting ships in the 1800s, and their numbers are estimated to be in excess of one million. They're a highly invasive species and threaten the fragile island ecosystem. Most disturbingly, they feed on albatross chicks on their nests – these birds have no natural defence against the mice and often succumb to their wounds.

The solution is to strategically drop rodent-specific bait on certain parts of the island by helicopter – a programme being administered by the conservation group Mouse-Free Marion. The group recently received a massive boost: a US\$10 million pledge from a Swiss company, which will go a long way to help eradicate mice completely and help protect the island and its birds.

This pledge follows a US\$1 million donation from South African entrepreneur Mark Shuttleworth in late 2025, and funds from the Lewis Foundation.

Visit mousefreemarion.org for more information.

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Four Questions

Botanist **Rupert Koopman** from Cape Town tells us about his passion for fynbos, “walk shops” and what readers can do to protect our special flora.



1 When did you become interested in fynbos?

My parents ensured that my two sisters and I spent a lot of time outdoors from an early age. We hiked regularly and went on road trips, even though our destinations and routes were limited in the 1980s because of apartheid. We often went for walks in Jonkershoek outside Stellenbosch, and on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain – Newlands Forest and Constantia Nek. And we travelled to Bontebok National Park for holidays.

My late dad, Robert, was a biology teacher who grew up working in his uncle's nursery in Faure. He had studied botany himself and played a significant role in educating and developing my love for our fynbos. He had a remarkable ability to teach not just facts, but wonder.

I knew back then that I'd work outdoors one day. Through my studies and time spent with people from the Cape plant community, my appreciation for the indigenous flora

of the Greater Cape Floristic Region – from fynbos to the Succulent Karoo – deepened into a lasting passion.

What began as curiosity gradually turned into a sense of responsibility: I felt compelled to play a part in safeguarding these remarkable ecosystems and species, so that they may endure for generations to come.

2 What can readers do to help preserve habitats?

South Africans love the outdoors. We spend an inordinate amount of time and effort travelling far distances to see and experience nature, yet we're sometimes not familiar with our immediate surroundings!

Take note of the local birds in your garden. Visit your closest nature reserve or urban pocket of biodiversity. Support conservation agencies (provincial and national) and the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI). You can volunteer or help financially.

Over the past decade alone, a proliferation

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of non-governmental organisations and local volunteer groups have sprung up – some removing invasive species at scale, others monitoring biodiversity on citizen science platforms like iNaturalist, others rehabilitating natural spaces. You're likely to have one close – check on Facebook or visit your local library to find one.

3 What happens on one of your guided walks?

I've taken to calling them "walk shops" as there's time for both education and connection to nature. The idea is that we have a gentle meander around a natural area (like the coastline of Paternoster for our Wolfgat walks) or a botanical garden (like Kirstenbosch). I interpret what we see – the flowers and the landscape in general – and weave in relevant site history, practical uses of plants and fynbos ecology. People often arrive expecting a walk and leave feeling as though they've been let into a secret world.

Walk shops are accessible for all ages

and can be customised to the interests of different groups. I've noticed a growing appetite for themed walks for university and school groups, as well as for birthday parties or for families who are either visiting the area or who live nearby. It's a wonderful way to experience a place more deeply.

4 And your writing side hustle?

I'm married to a writer – Dr Florence de Vries, a journalist and communications specialist. She has certainly influenced me and I do occasionally carve out time to put my thoughts on paper!

Most recently, I contributed to a team effort called *Farming with Biodiversity*, a WWF South Africa publication exploring the applied use of indigenous plants in agriculture. I also contributed to an essay called *Protean Routes*, by Dutch-based publishers Dwaalstêr.

Contact Rupert: koopmanrupert@gmail.com
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Vanishing tortoises of the Karoo

When looking at a landscape, do you ever wonder what it might have looked like in years gone by? For me, this question often comes to mind when driving through the central Karoo – seeing the parched, ancient riverbeds choked by invasive mesquite and tamarisk... Imagine that same place a thousand years ago, before corbelled huts or sheep farming. Certainly, the vegetation would have looked different, and generations of wildlife would have come and gone, but the general lay of the land would have been mostly unchanged.

Travel back 55 million years ago, however, and things would have looked very different! Except for a few creatures, like tortoises, which were already on the scene.

Worldwide, a total of about 50 different tortoise species exist (excluding aquatic relatives like sea turtles and terrapins) – everything from the Galápagos giants to the pancake tortoise of East Africa.

Despite our relatively small surface area, South Africa is recognised as the world's most biodiverse country for tortoises,

home to 13 different species! Many species are endemic, from the world's smallest tortoise – the speckled padloper (*Chersobius signatus*) of Namaqualand, which has a maximum adult carapace length of only 10 cm – to the large and widespread leopard tortoise (*Stigmochelys pardalis*), with a maximum adult carapace length of 70 cm.

Nine of those 13 species call the semi-arid Karoo region home, and each one exhibits its own set of adaptations that allow them to survive in such a harsh environment.

That said, over the last few decades, conservationists have observed an alarming decrease in numbers of speckled (*C. signatus*) and Karoo padlopers (*C. boulengeri*). It seems as if entire study populations have been all but wiped out, almost overnight. The factors influencing this decline seem to be the combined impact of pied crows and drought conditions.

Historically, the Karoo was terra incognita for pied crows because of their need for elevated, open structures on which to build their nests and raise chicks. With increased

human presence, and the development of infrastructure like telephone poles and wide-scale water provision for livestock, the crows have been able to encroach, putting padlopers on the menu.

A number of organisations are hard at work to better understand how best to conserve South Africa's tortoise diversity, including the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the Turtle Conservancy (🐢 www.turtleconservancy.org), and Dwarf Tortoise Conservation (🐢 www.dwarftortoises.org).

In 2024, while searching for reptiles in Namaqualand, I took a wrong turn and ended up near Paulshoek, a settlement in the Kamiesberg. I was driving a tiny hatchback on roads better suited to a Hilux, but the scenery was grand, with granite koppies in all directions, so I decided to keep driving. A few minutes later, I saw an oddly shaped rock in the road up ahead, so I slowed the car down to a crawl. When the rock started walking, I knew I was in the right place!

It was a speckled padloper, a species I had last seen almost a decade before. Needless to say, I was grateful for the detour!

– Courtney Hundermark



Loco Café, Hwange, Zimbabwe

The other day, I came stumbling out of Hwange National Park via the Sinamatella gate. I say “stumbling”, because once you leave the park you soon find yourself in the middle of a large coal mine; the public road trampled under heavy, earth-moving machinery and confusing signage.

When I eventually found my way to the Bulawayo-Vic Falls tar road (A8), I turned left towards Hwange town to fill up. Once I'd faced the facts of having to pay R37 per litre of diesel (this was early April) I tried to swipe my card. After a few failed attempts, the attendant sighed deeply and told me that the connection wasn't great.

With not much else to do but wait for the connection to improve, I left the Mahindra bakkie there and walked across the road to a garden with pretty flowers, with a locomotive parked right in the middle of it. That's how I came across Loco Café.

Since it was lunchtime, I decided to make an outing of it. Waiter Tafadzwa Gotido's recommendation was the beef burger with potato chips. This was very well priced at US\$6, or R98, especially compared to Vic Falls restaurant prices where you'll often pay double or more for a similar meal.

While I waited for the burger, I ordered a coffee and a chocolate chip cookie to sample more of their fare – both were great. The rest of the sit-down menu includes things like chicken quesadilla (US\$6), buffalo beef wrap (US\$8), chicken-and-mayo toasted sandwich with chips or salad (US\$6), Waldorf salad (US\$4), or breakfast options like eggs benedict (US\$6) and avo on toast (US\$3). They have a selection of baked goods too, so you can enjoy a slice of cake for dessert (US\$4).

Tafadzwa told me that locals often pull in after work for sundowners, when they sell wine by the glass. You can sit in the shade of some trees in the park, or closer to the coffee counter, also in the shade. The locomotive has historic significance since it was one of the first used during the early days of Hwange's coal-mining boom.

They don't have bathrooms but you can use the filling station's toilets. Ask for a Wi-Fi voucher if you need to send a message to your neighbour to check whether Foxy is still happy with her diet of Montego pellets.

Once I'd had my fill and taken some photos of the friendly staff who run Loco Café, I walked back to fuel station to try and pay for my diesel. (It's marked on Google as a Caltex, but it's a no-name brand.) Alas, the cell network was still down and in the end the attendant allowed me to drive away and go draw money at an ATM in nearby Hwange town, about a kilometre away.

Opening times: Daily from 7.30 am to 7 pm.

Where? Entrance to Hwange town, next to the Vic Falls-Bulawayo main road (A8).

Contact: Search “Loco Café Hwange” on Facebook

– *Toast Coetzer*



Above, from left to right: Hilton Dlamini, Blessed Musarurwa, Thembele Ncube, Joseph Mutengate, Trisha Ncube and Tafadzwa Gotido.

Big fun in Bloem

Travel writer **Willem van der Berg** moved to Bloemfontein in 2012, mainly because it's so centrally located. It's easy to travel to the Karoo, the Kalahari, Namaqualand and even the Drakensberg from there. When he met his wife Daleen, they decided to stay.



MADIBA STATUE ON NAVAL HILL

Play outside

Naval Hill is part of the Franklin Nature Reserve. When you walk or drive around, you can admire the views of the city and also look for animals like bushbuck, blesbok, wildebeest, zebra and ostrich, which roam on the koppie with its wild olive forests. Go take a sunset photo of the big statue of Madiba. Or do the popular 5 km Cityrun on Saturday mornings (cityrunnavalhill.wixsite.com/website).

You can also visit **the planetarium** (ufs.ac.za/planetarium) on Naval Hill – they project films on the dome and there are often theatre and music performances. (The planetarium is no longer used to look at the sky due to light pollution. There are telescopes at the Boyden Observatory outside the city.)

When you walk through the **Free State National Botanical Garden** (sanbi.org), you'll realise there's more to the province than flat, open grasslands. Climb through dense forests of wild olive trees and up a vegetated ridge where beautiful cabbage trees watch over Bloemfontein. Spread your picnic blanket under the big karee trees in the garden or head to the restaurant. See the Facebook page "Free State National Botanical Garden" for movie nights, music shows and other events.

Picklers Park (picklerspark.co.za) has four floodlit pickleball courts. They're part of the Sol Lifestyle Venue (sollifestylevenue.co.za) – there's lots of space for the kids to play and a restaurant called Paletas.



FREE STATE NATIONAL BOTANICAL GARDEN

For the bookworms

You can get a copy of basically any book ever written in Afrikaans at the **National Afrikaans Literary Museum and Research Centre** (📍 sacr.fs.gov.za). Manuscripts and author memorabilia – a backpack and a writer's chair once owned by Jan Rabie; Jan FE Celliers' straw hat – along with thousands of newspaper and magazine cuttings are preserved here. The building is also home to the **Sesotho Literary Museum**. After you've walked through all the exhibitions, you can visit the cellar full of second-hand books. Keep an eye on their Facebook page "Vriende van NALN" for upcoming book talks.

The **Paper Garden Bookshelf** (@thepapergardenbookshelf on Instagram) is a double-storey house filled with second-hand books. The variety is fantastic and most of the books are in great condition. You can read in the garden while enjoying a slice of cake and coffee.

For the culture vultures

At the **War Museum** (📍 wmbr.org.za) you get a good idea of what happened in the Anglo-Boer War. The **National Women's Monument** is also on the premises and



THE PAPER GARDEN BOOKSHELF

a new **Blockhouse Museum** has recently opened – it's a replica of the Tierfontein blockhouse about 30 km south of Bloemfontein, which is on Transnet land.

The history and well-known figures of Bloemfontein are celebrated at the **National Museum** (nationalmuseum.co.za) – both the ANC and the NP were founded in this city. This is where Leon Schuster, Zola Budd, Kepler Wessels, Hansie Cronjé and Bram Fischer hail from, and where many Springboks learnt to play rugby. The museum is well maintained and there are beautiful exhibits about fossils, animals, birds, geology, astronomy, African cultures and more.

Attention, foodies!

Singer Jack Parow says the best black beast steak he's ever had (fillet sautéed in lemon juice, brandy and black pepper) was at **Bella Casa** (bellacasarestaurant.co.za). This Italian restaurant is also known for pizza and pasta. The waiters welcome you like a good friend on your first visit, and like family on the next.

If you like an eatery with a more modern city feel, **Johnny Lucky Kitchen Bar** (johnnylucky.co.za) is a good option. And if you want a hearty five-course meal on a farm, there's no place better than **De Oude Kraal** (deoudekraal.com).

Every butchery in the country claims to have the best biltong. But **Bester Butchery** (besterbutchery.co.za) might just claim the crown.

Off to the market

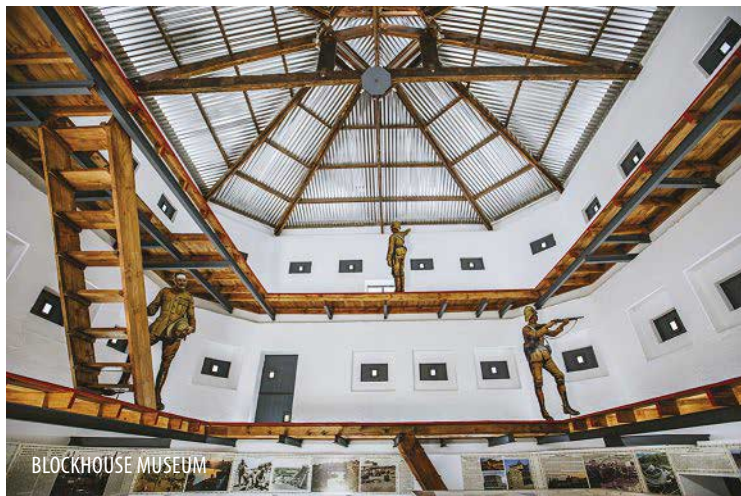
Every Saturday morning, the **Langenhoven Market** ("Langenhoven Mark/Market" on Facebook) takes place in Langenhoven Park. Buy anything from fresh veggies, fruit, and flowers to crafts. And pancakes and sosaties!

For a bit of French flair, browse the stalls at the monthly **French Market at Villa Avianto** (villa-avianto.co.za). If you can't wait that long for a croissant, you can also drop by on any Saturday morning, when the **Villa Café** sells fresh pastries and coffee.





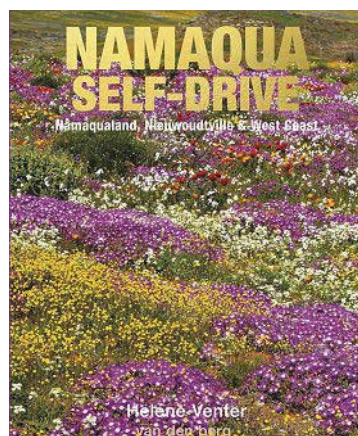
THE VIEW FROM NAVAL HILL



BLOCKHOUSE MUSEUM



PICKLERS PARK



Namaqua Self-Drive

by *Heléne Venter*,
HPH Publishing
R895 at hphpublishing.co.za

This beautiful book celebrates Heléne Venter's life-long love affair with the floral spectacle of Namaqualand and areas like the West Coast, Nieuwoudtville and the Hantam Karoo.

The pages are crammed with an outlandish abundance of flowers. Sometimes the colours are uniformly spaced, as if someone went out of their way to plant the flowers just so. In other scenes, nature has blended the colours together in psychedelic swirls – just look at the photo of orange daisies, *surings*, *hongerblomme*, *bittergousblomme* and *vygies* on p9, for example. (Pictured below right.) Another favourite is p74 – 75, of a landscape near Soebatsfontein where the proliferation of white sporrie, purple *vygies* and yellow *knopiesopslag* create the impression that the colour explosion continues forever beyond the margins of the double-page spread (below left).

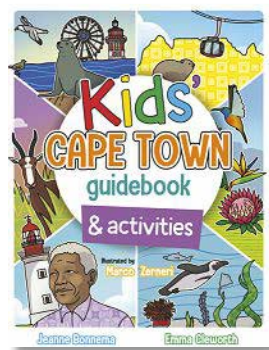
The names of some of the flowers sing their own song, from the sunflower yellow *bobbejaangesiggies* to the sky-blue *sambreeltjies*.

Although the book's first impression (weighty and luxurious-feeling) is that of a coffee table book, it is also a guide that you can use to plan your own trip through flower fantasia. Venter discusses the best months to visit different flower areas, and supplies phone numbers for prominent nature reserves so you can call ahead and double check whether or not the flowers are blooming.

Each region is then divided into focused areas (for example, Springbok, Naries Namakwa Retreat, Kamieskroon, Wildeperdehoek Pass etc, under the Namaqualand section) so you can zoom in on specific routes for your flower foray.

Venter has set a new standard with this book. Add it to your collection and it will give you joy for years to come!

– *Toast Coetzer*

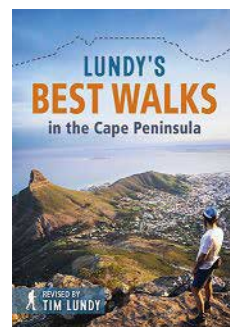


Kids' Cape Town Guidebook & Activities

by *Jeanne Bonnema & Emma Cleworth*,
Struik Travel & Heritage
R170 in bookstores

Turn your next visit to the Mother City into a fun learning experience with this guide and activity book. Aimed at children aged 6 to 10, the book focuses on six local landmarks: Table Mountain, the V&A Waterfront, Cape Point, Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, Boulders Beach, and Robben Island.

There are practical tips about the places you're visiting – what to pack, what you can see and do – and interesting facts. On the activity pages, your kids can colour, draw and play games like spot the difference and I-spy. There are also puzzles, word searches and mazes to teach your kids more about what they're seeing.



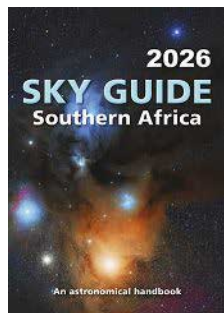
Lundy's Best Walks in the Cape Peninsula

Revised by *Tim Lundy*,
Struik Travel & Heritage
R290 in bookstores

This classic hiking guide by the late Mike Lundy was last revised in 2012. Realising it needed a refresh, his son Tim – an accredited mountain guide – walked all 30 trails over the course of a year, updated directions and maps, and added colour photographs. He also replaced outdated routes with four new hikes for this 9th edition.

The introduction covers the history, fauna and flora, weather and geology of the Cape Peninsula. There are routes all the way around the peninsula, from Kloof Nek down to Cape Point and up to Newlands. The trailheads are indicated with a QR code, which will take you to the correct spot on Google Maps. A simple grading system shows the effort required, and the exposure to heights. Also listed are average hiking times, availability of water, and points of interest.

A good hiking companion to have in your backpack!



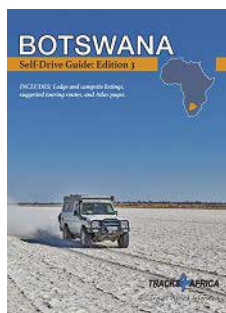
Sky Guide Southern Africa 2026: An astronomical handbook

by *Astronomical Society of
Southern Africa, Struik Nature*
R190 in bookstores

This is a nifty little guide compiled by the Astronomical Society of Southern Africa. It's in its 81st year of publication and their team of specialists have honed a winning recipe over the years, summarising the astronomical events we can observe locally for each month of the year. You'll know when to look up to see planetary movements, eclipses, meteor showers and bright comets – there's one coming in August!

There are also sky charts for each season, a calendar for supermoons and heritage moons, and an abundance of information about the sun, moon, constellations and stargazing. Photos and diagrams also help you make sense of it all.

If you can think of nothing better than staring at the stars, this is a good buy to guide you through the celestial highlights for the rest of 2026.



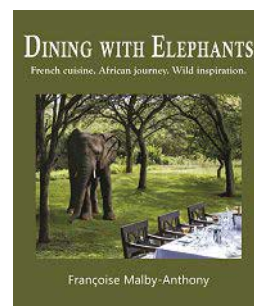
Botswana Self-drive Guide: Edition 3

by *Tracks4Africa*
R695 at shop.tracks4africa.co.za

Do you want to camp on the vast Makgadikgadi Pans with a majestic baobab keeping watch, but you feel a bit daunted by planning a self-drive trip to Botswana? No need to worry – this comprehensive travel guide will see you through.

First published in 2013 and now in its third edition, the guide sources much of its information from seasoned overlanders to give you up-to-date, practical tips about the best times to visit, the road conditions, safety, navigation, vehicle preparation and border posts. It also steers you in the right direction on how to rent a 4x4.

There are two suggested routes: a grand tour of Botswana and one that also includes Namibia – with day-to-day itineraries. The country is also divided by region if you have a specific destination in mind. There are 323 lodge listings and 174 campsites, and 23 pages of 1:1000 000 scale maps to equip you with everything you need for your great Bots adventure.



Dining with Elephants

by *Françoise Malby-Anthony,*
Rockhopper Books
R430 in bookstores

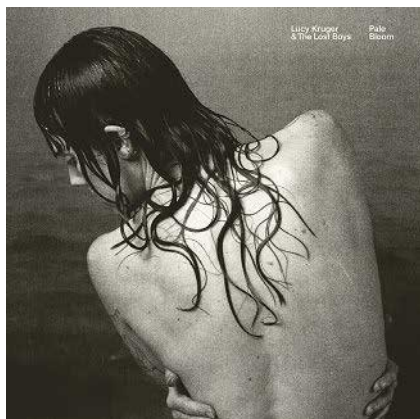
Author Françoise Malby-Anthony and her husband Lawrence established the Thula Thula Private Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal in the late 1990s. Lawrence was known as the elephant whisperer, and when he passed away in 2012, Françoise had to take over the management of the reserve.

Her first book, *An Elephant in my Kitchen* (2018), chronicled how she tackled this challenge, and her second book, *The Elephants of Thula Thula* (2022), shared more about her conservation work.

Her latest offering – part memoir, part cookbook – marries her love of animals with her flair for French cuisine. Trained at the French cooking school Lenôtre in Paris, Françoise learnt to cook for reserve guests with limited resources in the heart of Zululand. Recipes for dishes like soufflé omelette, bouillabaisse creole and Amarula crème brûlée are interspersed with animal anecdotes from her decades in the bush.

As in her other books, elephants play a central, often humorous, role – they raid the veggie patch, wander into the garden and steal groceries from the bakkie!

ROAD MUSIC



Pale Bloom

by *Lucy Kruger & The Lost Boys*
€9 at bandcamp.com

South African-born Lucy Kruger and her band are based in Berlin, where they've steadily made a name for themselves with their intense, moody rock music. Lucy's vocals can rise from an intimate whisper to a berg-wind roar in the course of a phrase, while the band can take an apparently gentle song and stir it into a galloping riot, as they show halfway through opening song, "Bloom".

"Ambient Heat" is all pedal to the metal, a hazy highway on the Highveld, while "Adder" feels like awakening from a dream to find yourself in an Airbnb you can't remember booking.

The album is just the right companion for a long weekend of exploring a soulful place like Nieu-Bethesda, or anywhere where the spirits tread softly, like in the heart of a poplar forest or an old shearing shed at dusk, or under a star-filled sky deep in the Kalahari.

– *Toast Coetzer*



The Secret Garden Diaries

Ever thought of swapping the suburbs for a cabin in the forest? **Jacques Marais** and his family moved from Fish Hoek to Fisanthoek on the Garden Route and are now slowly establishing an equilibrium with Mother Nature.

ILLUSTRATION AIMEE LINDEQUE

Step onto the dappled forest track that winds beyond our home near Harkerville in the Knysna Forest and you'll soon reach the burly stump of an Australian blackwood tree. The organic relic rises like a roughshod tombstone, standing as a memorial to one of the many alien trees we've felled here in recent years.

The meandering track has since become our driveway. About 300m along the track, a nondescript wooden gate connects onto the rural Fisanthoek

gravel "highway", where we need to dodge bushbuck, flocks of guineafowl, and the occasional logging truck en route to the N2.

When my wife Karyn and I, and the extended Marais clan, bought this little three-hectare "peace" of forest in 2023, it bristled with blackwood bullies. They grow up to 40m tall and guzzle thousands of litres of water every day, spreading their gargantuan canopies to overshadow the slow-growing indigenous trees beneath them. We got to work and

cut most of the buggers down.

A few remain, taunting me from less accessible gullies, despite regular weekend sorties with my trusty chainsaw. I swapped my Virgin Active membership and instead work on becoming "farm-strong", sweating buckets as I wage war with Stihl, axe and panga in hand.

Our three dogs have bought into this Saturday morning routine. Mostly. The notable exception is Thor (named for his thunderous greenhouse gas emissions) who prefers the comfort

*The toad pauses.
I freeze in stunned
disbelief. What a
shot, what a scene.
Belatedly, I spring
into action with
my camera.*

I'm still in the process of finalising my award-winning *Lord of the Rings* lighting design as the amphibian concerto builds towards its crescendo. As I sit back on my haunches to admire my handiwork, a large moth flutters in from a tangle of tree fuchsias, lured by my lighting setup, and soon a dozen insects are swirling around me.

The assembled amphibians seem to sense this sudden abundance of in-flight snacks, and a belligerent *ghwaaaarrrrk* base note jolts the chorus. And then – we're shifting now from Peter Jackson to Tim Burton – a raucous toad (that's literally its name – *Sclerophrys capensis*) nonchalantly shuffles into frame, clambering onto one of the trainwrecker mushroom caps!

The toad pauses. I freeze in stunned disbelief. What a shot, what a scene. Belatedly, I spring into action with my camera. Or leopard crawl, I should say, as I scoot around on the ground, shuffling Lume Cubes about, muttering like a tipsy loon. These ungainly attempts at a more creative composition are observed with a beady eye by the – now dead quiet, perching as still as a statue – raucous toad.

Beyond the light, I hear a wood owl *whoop-whoop*, and for an instant the amphibian army seems to falter before resuming. It's subtle but unmistakable: I can sense that – somewhere beyond the pool of light – something bigger and brawnier seems to be moving about.

The forest holds its breath, leaning into itself. Maybe it was just an ancient tree skeleton creaking, I think to myself. I hope to myself. Our movie star toad, unblinking, glares me straight in the eye. And then, with a whimsical hop, the nocturnal amphibian flops out of frame.

I squat there next to the dead blackwood stump for a long second, listening as the frog sounds swell again to fill the forest. Then, quietly, I pack up my camera kit and wander home through the whispering candlewoods.

And it's as if none of this ever happened. At all.

of our daughter Grace's bed. (Grace's two older siblings, Beth and Robert, are travelling and working overseas for now.) This is strategically close to the kitchen, allowing him to keep a beady eye on potential snack drops.

Calico, our bat-eared fox-slash-boere-windhond, generally leads the walk onto the forest singletrack. She has her Ewok appendages up like satellite dishes, scanning the woods to identify potential danger, while her nose stays close to the ground in search of any edibles – baboon and bushpig poop are firm favourites...

Then there's "Stormin'" Norman, the 4x4 dachshund who sports a "lifted" suspension thanks to genetic interference by a terrier in his recent ancestry. Norman prefers going off-trail. His transition from park walks in Fish Hoek to the Knysna Forest has bolstered his confidence, and when he bounds among the candlewood and Cape beech trees, he channels his inner attack Doberman.

Whenever we come across leopard or caracal spray or scat, the dogs freeze, breathing in great gulps of forest air. Their hackles go up and their tails vibrate like lightning conductors in a strong breeze.

And when I fire up the chainsaw, they know we'll be in one spot for a couple of hours. They do the proper feral dog thing then, walking around in circles to trample the undergrowth, before digging down into the rich and rooty soil for coolness.

Back to that blackwood stump

near our home. It may seem dead and gone, but beneath it all, like an unseen entity from *Stranger Things*, there's a hive mind connecting endless roots and mycelium strands and mycorrhizal root fungi, invisible to the casual observer. That is, except when they fruit...

About a year ago, a flush of trainwrecker mushrooms (*Neolentinus lepideus*) sprouted on the old stump. The name comes from this species' resistance to chemicals like creosote,

which allows them to colonise treated lumber like railroad sleepers, for example.

I verified the name on an online fungi group, because my wife pointed out that I tend to eat mushrooms before I research their edibility. The trainwrecker turned out to be edible – if rather tough and bland.

Last December, a new batch of trainwreckers periscoped from the crown of the same stump. I had noticed their scaley caps and serrated gills in the twilight one evening en route to our neighbours, and it looked quite elvish and magical.

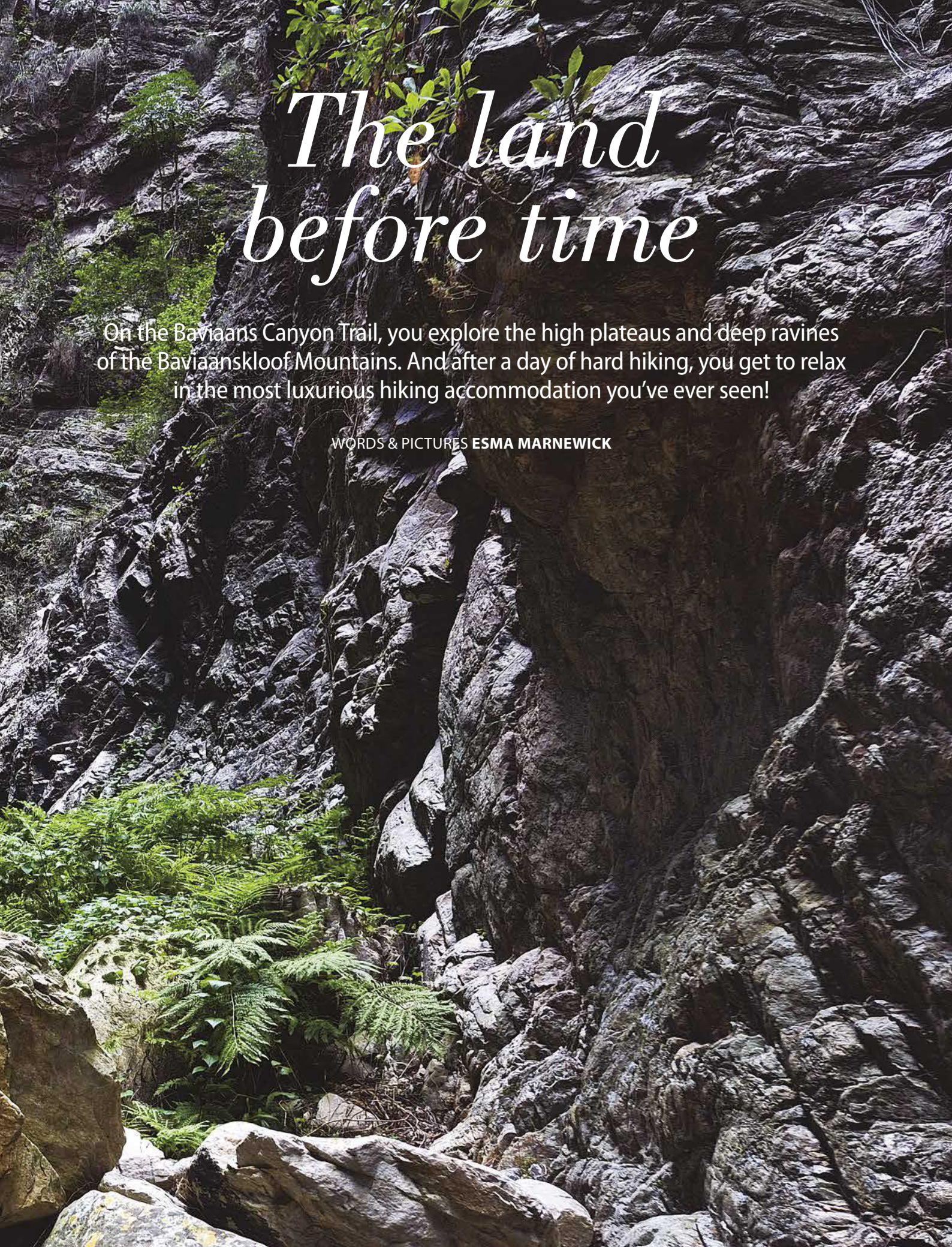
After a few sundowners, which extended well beyond sunset, I stumbled back to our cabin to grab my camera and then retraced my steps to the stump. The excess shiraz nudged me into a Peter Jackson frame of mind, and I felt like making some art. I popped a few Lume Cube lights in my pocket to light the scene I had in mind.

Come nightfall, the forest is anything but silent. The soundscape swells as the day drains from the canopy, as if the entire forest exhales. Then, tentatively, the nightlife kicks in – a single *grrunk* from the edge of the ravine, answered moments later by a buckety plonk from the *onderbos* fringe.

As if cued by an unseen conductor, the frogs and toads escalate into full vibrato mode. Clicks, croaks, trills and extraterrestrial ribbits ricochet from trunk to trunk. Their symphony swells into a layered opus that resonates deep within the bony labyrinth of my inner ear.

A person wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a backpack is seen from behind, standing on a rocky path in a lush, green canyon. The canyon walls are steep and covered in dense vegetation, including ferns and other green plants. The scene is illuminated by natural light, creating a vibrant and adventurous atmosphere.

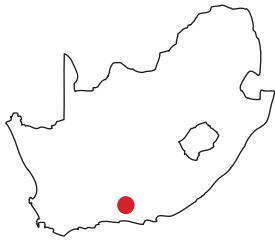
In the narrow, vertical canyons that cut through the Baviaanskloof and Kouga mountains, you find a lush environment hidden away from the dry plateau, with permanent water and lots of greenery. You can explore Paradise Kloof on Day 3 in flip-flops or aqua shoes.



The land before time

On the Baviaans Canyon Trail, you explore the high plateaus and deep ravines of the Baviaanskloof Mountains. And after a day of hard hiking, you get to relax in the most luxurious hiking accommodation you've ever seen!

WORDS & PICTURES **ESMA MARNEWICK**



Just like that, the sun crests the walls of the canyon. Our group of eight all look up: A thin strip of blue sky peeks out.

The timing is perfect. A few minutes ago, it was still cool and dusky in the canyon, but now the sun is streaming in. Two other hikers and I put on our swimming costumes and wade into the icy pool at the end of Paradise Kloof, which is aptly named Full Stop. Another 15 minutes later, the sun has passed across the narrow gap and it's cool and dim down here again. What a majestic moment – to experience the earth turning!

On the new five-day Baviaans Canyon slackpacking trail, there are lots of moments like this. One day, you're high on the plateau, surrounded by mountains upon mountains, struggling against the wind. Next, you're in a damp canyon, beneath rock walls as high as ten-storey buildings, deep in the folds of the very same mountains.

This is the sister hike of the popular Leopard Trail. On the Leopard, hikers mostly track along ridges and through valleys where a leopard would typically roam. The Baviaans Canyon Trail takes you out of those valleys and high into the mountains that formed when the continents collided millions of years ago. When you look at the rock formations, you can see how the landscape creased and rivers made their way to the sea. The geology of the earth comes to life.

An hour or so later, as I slowly exit the canyon and walk back to Savannah Camp, I wish the earth would slow on its axis so I could spend more time in the clear pools and rock corridors. In fact, on the Baviaans Canyon Trail, you'll find yourself hoping that time would stand still completely!

DAY 1 16,2 KM

Base Camp to Cedar Camp

A single acacia tree grows in the valley – that must be Leopards Rest. It's 12.30 pm and we've already crossed three koppies and two valleys. Donne-Lee Cupido, the receptionist at the Baviaanskloof Interpretive Centre at Base Camp, recommended we stop at Gabriel's Pool for lunch.

About half an hour later, we see a sign for

Gabriel's Pool to the right. The rock walls wind deeper into the kloof to a pool where you can see a wispy waterfall after good rain. With the light hitting the rock just right, the kloof feels like sacred ground.

We snack on last night's braai meat but we don't stay long. It's dry in the Baviaanskloof right now, and judging by the variety of droppings around the pool, this is a very popular spot among the local animals.

From the kloof, the path twists up a mountain. Now you have to lower your head and *hike*. It's a slog up to the Hunters View lookout point. The white tail of a mountain reedbuck bounces down the slopes while a cool wind cuts through my clothes.

Once we've all caught our breath, we descend to a valley where we walk through a stand of proteas for the first time. The flowers – light yellow with cerise edges – are still closed. It looks like they might be strap-leaf sugarbush.

There are 15 protea species here. So far today, we've walked through fynbos and thicket biomes. Seven of South Africa's eight most important biomes are found in the greater Baviaanskloof area. And the Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve is also a part of the Cape Floral Kingdom, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

From the valley, we walk along Dragon's Ridge and down another long, narrow valley to the last hill. Up, up, up and over the nek I go – down below one of the other hikers is already in the swimming pool at the camp. I basically skip down the path.

We're all amazed as we enter the communal tent and walk past the big granite counter in the spacious kitchen to where our black luggage boxes are set out in a corner. There's a hook for your daypack above your box. There's even a massage gun on the shelf next to a series of plugs where you can charge your cellphone and camera.

The three sleeping tents are set apart from the communal tent and outdoor showers (with hot water). Each one has two en suite rooms with enough hooks and places to hang wet towels and clothes.

After we've oohed and aahed over the creature comforts, we take out cooldrinks and kick off our hiking boots.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The first day included Gabriel's Pool – not to be confused with Gabriel's Loop. Each overnight camp has a swimming pool, which does wonders for tired feet and shoulders. Take your next profile picture at Gabriel's Pool. The strap-leaf sugarbush is one of 15 protea species that grow in the Baviaanskloof.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Only a klipspringer would manage the Klipspringer Traverse without chains. Each tent camp has a firepit, where you can reminisce about the day's hike. Wooden steps and ladders help you over some of the more tricky sections. Evidence suggests the vertical canyons – also called slot canyons – were formed by stress fractures during Gondwana's separation.



IN OTHER WORDS

Donne-Lee Cupido,
reception manager

On the first day of the trail, you're excited about what lies ahead. By the last day, you're excited about finishing the hike! The second day is my favourite. I'm afraid of heights but I love walking along the ridges – you're high up, but it feels like your feet are firmly on the ground. I climbed down the ladders on Day 4 with ease and now I've conquered my fears!

DAY 2 16,6 KM

Cedar Camp to Kudu Camp

This morning we have to climb, up a trail called Red Cliffs. Wooden steps are bolted to the rock in places, making it possible to scale the steep slope. We groan and gasp for air, but we were warned – it's about a 200m gain in elevation over 1 km.

Up on the plateau again, we're greeted by a landscape of waving grass. The wind snaps my jacket and cools the sweat on my cheeks.

We're not at the very top just yet and hike along the edge of the mountain to a nek. On the other side, the path disappears down a ladder. Two sets of chains, each about 3 m in length, lead the way. This must be the place called Klipspringer Traverse on the map.

Just over the next nek, the wind quiets down. I turn back to look at the improbable path and think how trail designer Conrad Windvogel and his team must have bundubashed around here nine months ago, looking to create a traversable path. Incredible.

The path keeps climbing. One foot in front of the other... and we're at the top! Mountains in all directions, and it's only 9.45 am.

I sit on a rock. A fly zooms by. A bird chirps. It's so quiet I can hear the wind approaching. A gust ripples the grass, pulls my jacket and tumbles away over the peaks. I can hear myself chewing a piece of dried mango. Rows and rows of mountains rise in greens, greys and blues as far as the eye can see.

We stay on the plateau until the trail descends to a valley and criss-crosses a dry riverbed. Past cabbage trees, crassula, spekboom and pelargonium. The valley narrows until we're enveloped in a canyon. White rocks are scattered across the canyon floor – we rest again, just to spend more time here.

The path snakes out of the canyon and joins up with a jeep track. It's drizzling lightly now. A windmill, one of the last of its species, turns next to an empty cement dam. Around the next corner we see Kudu Camp. It's 1.30 pm. More than enough time to act like a guest at a fancy lodge and head straight for the swimming pool!

DAY 3 8 KM

Kudu Camp to Savannah Camp

"It's heaven," is how Robin Booth, one of the founders of the trail, sums up today's in-and-out hike through Paradise Kloof.

After about 700m, there's a sign that reads, "Restricted Conservation Area". A few metres further, another sign: "No fires, no toilet paper, no food waste..."

But when we exit Paradise Kloof five hours later, I feel that this special place needs more protection than what a few signs can offer. Build a gate, a moat, a wall! Because this kloof holds a world you've never experienced before.

Orange-brown cliffs – 80m high in places – rise all around. The canyon floor is littered with white stones and big boulders. Arum lilies stand a metre tall, with big green leaves. Wild mint, wild sage and pelargoniums grow hip-high next to crystal-clear pools. Underwater, crabs and frogs in every stage of life dart away to hide beneath leaves. Nature is bursting with life everywhere – in paths, on rocks, from fallen tree trunks.

At one point, a colourful dragonfly lands on my arm as if I'm just another tree.

DAY 4 14,5 KM

Savannah Camp to Canyon Camp

During our preparation talk at the Interpretive Centre, Donne-Lee Cupido and Franklin Windvogel at reception only shook their heads about Day 4. The first 6 km is uphill all the way. The weather forecast predicted high temperatures, so we set off early, at 6.30 am.

The route crosses the R332 dirt road and goes up the mountain. By 7 am, my shirt is drenched. A big drop of sweat forms in the corner of my eye and runs down my cheek. My glasses slip down my nose.

Each hiker has their own technique to tackle a never-ending climb. Mine is simple: Just keep moving, even if it's at a shuffle. And don't look up.

After an hour and a half, we plonk down on a rock for a rest. In front of us, the Baviaanskloof sprawls out. Phew – that was tough.

I eat some droëwors and cheese for energy before we push on. In the distance I see two hikers on a nek. I blink to see better... Behind them, on the next slope, the path zigzags to the top. But between those points, the trail has to descend into another valley...

I put one foot in front of the other and fight to keep the exhaustion at bay.

A long hour later, I sit at the top of the



zigzag path, tired to the bone. I look around. I can't see the trail anywhere on the surrounding mountains and we still have 5,5 km to go.

After a 10-minute walk, I realise why...

A series of wooden steps and platforms take you straight down to the canyon floor. To think, someone had to carry all the planks up here...

This canyon is wider and drier than Paradise Kloof, but with the same white stones along its winding course. In places you climb down long wooden ladders. Rare redfin minnows flit around a pool as clear as whiskey.

The path eventually leads to the overnight camp, which is just outside the mouth of the canyon called Duiwekloof. We all pull off our boots and get into our swimming costumes. I sink into the cool water.

We spend a quiet afternoon in camp, resting and ruminating, as a cool breeze blows through the kloof.

DAY 5 17 KM

Canyon Camp to Base Camp

Wow, I should have added an extra spoonful of sugar to my porridge this morning... The climb up so-called Morning Glory from Duiwekloof is already sapping my energy. After a while we reach a viewpoint and look back down at the camp and the swimming pool in the narrow kloof below. Thanks for having us. Onward we go.

Half an hour later, the mountainous landscape opens up. The Baviaanskloof Mountains are unique – their tablelands are remnants of the African Erosion Surface, the landscape that formed after the supercontinent Gondwana broke apart. When the surface of southern Africa began to rise, inland rivers carved their way to the sea, and some of the famous gorges, such as Storms River and Oribi, were formed, as were the vertical canyons in these mountains.

Millions of years later, the canyons offer shelter to animals and plants (and hikers) – and up here, in the fynbos, the wind clears your head. It's an ancient landscape where many things have happened, and are still happening.

On the Baviaans Canyon Trail, you can't help but ponder the cosmic questions: the history of this fragile planet and the short life we're granted in its sheltering embrace.

Source: Plants of the Baviaanskloof by Douglas Euston-Brown and Magriet Kruger



Clockwise from top left: The Karoo conebush is one of the hardiest conebushes in the region. The huts each feature two bedrooms and a bathroom (without a shower). This trail offers views of mountains upon mountains. The relatively flat "peaks" are remainders of the African Erosion Surface.



LEOPARD TRAIL OR BAVIAANS CANYON TRAIL?

Willemien Janse van Rensburg from Somerset West has hiked both the Leopard (62 km) and Baviaans Canyon (73 km) trails.

Are there similarities? Yes, the trails are similar for a kilometre or two on Day 1 and Day 2. There's a sense of déjà vu. But you do approach the kloofs and mountains from a different direction, so you often see things you might have missed on your previous visit. (*Go Baviaans has since re-routed Day 1 of the Baviaans Canyon Trail to exclude Gabriel's Pool.* – Ed.)

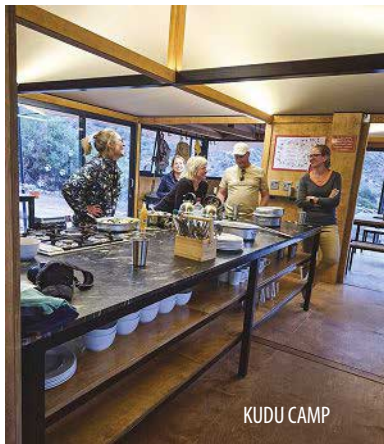
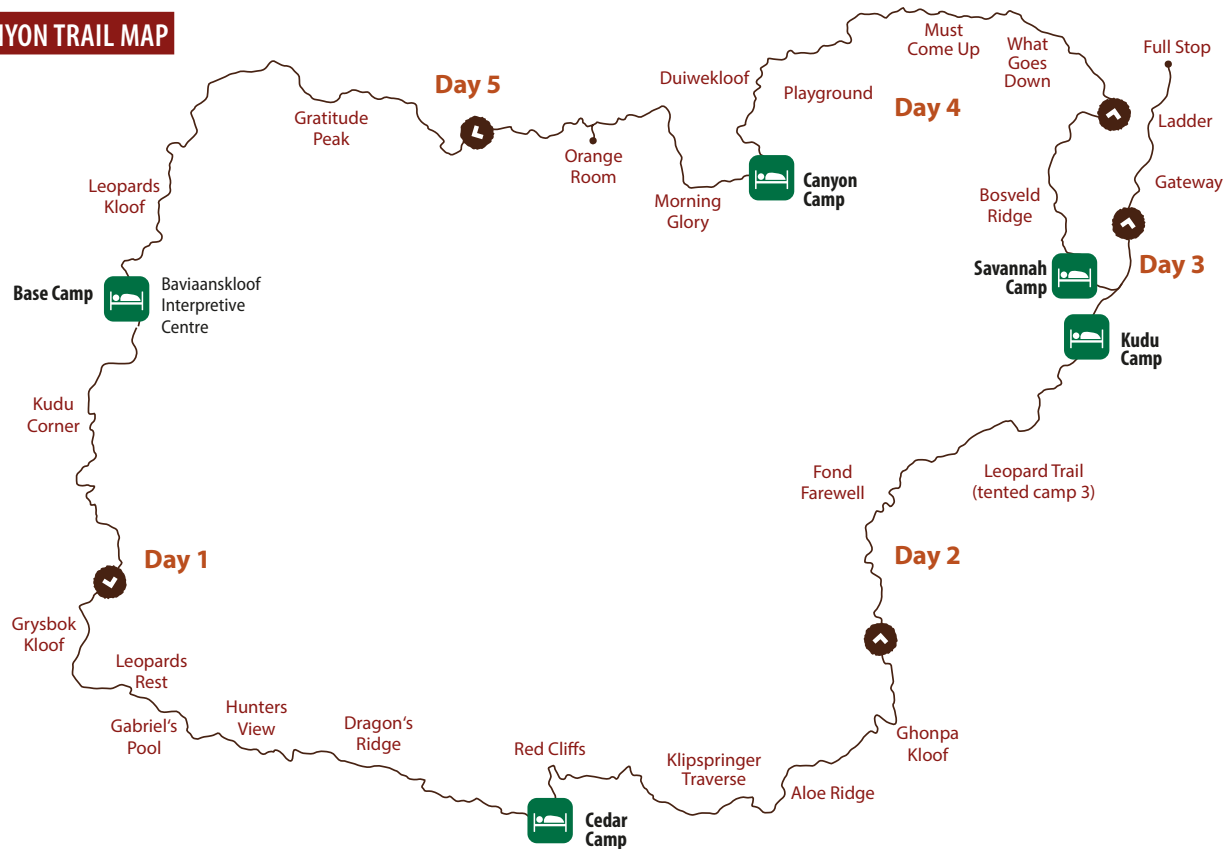
The main differences? Days 3 and 4 of the Baviaans Canyon clearly inspired the trail's name... I was amazed by the pools and rock formations we hiked past. The Leopard Trail's huts are luxurious in comparison to other trails, but the Canyon Trail's huts are on another level. The Canyon Trail is also more challenging. The hiking days are longer, with more climbing and descending. You feel those extra 11 km!

Would you recommend both? Definitely – the trails are different enough to draw you back to the Baviaans. I hope to do both trails again.

The Leopard Trail is a four-day, three-night trail and costs R3 700 per person. Visit gobaviaans.co.za for more information.

BAVIAANSKLOOF

CANYON TRAIL MAP



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How does it work? The Baviaans Canyon slackpacking trail (73 km) is a five-day, four-night hike – you sleep at Base Camp near the Interpretive Centre the night before and after the hike, turning it into a seven-day experience. Each hiker gets a black box for their stuff and the group shares three cooler boxes and a camping fridge – these are transported between the camps. You can keep food for the last night in a fridge at Base Camp. You hike with a daypack.

Facilities: Each camp has three tented huts (for 12 people in total) and a communal tent with a spacious kitchen, living area with a fireplace, dining area and a deck. Hikers also share a braai lapa, swimming pool and hot outdoor showers. Each sleeping hut has two bedrooms (with a toilet and basin) that sleep two people each. Two of the huts are close together and the third is set

slightly apart. The rate includes a bag of firewood and two bags of ice per day.

Nice extras: Each camp has a massage gun and there's a massage chair at Base Camp. Hikers can order Nespresso capsules (R160 for 10 pods) and Baviaansbrew beers (R35 per can or R210 for a six pack). You can bring your own coffee pods if they're biodegradable.

What should I pack? Snacks, meals, drinks, clothes, shoes, bedding, a daypack, camera, chargers, a bird guide, and binoculars...

Cost: From R5 900 per person. Book at least a year in advance. Take note: Your booking is not per person but per hut (each unit sleeps four people). Groups of fewer than 12 people will share the trail with other hikers.

Contact: ☎ 074 939 4395

🌐 baviaanscanyontrail.co.za



IN OTHER WORDS

Marilette Coates, Gqeberha

This adventure should be on every hiker's wish list. The silence and vast open spaces in the mountains were wonderful to experience. I was grateful to have a quality hiking pole to help me on the steep slopes.



Stu Coates, Gqeberha

The trail rewards you with diverse landscapes – Day 4 was a real highlight. Carry enough water; I drank 4 – 5 litres per day. The days can be hot and the nights cold, even in summer, so pack for all kinds of weather.



Adri Diener, Somerset West

Bring a pillow; there's enough space in the black boxes. It's nice to arrive at the camps early, but don't rush to get there. The trail is so scenic – stop to enjoy the views wherever you can.



Suna Jubelius, Jansenville

Every day has its own beauty, and the biodiversity is amazing. The koppie at Kudu Camp was extra special – it was even more scenic from Savannah Camp the next night. The unexpected openness of Savannah made it my favourite camp. It's the first trail I've done that I definitely want to do again.



THE BIRTH OF A HIKING TRAIL

When Linden Booth, co-owner of Go Baviaans, first visited the Baviaanskloof years ago, there were no trails or campsites. "You bought a permit to sleep in the veld for R22 per night," he says.

Initially, he established the Leopard Trail to raise funds for upliftment work in the Baviaans. The trail's popularity caught him off guard.

In 2025, Linden and his brother Robin decided to build another trail, the more luxurious and tougher Baviaans Canyon Trail. With a rough idea of the route, a few photos and a video of the highlights, they announced the trail online. Within eight minutes, they were fully booked a year in advance!

They got to work. Along with a group of Baviaanskloof residents from the Eastern Cape branch of Working on Fire – and the odd helicopter! – they completed the trail in nine months.



Franklin Windvogel, receptionist

I joined the project team when the trail was still only an idea in Linden and Robin's heads. We made that idea a reality.

I was born in the Baviaans and matriculated in Willowmore in 2021. Last year was one of the best years of my life. God really came through for me.

It was hard work. We had to carry planks for the steps up the mountain. We camped in the veld for up to a week at a time. We used flags to mark the route beforehand, then three men would walk ahead and clear the vegetation with shears. Behind them would be a few men with hoes. And then followed the men who levelled the path with pickaxes. Two men then raked the ground. All of our hands were covered in blood blisters. A few men also dropped out.

I was lucky to get a permanent job. I have to take care of myself – I have a child to support and I want to give my parents the best life I can. I can't repay them for everything they've done for me, but I can give something back.

Paradise Kloof on the third day is my favourite. I could lie there all day. Look for the camera trap in the kloof – on the tree opposite the camera, you'll see claw marks of a leopard that often visits the area.



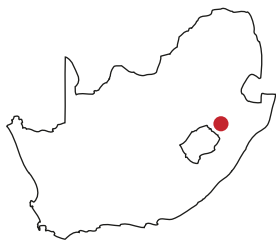
Spoilt for choice in the Champagne Valley

Winterton – on the banks of the Little Tugela River – is your portal to the central Drakensberg. In the shadow of Cathkin Peak and Champagne Castle, you'll find a valley brimming with adventure and natural beauty.

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



Hike to the top of the Sphinx, about 2 km from the Monks Cowl Nature Reserve campsite, for views of the central Drakensberg.



“**G**rowing up in Ballito, Winterton was where my parents would refuel and buy last-minute groceries before heading into the Champagne Valley for a family holiday,” says Anika Botha, remembering the town she now calls home.

Seated in the Roots Clay Café, she says it’s only when she moved to Winterton as an adult that she started paying attention to all the experiences on offer here.

“I did my medical community service year at the local hospital in 2020, and although I had no plans to stay, the town quickly became dear to me,” she says. “I think my fiancé Chris had a role to play!”

Anika admits that settling into a life in rural KZN wasn’t always easy. “It took some getting used to, but I’ve come to prefer the slower pace,” she says. (“Slow” is relative – she does online work, manages a guesthouse in a private game reserve and does social media marketing for several local businesses!)

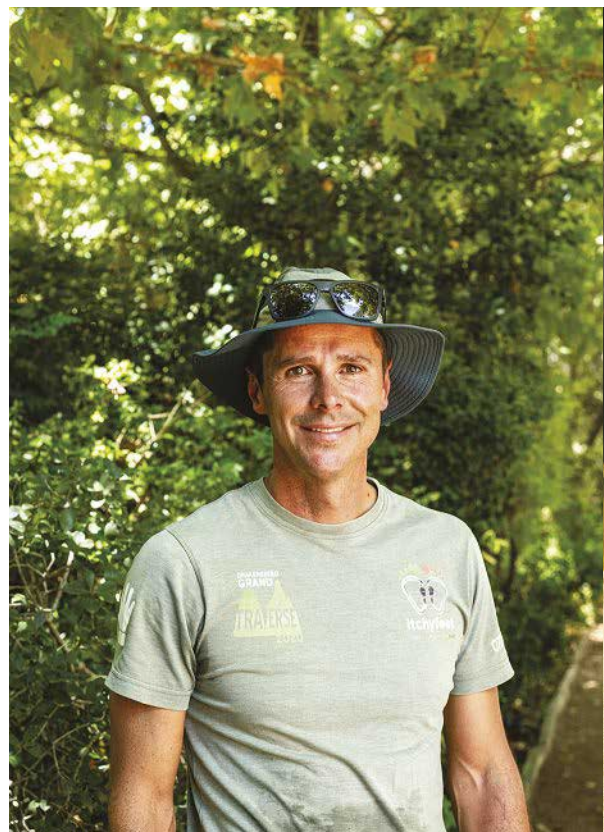
Anika says the valley hardly ever feels crowded. “Okay, perhaps over the Easter weekend and Christmas you’ll notice more activity at places like the Berg Air Lifestyle Centre or fuel stations in town, but it never feels overrun. That’s what sets Winterton and the Champagne Valley apart from other tourist towns.”

An expert on the various outdoor activities in the Champagne Valley is Gustav Greffrath, owner of Itchy Feet Adventures.

“I grew up exploring these valleys, peaks and streams,” says Gustav, pointing toward the flat-topped Cathkin Peak (3 149 m) and Champagne Castle (3 248 m), which tower over the central Drakensberg. “This was a quiet farming community when I was young. Back then, outsiders and tourists were a rare sight. But about twenty years ago, people started to realise that there’s more to this area than fertile soil and abundant water.”

After completing his doctorate in recreation studies, Gustav started looking for a place to practise his academic and practical skills as a wilderness guide and instructor. “I was committed to staying in South Africa, so all I could think was, ‘What about going back to the mountains and rivers I know best?’ After all these years, the beauty of the Drakensberg still catches me off guard.”

Clockwise from the top: Watch the sunset over the Tugela River from your private deck or hot tub at Tugela River Lodge. You’ll find a host of farming equipment and other artefacts dating from the previous two centuries on display at the Winterton Museum – an indication of the rich agricultural history of the Champagne Valley. The area around the Bell Park Dam is a birder’s paradise, especially if you’re looking to spot waterfowl – like this hamerkop hunting frogs on the road along the dam. Despite his intimate knowledge of the passes, trails and caves of the central Drakensberg, Gustav Greffrath still remains in awe of the natural beauty of his “backyard”.





5 THINGS TO DO

1 Hike in Monks Cowl Nature Reserve

From Monks Cowl, hikers can explore the Mlambonja and Mdedelo wilderness areas via a network of trails. During our visit, we hiked to Zulu Cave and spent the night camping in the cave (26 km return).

We also walked the easy 3 km Sterkspruit Falls loop, which takes you to a clear river pool.

The undemanding 10 km loop to Nandi's Falls and back is another favourite among day visitors.

The campsite and shared facilities at Monks Cowl are basic, but the views of the Sphinx, Cathkin Peak and Champagne Castle make up for it.

Where? The reserve is 36 km south-west of Winterton along the R600.

Cost: Day visitors R80 per person; overnight hike R120 per person; camping R140 per person for a stand with power.

Opening times: 6 am to 6 pm.

Contact: ☎ 036 468 1103; 🌐 kznwildlife.com

2 Watch avian acrobatics

Did you know that a Cape vulture can spot a carcass from up to 8 km away? Or that the peregrine falcon is the fastest animal on earth? Seeing is believing! At Falcon Ridge, you can watch a kettle of vultures riding the thermals, returning to earth at the slightest signal by their handler. And you can marvel at a falcon swooping at breakneck speed to catch its prey in mid-flight.

"The aim is to showcase the incredible capabilities of these animals," says Alison McBey. Alison and her husband Greg have been rehabilitating birds of prey for the last 27 years – they share their wealth of knowledge during an hour-long show that features a variety of birds, including Becky the African fish-eagle, and Jack the jackal buzzard. If you're lucky, they might let one of the stars of the show perch on your hand.

Where? 30 km south-west of Winterton via the R600.

Cost: R195 per adult; R165 for pensioners; R125 for children under 12.

Opening times: 9.30 am to 11.30 am. Closed on Mondays and Fridays.

Contact: ☎ 082 774 6398; "Falcon Ridge" on Facebook

POOL ABOVE STERKSPRUIT FALLS



3 Visit the Spioenkop Battlefield

Wander among the memorials erected in honour of the casualties of the Battle of Spioenkop – one of the bloodiest British defeats to the Boers.

The battle, which lasted from 23 to 24 January in 1900, ended with more than 1 500 British casualties and 335 recorded Boer losses, and it was the third attempt by British forces to relieve the Siege of Ladysmith.

Visitors can follow a short trail that winds between the various memorials and visit several graves and trenches preserved on the summit of the mountain. The memorial site offers panoramic views of Spioenkop Dam and the Drakensberg.

Where? 35 km north of Winterton along the R600 and L282. Watch out for potholes.

Cost: R70 per person.

Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 4 pm.

Contact: ☎ 035 870 2050



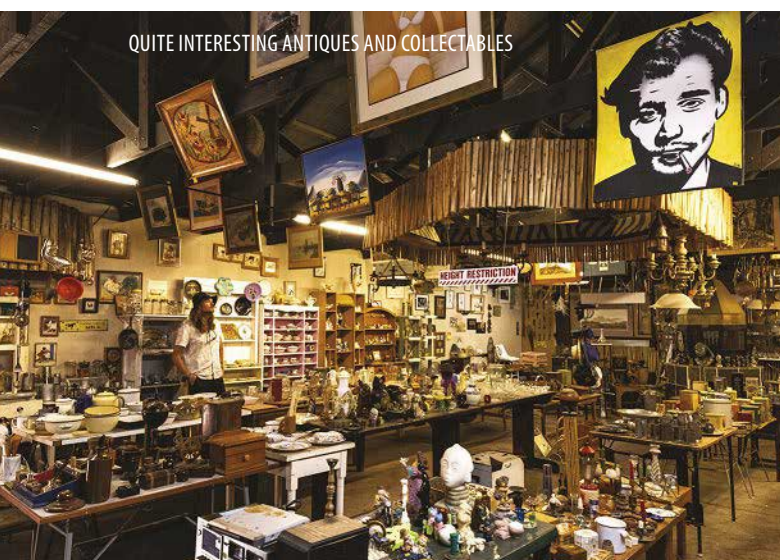
SPIOENKOP DAM



DRAKENSBURG CHOCOLATE
MEMORIES



CEDARWOOD VILLAGE



QUITE INTERESTING ANTIQUES AND COLLECTABLES



4 Shop the Champagne Valley

With curio and gift shops aplenty, the Champagne Valley will sate even the most rapacious shopper's appetite.

Buy handmade scented candles at **KwaZulu Candles and Weaving** (036 488 1500), and browse their beautifully crafted hand-spun wool rugs and brushed cotton homeware made on the premises.

If you're after vintage vinyl, homeware and military memorabilia, pay a visit to **Quite Interesting Antiques and Collectables** (083 740 2962), where you can easily lose half a morning navigating the collection of curiosities. The kids can keep busy in the play area, which includes a nine-hole putt-putt course on the property.

In need of some last-minute supplies? At the **Thokozi'sa Deli** (082 958 0977) you'll find locally produced jams, baked goods and pickles. Try the muesli rusks (R50) or pepper chicken pie (R38). If you're short on something to enjoy as a sundowner, there's also a little wine cellar on site.

At the **Berg Air Lifestyle Centre**, you can sample artisanal chocolates at the free tasting bar at **Drakensberg Chocolate Memories** (drakensbergchocolate.com) while you wait for a cappuccino and three truffles special (R55). No sweet tooth? Try a beer tasting board (R69) at the **Drakensberg Craft Brewery** (drakbrew.co.za).



5 Step back in time (really)

The Trading Store Museum holds a staggering amount of household products dating from the 1960s and earlier. Think vintage sweets, razor blades, soaps, canned food, rolls of cloth, small sewing wares, toys and medicine, most still in their original packaging, some with price tags still attached.

These unsold goods are remnants of a trading store in Lesotho. Sandra Lemmer, the curator, bought the entire stock in 2007 after the original owner passed away – to preserve it all as a “living exhibition”.

“Although most of the items are not for sale, people can’t resist the urge to try and convince me to sell them things,” says store assistant Gugu Hadebe with a laugh.

You can buy things next door, however, at **Sandra se Winkel** – an antique shop with vintage enamelware, cutlery, crockery, books, textiles and other bits of bric-a-brac. Also pop into **Zimele Ceramics’** small gallery.

Where? 25 km south-west of Winterton on Heartsease Farm in the Cathkin Valley, via the D275.

Museum entrance fee: R20 per adult.

Contact: 082 371 2137; “Sandra se Winkel” on Facebook
lemmersandra@gmail.com

IN OTHER WORDS

Jane McGlew, owner, Jane Collectables, Thokozisa Lifestyle Centre

Sunrise over the Bell Park Dam (073 499 3354) is spectacular, not to mention the abundant birdlife to be seen all year round. It’s a good spot for a picnic and popular among anglers. Just watch out, apparently there’s a resident crocodile that hangs around...

Yenziwe Ndumo, tourism information officer, Winterton

If your time is limited and you’re looking for an exciting day outing, I recommend Drakensberg Canopy Tours (drakensbergcanopytour.co.za).

Trevor Hall, owner, Quite Interesting Antiques

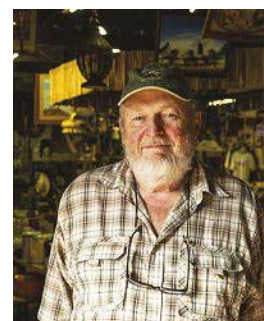
Go visit Cathedral Peak Wine Estate (cathpeakwines.com) for wine tasting or a meal. If you enjoy a good pinotage, theirs is award-winning.

Septima Peyper, reservations co-ordinator, Mountain Splendour

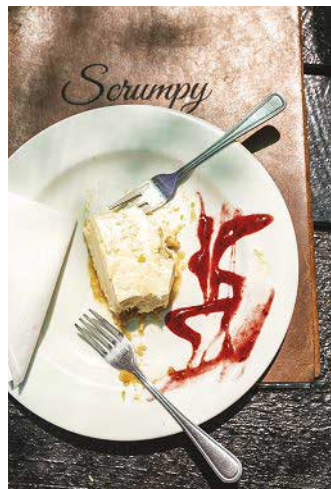
The roughly 6 km circular hike to Blue Grotto pool is my favourite day hike in the area. The route is relatively easy and the pool is perfect for a picnic and a splash. It starts from the Drakensberg Sun Hotel. Just tell the guard at the gate you’re going for a hike.

Anika Botha, Winterton

If you’re in the area over a weekend, book a seat at the Sunday harvest table at the Champagne Bistro Café (078 358 6896) at the Berg Air Lifestyle Centre. Elsa Buys, the chef, was the winner of the 2014 kykNET Kokkedoor cooking competition and spoils guests with an assortment of sweet and savoury dishes.



TOWN



WHAT ELSE?

• **Visit the Tourism Information Office.** Walk, swim, float, shop, zipline, paddle... Winterton has no shortage of things to do. Get insider info from the tourism office, behind the Winterton museum at 1 Church Street. ☎ 036 488 1885

• **Drakensberg Boys Choir.** Performances at 3.30 pm on Wednesdays and 10.30 am on Saturdays during term time. The Drakensberg Boys Choir School is about 30 km from Winterton along the R600. ☎ 036 468 1012; 📧 dbchoir.com

• **Bread and milk.** Cedarwood Village has a supermarket, liquor store and fuel station – it means you don't need to travel all the way into Winterton to stock up on essentials if you're staying higher up the Champagne Valley. The centre is about 25 km south of Winterton along the R600.

• **Go with a guide.** The higher reaches of the central Drakensberg can be tricky to navigate. If you want to do a multi-day hike, go with an experienced guide – consider Itchy Feet Adventures. 📧 itchyfeetsa.co.za

• **Soar over the Champagne Valley.** Take flight in a hot air balloon with Drakensberg Ballooning, about 10 km west of Winterton on the Mooihoeck Road. ☎ 082 802 7527 📧 drakensbergballooning.com

EAT HERE

The Pig & Plough Restaurant & Farmstall

With its large patio and shaded garden, the Pig & Plough offers family-friendly dining in the heart of town. A fenced-in play area and petting farm make it a great place for families with youngsters to enjoy a relaxed brunch.

In addition to the restaurant, which serves breakfasts and light meals, there's a deli selling cheese, cold meats, artisanal preserves and baked goods. There's also a small cellar with South African wines and olive oils on sale.

Where? Springfield Road (R74), Winterton

Contact: ☎ 036 488 1542
📧 amblesidefarm.co.za

Valley Bakery, Coffee Shop and Art Gallery

In this country bakery with its manicured gardens, you'll find fresh pastries, pies, tarts, biscuits and speciality breads all baked with flour milled on site. Try a spinach-and-feta or bacon-and-cheese quiche (R45), or a mini lemon meringue (R30).

Where? 20 km south-west of Winterton along the R600.

Contact: ☎ 060 397 7837
"Valley Bakery" on Facebook

Scrumpy Jack's Restaurant

Sit back and enjoy the view

while you wait for a crumpet stack (R75) or a beef burger with honey and chilli (R130). Browse local honey products like creamed honey, propolis and honey-based salves and ointments in the farm stall, and don't forget to try a slice of their famous baked honey cheesecake (R55).

Where? On the R600, 16 km south-west of Winterton.

Contact: ☎ 082 879 6042

📧 deon@deonshoney

products.co.za

@scrumpyjackssa on Instagram

Dragonview Bistro

Enjoy a cocktail on the spacious outdoor deck while you watch the sun set, or settle in for a fireside dinner during winter. The children's play area with its near life-size sculptures of a dinosaur, Land Rover and helicopter will have parents and offspring equally excited.

We can recommend the Dragonview pizza (halloumi, tomato chilli jam, garlic and rocket; R160) and the Dragon Tears cocktail (vodka, orange and cranberry juice; R95).

Where? 30 km south-west of Winterton via the R600 and Champagne Lane.

Contact: ☎ 084 815 1113

📧 dragonview.co.za



STAY HERE

Mountain Splendour Eco-Resort

This family-owned resort feels more like a farm stay than a traditional resort. Pitch your tent in the shade of established trees, or book a glamping tent or log cabin with a view.

The prime campsites (numbers 41 – 50) have great views of the 'Berg. Campers can choose between stands with access to communal bathrooms and a limited number of private ablution facilities.

There are plenty of diversions for the kids: a swimming pool with a slide; tennis and volleyball courts; a petting zoo; and a large indoor entertainment area with table tennis and pool tables.

"There's also 10 km of mountain-biking trails around the property, and a few short walks for those looking to get the blood flowing," says reservations co-ordinator Septima Peyper.

Where? 27 km south-west of Winterton via the R600 and Champagne Lane.

Rates: Camping from R260 per person. Self-catering accommodation from R890 per person.

Contact: ☎ 082 577 6841

📍 mountainsplendour.co.za

Cwebile Guesthouse

This luxurious home, with three tastefully decorated double rooms, is in the Ntabamoya Private Game Reserve. Watch waterfowl like hamerkop and red-knobbed coot scuttle between the reeds of the large dam, while giraffe, impala, wildebeest and waterbuck

graze beneath enormous paperbark trees that dot the lawns outside your bedroom window.

Where? 15 km west of Winterton on the Mooihoek Road.

Rates: From R1 175 per person sharing, breakfast included.

Contact: ☎ 072 198 1736

📍 cwebile.com

AfriCamps Champagne Valley

Unwind in a wood-fired hot tub while you watch the sun go down, or snuggle up beside the fireplace in your glamping tent on a ridge. If taking in the views becomes too much to bear, go see the 250 tree species along the 1 km Yellowwood Walk, or take a dip in the eco farm pool.

Where? 28 km south-west of Winterton on the R600.

Rates: From R1 790 per night for two adults.

Contact: ☎ 021 300 5694

📍 africamps.com

Tugela River Lodge

The five fenced-off units each has a river view – they're also pet-friendly and off-grid. Thrill-seeking guests can enjoy a network of mountain-biking and trail-running routes that criss-cross the cattle and game farm.

"The trail along the river is perfect for a stroll with your four-footed friend," says Julian Pearce, owner and manager. Four of the units have hot tubs.

Where? 29 km north of Winterton on the R600.

Rates: From R1 628 per night for two adults.

Contact: ☎ 083 680 2649

📍 tugelariverlodge.co.za

FOR YOUR DIARY

Berg & Bush MTB Race

The mountains and bushveld around Winterton have been home to the annual Berg & Bush stage race for more than two decades. The two-day option takes place from 29 – 31 May 2026, or do the full three-day route – The Descent – from 5 – 7 June.

The Oxpecker (📍 theoxpecker.co.za) is the trail-running stage race equivalent of Berg & Bush. This popular event takes place in May each year.

More info: 📍 bergandbush.co.za



MOUNTAIN SPLENDOUR ECO-RESORT



AFRICAMPS CHAMPAGNE VALLEY



CWEBILE GUESTHOUSE



CWEBILE GUESTHOUSE



TUGELA RIVER LODGE

Love and death in Bushmanland

You might think the name Keelafsnyleegte is made up. But there really is such a place. And you won't believe the miracles you'll find there.

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**

Sunset overlooking Verneukpan.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Oom Vasie de Kock from Vanwyksvlei says it's best to carry on smoking his pipe at his age. He reckons quitting now will be too much of a shock to his body. Of the many letters and photos that were locked inside a chest for 50 years, only Ronel Moolman and her horse withstood the elements. The people of Vanwyksvlei were eager to find out what the language monument would reveal. The night around Keelafsný is set ablaze by 15 seconds of lightning.

There's no shortcut to Keelafsný. So, Oom Vasie de Kock reckons I should first visit him in Vanwyksvlei. Vanwyksvlei is close to many things that are usually far away. Like Verneukpan and the town of Marydale, which lie on either side of Keelafsnýleegte.

And, says Oom Vasie, I'll be able to attend a big event in Vanwyksvlei. There's a language monument in town, built in 1975. Back then, a chest was bricked into the monument, said to be filled with letters and messages to families. The time has come to break it out – in honour of the centenary of Afrikaans being declared an official language.

"Some people say there might be a few gold pounds inside," says Oom Vasie. Either way, we'll find out tomorrow.

I hope something about Keelafsný was left in that trunk. The name, which translates as "Cut Throat", first caught my eye when I studied the landscape around Verneukpan on Google Earth.

Keelafsnýleegte is a faint wrinkle that runs from Marydale along the empty palm of Bushmanland, to the Hartbees River north of Verneukpan. A *leegte* in this area is almost like a *vlei*, but it seldom has water. It's not really a spruit either, but when there's heavy rain, it fills up. Basically, you shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that a *leegte* is empty. These areas are also often very beautiful.

On a map with farm names of the area, I found a farm called Bovenend-van-Keelafsnýleegte, meaning "Upper end of Cut Throat". There are also many other names to make you wonder: Stompoor, Klaarpraat, Kombersbrand, Rokoptel, Wieldraai, Staans-Stil, Afspring and Liefdood.

"Ja, there are lots of funny names in our district. On the other side of town you'll find Brekkierie. No one knows who broke a kieke here," says Oom Vasie.

Years ago, the author Lawrence Green also visited the area to learn the stories behind these names. In *Karoo* (1955), he writes: "The farm Keelafsný, I know, was the place where the rebellious Korannas cut the throat of the unfortunate magistrate named Maximilian James Jackson."

He could find no explanation for most other names.

But, says Oom Vasie, this dull patch of land has inspired many imaginations. "It's the mirages. You see something happen and later you have no proof that it did. If you stare out

there for too long, you'll find yourself in a dream. Ou Frans [Afrikaans author FA Venter] wrote the most wonderful stories on his farm stoep here."

FA Venter and his wife Stella lived on the farm Constantia, about 50 km north of Vanwyksvlei, for a few years. In his book *Werfjoernaal* (1965), he writes: "This land might seem monotonous, but look closely in its folds and leegtes, on its plains and hills and limestone slabs and you'll be amazed at everything it keeps hidden away."

Venter retired to Cape Town and Oom Vasie went to visit him. "He always stirred the ice in his whiskey glass with a *driedoring* twig from Constantia, like this." Vasie spreads his thumb, forefinger and middle finger and swirls the ice in an imaginary glass.

"Then he'd look at that twig and say: No sea, mountain or forest will ever be as beautiful as a *driedoring* flower."

An open grave

It's early, but already there's a hive of activity around the language monument in front of the Dutch Reformed church. People have travelled from as far as Botswana to see what their families stowed here 50 years ago. It takes a while to figure out how to retrieve the treasure, but it's Tilla la Grange who finds the hollow area in the plasterwork and hammers away.

"HJ, where are you? Come help me!"

Soon, young HJ van Wyk shows up with more tools. With each piece of cement that breaks away, people crowd closer in excitement.

There it is! Inside the monument is a rusty tin trunk wrapped in plastic. It's carried into the church, followed by a procession of people. The organ resounds. When the trunk is opened, Tilla yells "O, *koek*!"

The contents have disintegrated. Of all the words locked inside, only a few sentences on a scrap of moist paper from a *Landbouweekblad* have survived: "I have a field of lucerne six years old. Over the last two seasons, the yield has dropped dramatically."

And something about a horse show for children.

Two photo negatives also survived. One shows a girl on the back of a horse. It's Ronel Moolman, now Visagie – the woman who travelled all the way from Pandamatenga in Botswana.

"I still remember that morning," she says.

"She works harder than most men. She can carry a bag of mielies in each hand and will bite down on a third with her teeth to climb onto the back of a truck."



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: It's not clear if Lawrence Green's account of the murder of a magistrate at Keelafsný is accurate. But there's no doubt that death is part of this place. Signs of rain hang over the farmyard at Klaarpraat. Keep your eyes peeled for ostriches. Basie Coetzee has his own interpretations of the farm names in the district.

*Now they sit
huddled together
in the fork of an
ancient camel
thorn tree.
They call each
other Bokka.
They're each
other's life
after death.*

"My dad took the photo."

Many people wipe away tears when they think of all that has been lost over the last 50 years. Not only the letters in the trunk, but also the people who wrote them.

Later that afternoon, Oom Vasie lights his pipe as everyone eats and talks together. "I'm sure the people are disappointed, but I still think it was a success," he says. "Do you think anyone would have come here if I just invited them? I had to lure them here with gold pounds! But just listen to the wonderful stories they're telling each other."

Landscape of mirages

The dirt road to Marydale is full of the dreamy mirages Vasie talked about last night. It looks like the earth will end in a few metres. White grass rolls out from the road to the horizon. There's nothing much taller than the grass. Sheep cluster in the small shadow of a pepper tree. Shade is rare under the Bushmanland sun. That's why so many farmhouses stand empty on the deserted plains. Fewer and fewer people are willing to live and farm here.

Lawrence Green writes about a comment made by a woman in this remote place: "The space you admire so much makes us feel petty, and indeed we are small."

The Land of Begin Again, she called it. And not many have the courage to do it over and over.

From Marydale, I head west, towards Verneukpan, because the best farm names are found along this dirt road. Rokoptel and Kombersbrand are nowhere to be seen. At Angelierspan I spot people in the dust of a sheep kraal.

Yes, says Basie Coetzee – Rokoptel and Kombersbrand are both close by, but he knows nothing about the origin of the names.

"Rokoptel I can understand," says Basie. His way of speaking is like the veld – dry and without pretence. "The women of this area are strong. If you're not, you'll go under. So you better hitch your skirt, do the work and keep your chin up."

Green writes: "I solved Rokoptel (pick up the skirt). A peculiar thorn grew on this farm after rain and caught in the long dresses of the women if they were not careful."

Basie is sceptical of Green's explanation.

"Let me tell you, my neighbour on Kombersbrand is a woman and she farms there on her own. She's as tough as a blêrrie

Damara sheep. She works harder than most men. She can carry a bag of mielies in each hand and will bite down on a third with her teeth to climb onto the back of a truck. No word of a lie. Here you have to pick up your dress or you're gone."

His bristly beard is as white as the limestone around the kraal. His arms are brown and as hard as a thorn tree. In his sunglasses, I can see the promise of a thunderstorm in the sky. Basie is Bushmanland. So why don't I believe him?

Basie warned me that the dirt road onward was poor and there were lots of gates. He was right. I drive slower and slower. And that's good. I bob along in a Bushmanland sea. The wind makes waves in the white grassland. Archipelagos of clouds, blue and puffed up with rain, float closer.

To the left is Keelafsnyleegte. Almost invisible; a sparsely vegetated strip in the grass. And there, next to the road, I see a grave. Fenced in with jackal-proof wire.

Is this where the English magistrate got his throat cut? In this endless emptiness, while the sun looked on and baked his blood dry? Did a full moon glint on the blade? Did the Southern Cross keel over when Maximilian James Jackson fell?

Hard footsteps behind me make me swing around.

A male ostrich runs past with an open mouth. His bare neck is red, like he's been injured in a fight.

I crouch next to the gravestone. The words have been eaten away by time. The grave is surrounded by burrows – whoever lies here shares the earth with meerkats, porcupines and maybe a family of bat-eared foxes. Death is a sombre business, but I can't help but feel that Keelafsnyleegte is a good place to take your last breath. A place where the veld is always bigger than you, and where you can become part of it.

I continue. Eventually, the road peters out into a track. According to my map, I'm driving through a farm called Klaarpraat. A beautiful, simple house with a wide stoep stands deserted on a hill. It's not yet dilapidated, but life is evaporating from its walls. I want to sit on the stoep and wait for rain. Laugh with the corrugated-iron roof when the first drops fall. But a camera on a pole is watching me and I push on.

Not much further, I cross Keelafsnyleegte



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Serieta Klindt and Johan de Beer walk hand-in-hand on the farm Liefdood. Eva Adams in her own little Garden of Eden, her place of peace under the harsh Bushmanland sun. Magda Maritz is as colourful as her cash shop in the settlement of Swartkop. Contact her if you'd like to donate books to the library across the road: ☎ 083 533 0301. Breakfast in the veld under Liefdood's camel thorn trees is a memorable event.

then I pop back out at the R361 dirt road between Vanwyksvlei and Kenhardt. It's late, the sky is heavy with dark clouds, and I don't have much choice but to pitch my tent right here. I do so quickly and braai my meat and braaibroodjies just as fast, because lightning soon strikes the earth nearby. The first drops fall when my meal is about halfway eaten. I hide in my bakkie as fireworks and streams of water rain down. I sit inside this spectacle for more than two hours. And I know – just like magistrate Maximilian did – that I'll never find the words to describe how magical and terrifying a night in Keelafsnyleegte can be.

The next day, about 20 km before Kenhardt, I spot another strange name on a farm sign: Liefdood. There's also a sign that advertises camping facilities. At the farmstead, I meet Johan de Beer and Serieta Klindt. Soon we're in the veld so they can show me why their farm is named for love and death. We stop where a stone wall surrounds a grave.

"Jan-Hendrik Erasmus died here on 15 October 1920," says Johan. "The story goes that he was on his way to see his girlfriend Jessica on horseback one night. People found him here and no one knows what happened to him."

Later, while we braai in a dry riverbed, they share their own story with me. Serieta's husband George passed away from a heart attack and Johan's wife Malana from cancer.

"When George died, I also lost all his friends," Serieta says. "I was alone on a farm in Bushmanland. All I did was farm and bake cakes."

For Johan, the quiet, empty house proved too much. "I spent more time at the Kenhardt Hotel than on the farm," he says.

They met each other on Facebook when Serieta was looking for a new owner for a tame crow. After a few conversations, they arranged a date at Augrabies Falls National Park.

"It was Valentine's Day – I was crazy stressed!" says Johan. "I was drenched in sweat."

Serieta saw him get out of his bakkie and said a silent prayer: "Ag, please don't let it be this tall, skinny guy!"

Now they sit huddled together in the fork of an ancient camel thorn tree. They call each other Bokka. They're each other's life after death. On Johan's farm with the wonderfully apt name, Liefdood.

From Liefdood, I drive through Kenhardt, and follow the R27 to Brandvlei for a short distance before I turn off onto a quiet dirt road that passes to the west of Verneukpan. Around me, clouds bulge with raindrops, spilling over. And because rain in Bushmanland is always a miracle, the earth answers with lightning and clouds of dust. I pull over at the farm Staans-Stil as the thunder growls and rain falls.

The sign on the gate of the neighbouring farm reads Afspring. It must have been a beautiful day like today when people decided to "jump off" here. Had it been hot and dry, they would have seen trouble ahead and kept the wheels moving. As the name of another farm, Wieldraai, suggests...

It feels like every wind in South Africa has come to a meeting on Verneukpan. My plan was to camp in the open tonight, but instead I hide in a dry riverbed behind a ridge. The wind calms down during the night and I wake to soft raindrops on my tent and singing larks and chats. It's almost as if everything in the veld has already forgotten about last night's wild storm.

The cool morning feels fresh and new. But in the settlement of Swartkop, rain causes a panic. Many of the people in this hidden-away community to the south of Verneukpan live in houses built from mud. "They basically melt when it's wet," says Eva Adams about the challenges of living in such a residence.

"You see that guy running around? He's looking for a trowel to plaster his house. He waited until the rain came. Not very smart."

Eva and some of the other residents are waiting next to the Swartkop cash shop. Owner Magda Maritz farms with her husband in the area and she'll soon arrive to open the doors.

Eva tells me that she also lives near here, and her garden is the prettiest in the area. Would I like to see it? We drive a kilometre to her red, corrugated-iron house under a big prosopis tree. Shade netting provides extra shelter for her congregation of plants, in a variety of pots and tins and containers – a miniature jungle, mostly grown from cuttings she collected from the farms she's worked on. There's also a chair she saved from the dump.

"When life gets difficult, I sit here," she says.

Behind the chair is a painted sign: Uitspan.

"That's the name of this place. I've already

made a deal with the Lord – don't come get my soul when I die. Heaven seems crowded already. He can leave me here. It's the most peaceful place I know."

A queue quickly forms in front of the counter when Magda opens the shop half an hour later. The interior has taken on her personality over the years: There's too much stuff and the shop is bursting at the seams, but Magda knows where everything is and exactly where to find it, including that last unfinished thought. She sells everything from nappies to Mrs Balls, and she tells me how drought and depopulation have emptied the landscape.

"Your closest neighbours are moving further and further away. It becomes so far that you no longer feel like driving there to see them. But if you stay on your little anthill in all the nothingness, you can't mean much to others and soon you'll start disappearing, too. So we're grateful for the shop and to be a part of something more. Across the street you'll see a community centre that we started with the help of the Square Kilometre Array. It has a soup kitchen, a clinic, a small school and a library."

All so that Magda and the other residents don't fade into mirages.

Behind the centre, *driedoring* bushes hold their white flowers aloft. Because even emptiness has life; every desert is full of miracles. And love and death sometimes walk this earth hand-in-hand.





STAY HERE

Liefdood Campsite

There are several stands under beautiful camel thorn trees. An old cement dam has been equipped with showers and flush toilets – these facilities are shared by campers. A donkey boiler supplies hot water. *(Since Willem's stay, a renovated school bus that sleeps two people has been added to the campsite. – Ed.)*

Where? The turn-off is on the R361, about 20 km south of Kenhardt, and then 4 km along a farm road.

Rates: R450 per vehicle and two people; R50 per extra person. R350 per person for a veld outing and breakfast.

Contact: ☎ 073 133 5737 (WhatsApp); "Liefdood Campsite" on Facebook

Hoop Guest Farm

This self-catering farmhouse has a view of an open plain and the western edge of Verneukpan. It has been nicely renovated and is equipped with everything

you might need. There are two bedrooms that sleep four people.

Where? The turn-off is on the R27 between Kenhardt (60 km) and Brandvlei (80 km). From there, it's about 4 km along a farm road.

Rate: From R650 per person.

Contact: ☎ 076 507 9502 (WhatsApp); "Hoop Gasteplaas" on Facebook

Verneukpan Wild Camping

No facilities or cellphone reception – just the moon landscape of the pan. You can choose where to pitch your tent.

Where? Turn off the R27 between Kenhardt (74 km) and Brandvlei (94 km) and follow the dirt road for 25 km to the farmhouse on Kareeboomdam. From there, it's about 4 km to the pan.

Rates: R200 per person; R50 for a bag of firewood.

Contact:

📧 verneukpancamping.co.za

📧 booking@verneukpancamping.co.za

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**WINNING
PHOTO**

▲ ALTA BRAND

Nikon D7000
Sigma 150 – 500 mm lens

ALTA WRITES: Early one morning in the Kgalagadi, my husband and I came across a pride of lions just north of the Kij Kij waterhole. The pride consisted of a male, a lioness and four cubs. They were lying in the grass in the Nossob riverbed.

There were already a few cars parked next to them. As we approached the sighting, we saw a gemsbok nearby. After a while, the lioness started to stalk the gemsbok. Eventually, she charged and caught the antelope. The male lion joined her, and they both

suffocated and killed it.

Afterwards, the cubs joined the adults and also started to “kill” the already dead gemsbok. In this photo, one of the cubs put both its legs and paws around the head of the gemsbok with the male lion looking almost proud of what the cub was trying to achieve.

My settings: shutter speed 1/1 600 second, aperture f6.3, ISO 400.

TOAST SAYS: What a shot! Alta’s description of the lead-up is very nonchalant, but it must have been a dramatic scene to witness. A kill can be traumatic to watch since

it’s not always over quickly... Likewise, photographing it can be challenging as the scene can soon look like something from a Tarantino movie.

But in Alta’s photo, there’s no obvious blood on the gemsbok, and with the green vegetation in the foreground, the whole situation is almost serene. I’m not saying one should shy away from the realities of nature – a predator needs to eat! – but a “softer” image like this is more palatable over your morning coffee than a gory one.

The light is pleasing too, and the composition works perfectly,

with the male lion looking up at the young one. This creates a strong triangle between the heads of the two lions and the gemsbok, with the bold lines of its horns planted into the ground. (The other young lion has its back turned and therefore mostly disappears.)

The sparkle in the eyes of the two predators is stark against the absence of any clear view of the eyes of the gemsbok. The cub’s massive paw completely covers the gemsbok’s eye.

Good work, Alta – and congratulations, you win the North Ridge bag!



BERNARD FRONEMAN

Canon EOS 550D
Canon 55 – 250 mm lens

BERNARD WRITES: This was one of the last photos I took on our most recent visit to the Kruger. We were driving along the H1-2, heading for the Kruger Gate. We already had to drive away from some lions since we really had to get out of the park to make sure we got back home to Pretoria before dark.

Suddenly, near the Orpen Memorial Rocks, we noticed about 10 cars stopped up ahead.

More lions, I hoped. I was initially disappointed that it wasn't a cat sighting, but a group of three klipspringer instead. In the end, they made for good photos, and I was glad to see them – until then we hadn't seen any during our visit.

My shutter speed was 1/400 second, aperture f7.1 and ISO on automatic.

TOAST SAYS: I'll take a klipspringer sighting any day! A trio of these cute little bakkies seems like the

perfect Kruger farewell gift.

Bernard's photo shows the klipspringer in its natural habitat, and you can clearly see the uniquely adapted hooves that make it so surefooted in its rocky habitat. A klipspringer always reminds me of something between a ballet dancer and a rugby player – imagine Faf de Klerk in a tutu jumping over the loose forwards at the ruck...

The only thing I would change about this photo is the

framing. The branch at left in the foreground is a bit distracting, so too the large part of out-of-focus background at the top. It's easy to re-crop the image on your computer and get rid of the branch and most of the background. In photo B, your attention is drawn more strongly to the klipspringer and the boulder.

Hopefully you get lucky with another lion sighting next time, Bernard – and I hope you have enough time to photograph them properly!



▲ **JACKIE BELL**

Canon EOS 7D Mk II
Canon 65 mm macro lens

JACKIE WRITES: I photographed this hump back araneid spider (*Eriovixia excelsa*) during our stay at Nguni Lodge in Kuleni Game Park near Hluhluwe. I found it resting on a leaf and was immediately drawn to its unusual hump-backed shape and intricate details.

As I moved in closer it suddenly ballooned and raised its abdomen in a spectacular display, warning me that I was too close. I backed off and gave

it some space, which allowed me to take a few photographs of this delightful spider.

I had my shutter speed set to 1/250 second, with aperture at f14 and ISO 400.

TOAST SAYS: Although not much bigger than a lentil, this spider sure has attitude! It can be fiendishly difficult to get your focus right when shooting with a macro lens, but Jackie did superbly. Look closely and you'll see the eyes are sharp as can be.

A successful macro photograph unlocks a hidden world, showing us tiny details that the naked eye simply can't appreciate. Now we can marvel at the luxurious "fur coat" of the spider, the bristles on its legs, and the colours that blend in so perfectly with its habitat.

I also really love the dry leaf it's standing on. Under a macro lens, it's transformed into a lavish leather couch straight from the pages of a fancy interior design magazine.

Good work, Jackie!

Although not much bigger than a lentil, this spider sure has attitude!



▲ **JOHAN SWANEPOEL**

Nikon D7200

Sigma 150–600 mm lens

JOHAN WRITES: In my *Newman's* bird guide, I read that Abdim's storks like to congregate in large flocks of several hundred – and they're often seen soaring up in thermals together.

This photograph, taken in the Sterkfontein area near Krugersdorp, illustrates this behaviour perfectly. There were hundreds of Abdim's storks, and a single white stork. I was tempted to zoom in more, but I prefer this wider shot since it shows the size of the flock.

TOAST SAYS: Thanks for sharing this photo, Johan!

At the back end of a wet summer – like the one we had in 2026 – you'll often see big numbers of Abdim's storks in the veld, where they Hoover up all the excess insects.

It's quite difficult to get a good shot of a large flock of birds because the birds can easily just look like featureless dots in your frame. However, the black and white plumage of the Abdim's

storks make them stand out better as individuals.

It's also good to break a visual pattern – the presence of the single white stork becomes really important the more you look at this photo. (Can you see it? It's in the centre of the photo, about a third from the bottom.) It provides a sense of scale to the smaller Abdim's storks and becomes the resting point for your eye once you've looked at all the other birds.



▲ **CRESTELLE COETZEE**

Canon EOS 600D
Canon 75–300 mm lens

CRESTELLE WRITES: I really love visiting Namibia; taking landscape photos is a great passion of mine. I took this one in the Namib-Naukluft National Park, next to the road between Sesriem and Dead Vlei.

TOAST SAYS: The dunes of the Namib are truly mesmerising. There's good reason why tourists from all over the world visit Namibia to see these red giants for themselves. Their sheer size and effortless beauty stop you in your tracks.

They're also very accessible, thanks to the (mostly) tarred

road between Sesriem and Dead Vlei. This makes taking photos easy, since you can pull over at any point along this road and get a good shot. That said, it's best to have a zoom lens on your camera, like Crestelle's 70–300 mm, which allows you to isolate some details within the bigger landscape.



I like how the crest of the dune rises from the flat foreground in a typical S-curve. And look at how perfectly the six camel thorn trees provide further points of interest, together with the texture of the dune grass, and more subtle things like the difference between the shaded and sunny sides of the dune.

Crestelle's composition is nice and compact. By cropping off the top of the dune, the S-shape of the crest is accentuated. The balance between that part of the photo – the right third of the frame – and the more open two thirds to the left is very good, too.

Solid as a rock. I mean, dune...



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The weight of water

COMPILED BY **LYNNE FRASER**

Underwater Photographer of the Year (UPY) is an annual competition, based in the UK, which celebrates photography beneath the surface of the ocean, lakes, rivers and even swimming pools.

This year, 7 934 photographs were entered from photographers in 28 different countries. For the first time, there was a Smartphone category to encourage more people to try taking images underwater using the camera most people carry in their pocket.

The priority for UPY – and all the competition's sponsors – is to raise awareness about conservation and engender respect for the world's aquatic ecosystems.

See the full gallery at underwaterphotographeroftheyear.com

📌 The Guns of the Nagato

Niclas Andersson, Sweden

The *Nagato* is a famous Japanese battleship, from which Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto is said to have issued the order to attack Pearl Harbour. Seized by the United States at the end of World War II, the ship was later towed to Bikini Atoll in the central Pacific Ocean and used as a target during Operation Crossroads, when early nuclear weapons were tested.

Today, the *Nagato* rests upside down at roughly 52 metres, making it a demanding but highly rewarding dive. On descent, divers are greeted by four enormous propellers, while the standout features are the twin stern guns, best approached from the port side.

Niclas carefully staged this shot with the help of three other divers to maximise safety and reduce silt, since visibility can be limited and particles stir easily. His shot was the winner in the Wreck category.

HOW: Sony A7R IV in an Ikelite housing, 12–24 mm lens, shutter speed 1/100 second, aperture f9, ISO 8 000, with multiple lights.





◀ Calm at the heart of turmoil

SeongCheol Cho, South Korea

While diving in Tulamben, Bali, SeongCheol encountered a commensal shrimp living inside a naturally spiralling whip coral. The coral's deep, rich green formed a striking nest for the brightly coloured shrimp inside. By introducing red and blue light against the green coral, with the help of his guide, he created a sense of beauty combined with a colour vortex, with the shrimp as a focal point of stillness.

This hypnotic shot was the winner in the Macro category.

HOW: Nikon D850 in a Nexus housing, 105 mm macro lens, shutter speed 1/160 second, aperture f16, ISO 560, with two external lights.



◀ Egg clutcher

Anton Sorokin, USA

A female California newt in San Francisco Bay holds onto vegetation and a previously laid clutch from another newt to anchor herself as she begins to lay her own eggs. Her holding onto the eggs this way was a lucky coincidence but made for an exciting photo opportunity.

The judges felt the image just shouts parental care. The composition perfectly captures the way the newt is delicately, but protectively, clutching the eggs.

Anton's quirky shot was third in the Behaviour category.

HOW: Nikon D850 in a Seacam 60D housing, 8 – 15 mm fisheye lens, shutter speed 1/100 second, aperture f18, ISO 200, with a strobe.

🔦 Veins of the Earth

Manuel Wüthrich, Switzerland

"Cenotes have always fascinated me," says Manuel, of Mexico's famous clear-water natural sinkholes. "They're ancient windows into the underworld where light, water and geology meet."

In Cenote Dos Pisos, he discovered a chamber with a ceiling pierced by roots. They reached deep into the water like veins, connecting the subterranean world with the life above.

"To capture this image, we planned a special cave dive to reach the exact spot under safe and optimal conditions," Manuel says. "In that silence, nature felt like a single, breathing organism. My goal was to reveal this fragile connection, the vulnerability of the cenotes, their spiritual atmosphere, and the power of life that finds its way into even the most unlikely places."

Manuel's shot was runner-up in the Compact category.

HOW: Sony RX100 VI in a Nauticam housing, shutter speed 1/50 second, aperture f2.8, ISO 1 600, with three external lights.



📸 Rockpool rookies

Matty Smith, Australia

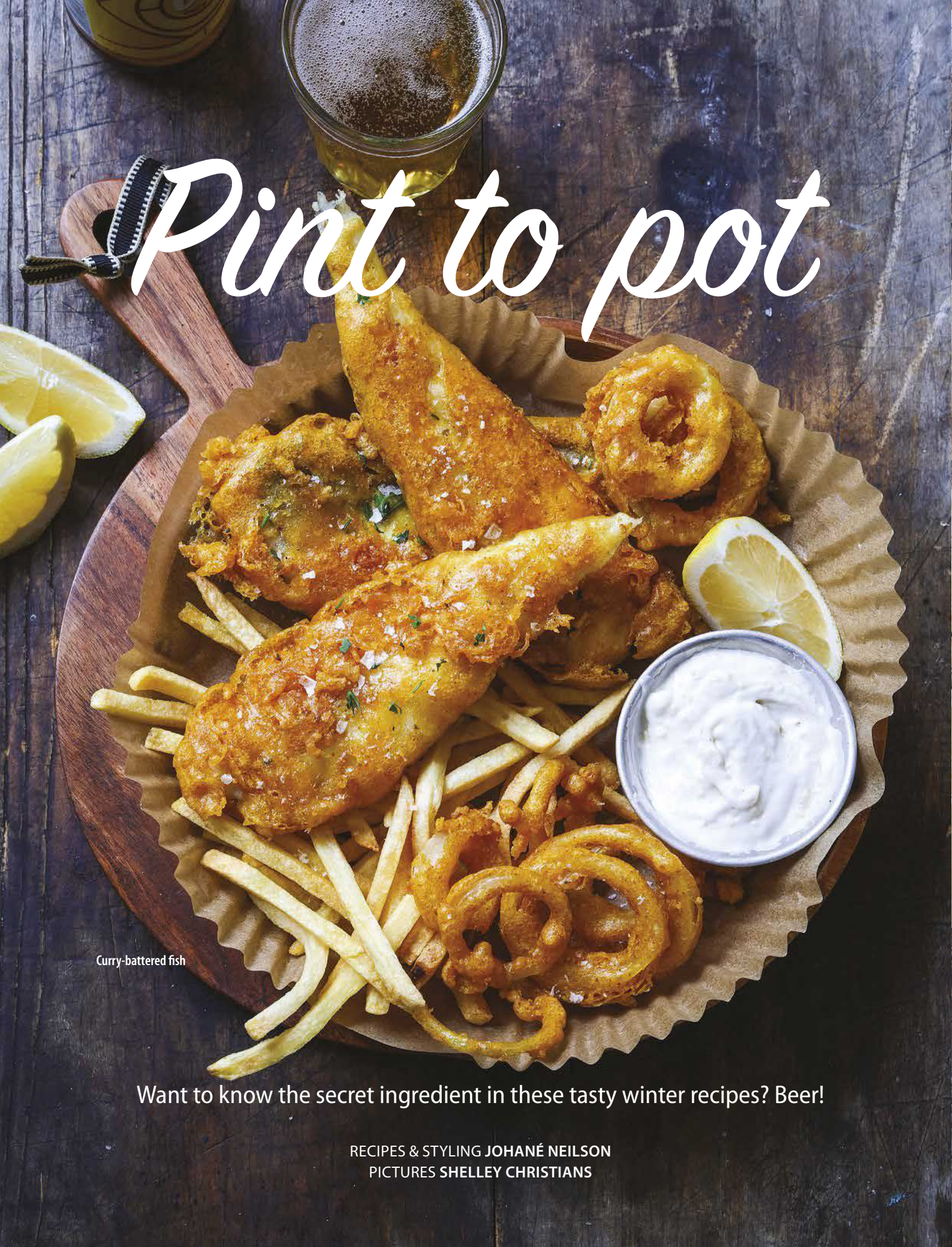
When they're several weeks old and weaned from their mother's milk, elephant seal pups are abandoned by their parents on shore and left to navigate life alone. On Sealion Island in the Falklands, Matty watched dozens of them clambering over each another in shallow rockpools, awkwardly learning to swim.

"I'd come here for this moment," he says. "To witness and photograph their first solo lessons in life. On the very first evening of my arrival, the sky ignited with colour. I donned my dry suit and rushed into the water, capturing a handful of frames before the light vanished. It turned out to be the defining moment of the trip, and I'm glad I didn't hesitate."

Matty's technically perfect and affecting image won the Portrait category and the overall title of Underwater Photographer of the Year 2026.

HOW: Nikon Z9 in an Aquatica housing, 14–30 mm lens, shutter speed 1/60 second, aperture f16, ISO 200, with two strobe lights.





Pint to pot

Curry-battered fish

Want to know the secret ingredient in these tasty winter recipes? Beer!

RECIPES & STYLING JOHANÉ NEILSON
PICTURES SHELLEY CHRISTIANS



Chicken-and-bacon pie



Mussel-and-tomato soup

Curry-battered fish

Serves 4

Preparation time 20 minutes

Cooking time 3–5 minutes
per batch

You need

- 8–10 thin hake fillets (I used Sea Harvest's petite hake)
- salt, to taste
- ½ cup cornflour
- 1 cup cake flour
- 2 teaspoons leaf masala or your favourite curry powder
- ½ teaspoon turmeric
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- vegetable oil, for deep-frying
- 1 bottle (330 ml) cold lager
- a few ice cubes

Here's how

1 Pat the fish fillets dry and season with salt on both sides. Dip the fish in the cornflour and shake off any excess. Mix the remaining cornflour with the cake flour, masala, turmeric and baking powder. Add a pinch of salt.

2 Heat the oil.

3 Beat the cold beer into the dry ingredients until the batter is smooth and like thick cream. (Don't worry if there are a few lumps.) Add the ice cubes. Work quickly so the batter is very cold when it goes into the oil.

4 Dip the cornflour-covered fish fillets into the batter one by one and let the excess batter drip off. Deep-fry the fillets in the hot oil until crisp and cooked through. Work in batches of one or two

fillets at a time. Drain on kitchen paper and repeat the process with the rest.

5 Serve hot with extra salt. The fish is even better with garlic mayonnaise or tartare sauce, air-fried chips and lemon wedges.

TIP Leftover batter? Use it to make crisp onion rings! Coat the rings in cornflour before dipping them into the batter.

Chicken-and-bacon pie

Serves 4

Preparation time 25 minutes

Baking time 40 minutes

You need

- 200 g streaky bacon, chopped
- 3 tablespoons butter
- ¼ cup flour
- ½ cup beer, at room temperature
- 1 cup warm milk
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 cup grated mature cheddar
- about 3 cups cooked chicken (flaked store-bought chicken works well)
- 1 roll (400 g) puff pastry, thawed
- 1 egg, beaten

Here's how

1 Fry the bacon in the butter in a small pot until crisp. Use a balloon whisk to mix the flour into the bacon to form a roux and fry for a few minutes until foamy.

2 Add the beer in a thin stream while you beat the mixture to prevent lumps from forming. Also beat in the milk to make a smooth sauce. Bring to a boil and cook the sauce for a few minutes until it thickens.

3 Season with the paprika, salt and black pepper. Stir in the cheese until melted and remove the pot from the heat. Add the chicken and let the mixture cool down completely.

4 Preheat the oven to 180 °C.

Unroll the puff pastry on a sheet of baking paper and brush the edges of the rectangle with egg. Spoon the cold filling onto one half of the sheet of pastry, leaving 1,5 cm open along the edges. Fold the other half of the pastry over the filling to make a square pie. Use a fork to press down the edges all around. Make a few cuts in the top of the pie and brush with egg. Use the baking paper to transfer the pie onto a baking sheet and bake for 40 minutes or until golden brown and cooked.

TIP The pie fits into my air fryer and bakes like a dream. Turn the pie over after 20 minutes at 180 °C and then air-fry for 10–15 minutes so the pastry is baked evenly.

Mussel-and-tomato soup

Serves 4 as an appetiser

Preparation time 25 minutes

Cooking time 20 minutes

You need

- 1 onion, very finely chopped
- 2 leeks, chopped
- 2 chillies or to taste, finely chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon each butter and olive oil
- ½ cup lager or your favourite light beer
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tin (400 g) plum tomatoes
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 400 g half-shell mussels
- 400 g mussel meat
- 1 cup cream
- grated zest of 1 lemon
- salt and black pepper, to taste
- 1 tablespoon chopped flat-leaf parsley
- fresh or toasted ciabatta slices

Here's how

1 Fry the onion, leeks, chilli and garlic in the oil and butter for at least 5 minutes until glossy and flavoursome.

2 Add the beer and bay leaves

and cook for a minute or two until the beer has reduced by half. Add the tomatoes and stock and cook for 3 minutes. Use kitchen scissors to cut the tomatoes into smaller pieces or mash them with a fork.

3 Rinse the mussels and make sure there are no broken pieces of shell or beards left. Drain and add to the soup. Simmer over a low heat for 3 to 5 minutes until cooked. (Check the packaging for the cooking time for the mussels – sometimes frozen mussels have already been cooked.)

4 Add half the cream and the lemon zest to the soup and season with salt and pepper. Scatter over the parsley. Serve with a dash of cream in each bowl, lemon wedges and fresh or lightly toasted ciabatta to mop up the soup.

Guinness-glazed chicken

For 2 spatchcock chickens or lots of wings

Preparation time

1 hour 15 minutes

Cooking time 1 hour

You need

- 2 spatchcock chickens
- braai salt, to taste or your favourite BBQ rub
- 1 cup Guinness
- 1 cup tomato sauce
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon wholegrain mustard
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- salt and black pepper, to taste

Here's how

1 Pat the chickens dry and season all over with the braai salt – also add some under the skin. If time allows, let the chicken rest uncovered for 30 minutes while you prepare the coals. (Rest in the fridge if it's a hot day.)

2 Braai the chicken in a hinged grid over medium-hot coals, turning often, until cooked with a crisp skin. It takes about 45 minutes, depending on the heat of the coals.

3 While the chicken is on the braai, beat the ingredients for the glaze together in a pot and cook for 5 minutes.

4 Remove the cooked chicken from the coals, put it in a shallow dish and pour over the glaze. Use a brush or a spoon to make sure it covers everything. Braai the chicken for 10–15 minutes until

caramelised. Baste with the extra glaze as you braai.

Bacon-and-onion smoor

Makes about 650 ml

Preparation time 30 minutes

Cooking time 1 hour

You need

- 300 g smoked pork rashers, in 1 cm cubes
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 4 red onions, halved and thinly sliced

- 2 small Pink Lady apples, in small cubes
- 2 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika
- 3 sprigs of fresh thyme or a big pinch of dried thyme
- 1 whole dried chilli
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1 bottle (330 ml) lager
- 1 tablespoon each balsamic vinegar and Worcestershire sauce
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste





Bacon-and-onion smoor

Here's how

1 Fry the pork in oil until crisp. Remove the pieces and fry the onions, apples and garlic for about 10 minutes in the rendered fat until glossy and flavoursome. (If it looks like the onions are changing colour too soon, add a bit of beer and let it evaporate.)

2 Add the paprika, thyme, chilli, sugar and honey and mix well. Add the lager, vinegar and Worcestershire sauce and stir until all the sugar has dissolved. Simmer the smoor until thick and syrupy. Add the crisp pork and season generously with salt and pepper.

3 The smoor makes delicious braaibroodjies! I use store-bought bread, buttered on the outside, with a filling of cheddar and mozzarella.

TIP If you're not using the smoor straight away, transfer it to a

sterilised glass jar while still hot. Let it cool down completely and store in the fridge. The smoor is great with a cheese platter, as glazing for pork sausages on mash, or on a boerewors roll.

Chuck steak chilli con carne

Serves 12, with leftovers

Preparation time 1 hour

Cooking time 2–3 hours

You need

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 kg chuck steak, in 3 x 3 cm cubes
- 1 big white onion, chopped
- 800 g mince
- 50 g taco spice (I used Cape Herb & Spice's Taco Spice)
- 1–3 red chillies, chopped
- 4 whole cloves of garlic, peeled and crushed with the flat side of a knife

- 1 sachet (70 g) tomato paste
- 1 Guinness (440 ml)
- 2 x tins (400 g each) chopped tomatoes
- 2 x 28 g Knorr beef stock pots
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- 2 bay leaves
- salt, to taste
- 1 red and 1 yellow pepper
- 2 x tins (400 g each) red kidney beans
- 1 cup sour cream

Here's how

1 Heat the oil in a flat-bottomed pot over the coals (I use a number 6 Falkirk) and fry the chuck steak until browned. Add the onion and fry for a few minutes until it changes colour. Add the mince, spice, chilli, garlic and tomato paste and fry until flavoursome. Use a spatula to break up the mince.

2 Add the beer and scrape the bottom of the pot to loosen any bits. Cook over a high heat until

the liquid has been reduced by half.

3 Add the tomatoes, stock pots, sugar and bay leaves. Rinse the tomato tins with a little water and add it to the pot so the meat is covered with liquid. Season generously with salt. Remove some of the coals so the potjie simmers gently. Close the lid and place a few coals on top. Cook until the meat is tender. Check on the potjie after an hour and a half.

4 Roast the sweet peppers over the flames until charred all over. Put them in a closed dish to sweat and then peel off the skin. Cut the flesh into thin strips.

5 When the meat is soft, flake it with a fork. Add the sweet pepper strips, beans and sour cream and season to taste. Serve with rice or tortillas or make a beer bread topping – see below.

Beer bread topping

You need

- 3 cups self-raising flour
- 3 tablespoons light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt or to taste
- 1½ cups grated cheddar
- 1 bottle (330 ml) lager
- 2 eggs, beaten

Here's how

1 Mix the flour, sugar, salt and cheese together. Beat the beer and eggs in to make a thick batter.

2 Scoop big spoonfuls of the batter on top of the hot chilli con carne. Work fast! Return the lid of the potjie, put a few coals on top of the lid, and bake for 35 minutes or until the tip of a knife comes out clean when you prick the bread. Make sure the lid of the pot doesn't touch the batter – it will rise a bit.

TIP If the coals have cooled down too much, you can bake the batter separately in a loaf pan in the oven. It takes about 45 minutes at 180°C.



Beer bread topping

Chuck steak chilli con carne



High time for tea

Tea is one of the oldest drinks in the world. Thanks to the Chinese, it has been enjoyed by humanity for thousands of years. Our very own rooibos is not a modern-day invention either and has been around since the Khoisan first walked in the Cederberg. Here are our favourite tea gadgets and products for everything from cocktails to casseroles!

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

We asked Mientjie Mouton, founder of Carmién Tea, for advice on what constitutes a good cup of rooibos:

"A good cup of tea starts before you even turn on the kettle. It starts with the quality of tea you choose, the beautiful cup you drink it from, and the simple technique you apply. Unlike English (Ceylon) tea, which turns bitter if steeped too long, rooibos is more versatile and can be steeped for five to ten minutes or even longer. It develops a more fragrant taste the longer the teabag is left in. Rooibos is naturally caffeine-free and rich in antioxidants; so you can enjoy it at any time of the day.

"Add milk, honey, sugar or a slice of lemon... just the way you like it. Milk and sugar complement an English tea, whereas rooibos has a natural sweetness and can easily be enjoyed on its own. However, a little honey always goes well with rooibos tea. The best tea is the one you've made the way you like it!"



▲ **DOUBLE-WALLED TEA GLASS**

There's nothing wrong with drinking your Darjeeling Oolong pinkie-in-the-air from your grandmother's porcelain cup, but I think rooibos looks best in a double-walled glass mug. The double-wall design keeps the tea nice and warm, and you can hold it comfortably without burning your fingers. It works just as well for a cappuccino or a cortado. The glasses are dishwasher-safe and they're available in two sizes: 200 ml (pictured) and 125 ml (R69 each).

R99 🛒 carmientea.co.za

▲ **JAPANESE TEAPOT**

Boil water in a kettle but let your tea steep in a proper teapot. This cast iron pot has its own tea strainer so you can steep loose-leaf tea; and it has a separate stand for a tea light candle to keep your pot warm.

Not only is the pot beautiful, but it will last a lifetime if you take good care of it. Don't use it on top of a stove and wait until the pot has cooled completely before cleaning it. Use only hot water; no detergents. If a spot of rust develops over the years, you can remove it with a soft brush. Fill the pot with used tea leaves and hot water and leave for 20 minutes. Then rinse it out. The tannin in the tea leaves reacts with the rust and naturally seals it so it doesn't rust again. Or you can leave the rust – it's not toxic and there are many Japanese tea connoisseurs who will tell you that the best tea is made in a rusted teapot!

R499 for the teapot; R309 for the stand 🛒 carmientea.co.za



Cold brew and cooking products

◀ **TWO IN A BUSH ROOIBOS CORDIAL**

Two friends, Marie-Louise Oosthuizen and Hetta van Deventer-Terblanche, started this business in Franschhoek during the Covid-19 years. Since then, it has gone from strength to strength.

Before I go cycling in the morning, I fill one of my water bottles with ice and soda water, then I add their honeybush and lemon cordial. It contains only natural ingredients (without any caffeine) and is wonderfully refreshing.

There are six other flavours to choose from and all of them are just as delicious before sunset in your non-alcoholic mocktail, or in the real McCoy with gin, vodka or brandy. There are several recipes that you can download from the website. (Try the *Jungle Juice* with gin, kiwifruit, basil and lime juice. – Ed.)

R110 for 500 ml 📞 twoinabush.co.za

◀ **TWO IN A BUSH SPARKLING ROOIBOS FUEL**

If you don't have the time or the inclination to mix your own drinks, you can buy this rooibos sparkling tea in a 300 ml can. It's available in citrus, raspberry and peach flavours, and it's especially yummy to drink ice-cold after a workout. It contains no caffeine, preservatives, colours, flavours or gluten, and it's endorsed by Diabetes South Africa and the GI Foundation.

R149 for six cans 📞 twoinabush.co.za

▶ **PUKKA PURE CHAI**

It's no wonder chai, or chai masala, is the national drink of India. Once you've tried this traditional drink of black tea and milk with all sorts of spices (black pepper, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves...) you'll quickly become hooked.

Locally, Pukka Pure produces a wide range of great chai products. The original Pukka Chai powder, which you can enjoy hot (three scoops stirred into a mug of hot water) or cold (as a milkshake, or in a smoothie) is still our favourite. But the new Spicy Choc Chai (chai and dark chocolate) is decadent and especially relaxing before bed!

R158 for 400 g 📞 pukkapure.co.za





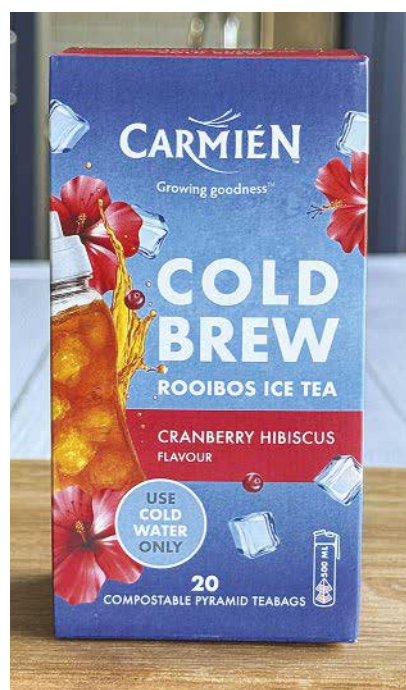
◀ **L&G COOKING TEABAGS**

Carmen Niehaus, the author of numerous cookbooks, former *YOU* magazine food editor and presenter of the food show *Lekker & Goed* on kykNET, is a South African cooking legend.

But did you know she's also the Car of Carmien? Yes, she's Mientjie's twin sister! They teamed up to develop these rooibos cooking teabags. You use them as you would a traditional stock: Soak the bag in 400 ml of boiled water for five to ten minutes, and use the liquid in curries, stews, soups, potjiekos or even with couscous to add extra flavour.

You can steep this one (Spicy Rooibos Masala Chai) in milk or cream too, if you want to use it in a dessert.

R99 for 20 sachets 📞 carmienteaco.za



▲ **CARMIÉN COLD BREW**

Carmien makes a host of different rooibos teas that can be enjoyed hot or cold, but this one has been created specifically to be made with cold water. The sweet and tart flavours of the rooibos, along with the dried berries and hibiscus, develop when steeped in cold water over time – throw a bag in your water bottle before you set off on a day hike in the Drakensberg. Or add two bags to your Stanley flask with plenty of ice the next time you're road-tripping through Namibia.

R40 for 20 teabags 📞 carmienteaco.za

South Korea joins the bakkie war



Once you see a **Kia Tasman** in the metal, it's not something you can easily unsee. Looks-wise, it might be divisive, but it's a proper double-cab that can take on the big players in South Africa's most competitive vehicle segment.

BY PIERRE STEYN

AK-wave has washed over the world: K-pop has taken the music industry by storm; movies like *Parasite* won Oscars; *Squid Game* has given Netflix a big boost; Korean restaurants are buzzing from Sandton and Sydney to Sea Point; and Han Kang won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

So, why not ride the K-wave and build a double-cab bakkie, loaded with unique South Korean style and technology, which can compete with the best in the world? Enter the new Kia Tasman. You'll either love or hate the chunky front end and aggressive grille, but in terms of ride comfort and 4x4 capability, this bakkie stands its ground against any Ford, Toyota, Isuzu or Nissan.

What's more, the ultra-modern cabin is probably the best interior on the market. And the build quality is excellent – better, for example, than the multitude of Chinese

bakkies trying to eke out a market share.

Our nearly 1 000 km test drive took us on tarmac, gravel roads through the Cederberg and sand dunes along the West Coast. There's very little to fault with the Tasman. Even the appearance, which initially made us do a double take, had us thinking by the third day: "I actually don't mind the styling..."

It's interesting that Kia didn't team up with any other established bakkie manufacturers to design and build the Tasman. "What does Kia even know about bakkies?" is a good question to ask around the braai fire. The equally good answer is that the company is more than 80 years old, and has long been involved in building tough 4x4 military vehicles for the South Korean army. As the name "Tasman" suggests, Kia's bakkie was built with the Australian market in mind. The Aussies love their "utes", just as much as we love

our bakkies, and the Outback was the testing ground for the Tasman.

The 2.2-litre turbo-diesel is the same proven engine used in the Sorento and Carnival. Both Ford and Toyota have more powerful engines in their bakkies and yes, it's nice to have that extra bit of oomph (even if your fuel costs are higher), but the Tasman delivers its 154 kW of power and 440 Nm of torque in a very civilised manner, aided by a smooth, eight-speed automatic transmission.

The Tasman is built on a ladder-frame chassis, with double wishbone springs up front and a solid axle with leaf springs at the rear. The 4x4 models have low range and a diff lock with driving modes for sand, mud and rocky terrain. Ground clearance is 252 mm and wading depth is 800 mm.

While the Tasman can comfortably compete with other bakkies on- and



off-road, the interior makes it stand out from the crowd. The finishes are excellent, with a huge 12.3-inch digital screen that consolidates all the driving information with the entertainment applications. There are lovely, tactile, well-machined switches to control the air conditioning, ample legroom in the back that allows large adults to sit comfortably, and six USB-C charging points placed strategically around the cabin.

Kia has taken the bakkie bull by the horns by introducing three derivatives of the Tasman: the LX 4x2 (R680 000); SX 4x4 (R880 000) and the X-Pro – with an electronic diff lock, X-TREK rock crawl mode and lifestyle extras like a Harman Kardon sound system (R1 million).

All the models have a five-year/unlimited kilometre warranty, and a six-year/90 000 km service plan – one of the best on the market. There's an excellent chance we'll soon see a lot of these demon hunters in our rearview mirrors.



ERONGO ROCKS, OMARURU

Most of us struggled during the Covid lockdown. Suddenly we had too much free time and too little work to keep our minds busy. And you know what they say about idle hands...

But on a farm north of the Erongo Mountains in Namibia, Didi and Terry Rust took the time to turn their land into a dream destination. Where they once farmed with sheep and cattle, they now have one of the most scenic places to camp in the country. They've hit upon a winning recipe: Let visitors experience the veld first-hand, but still give them the best facilities.

Erongo Rocks is a part of the greater Erongo Mountain Nature Sanctuary – an area of 180 000 hectares in the eponymous volcanic mountain range that stretches over five properties. Border fences have been lowered so game can wander as they please, and species like black rhino and black-faced impala have been reintroduced. Erongo Rocks is also strict about their silence policy: You're welcome to stay, but please be mindful of others.

When you leave the reception office and enter the veld with this attitude, you'll automatically take things slower. You'll stop for rosy-faced lovebirds sitting in the jeep track – let them finish their conversation – and you'll hear a Monteiro's hornbill land in the branches above you. Best of all? As you quietly munch a rusk in the morning, small animals might come to drink at the water trough in each camp.

There are three big camps – 360°, Granite and Mountain View – for groups of 20 and 30 people respectively; and five smaller camps – Dik-Dik, KykNet, Petite, Acacia and Starling – which are suitable for four to ten people.

Some of the camps – like Dik-Dik (pictured top) where we stayed – are laid out among boulders. Others are on hills with views. With the exception of Starling, which has a pit toilet, each camp has a modern flush toilet, bucket shower and basin in a private, open-air bathroom. There's also a kitchen – sometimes under an awning, sometimes under shade netting – with a sink, braai, work surfaces and a steel table with canvas chairs. The three big camps even have a fridge and a stove. You get complete isolation and super-neat facilities. Even the sand is raked!

You're free to explore the farm roads and footpaths, or bring your mountain bike and explore the trails. Rock climbers can tackle more than 20 marked routes, and there are also four viewpoints with benches if you simply want to sit and stare at the landscape. Just bring your binoculars and cooler box.

The old farmstead is now a deli (with Wi-Fi; pictured middle) where you can relax under the trees with a slice of carrot cake and a Coke. Since our visit, they've also added a splash pool but I have a soft spot for the old cement dam.

Rates: Granite, 360° and Mountain View: R1 440 for the first four adults, plus R360 per extra adult. Dik-Dik, KykNet, Acacia, Petite and Starling: R720 for the first two adults, plus R360 per extra adult. Half-price for children aged 7 – 12; free for children under 7.

Where? 41 km west of Omaruru, along the D2315.

Contact: ☎ 00 264 81 210 2427; 🌐 erongorocks.com

What else? If you're travelling without camping gear, the Rusts will pitch a dome tent for you with thick camping mattresses, bedding and towels. This Comfy Camping option is double the standard fee.

– Sophia van Taak





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A scenic view of a lake at sunset. In the middle ground, a white boat with a blue stripe and the name 'Excalibur' and registration 'DTG 7975 R' is on the water. The background features dark, silhouetted mountains under a sky with golden light and clouds. In the foreground, several geese are swimming in the water.

Home of the healing waters

eManzana – the new name of Badplaas – means “healing water” in siSwati. Both names refer to the local hot spring, which gives life to this Mpumalanga town at the foot of the northern Drakensberg. Here are our five top places to stay.

WORDS & PICTURES **MIA LOUW**



FOR WATER ACTIVITIES

1. OppiDam, Vygeboom Dam

On a quiet weekend you'll hear nothing but water lapping the shore and geese honking, but if you visit during an angling competition or during the OppiDam Music Festival, expect a party. When we visited, there was a bass fishing competition underway and music played at the Ararat Restaurant until late.

It's easy to understand why the dam is so popular with anglers, who come here to fish for barbel, carp, bass, yellowfish and bream. "The water is clean and clear – you can easily see 3,5 m from the surface," says owner Jaco Landsberg. "We also allow spearfishing – the divers often get up to 7 m visibility underwater."

There's a campsite and self-catering units that sleep four to ten, plus a tented camp for 18 people, and some permanent caravans. The new Vishuys unit sleeps six people – the living area overlooks the water and the braai facilities are only a stone's throw from the shore.

"We're still building Huisie Vir Twee. The unit is in the corner, the furthest from all the action," says Jaco. "It has a deck and an indoor braai and fireplace."

For something completely different, book a night or two on a houseboat – you can explore for 12 km to the inlet of the dam.

Where? 12 km north-east of eManzana.

Rates: Camping stand next to the water: R420 per night for two people, plus R70 per extra person (max six per stand). Houseboat from R1 950 per night for two people; the boat sleeps five; 20 ℓ of fuel included (skipper's licence required). Day visitors R100 per person; R60 per vehicle; R130 per boat or jet ski.

Contact: ☎ 066 327 1068; 🌐 oppidam.co.za

What else? Hire a kayak for R150 per day. Boat ride R180 per adult; R90 per child. The *Lawaaiwater* raft (max 12 people) costs R1 850 for half a day and R2 850 for a full day; 20 ℓ of fuel included. You need a skipper's licence, but you can also hire a skipper (R300 for a half day; R650 for a full day). The boat has a toilet, basin and a gas braai.



FOR HIKERS

2. Blue Wildebeest

You'll feel like a pioneer on the stoep of this thatched stone house, which has no power and a donkey boiler for hot water. (The farm also has real donkeys...) It's the base camp for the Blue Wildebeest Trail, but also a good option for a big family get-together.

The house sleeps 12 in three bedrooms, and it has two bathrooms and a lapa. The outdoor kitchen is well equipped with cutlery and crockery. Bring your own gas bottle, bedding and towels.

Two circular hiking trails (6,5 km and 9,5 km) take you through grassland and forests, past krantz aloes that cling to rock faces, and cabbage and fig trees next to waterfalls and river pools.

Or just relax at the house all day with a book. There are several nooks where guests can enjoy the views with a cup of tea or a sundowner.

The farm has been in the Lourens family since 1936. Current owner Tharina tells me how her great-grandfather moved his sheep from this farm, in the warmer Lowveld, to his Highveld farm in summer.

These days, sheep have made way for game like blue wildebeest, blesbok, impala, kudu, grey rhebok and endangered oribi. Interesting local birds include secretarybird and hamerkop – and a pair of long-crested eagles that nest on the farm. The plant life is also special. The endangered Hilton daisy (*Gerbera aurantiaca*) grows in abundance, and Tharina is in the process of having the farm declared a nature reserve.

Where? About 11 km south-west of eManzana.

Rates: R250 per person.

Contact: ☎ 082 563 1801; ✉ lourenstharina1@gmail.com

What else? Day visitors are welcome. The farm is dog-friendly, too, but keep your pooch on a leash so the antelope can graze in peace.

FOR THE KIDS (AND YOUNG AT HEART)

3. Badplaas, A Forever Resort

This place is every child's dream. I grew up in Mbombela, about 100 km away, and I remember many birthday parties and school outings at the resort: soft-serve ice cream at the Milky Lane, hot days in the swimming pool, screaming down the Rinkhals water slide...

More than 20 years later and the water slide is still great fun, but I've also learnt to appreciate other aspects, like the adjacent eManzana Nature Reserve. You can hike, mountain-bike, ride a horse or visit the Hydro & Spa to swim in the hot pools (R10 per person to enter the spa).

The water from the hot spring has all kinds of minerals – like sulphur, magnesium and silica – that have been proven to help with various ailments. You'll feel great after a dip.

As with any resort, there are lots of activities on offer, from paintball to ziplines, and every kind of accommodation. The campsites, log cabins and chalets all have a view of the Seekoeispruit and Dhlumudhlumu Mountains.

If you want to spend most of your time at the swimming pools and water slides, the rondavels and chalets for two are the closest. You can quickly run back to your room if you've forgotten your towel.

The campsite is a bit further away, but the walk to the swimming pool is an adventure, along a path under big trees and across bridges.

Rates: Camping from R240 per person; self-catering rondavel from R1 060 per night for two.

Contact: ☎ 017 844 8000; 🌐 foreverbadplaas.co.za



TAKE FIVE

FOR A SPECIAL EVENING

4. Dawsons Game Lodge

On the lodge website, there's that famous quote by Danish author Karen Blixen: "I had a farm in Africa..." And when you sink into a couch while zebra and springbok graze nearby, you'll definitely get that "Out of Africa" feeling!

The luxury lodge has eight en suite rooms, an old-fashioned games room, bar, restaurant and swimming pool. In the small library, there's a photo of Edgar and Illey Dawson with their dog in front of the farmhouse, called the Homestead, which was built in 1906.

The Homestead now sleeps 14 with its own swimming pool, and there are two other self-catering units, sleeping six and seven respectively, which are far apart from each other.

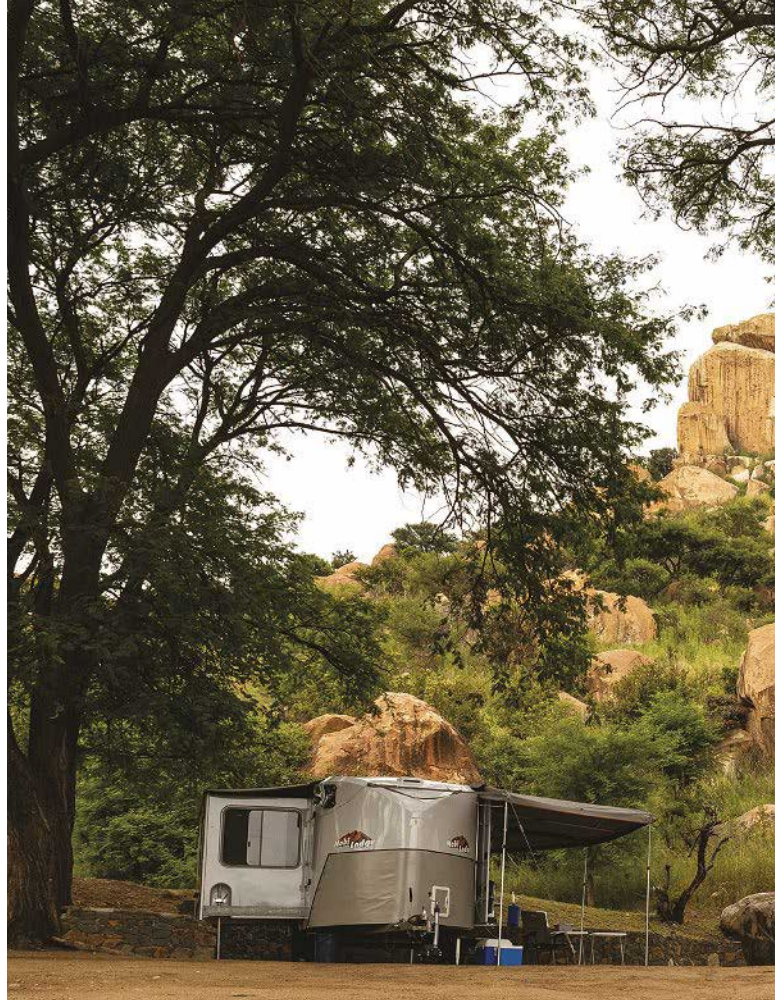
Go for a mountain-bike ride with the blesbok, nyala and wildebeest on the farm, or walk to the small waterfall in a forest. You can also fish, go on a game drive or guided quad-bike ride, or try your hand at archery.

Where? The turn-off to Dawsons is 21 km north-east of eManzana.

Rates: Self-catering from R3 000 per night for six people.

Contact: ☎ 083 576 4216; 🌐 dawsonslodge.com

What else? You can also book meals (or a spa treatment) at the lodge.



FOR 4X4 ENTHUSIASTS

5. Wild Camping Nkomazi

"When we don't have campers, elephants sometimes come looking for water in the pipes of the ablution block," says Flavia Casali, wildlife monitor and conservation assistant, about the new Thaba Camp in the Nkomazi Private Nature Reserve.

"Lions also like to hunt in the area."

This exclusive, unfenced campsite is at the base of a koppie – huge granite boulders tower over your tent. There's no power, but gas geysers supply hot water for the open-air bathroom. Other facilities include a firepit, braai and small swimming pool.

The 150 km² game reserve includes a 50 km² area for 4x4 trails, called Mawelawela; the rest is managed as a reserve. "Mawelawela means to cross and cross again, because there are 17 streams to drive through," Flavia explains. "There are no dangerous animals in Mawelawela, so you can get out of your vehicle."

Thaba Camp is in the wild section of the reserve. Campers may drive around on their own between 9 am and 3 pm – you get a digital map and radios to make sure you don't get lost.

Where? Thaba Camp is 13 km south-east of eManzana.

Rates: R1 250 per night (maximum 16 people and five vehicles); R45 per bag of firewood; minimum two nights.

Contact: ☎ 082 388 4086; 🌐 nkomaziwildcamping.co.za

What else? Experienced horse riders can do a two- to three-hour outride for R800 per person. Campers can enjoy drinks and meals at the lodge; book beforehand.

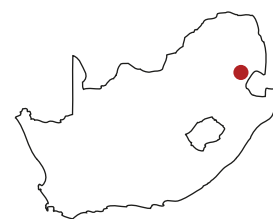


NOTE

- Day visitors are welcome at OppiDam's Ararat Restaurant (pictured left). Order pub grub or a pizza (R85 for a margherita) and look out over the Vygeboom Dam. ☎ 079 241 0110
- eManzana is in cattle country. Buy braai meat or biltong at Flippen Lekker Slaghuys. ☎ 076 174 4040
- You can buy everything from a camping chair to hiking boots or a swimming costume at Tourist Bazaar in town. ☎ 017 844 1111

HIKE IN THE SKURWEBERG

The northern Drakensberg between eManzana and Machadodorp (eNtokozweni) is known as the Skurweberg, and there are base camps for three hiking operators next to the Skurweberg Pass (R541): The High 5 Trail (previously the Num-Num; 📞 num-num.co.za); Bermanzi Hiking Trails (📞 bermanzi.co.za) and Wathaba Hiking Trails (📞 wathaba.co.za). Each has its own hiking camps, day hikes and overnight trails.



IN OTHER WORDS

Msoni Masinga (and Lerato Beck), manager, Dawsons Game Lodge

People are always surprised by how quiet it is here behind the koppies when you turn off the R38.



Samson Zulu, caretaker, Blue Wildebeest

People love the hiking trails in the area – some even visit in the middle of the week!



Flavia Casali, wildlife monitor and conservation assistant, Nkomazi Private Game Reserve

My favourite sighting in Nkomazi happened three years ago. Two young lionesses played with two porcupines – it looked like they were doing the tango! Neither lion nor porcupine was injured in the altercation.



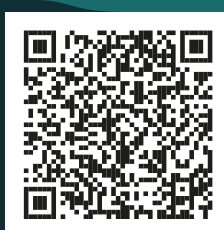
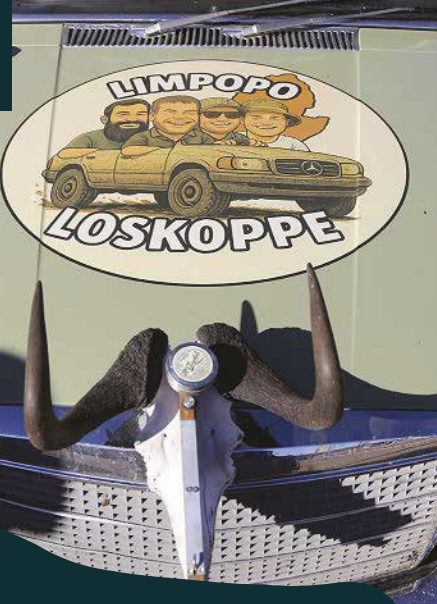
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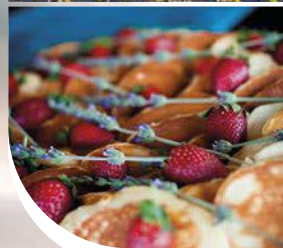
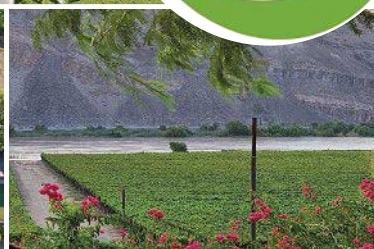
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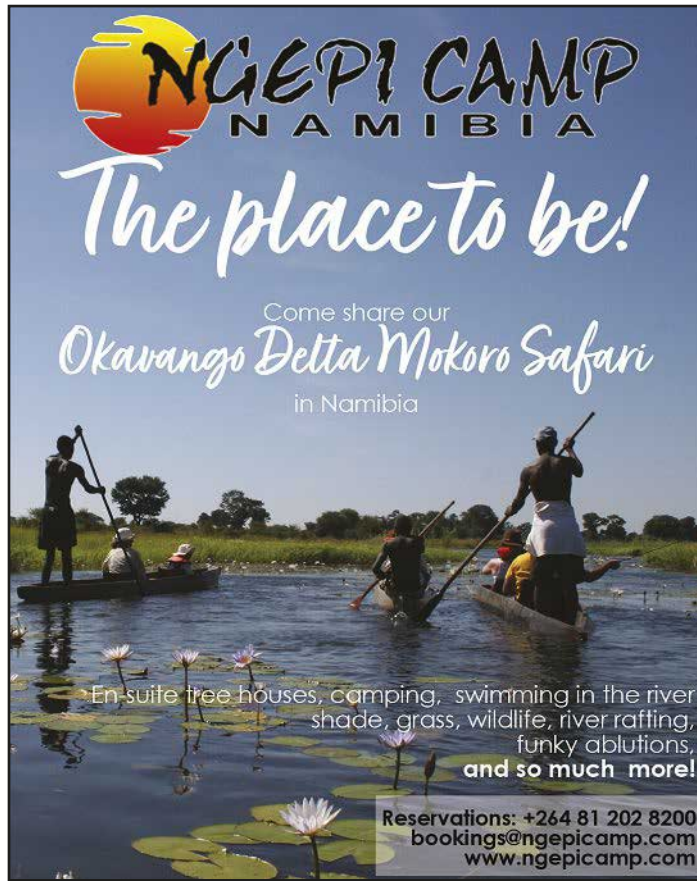
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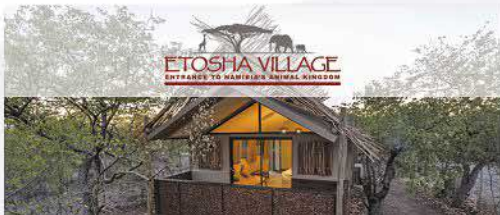
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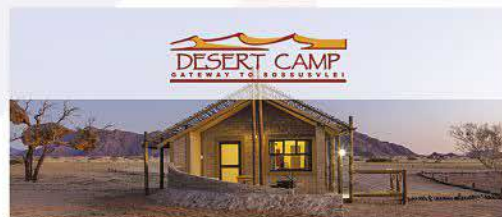
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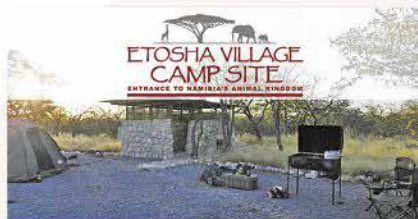
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WITH MY OWN EYES



When **David G Richardson** first noticed an African harrier-hawk hunting on the busy streets of Cape Town, he was surprised. Little did he know the raptor would lead him on a fascinating photographic quest...

During the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, I was living next to the V&A Waterfront, close to Cape Town's busy CBD. One day in June that year, I was walking back home after taking pictures with my trusty Canon EOS 60D and my brand-new Sigma 150 – 600 mm lens, when a large bird flew over my head and landed in the road.

I could see it had something in its talons. I cautiously approached until I was about 20 metres away, then crouched down to take some shots. It was an African harrier-hawk, also known as a gymnogene, gripping a young pigeon in its talons **1**. I was surprised to see this raptor in such a built-up environment, since it's usually found in wooded areas and riverine forests.

A few months later, I saw what I thought was the same bird hunting for pigeons under the eaves of the ONOMO Cape Town Waterfront hotel across the road from my building. I grabbed my camera and got another photo **2**.

The bird flew off – but seconds later another big brown raptor **3** flew down and started doing exactly the same thing as the previous bird did! I realised what I'd just photographed was learned behaviour of a juvenile African harrier-hawk, copying the parent bird.

Later, on my computer when I could look clearly at the images, I noticed the first adult I'd photographed and this one were two different individuals – the black spots on the primary wing feathers were not the same. I now had confirmation that this was a breeding pair of harrier-hawks!

A couple of months later, the juvenile came to hunt for pigeons across the road. I managed to get a shot which shows the unique ability of these birds to hunt upside down by utilizing their double-jointed knees **4**.

I believe it was the female that was teaching the young one how to hunt. She came on several more occasions to hunt pigeons under the hotel eaves. In one shot you can see a partially eaten pigeon chick at her feet **5**. In **6** the female flies off after killing and eating another nestling pigeon.



WITH MY OWN EYES



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Almost exactly five and a half years after first photographing the male African harrier-hawk in the Waterfront, my project of documenting these birds came full circle. In June 2025, I received a tip that these birds had been nesting for some time in one of Cape Town's busiest inner-city streets – Bree Street.

The next day I went looking for the nest. About halfway up Bree Street I saw a tangle of twigs high up in a big gum tree **7**. A tenant in a building across the road confirmed that this was the nest of the harrier-hawks.

In December 2025, I returned to Bree Street after being told a chick was on the nest. The office block across the road was locked, so I had to stand on the pavement and shoot up into the tree to get a shot of the nestling **8** and the mother bird **9**.

It remains to be seen if the offspring decides to stick around in the city and start a family of its own.



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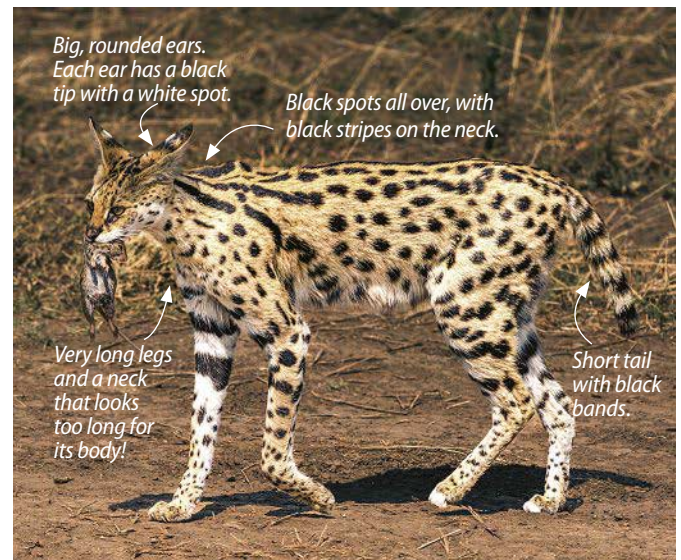
Do you know the smaller predators of South Africa? Most of them are well camouflaged and nocturnal, so we don't see them very often. But they can hunt just as well as any lion or leopard!

COMPILED BY SOPHIA VAN TAAK



✓ Serval

This lean spotted cat is the tallest of the smaller cats, standing more than half a metre high. It occurs in KZN and the northern provinces of the country. The serval usually lives in habitats with lots of water, preferring dense reed beds and forests where there are hares, mice and rats to hunt. They also sometimes catch fish!



^ Caracal

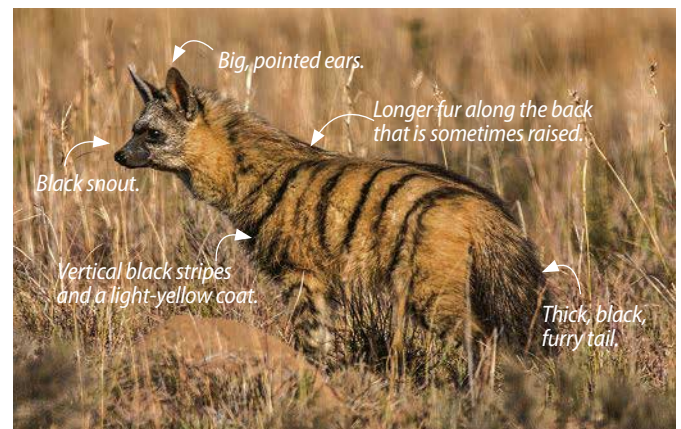
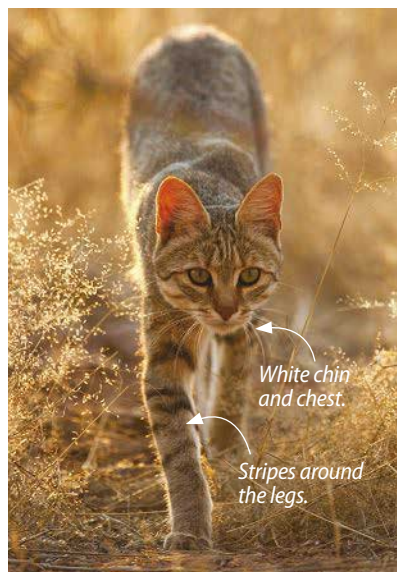
The caracal has the heaviest build of our smaller wild cats. It occurs all over South Africa and likes to sneak up on its prey before pouncing.

It hunts anything from dassies to antelope and also small livestock like sheep and goats. It's also well known for hunting birds – often jumping up to 3 m into the air using its powerful hind legs.

The name "caracal" comes from the Turkish word *karakulak*, which means "black ears".

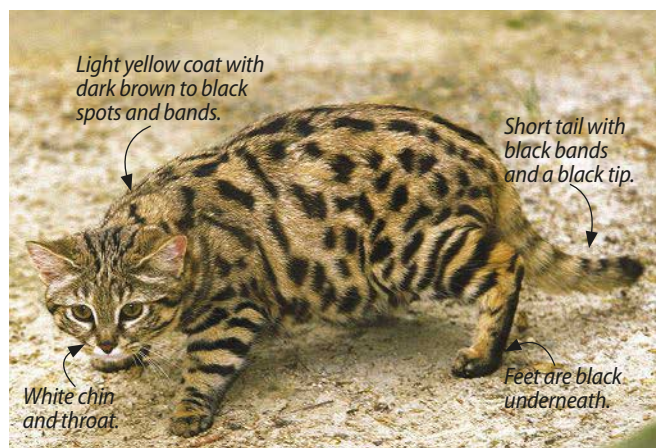
> African wildcat

This cat looks a lot like a domestic cat, but has a slightly bigger build and longer legs. It's found all over South Africa and mostly hunts rodents like rats and mice, but will also catch birds and reptiles.



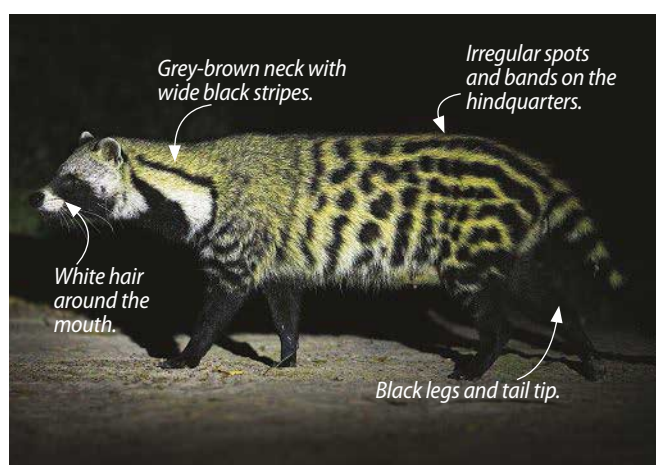
^ Aardwolf

The aardwolf is found all across South Africa, but prefers open habitats. Although its short hindlegs make it look like a hyena, it's not nearly as aggressive. It mostly eats insects and termites, specifically the snouted harvester termite. The aardwolf can lick up nearly 30 000 termites per night with its sticky tongue!



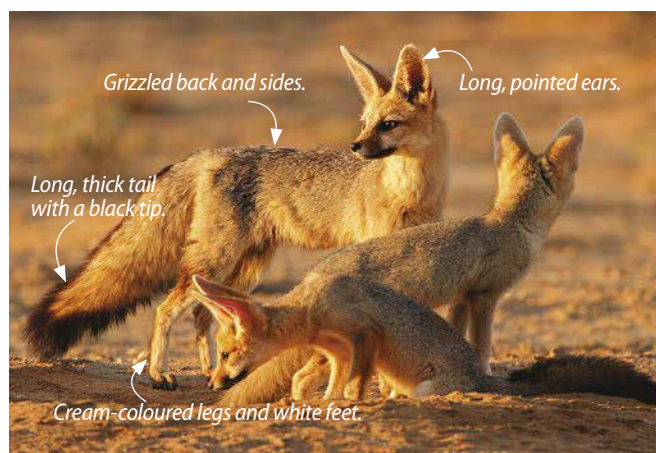
Black-footed cat

Meet the smallest wild cat in southern Africa! This spotted cat has a shoulder height of only 25 cm. It's very shy and is seldom seen. It mostly eats birds, reptiles, small rodents and insects. It might look cute, but it's still a wild, efficient hunter.



African civet

This animal is unique: Its rear part is genet-like, but its torso looks like it comes from a different animal! It's much bigger than a genet, with a shoulder height of about 40 cm. The civet is found in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West. It hunts everything from guineafowl to insects and will also eat wild fruit. It doesn't use its claws to catch prey, only its mouth. It shakes, throws and bites its prey to death.



Genet

There are three kinds: The small-spotted genet is found across South Africa except in KZN. The rusty-spotted genet occurs in the northern provinces and the large-spotted genet prefers coastal areas. All genets have lean bodies and long tails and they're good climbers – you often see them in trees. They hunt frogs, lizards, moles and birds and will cause big problems if they get into the chicken coop!



Bat-eared fox

You can't miss this little guy's ears! The bat-eared fox occurs in most parts of the country, except for the mountains and thickets of Mpumalanga and KZN. Bat-eared foxes like open veld. They eat termites, but also hunt small rodents, beetles and reptiles. They have between 46 and 50 small, sharp teeth to quickly chew up prey.

Cape fox

Like the bat-eared fox, the Cape fox prefers the more open landscapes of South Africa. Its diet mostly consists of insects, but it will also occasionally hunt rodents or geckos. It can run very fast – up to 48 km/h! And it has adapted to survive without much water. A Cape fox doesn't sweat when hot because that's a waste of body fluids. Rather, it will pant with an open mouth to cool down.

Sources: *Stuarts' Field Guide to Mammals of Southern Africa*; sanbi.org; animaldiversity.org; workingwithwildlife.org



GONE BIRDING

BY FAANSIE PEACOCK

GREEN-BACKED HONEYBIRD



ROB CLIFF

Stinky sightings

When you visit a foreign city, what's the first place you ask your Uber driver to take you after dumping your bags at the hotel? If you're a birder, I'm afraid the answer is probably the local sewage treatment plant. Yes, I've seen my fair share of settling ponds, aeration tanks and sludge scrapers in my birding travels – from Barcelona to Bangkok to Bloemfontein. The smell is horrifying, but the birding is brilliant!

So, on a recent jaunt to Harare in Zimbabwe, our first stop was – predictably – that charming little facility known as the Marlborough Sewage Works.

The five of us had come from all over: a writer from the West Coast; a conservationist from the Little Karoo; two ophthalmologists and an executive from Gqeberha. We didn't know each other before the trip, but once you're crammed into a minibus taxi, negotiating the streets of a bustling African city, on the way to stare at sewage, you're friends for life.

Few of Harare's traffic lights still function.

So, the de facto system for crossing an intersection is that delicate balance between patience and intimidation. Also, the sight of five white guys in a battered Quantum buys you a precious few seconds of confusion to make your move. Eventually, we made it to Marlborough. Once our wheels started spinning in the questionable black mud, we knew we'd arrived.

Believe it or not, we were clearly not the first tourists birders to rock up here. An all-smiling municipal engineer knew exactly what we'd come for. The whole reason we had all boarded our respective Airlink flights was to try and glimpse Harare's rare and special waterbirds: ethereal phantoms like streaky-breasted flufftail and striped crane. The friendly gentleman vaguely gestured to the north somewhere, but all I could see was an ocean of mielies. Sadly, with Zimbabwe's dwindling resources, many hectares of wetland are lost to subsistence cultivation each year.

Nevertheless, we optimistically set out to fight our way through the maze of maize.

There was no path to speak of, but with each step the ground got soggy, so we seemed to be heading in the right direction. To my surprise, we weren't alone – every so often we'd cross paths with someone doing their thing. What the local people must have thought of the five of us just randomly appearing out of the head-high mielies on a Tuesday morning is anyone's guess.

Birders have a foolhardy optimism that there's an awesome bird right around the next corner. So, despite the lack of birds, we pushed on. Eventually, we struggled our way to the swirling Gwebi River. The good birds must be just on the other side, surely? Now came the moment for glory: Who was going to volunteer to see how deep the water was? Clinging to the reeds, our brave champion gave an experimental step off the riverbank – and promptly disappeared underwater! That momentary look of panic on his face told us this was the end of the road.

Marlborough was a dead loss. Fortunately, Harare boasts a plethora of prime birding spots. The delightful Mukuvisi Woodlands



FRANSIE PEACOCK

(where we birded alongside a couple doing a pregnancy photoshoot) yielded the drab but localised Whyte's barbet. Monavale Vlei – a sliver of wetland in the suburbs – produced a spectacular yellow-mantled widowbird. We watched rosy-throated longclaws and black coucals at an airstrip outside town. We even spotted a miombo blue-eared starling hopping about in the garden of our Airbnb.

Sadly, we missed southern Africa's only reliable pair of spur-winged lapwings at Lake Chivero because of the high water levels there. But an Allen's gallinule was a nice consolation prize.

Our favourite spot, however, was the Mazowe Botanical Reserve at Christon Bank, a few minutes north along the A11, where you can easily spend a whole morning appreciating the endless vista from towering granite boulders. (With boulder chats bouncing all around you, of course.) Or you can hunt down the full suite of miombo woodland specials along the network of hiking trails: red-faced crombec, miombo

rock thrush, spotted creeper, southern hylia, black-eared seedeater and Cabanis's bunting, to name but a few.

As this was their first birding trip to Harare, the other guys were ticking new birds left, right and centre. But since I'd been many times, I hadn't seen even a single lone lifer.

It finally happened after five exhausting 20 000-step days. We were at Haka Game Park on the Marondera road, and a small grey-and-green bird landed on a dead branch, peered around, and flitted onwards. It was a long-time bogey of mine; something I'd missed on every other trip; and a gaping hole in my life list. A mysterious, sneaky and elusive LBJ that lays its eggs in the nests of white-eyes... The green-backed honeybird.

After 30 years of birding, I had finally – finally – managed to get my binoculars on it. In that moment, a surge of adrenaline shot up my spine and my vocal cords responded. I let fly with an almighty cry of "Hoooneeybird!" at the top of my lungs.

Yup. These are the moments birders live for, never mind the smell.

Above: Birding in these beautiful miombo woodlands is all about locating a mixed bird party – a roving swarm of several species that criss-cross the canopy in search of prey. Expect an aching neck!



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TRAVEL JOURNAL



The Welsh Slam

Wales is a place of vertical landscapes and horizontal rain, where sheep outnumber people and the hospitality is as rugged as the coast. **Patrick Cruywagen** goes forth in search of adventure.

PICTURES GIJS HARDEMAN & PATRICK CRUYWAGEN

The Worm's Head hike on the Gower Peninsula must be timed within two hours of low tide; otherwise, you'll be cut off from the Welsh mainland for several hours.

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: A kayak and coasteering session off St Catherine's Island in Tenby, with St Catherine's Fort up on the rise. The fort was built in the 19th century to counter a potential invasion by Napoleon. Welsh winter weather can be gnarly – make sure to pack appropriate gear if you plan to spend time outside. The coffee shop next to Tenby Adventure is a good spot to warm up after your outing.

*Wales is a wild,
rain-drenched
sanctuary built
to recalibrate the
human soul.*

When the claustrophobia of England finally overtakes your spirit, and the M25 begins to feel less like a motorway and more like a congested car park for the clinically depressed, there is only one solution. You must point the snout of your Ford Ranger west and drive away. It's really as simple as that.

I grew up in South Africa and worked there as a 4x4 and adventure journalist, but moved to the UK in 2012 where I now work as a writer for Front Runner Dometic, the roof rack company. While I may have left my beloved Africa, my need for a getaway in my bakkie has not left me!

Beyond the River Severn, which in places forms the political boundary between Wales and England, the air sheds its exhausted, second-hand smell and the horizon begins to expand. Wales is a wild, rain-drenched sanctuary built to recalibrate the human soul.

Living on this "Mud Island" has its quirks. For historical reasons involving a lot of shouting and several centuries of creative border-shifting, the four nations of this green land often view one another with the kind of squinty suspicion usually reserved for a used-car salesman.

But for a South African, this is wonderful. To the Welsh, I am an impartial person with a pleasant accent and a good knowledge of world-class fly-halves such as Barry John, Phil Bennett and Handré Pollard. In thirteen years of living in the UK, Wales has become my spiritual high-octane filling station.

As the winter of 2025 settled in with its usual gloom, Dutch photographer Gijs Hardeman and I packed our gear into a well-equipped Ford Ranger. Our plan was simple: to take on – and hopefully survive – as many of the wildest adventure activities we could find in Wales in a week. This story covers the first half of that mission.

We left London at 4 am, and the city soon became a blur of sodium lights in the rearview mirror. The M4 was a glossy, black ribbon leading towards the Welsh valleys I cherish so much.

Gijs and I share a history. We first met before the 2010 FIFA World Cup when he and 30 other soccer enthusiasts drove from Amsterdam to Cape Town in a convoy of orange vehicles. I joined them in the Serengeti, where our time together was filled with dust, lions and over a million wildebeest, before they continued south to watch their team lose the final against Spain.

It's a long journey for a silver medal, perhaps, but as Gijs would say, the point wasn't the trophy; it was the fun along the way. Since then, we've taken

part in a few more trips, like the bat migration in Zambia's Kasanka National Park. Wales was a new playground for Gijs, although I had been there a few times.

DAY 1

A race against the moon

Our first destination lay just west of the city of Swansea: the Gower Peninsula; specifically, a geological protrusion known as Worm's Head. The name originates from the Old Norse *ormr*, meaning dragon, and from the cliffs of Rhossili, it truly resembles a giant serpent frozen in time, attempting to escape the Atlantic.

Access to Worm's Head is granted via a rocky causeway that appears for only two hours on either side of low tide. Get your maths wrong and you aren't just late for dinner, you're marooned on a jagged rock in the Bristol Channel with nothing but disgruntled gulls for company.

Our upcoming trip would entail a full clockwise loop around Wales, starting in the south at Gower, famous for its beaches and classic coastal walks. I initially learnt about Worm's Head through a BBC documentary, which inspired me to hike there with friends a few summers back. Now, my favourite Dutchman will join me as I do it again.

We arrived at Rhossili Bay car park, about 30 km from Swansea. In summer, it's a hive of ice cream and sunburn, but in winter it feels like the edge of the known world. We swapped trainers for proper hiking boots, glanced at the 5 km sweep of beach, and did that awkward half-jog-half-scramble towards the old coastguard station.

The causeway was clear. We leapt over the barnacle-encrusted rocks of the Inner Head and scrambled towards Devil's Bridge. By the time we reached the westernmost point, the sun had peeked out, illuminating the jagged cracks in the stone. It was a spectacular, 360-degree display of spray and sky. But there was no time for a celebratory sausage bap (the inferior British equivalent of a boerewors roll); the moon was shifting the water and the tide was about to cut us off. We retreated just as the first fingers of the tide began to lap over the path.

By 2 pm, we were back in the Ford and headed for Tenby, which was about 110 km to the west. This would take us about two hours, thanks to the countryside nature of the single-carriage roads.

If Disney were asked to design a Welsh seaside town, they would fail because they wouldn't be able to match Tenby's authentic charm. It's a pastel-coloured dream of 13th-century walls and white sands.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Coasteering off Tenby includes kayaking in and out of sea caves like this one. Lindsay Ketteringham (left), owner of the Neuadd Arms Hotel, once poured King Charles a pint – author Patrick Cruywagen points to the commemorating sign. Wales displays her winter colours. Whitesands Bay in Pembrokeshire: “Don’t stand too close to the cliff’s edge,” said the nearby sign...

We had booked a “coasteering” session with Tenby Adventure, but the weather gods were in a foul mood. Coasteering involves scrambling and climbing over coastal rocks or cliffs, swimming and jumping into the sea. The swells were enormous, the wind was howling, and the ocean looked like a washing machine full of wet concrete.

Mark Hicks and Tom Horton, men who clearly have more saltwater than blood in their veins, offered us the Salty Dog alternative: sea kayaking followed by “micro-coasteering” off St Catherine’s Island.

Launching from the Tenby Sailing Club, we paddled past the fortress-like castle tower and walls, which the Normans built during their 12th-century invasion of west Wales.

Once we cleared the protective harbour wall, the Atlantic reminded us of who was in charge. The swell grew until I felt like a tiny cork in a vast bathtub. Tom and Mark, however, appeared completely unfazed, navigating the waves as if they were reclining on a lilo.

We ducked into caves, timing our paddles to avoid being smashed against the cavern roof by incoming waves, and took turns jumping into the bracing, icy slush of the November sea. Thank goodness for a wetsuit offering 5 mm of neoprene protection!

We finished the day with visits to Tenby Harbour Brewery, to sample some craft beers, and the Pembrokeshire Pasty and Pie Company. According to a newspaper cutting on the wall, King Charles decreed their pies “delicious” when he visited. Both stops were great recovery spots after our adventurous first day in the elements.

Accommodation in Wales is never boring. On our first night, we stayed a few kilometres outside Tenby at Norchard Farmhouse’s Apple Camping. You can choose from stays in quirky structures shaped like a witch’s hat or an old aeroplane. I checked into the Apple Express, a retro train carriage that seemed like a Hercule Poirot-themed camping experience. It had a hot tub to soothe my sore shoulders, offering a view of the dark hills.

Gijs was assigned to the Igloo, a dome resembling those at South Pole weather stations. Most importantly, its interior was very warm and provided cosy protection from the harsh weather.

DAY 2

Where the wind has teeth

Day two started with a warm-up dip in the hot tub outside my carriage before loading up the bakkie. From there, Gijs and I drove about 60 km to Whitesands Bay, at the northern tip of the Welsh county of Pembrokeshire.

Meanwhile, the weather had shifted from “unsettled” to “biblical”. Gale-force winds and sideways rain greeted us at the trailhead, but as any Welshman will tell you, there is no such thing as bad weather, only a poor choice of jacket.

Today, we planned to do a coastal hike starting at Whitesands Bay, then enjoy a relaxed drive to the UK’s smallest city, and eventually find our way to Pwllgaelod for a sunset paddle and nap.

As the 10 km hike is an out-and-back route, we left the Ford in the deserted beach car park. The hike started with a sharp climb up to Trwyn Harddyn which is steep enough to make your calves question your life choices. From there, the view of the bay was hauntingly empty. In August, you wouldn’t be able to move here for tourists; in November, it’s just you, the black cliffs and the roaring prehistoric voice of the sea.

We followed the Pembrokeshire Coast Path north until my watch told me we’d walked 5 km. Then we turned back, our lungs bursting with the almost-intoxicating fresh air. It was a two-hour reminder that the best things in life are usually free and often involve getting very wet. The Pembrokeshire Coast Path National Trail is a whopping 299 km long, and we’d only sampled a small section of it.

Once back at the Ranger, a most welcome tea was brewed before we drove east, and after a few miles, we passed through St Davids. Now, the British have a very peculiar way of defining a “city”. In South Africa, a city requires skyscrapers, millions of inhabitants and at least one high-speed car chase. In the UK, all you need is a cathedral.

St Davids has a population of 1 850. It boasts a stunning 12th-century cathedral – however, calling it a city is like calling a puddle the Pacific Ocean. I live in Northampton, a town of 250 000 people with a Premiership rugby team, yet we’re officially a “town”. St Davids, on the other hand, holds “city” status despite having fewer residents than a big primary school.

From St Davids, we headed 33 km north-east to Pwllgaelod, our endpoint for the day. This small harbour town features a few houses and an old smugglers’ pub called Sailors’ Safety, dating back to 1593.

The gracious landlord allowed us to set up our tents on their lawn, as it was quiet and the off-season. Despite the winter chill, the bay provided shelter. I inflated my paddleboard as the sky shifted to a bruised purple hue. Paddling into the orange glow of a winter sunset became a form of meditation. The water was empty, no engines, no smartphone pings, just the steady slap of my board against the Atlantic.

*The swells
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wet concrete.*



DAY 3

Man vs Horse (and beer)

Late the next morning, we packed up the tents and paddleboards and headed east towards Mid-Wales. We stopped at Llanwrtyd Wells, about 70 km from Pwllgaelod, which is officially the smallest town in Britain. I remember seeing this place featured on *Panasonic World of Sport* as a kid – it's the home of the World Bog Snorkelling Championship!

We met Lindsay Ketteringham at the Neuadd Arms Hotel, a man who oversees a calendar of events that can only be described as “magnificently Welsh”. They host the Welsh Stone Skimming Championships, the Bog Snorkelling World Cup, and the Man vs Horse Marathon. The latter is a race in which trail runners compete against horses over a technical 22-mile (35 km) route.

“We have a picture of King Charles opening the brewery beside the 2007 Welsh Rugby team,” Lindsay said, pouring me a pint of his own brew.

After running 50 marathons, I decided then and there that my next challenge should be a 22-mile race against an actual horse. I'm not saying I'd win, but Lindsay's beer made me feel as if anything was possible...

We left later than anticipated, and the early-setting winter sun caught us out. The last part of our 17 km drive to the Chiltern Red Kite Estate was in the dark and heavy rain. The estate is situated in a “Dark Sky” reserve, meaning I couldn't see my own hand in front of my face once we'd turned off the headlights of the Ford.

The Chiltern Red Kite Estate is in a remote part of the Cambrian Mountains, and they offer some impressive off-grid glamping options. Red kites (a relative of the yellow-billed kite common in South Africa) were once nearly extinct in the UK. Today, Wales is littered with sites like this that play an important role in ensuring the species' survival.

My home for the night was the heated Moon Conker, a soccer-ball-shaped pod hanging among the trees, while Gijs was in the similarly shaped Earth Conker. To have a bath, I had to fetch water from the river, carry it up, and boil it on a wood-fired stove. It was primitive, tiring and utterly brilliant. There's something deeply satisfying about earning your own hot water while the rain pounds against a copper sphere in the heart of a Welsh forest.

My favourite part of our setup was the undercover food prep area, where we could enjoy the sounds and smells of nature while escaping the damp. Gijs made the salads while I made sure the braai met South African standards.

As our adventure took shape, I realised this wasn't just another trip for me and Gijs; it was something rather special. We were proving, one adventure at a time, that if you're looking for a soul-stirring break in the UK, Wales should be your first port of call.

In the next article, Patrick and Gijs swap the Ford Ranger for mountain bikes at the UK's oldest bike park, and they try to summit Yr Wyddfa (or Snowdon, to you and me).

**MEET THE AUTHOR**

South African-born Patrick Cruywagen is the former editor of SA4x4 and Land Rover Monthly magazines. He has visited over 50 countries and finds his greatest happiness watching sunsets from his paddleboard.

Today, Patrick lives in the UK. Despite the negative press about the weather, he sees it as a new place to explore. Follow him on Instagram: @busheditor

See more of Gijs Hardeman's photos on Instagram: @travelgijs





Clockwise from top left: Joel Pendell knows his way around pouring you a pint at Tenby Harbour Brewery. The outdoor kitchen at the Chillderness Red Kite Estate will keep you out of the elements. Sleeping in the Moon Conker, on the same estate, felt like being in a giant, heated football, Patrick says. The Ford Ranger is the ideal Welsh adventure chariot.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Patrick travelled to Wales in November 2025. The prices below are meant to offer a rough guide to what things cost.

ACCOMMODATION

Norchard Farmhouse (Apple Camping)

Situated at Redberth, near Tenby. Several cosy (and quirky) accommodation options, including an old aeroplane! Prices for a twin-sleeper stay start from £179 (R3 950) per night. 📍 applecamping.co.uk

Pwllgwaelod Beach

During the summer, I have slept on the beach here – it's free. On this trip, the landlord at the Sailors' Safety pub kindly allowed us to pitch our tents on the grass since it was out of season.

The Chillderness Red Kite Estate

The Cambrian Mountains give this area an authentic wilderness feel. Prices for a twin-sleeper conker start from £150 (R3 312) per night.

📍 chillderness.co.uk/glamping

ACTIVITIES

The Worm's Head hike and paddle at Pwllgwaelod are activities you can turn up and do on your own, provided you have the gear. With the hike, you need to be aware of the tide times. Paddleboarding in the ocean is not recommended if there is an offshore wind blowing.

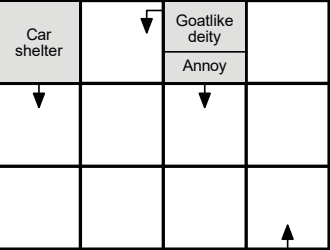
Tenby Adventure

Choose your favourite activity or try them all: coasteering, kayaking, and climbing. 📍 tenbyadventure.co.uk

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

BY GERDA ENGELBRECHT

SOLUTION ON PAGE 101

		Small bird (6,7)	↓	Personal assistant (abbr)	↓	Prosperity	Epoch	↓	Wetland park in KZN				
				↓		East side (abbr)	↓		Chief gods of Norse mythology				
		Survive				Curvature							
		Tropical disease	→										
Com-manding	↓	For each	↓	Get out of bed		Mount	→			Small dogs	↓	Attains	↓
Dance		Circuit								Whirlpool		Agent (short)	
→		↓		↓		Actinium (symbol)	→		Remove doubt	→		↓	
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Sailor	→					↓		Fragment	→				
Fastener								Faucet					
→			Sugary	→				↓	Under-stands	→			
			Fortune-teller						Portion				
Battering wind		Close	→	↓			Camel hair cloth	→	↓		Prede-cessor of the CD		
		Sheltered side					Obstacle						
→		↓		Ten (Roman numeral)	→	Overflow	→						
						Indefinite article							
Born (French)	→			Prohibit	→	↓		Pinnacle	→				
								Wool animals					
Extreme	→							↓	Osmium (symbol)		National park in Zimbabwe		
		Hardwood tree				Melan-choly	→		↓		↓	Car shelter	↓
						Film						Goatlike deity	
								While	→		Succulent	→	↓
								Greeting					
Abandon		Electrical unit	→					↓	Says	→			
		Upon							Mis-laid				
Forever Resort outside Hoedspruit	↓	Female sheep	→	Cheerful	→				↓	Antelope	→		Of course!
		Hatchet		Father									Small hotel
→		↓		↓									↓
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Lofty	→							↓	Hence	→			"Carry ...!"
Familiar with (4,2)									Air pollution	→			→
→													
						Locale	→				Merit	→	

MIA LOUW; GETTY/GALLOIMAGES.COM; PIERRE STEYN



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When **Kobus Kotzé** got a job as an English teacher in Greenland, he could never have guessed how this strange landscape would affect him.

Three years ago, I sent an e-mail from Vietnam to the Greenlandic municipal council of a small settlement called Kangaatsiaq. At the time, I owned a live music venue, worked in advertising and occasionally taught English. A friend of a friend posted on Facebook that the *kommune* was looking for an English teacher. I couldn't even remember how I knew this Facebook friend – did we meet in a bar, on a train, somewhere in a coffee shop during my travels in Asia? Maybe the job wasn't even real at all.

I waited (and waited...) for a reply, but finally, it all fell into place. Three years later, on 10 October 2025, I arrived in Kangaatsiaq, which is a small island settlement of fewer than 300 people, in a country of about 56 000, almost all of whom are Inuit.

The island of Kangaatsiaq lies off the west coast of Greenland, about 465 km north of the capital, Nuuk. It's a place where the sea, snow, wind and family histories determine the rhythm of existence.

When the ship dropped me off, the days were already getting shorter, with nightfall arriving early in the afternoon. Winter lasts eight to nine months, with long periods of darkness, while summer is short and intense – just two to three months – when daylight is almost continuous.

What struck me most during those first days was not the darkness, but the sound of snow crunching under my boots. It's not a dramatic sound; it's simply the sound of snow compressing. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Always that same sound coming from under your feet, whether it was day or night, still or windy.

Initially, it felt like I was being watched – not by people, but by the landscape, and by the crows. There are crows everywhere. Black punctuation marks on the blank paper of the snowy landscape. Crows congregate on roofs, electricity poles and any other structure. Always alert, always watching. Over time, the

landscape seems to absorb you. It takes you in, accommodates you. Window frames seem to blink, like eyes. Doors creak and open slowly, revealing what lives inside.

There's a Filipino man here who works in the shrimp factory. He arrived in Greenland 12 years ago, but the ship left without him so he decided to stay and make the best of it. We run into each other weekly and talk about things like travel to the outside world, the oil price, the weather, fishing boats that might take us out to explore the area, and the island's government-contracted helicopter: an irregular link to the rest of Greenland, and sometimes the community's only link to the outside world.

The children in my school, aged between 10 and 16, tell me about the Qivitoq. The Qivitoq is a mythical folk figure: Someone who leaves the settlement, disappears into the wilderness and gradually transforms to something between flesh and spirit.

Greenlandic, Kalaallisut, is an ancient language. It carries the rhythmic sound of wind over ice, of water breaking against rock; it resonates with the distance between places. Words stretch and fold into uninterrupted streams. It is polysynthetic, where one word can be a whole sentence; fluid, rounded and grounded. It is history, identity and represents a way of being that moves with nature.

At ten o'clock every Sunday morning, the church bell tolls over the houses of the town. These houses are painted red, blue, yellow and green. During the early days of the Danish colonial period, colours were a code. A red building was for trade and storage, yellow for health, blue for fishing, green for administration. Today that code is no longer strictly followed, but the colours remain, and against the snow they stand out like a Piet Mondrian painting.

I got a Greenlandic dog called Qaamit, a name she already had. (It means "Moon".) For the hunters here, who hunt deer and marine life, dogs are workers and companions that pull sleds. For me, Qaamit is a friend who helps me orient myself in this strange place.

The settlement knows her name and children play with her when we walk around together. Through her, I've become less of an outsider, someone beginning to fit into the local rhythm.

It's April now and the days are getting longer. Soon, the sun will not set for a few months. To fit in here, it is best to let the yin and yang of the seasons determine your path.

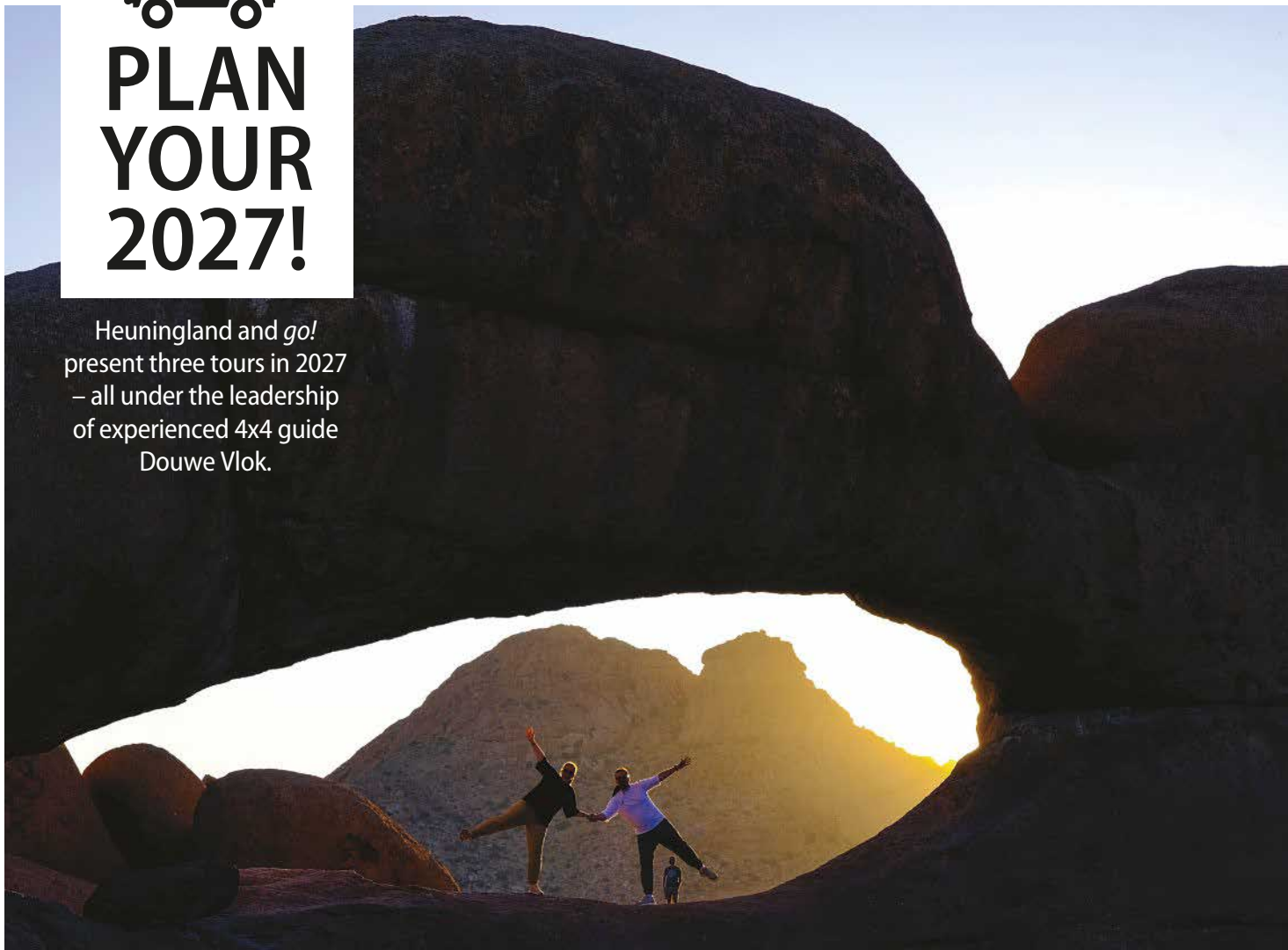
Kobus's new poetry collection, "Habitus", is available at naledi.co.za

*Initially, it felt like I was being
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There are crows everywhere.*



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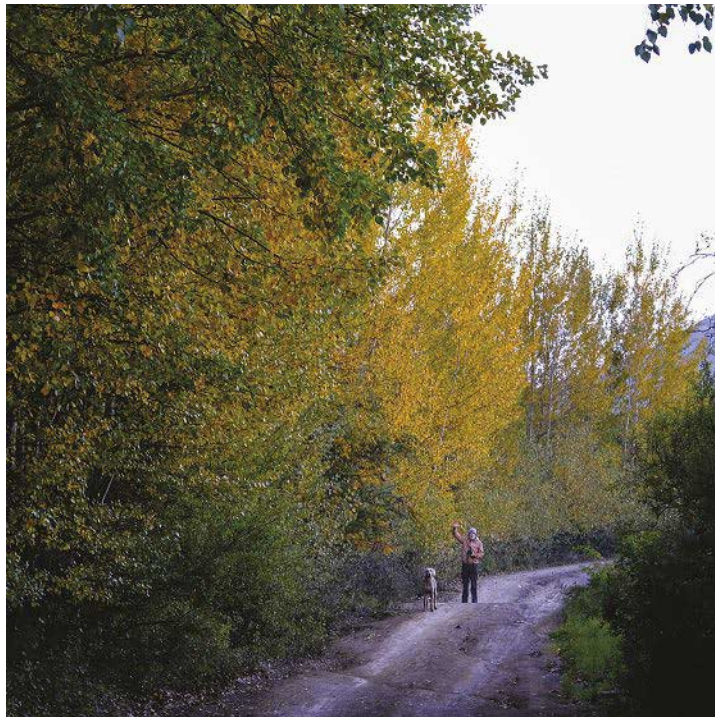
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For more information and reservations, contact Liezl Vlok at info@heuningland.com or visit heuningland.com





This is a photo that any ardent bush lover will be able to hear as much as see! The cry of a Swainson's spurfowl at dusk is one of Africa's most iconic sounds.

I was on a sunset drive at the back end of summer in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park and had just run into an elephant "roadblock", which forced me to turn around. On my way back to Kapula Private Camp (www.kapulacamp.com) I chanced upon a trio of African crakes catching insects in the road. I parked the Mahindra at an angle and squeezed off a couple of shots before they disappeared.

Just then, this Swainson's spurfowl announced its presence to my right, standing proud on top of an anthill.

Day made, as they say.

– Toast Coetzer

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