

go!

2026

West Coast

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Cederberg love song

Disappear into the mountains
beyond Wupperthal

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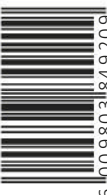
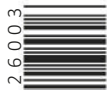
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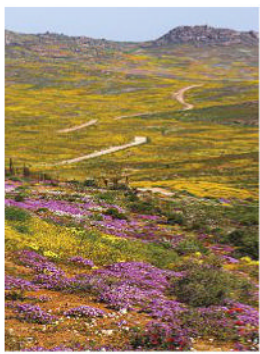
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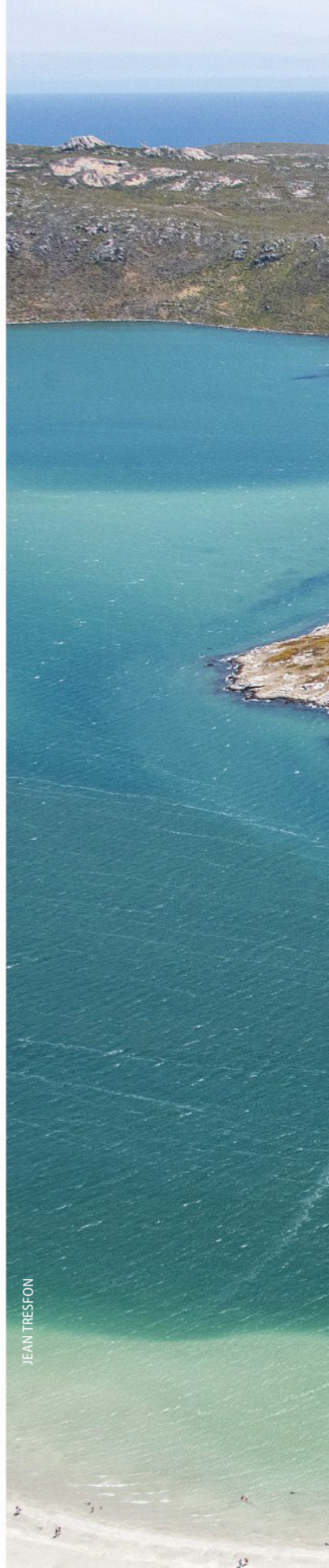
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Jean Tresfon takes to the sky above Elands Bay.



COVER PICTURE
HELÈNE VENTER

The road to Soebatsfontein, Namaqualand.



JEAN TRESFON



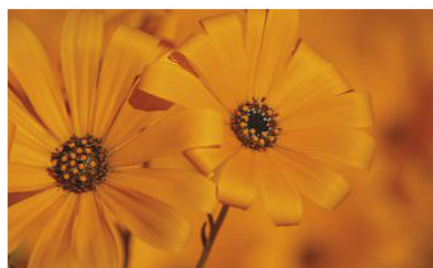
SCHAAPEN ISLAND, LANGEBAAN

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

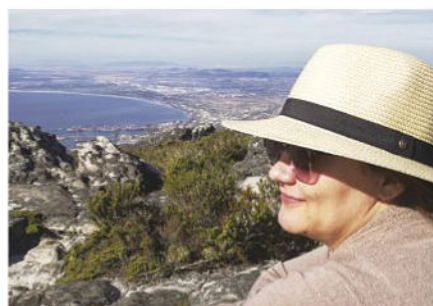
ANDREW KELLETT



HELÉNE VENTER



VANIA JOOSTE



JUSTIN FOX



The explosion of life and colour that is the annual Namaqualand wildflower bloom is really something to behold. And it's not just about "seeing pretty flowers". Here you have a landscape so dry and harsh that farmers and their livestock struggle to make it from one year to the next.

But then comes nature, with a sprinkle of rain at the right time, to remind us that salvation is always just around the corner. As long as you hope, and believe.

Heléne Venter takes us through some of the best places to view flowers in the heart of Namaqualand (p 30), while her bold photographs splash colour all over the pages of this year's special edition.

In *West Coast 2026*, we cover not only the coastline but also the adjacent interior – a place like the Cederberg, for example, which has long drawn devotees who believe that redemption can be found in its craggy heights. Writer Justin Fox drives the range from the Biedouw Valley to Wupperthal and beyond, to take its pulse (p 16).

Justin also compiled a selection of his favourite self-catering stays in Langebaan and the West Coast National Park (p 108), while another South African travel-writing stalwart, Jacques Marais, put together a pick of his recent hideaways, ranging from Kagga Kamma – also in the Cederberg – down to Vensterklip at Elands Bay (p 94).

This guide is something of a homage to Langebaan. It's a classic West Coast town with a unique character, thanks to its location on the shores of the placid lagoon. Nazreen Essack sketches out a perfect weekend in Langebaan with children (p 50), while Justin Fox delves into the fascinating history of the region – everything from naval battles to a time when guano scrapers descended upon the small islands of Saldanha Bay (p 72).

Jacques Marais loves some adventure – make sure to turn to his story about the best places to play in and on the water, from Ouberg Waterfall near Vanrhynsdorp (it only flows in winter – get your planning right) to the surf down at Strandfontein (p 56).

We hope you'll be inspired to go and visit some of these places yourself. Let us know what you find out there!

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Dieter Welp from Plumstead, Cape Town, admires the view at Tatasberg (1 112 m) in the |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park. For more information about accommodation in the park, visit sanparks.org. This photo was taken while on tour with Heuningland (heuningland.com).

PICTURE TOAST COETZER







THE WEST COAST AND ADJACENT INTERIOR

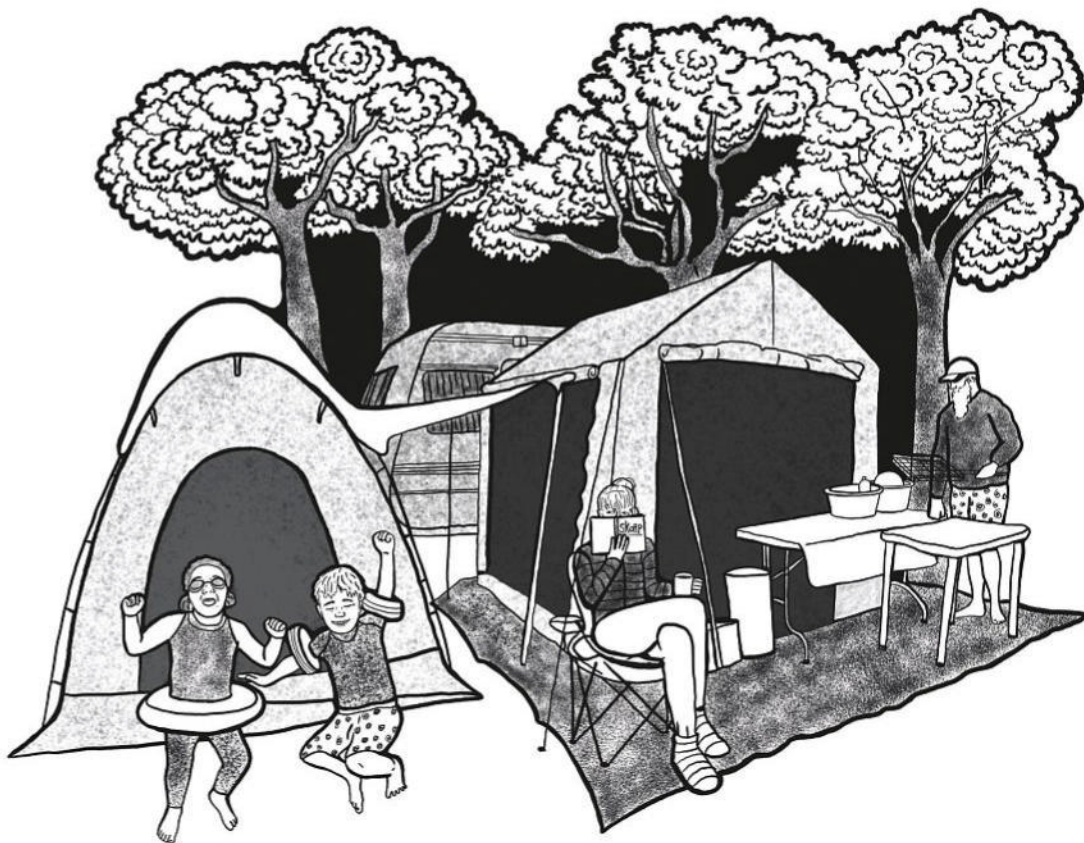
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Tides of memory

When you return to a place you camped at in childhood, it stirs up all kinds of memories, writes **Elzanne Coetzee** after a family holiday near Velddrif.

ILLUSTRATION **AIMEE LINDEQUE**

Iwalk with my brother's children – a four-year-old and an eight-year-old – to the playground in the campsite. They try to outdo each other with dangerous moves on the jungle gym. You need chameleon eyes and octopus arms to deal with them, I think to myself.

“Feeling a bit nostalgic now that we’re back here?” my dad asks when we return to our camping stand. My holiday has just started and I’m still thinking about work stuff. I don’t really have an answer to his question.

I grew up in Vredenburg. During the summer holidays, it and the other towns along the West Coast are hives of activity. You see number plates from the Free State and Gauteng. You can’t find a parking spot at the Weskus Mall and the shops are packed. Beach toys, sunscreen, swimming costumes – they all fly off the shelves.

The West Coast is a place to catch your breath, swim, maybe even start a summer romance. But there’s a flip side: If you’re a local, you can sometimes feel a bit claustrophobic when the crowds

descend and your normally quiet town has to make space for them.

I was grateful and relieved when my holiday finally started. Time to camp! And without Wi-Fi – the absence of which is ironically a luxury these days. The destination? Stywelyne Beach Resort in Laaiplek, a resort with 74 camping stands, a few chalets and two swimming pools, run by the Bergrivier Municipality.

We’ve been camping at Stywelyne since my mom was pregnant with me, sometime in the summer of 1993/94. There was a stretch of 12 years where

we didn't go there, but at the end of 2025 we resumed our tradition. I suspect it's mostly for the sake of the two grandchildren.

During childhood, our annual camping holiday was a chance to reunite with other regular campers who also pitched their tents here every December. Because of our hiatus, I don't see anyone I know in the campsite this time. Life goes on. But the feeling of the place has remained unchanged: The same waves lull you to sleep; the same sound of kids playing; the same crackle of evening campfires; the same vibe of "kick off your shoes and relax".

For this year's camping trip, my dad bought a second-hand 1994 Jurgens Fleetline caravan. A few weeks before our departure, every inch of the caravan was cleaned. The tent was washed, panel by panel, and carefully packed away again. Cups, saucers, bowls, plates... everything was checked.

So imagine our confusion when we arrived on 23 December and found parts of the tent missing. My mom and I just made big eyes at each other as my dad swore the tent must have been incomplete when he bought it. Luckily we still had the separate kitchen tent. It's much smaller than the caravan tent and an aesthetic predicament, but it worked. Anyway, no one camps because they want to look stylish.

My brother and his wife shared our stand. They brought their own tents – dad and daughter in one; mom and son in the other.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day pass by in a blur. My dad and I get up early on 26 December. The tops of the towering blue gums are hidden in fog. We pull on warm clothes and make a pot of coffee. My dad lights a fire. I read my book. The cool morning passes slowly; the rest of the family wakes one by

The West Coast is a place to catch your breath, swim, maybe even start a summer romance.

one. By lunchtime, the sun pierces the fog.

On another afternoon, we walk to the jetty at the Laaiplek harbour. Small groups of people stand together, fishing rods in hand. There's a reason the resort is called Stywelyne – one man's line pulls taught as he reels in. His catch? A long, brown piece of kelp!

At the end of the jetty, a teen girl stands with an older man. The pink stripes in her hair glisten in the sun. "I caught a shark!" she yells in excitement.

We walk closer. "No man, I don't like touching them," says the man as he removes the hook from the lip of a young shyshark. The shark makes a soft plop as he throws it back. It's gone in the blink of an eye.

I promised myself I'd exercise on holiday. Morning walks on the beach become a sacred ritual. A haze hangs over the ocean early in the day. Drops of condensation form on my glasses. The beach becomes an endless grey; the border between the horizon and sky indistinct. Couples walk together. A mom sits underneath a bright yellow umbrella while

her kids splash in the water. In the distance, a man walks with a crayfish net in his hand.

The sea is surprisingly warm. The cold swimming pool in the campsite is a different story. It never bothered me as much when I was a child, so I try to convince myself to be brave later in the day. A woman shivers next to me on the first step. "I know that once I'm in..." she says, trying to psyche herself up to take the plunge.

I think about that word my dad used: "nostalgic". As the days of the holiday flow into each other, I note the contrast between the child of my memories and who I am now.

I remember how Oom Spangenberg used to tower over me when he scolded me for walking across the strip of lawn in front of his chalet. I remember dear Ouma Enna – she was everyone's campsite granny – and how she drank her wine from a plastic glass and camped with her TV so she wouldn't miss a single episode of *7de Laan*. I remember the older kids sneaking off to the park to kiss.

I read somewhere that our emotions are actually located in our memories – and in the way we perceive them. Maybe that's true.

On the last night of our camping trip, I fall ill. I go to bed early and try to focus on the ever-present sound of the waves. It's New Year's Eve. People laugh and talk; others listen to music. "Wish you were here" by Pink Floyd floats on the West Coast breeze.

I am nostalgic, I realise. It's not that I miss being a child. Nor how I experienced the resort in earlier years. It has more to do with the fact that life can change in an instant.

Every moment is precious. And when we're no longer here, only the trees will remember.

CEDERBERG





Mountains of the heart

In the aftermath of last summer's devastating fires, journey into the Cederberg and explore this mountain wonderland on a slow, soulful meander from north to south.

WORDS & PICTURES **JUSTIN FOX**

It's a steep and rocky descent from the Wolfberg Cracks to Sanddrif, offering fine views of the Driehoek Valley.

In March 1973, my father, Revel, went to the Cederberg to hike with a group of friends. He returned smelling of woodsmoke and sporting a salt-and-pepper beard, and filled my six-year-old head with tales of high tablelands, caves of mysterious rock art, crystal-clear river pools and nights spent sleeping on a bed of fynbos under the stars.

Later, I learnt that my father's hike had been important for other reasons. Not only did it engender in him a love of those arid mountains to the north of Cape Town, but it made an equally strong impression on his group of friends.

Among them was poet and writer Breyten Breytenbach, who tells the story of their hike in *A Season in Paradise* (published in 1976), his travelogue of a journey through South Africa after 13 years of exile in France.

Breytenbach had visited these mountains several times in his youth and writes: "Always, even from the very beginning, as far back as I can remember, the Cederberg Mountains have been a place of refuge; but more than that, a place of magic, a prehistoric place, where there are no complications and little pain, where it is possible to touch the edge of the earth, virgin, undefiled, unknown, yet devoid of all peril; mountains without questions where the moon is born from a gorge and extinguished in the sea."

I'd visited these mountains many times in my childhood. Now it was time to go back.

The old fording place

It was late summer of 2026 when I returned to the Cederberg in a time of great heat. I took the R363 north of Clanwilliam, following the Olifants River, then turned north-east and followed a web of dusty farm roads bound for Oudrif, a remote retreat on the banks of the Doring River – effectively the northern "border" of the Cederberg.

Oudrif is an off-grid eco-lodge, its windows, doors and fittings salvaged from derelict buildings, its water sourced from a nearby stream, while the vegetables are grown on site and the "hobgoblin" chalets are built from straw bales (a natural insulator) plastered with cement. Owner Bill Mitchell – river guide, chef and conservationist – had wanted the lodge to occupy a tiny footprint, clearing minimal vegetation and using only alien wood and recycled materials.

There's no Wi-Fi at Oudrif and guests are encouraged to undertake a digital detox. Every chalet is elegant and white, with kelims, fine artwork and draped mosquito netting. Each one also has a library, and the Mitchell reading selection is rich and varied. I spent my days escaping the heat in a hammock reading Robert Macfarlane's *Is a River Alive?*, interspersed with dips in the Doring to cool off.

Dinners at Oudrif are communal. You sit around a big table and enjoy simple, hearty cooking done on the fire. Conversation with Bill and his wife Jeanine is lively, with topics ranging from literature and rock art to endemic fish and Cederberg

folklore. Jeanine spoke about regular visits to Oudrif by leopards, and how her portly old cat had ended up as (big) cat food.

Conversation turned to the former inhabitants of the area. The Khoisan legacy seems tantalisingly close at Oudrif, the old fording place. Their elemental presence is there in the rock art, but also in wooden pegs hammered into crevasses and used to hang possessions, as well as in arrow heads, broken ostrich eggshell containers and stone implements that dot the veld. And, of course, in the bloodlines of the people who still inhabit these mountains.

The next morning, we went for a walk before the heat set in. Ambling along the banks of the Doring, Bill noted interesting plants along the way. "From a botanical point of view, we're in a fascinating transition area between Cederberg, Gifberg and succulent Karoo zones," he said. "The Olifants-Doring river system has the greatest number of endemic fish species of any river system in South Africa, including the rare Clanwilliam yellowfish."

Bill also pointed out the dung and spoor of klipspringer, caracal and otter, as well as the delicate eggshell bead of a Khoisan necklace. He talked, too, about the early hominids who inhabited this region.

We came to what was effectively a Stone Age quarry and he showed me implements – scrapers and crushers – that fitted perfectly in the hand, evidence that expanded my idea of our ancestors' presence in this landscape.

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: The view to the north-east from the top of Uitkyk Pass reveals the scale of the damage around Algeria caused by the fires earlier this year. This good dog called Tubile lives at Oudrif, where accommodation comprises quaint (and well insulated) straw-bale chalets set along a low ridge. The Doring River snakes past Oudrif and provides welcome relief on hot summer days, as well as good kayaking in winter. Bill and Jeanine Mitchell are the delightful owners of Oudrif.



Hamlets of the high berg

From Oudrif, I headed south, stopping at Traveller's Rest, home to the Sevilla Rock Art Trail (4km out and back), which follows a series of caves and overhangs along the Brandewynrivier. On the trail, you'll see everything from simple handprint paintings to zebras and therianthropes (part-human, part-animal figures).

The prevailing view of much local rock art is that it represents shamanistic activity – a connection with the hereafter. John Parkington, professor of archaeology at the University of Cape Town, has proposed the theory that many Cederberg sites were closely related to initiation rites, in which boys and girls became “like the eland”, the most sacred creature in their world. Whatever the case, these images offer an extraordinary glimpse of the worldview of the ancient inhabitants of this place.

I drove further south, past the entrance to Bushmanskloof Lodge and the Anglo-Boer War Englishman's grave (Lieutenant Graham Clowes, killed in action here on 30 January 1901), then down Hoek se Berg Pass into the Biedouw Valley, wearing its brown summer livery, in contrast to the swathes of wildflower colour of springtime.

I spent the night at Enjo Nature Farm, a charming, family-run hideaway of Cape shepherd-style cottages and a leafy campsite. It has a labyrinth for meditation, a spring-fed dam, swimming pool and an honesty shop selling local produce, including homemade ice cream, braai packs on request, and Cederberg wine.

One of Enjo's cottages, called

Lonely Planet, is set all on its own up a remote kloof, and was to be my home for the night. It's a rustic retreat with a rocky splash pool – a place to escape the world in wild and dramatic surroundings. The cottage sleeps four: two in the bedroom and two in a loft, snug beneath bare thatch, reached by a wooden ladder.

In the late afternoon, I took a walk up Oskloof, into a vast amphitheatre of sandstone that reared up on three sides. My footfall echoed on stony ground.

Returning to the cottage, I lit a braai fire as dusk shuffled closer and the mountains glowed orange. Once the flames had mellowed, I placed a coil of Grabouw boerewors and a pair of chicken sosaties on the grid.

By now, enough black ink had leached into the sky to prevent me reading. Fetching a headlamp required a 15-metre trek, so I just sat there with the coals and the stars. The wine bottle emptied itself and the Milky Way topped itself up, the stars pressing lower, closer.

The next morning, the road to the Moravian mission station of Wupperthal led through impressive heights, then down Kouberg Pass to the lovely village on the banks of the Tra-Tra River.

Wupperthal was founded in 1830. Many Khoisan fleeing persecution took refuge here, settled and were converted to Christianity. There's an elegant gabled church, a *pastorie* and a core of old buildings that were sensitively restored after the devastating fire of 2018 (thanks in part to a large donation from the Rupert Foundation).

The village comprises rows of cottages terraced into a south-facing hill above the river. The

architecture is typical of the Cape – whitewashed and thatched with vine pergolas and stoeps. Many have acquired unsightly face-brick additions and satellite-dish appendages, and the old window frames have been replaced by steel. But from a distance it still gives the impression of the village of my childhood holidays, when Oom Frederik Joubert and his donkeys would lead us on hikes into the hills.

I first visited the mountains with my parents when I was about eight years old. We rented a house in Wupperthal and Oom Frederik took us on a hike to Kleinvlei. I was drawn to Frederik, a gentle soul with a kind, crinkly face who talked continuously to his mules as we walked. I saw him as a heroic man of the mountains and walked by his side the whole way. We reached Kleinvlei – to my boyhood eye, an impossibly romantic hamlet of thatched cottages cut off from the outside world by wild mountains. The Cederberg already had me properly hooked.

From Wupperthal, there are tracks that take you to quaint outlying settlements. The road east of town follows the Tra-Tra to Beukeskraal and even smaller Prins-se-Kraal. A rough road to the north-west ends at picturesque Heuningvlei, a village at the foot of Krakadouw's serrated peaks, which offer some of the toughest hiking in the area.

Heuningvlei's ring of cottages and plots seem painfully fragile against the savage rocklands that encircle it. From Heuningvlei, you can follow tracks (remember that these roads are maintained by local residents, so drive responsibly) to even more remote settlements, such as Witwater, Brugkraal and Kleinvlei.

It's in hamlets like these that you come face-to-face with a Cederberg that preserves an older way of life.

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Lonely Planet is a charming cottage set in Oskloof, far from the rest of the accommodation at Enjo Nature Farm in the Biedouw Valley. The southern exit to the Cederberg leads past Mount Ceder and over the picturesque Blinkberg Pass. Author Justin Fox with Oom Frederik Joubert during a hike from Wupperthal to Kleinvlei in the 1970s.



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: The famous "rain elephants" rock art at the Stadsaal caves. The Waenhuis kitchen/dining area at Keurbosfontein is an eclectic delight of fireplaces, sofas and ancient kitchen implements... and the home cooking is delicious. The elegant gabled facade and belfry of the Moravian church in Wupperthal. Justin Bonello, who runs Keurbosfontein, is a celebrity braai master, television producer and accomplished author. A window still life at the 200-year-old Onderhuis, Keurbosfontein.

"We start to feel the earth... as something like the Cederberg, cobbled together out of huge plates of rock, salted and peppered by scree, flogged by sunlight, splintered by cold."

– Stephen Watson,
A Writer's Diary (1997)

The architecture is simple and utilitarian, the farming is at subsistence level and donkey carts are still a popular means of transport.

The mountain people remain in touch with their Khoisan past, displaying a rich knowledge of the fauna and flora and the recipes of old. Aspects of their language hark back to a time before their ancestors came down from the mountain and found sanctuary among the missionaries.

Following the Moordenaarsgat River

You need a high-clearance 4x4 to tackle the rough road that runs south of Wupperthal down the spine of the central Cederberg. It leads through spectacular terrain of convoluted rock formations, montane fynbos and tea-coloured streams, and is the lofty realm of the Clanwilliam cedar tree and the rare snow protea.

After ascending the steep track out of the Tra-Tra Valley, I reached Eselbank, the biggest settlement in this part of the mountain range. Its semi-detached cottages and vine pergolas lined the sand road through the village. (Make a stop here to see the waterfall and the Ereboog rock formation.)

Pressing on, I passed the hamlets of Vaalfontein and Langkloof, with the deep gorge of the Moordenaarsgat River on my left, then descended into the desolate Trekkloof valley beside the ramparts of Wolfberg, until I came to the oasis of Keurbosfontein.

The visionary farmer here, Johan van der Westhuizen (who helped establish the Cape Leopard Trust), has granted a long-term lease to bush cook, Justin Bonello, who hosts guests in this place of timeless beauty. Keurbosfontein forms part of the so-called "Red Cederberg" – a tourism offering

that comprises three unique getaways: Keurbosfontein, the Klipwerf Veldhuysies and Bakkrans Private Wilderness Concession.

The 200-year-old Onderhuis at Keurbosfontein is impeccably restored in 19th-century Cape Dutch style, with antique furniture, lanterns, kelims and kists. There are two pools for cooling off on hot days; you share one of them with lilies, fish and frogs.

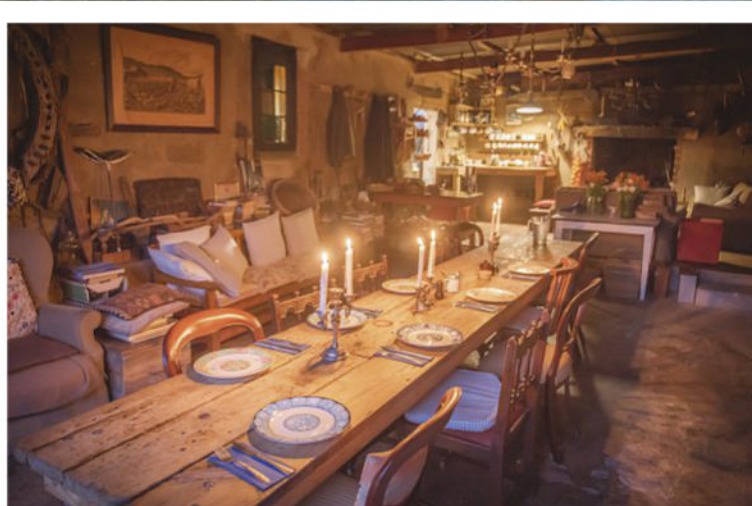
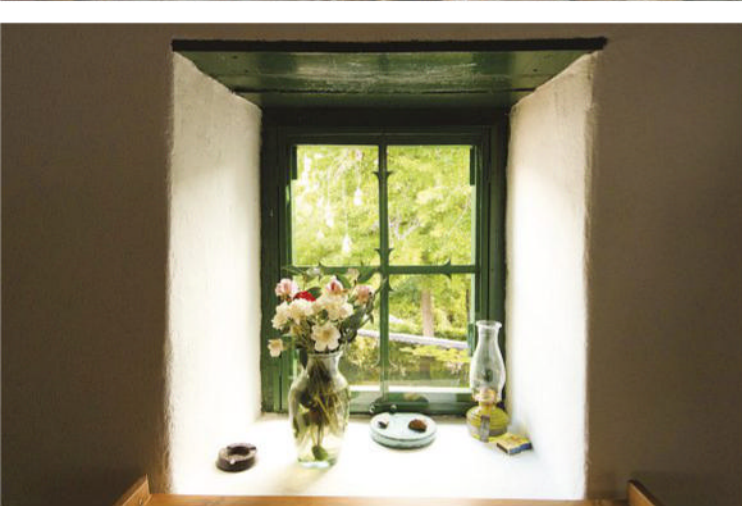
The Waenhuis kitchen/dining area is an eclectic delight of Aga stoves, fireplaces, baskets of fruit, sofas and ancient cooking implements adorning the fragrantly industrious space. A gramophone enhances the atmosphere, issuing classics by the likes of Nat King Cole and Louis Armstrong.

The meals are communal – delicious local dishes with a twist, using ingredients from the garden and washed down with fine Cederberg wine. Justin is the perfect host, full of anecdotes, foodie chat and flair.

Keurbosfontein only hosts one party of up to 10 guests at a time. Justin was kind enough to let me join a group for a rock-art walk the next morning. He drove us up Trekkloof, then pulled off the track and we set off on foot into rugged wilderness, our host talking all the while about his passion for the Cederberg and his delight at recently having made a home in these mountains.

Coming to an overhang, he pointed out dancing figures and antelope, faded ochre syphers offering a window on impossibly long stretches of time and human habitation. He explained how only the more potent ochre and yellow colours remained; the blacks (derived from charcoal or manganese dioxides) and whites (from clay) have faded over time. The rock seemed like a thin veil between this reality and another.

"Most Cederberg art is from



the last 10 000 years,” he said. “These images are of the fine-line tradition, which makes them more than 1 500 years old. When Khoikhoi herders moved into the area and chased out the San shaman artists, the fine-line tradition was replaced by cruder handpainting. So, it’s relatively easy to date the transition.”

Place of stars

I was collected from Keurbosfontein by Ozzy Yerlikaya and Ree Treweek, an intrepid couple who’ve been granted the 6 000-hectare concession to Bakkrans, another of Johan van der Westhuizen’s farms, originally used for winter grazing.

Our Land Rover Discovery headed up a steep track, via three gates, and into the remote uplands east of Tierhoksberg. The scenery was spellbinding; the succulent Karoo vegetation rich and fragrant.

The Bakkrans encampment is in the shadow of a rock-art decorated cave, and comprises four thatch-and-stone shepherds’ huts (reminiscent of 18th-century settler and trekboer dwellings), a lodge with adjacent kitchen, and an eco-pool and sauna.

The beds in the huts are covered in sheepskins and their bathrooms built into rocky overhangs. Ree is an artist from KZN and Ozzy is Turkish, so there’s a bit of eastern Mediterranean flair in the décor of Persian rugs, samovars, hanging lanterns and richly embroidered cushions.

That evening, we drove to a lookout point on Arrie se Pas, which offered spectacular views east into the Tankwa and west towards Tafelberg and the Cederberg’s central massif. A Verreaux’s eagle flew past as Ozzy poured the sauvignon blanc and

Ree buttered the roosterkoek.

“At Bakkrans, we work closely with the Cape Leopard Trust and the scientists,” said Ozzy. “In fact, the very first camera traps were set up here and this is actually where the Cape Leopard Trust began. Bakkrans is all about conservation and custodianship. There are plans to take down the fences with neighbouring farms and link up with CapeNature to form an official Cape Mountain Zebra Reserve. The vision is that this will eventually expand to become a 70 000-hectare greater Red Cederberg Karoo Park.”

Since the intention at Bakkrans is to have as light a human footprint as possible, only one group of self-drive guests (no more than eight) is allowed per month. The camp is self-catering, but there are two onsite managers (Whilmaine and Fonti Fabrick) who will make your fires, offer nibbles (such as Whilmaine’s to-die-for vetkoek), clean the camp and generally help out, but they’ll also leave you in peace if you so wish.

The walks and 4x4 tracks are superb, offering waterfalls in winter and plunge pools in summer. Bakkrans is a place of eternal stars, red rocks and deafening silence; one of the most beguiling places I’ve ever visited.

Leaving Bakkrans and heading further south, I stopped at two spectacular rock-art sites: Stadsaal and Truitjieskraal. The former comprises contorted outcrops that lead to a cave with sandstone altars, naves and chambers, all forged in the acid of time. The place must surely have had spiritual significance for the ancients: an African Stonehenge, perhaps?

Near the cave is a well-preserved

painting of elephants, possibly the rainmaking site of shamans. I pondered the sense of tranquillity that must have been inspired by those grazing pachyderms... and the violence unleashed by the arrival of settlers who drove out both the elephants and the Khoisan artists.

Next, I visited Truitjieskraal, entering the site via a sandy path that led to a series of rock pinnacles glowing crimson in the low sun. Entering a sandstone portal, I meandered through a warren of caves and cubbyholes, burrows and overhangs, many of them adorned with fine-line paintings: a row of dancers, an elephant, a large eland and many half-human, half-spirit-animal therianthropes. The ancients seemed palpably present, keepers of this wondrous spot.

The Cross, the Cracks, the Arch

To the west of these two rock-art sites are a group of popular farms in the Krom, Sand and Driehoek river valleys. I’ve spent many happy sojourns at the famous farms of the latter two: Sanddrif and Driehoek.

Both offer good, affordable accommodation and easy access to some of the best hikes in the Cederberg, notably the Maltese Cross, the Wolfberg Cracks and the Wolfberg Arch.

On this occasion, I pressed on to the next valley and stayed at Kromrivier Cederberg Park, where I checked into one of their luxury chalets. Sleeping four, these large self-catering houses have all the mod cons with comfortable and stylish interiors.

Kromrivier has been in the Nieuwoudt family since 1856 and started life as a livestock farm, but tourism later became an important part of the business due to the

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Ree Treweek and Ozzy Yerlikaya are a dynamic couple who’ve been granted the 6 000-hectare concession to Bakkrans in the Red Cederberg. Whilmaine Fabrick is on hand to produce the most delicious roosterkoek and vetkoek at Bakkrans. Tarzan takes a cooling dip in the pool at Bakkrans.



abundance of popular hiking and climbing routes in the area.

For many visitors to the Cederberg – especially the central region – a holiday here is all about exploring nature on foot. These are particularly accommodating, gentle mountains, with countless paths for rambling. You can wander for days through its uplands, through castles of sandstone stained with iron oxide or streaked with black manganese and overlaid with multi-coloured lichen, as though tagged by some giant graffiti artist. And everywhere, there is life-giving water: cutting through kloofs, tinkling off ledges or springing from barren ground.

However, the disastrous fire of early 2026 caused substantial damage and many hikes – particularly around Kromrivier, Driehoek, the Uitkyk Pass and Algeria – are currently closed to allow rehabilitation.

Luckily, the trail to Sugarloaf at Kromrivier was still open. Rising early, I crossed the Krom River smoking spindles of mist, the air alive with the industry of birds: chirruping weavers, sunbird agitation, spurfowl scuffling for braai leftovers, backed by the white-noise trilling of turtle doves.

The trail skirted Dwarsrivierberg and traversed the slopes of Sugarloaf through *perdebos* and *geelbos* untouched by fire, then west around the base of The Pup. I descended the slope and approached the Maltese Cross, which rises 30m above a plain rich in fynbos. The giant sandstone monolith is a symbol of these mountains and a pilgrimage site for hikers.

I noticed the remains of burnt cedars – blackened scarecrows

against the skyline. The settlers' greed for timber and the work of veld fires, many started by humans, have largely stripped the Cederberg of its eponym. As early as 1836, German traveller Wilhelm von Meyer noted: "All or nearly all the accessible cedars of commercial value are gone. What are left are either crooked, blemished, too young for the sawyer or inaccessible."

Nearly two centuries later, the cedar's continued existence is even more precarious, but there are efforts to save these beautiful trees, despite the ravages of regular fires. Dawie and Lizette Burger of Driehoek are doing especially good work with Sustainable Cedar, a project aimed at planting thousands of seedlings.

That evening at Kromrivier, I lit a braai fire and sat watching the last rays enflame the valley walls. As the sun disappeared, the kloof slipped into deep shadow like a ship slowly submerging, the light receding as Kromrivier sank into night. The first stars began to sparkle, slowly brightening in their bed of indigo. From the river came the throaty plosives of frogs and the cry of hadedas beating down the valley to their night roosts.

I drank my wine from a mug; chops leaked their aroma from the flames; the crags leant closer. It struck me how ingrained these mountains are in the Cape psyche. The Khoisan were in their thrall, of course, but the Cederberg had worked its way under people's skin in our time, too, manifesting itself in the writings of devotees such as C Louis Leipoldt, Breyten Breytenbach, Jan Rabie and Stephen Watson.

These have always been mountains with character and charm... mountains of enchantment.

Leave your heart under a stone

From Kromrivier, you can exit the Cederberg to the north-west via Uitkyk Pass, or you can continue south through the mountains, finally emerging at the village of Op-die-Berg. I opted for the latter. On Blinkberg Pass, I got out and knelt by a spring, cupping water that tasted of stone and vegetable matter. Then I looked back.

The Cederberg stretched north in a line of peaks like the spine of a *koggelmander*. The rock was blood red in the setting sun, almost liquefied by the light. The mountains seemed dipped in the sadness of the First People's passing, but the feeling of loss was not the same as you get in the expanses of the Northern Cape, which are devoid of any sign of their passing. Here, the Khoisan seemed close and their blood still coursed in the hamlets of the upper range. The mountains were welcoming, there was peace and beauty there, and I could feel the ancestors' living presence.

The Cederberg is a place where leopards still roam and where Clanwilliam yellowfish still fill the rivers; a realm of ethereal light, fynbos wonders, star blankets and deep silence; of life-giving oases and impossibly long trajectories of human habitation. It's a place of the heart.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Haffie Strauss (1943 – 2026) of Traveller's Rest, Agter-Pakhuis.

Opposite page clockwise from top left: Donkey traffic (seen here ascending Kouberg Pass with Wupperthal in the distance) is still a common sight in the Cederberg. Early morning mist steams off the Krom River, viewed from the bridge at Kromrivier Cederberg Park. The Maltese Cross sandstone formation is one of the icons of the Cederberg (easiest access is the trail from Dwarsrivier farm).



CEDERBERG



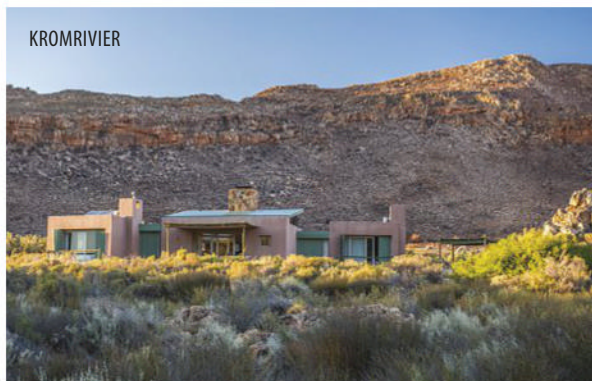
OUDRIF



ENJO NATURE FARM



BAKKRANS



KROMRIVIER

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

How do I get there? The three main access routes are via Ceres on the R303; via Algeria off the N7; or via Clanwilliam and the Pakhuis Pass off the N7. (See map on p 12.)

When to go? The Cederberg is a year-round destination, but if you're hiking or climbing, it can get very hot in mid-summer and very cold in mid-winter, when there's often snow on high ground. Early spring is flower time and extremely popular.

Maps and reading? Peter Slingsby's maps are excellent for touring and hiking (tracks4africa.co.za), while his latest publication, *Cederberg: The Book*, is a must for all mountain lovers.



STAY HERE

Oudrif

Accommodation in five retro-furnished, straw-bale houses. Full board R1 950 per person sharing, guided activities included. ☎ 083 381 0030

✉ oudrif@gmail.com

Enjo Nature Farm

Enjo is a pet-friendly, working farm with good hiking and mountain-bike trails. It offers seven self-catering cottages (sleeping two to six) and four campsites with power points and an ablution block. Cottage rates from R525 per person sharing; camping R140 per person. ☎ 066 333 6810

✉ enjonaturefarm.co.za

Red Cederberg Keurbosfontein

- Self-catering option – up to 10 guests; one group at a time; R14 375 per night for the entire farm; Justin's team will cook for you with your ingredients.

- Three-night, full-board, food-inspired escape: R11 788 per person, including all meals plus mountain and wine activities.

- The Bokpad Trail – a four-night, three-day slackpacking hike – opens in August 2026. More info: ☎ 082 215 0528

✉ redcederberg.co.za

Red Cederberg Bakkrans

Up to eight guests can sleep in four traditional shepherds' cottages that have been impeccably restored. There's a kitchen, lounge and dining area, plus a natural pool and sauna.

Bakkrans only hosts one party per month – you get the whole 6 000 ha property to yourself. You need a 4x4 with high ground clearance to reach the reserve.

The self-catering camp costs R30 000 per night (R3 750 per person if you go in a group of eight), including wood and ice.

☎ 076 907 9466

✉ info@traveldesigner.com

Kromrivier Cederberg Park

They have 10 fully equipped, self-catering chalets, 10 two-bedroom safari tents and 18 campsites. Die Snee Restaurant serves traditional meals (breakfast and lunch) and there's a shop that sells basics, plus wine and craft beer made on the farm.

Luxury chalets from R1 445 per person sharing; safari tents from R875 per person sharing. Each campsite has its own bathroom, sink, power point and braai pit – rates from R220 per person.

☎ 027 482 2807

✉ cederbergpark.com



DO THIS

Hiking

You'll need a permit to walk and use the huts in the wilderness area, which has been divided into three zones, stretching from the Pakhuis Pass in the north to the Maltese Cross in the central Cederberg.

Most day hikes are R40 – R70 per adult; R20 – R50 per child. Day permits are available from CapeNature at the Algeria and Kliphuis offices, or from the place you're staying at.

Due to the recent fire, most hikes in the central region are closed until about December 2026. However, these hikes are still open: Maltese Cross (from Sanddrif/Dwarsrivier), Wolfberg Cracks and Wolfberg Arch (from Sanddrif) and Sugarloaf and The Pup (from Kromrivier).

The trails in the northern region (Heuningvlei etc.) have reopened since the big fire of March 2025.

(The May 2026 flood event might have changed the above information – double check the CapeNature website to see which hikes are open 📍capenature.co.za – Ed.)

Rock art and activities

There are more than a thousand known rock-art sites in the Cederberg, making this one of the richest open-air art galleries in the world. The two-hour, self-guided **Sevilla Rock Art Trail** is a must (entrance is R50 per adult; free for children under 12). ☎ 027 482 1824

For **Stadsaal** and **Truitjieskraal**, collect an entry permit from your guest farm or at Matjiesrivier (R60 – R70 per adult; R30 – R40 for children under 17).

There are several excellent **4x4 and mountain-bike routes** in the mountains. From Wupperthal, the Biedouw Valley and Kaggas Kamma alone, there are more than a dozen. Many farms such as Enjo, Kromrivier and Sanddrif also have trails.

The **flower season** generally comes early to the region, often starting in July. The Biedouw Valley is where you'll usually see the most spectacular blooms. The spring flower show in Clanwilliam, and the town's botanical garden, are also excellent.







A universe of colour

The annual Namaqualand wildflower bloom is a unique spectacle. **Helène Venter** has photographed this part of the Northern Cape for 20 years and has put together an expert guide. Planning your next flower tour starts here!

PICTURES **HELÈNE VENTER**

For 38 years, Namaqualand was not just my home; it was my muse. To the casual observer, Namaqualand is a place of *tandekners* (grinding teeth) – it's a harsh, semi-arid expanse defined by sun-scorched granite and a profound silence.

Yet, beneath this seemingly desolate crust lies a hidden richness, a dormant energy waiting for the precise kiss of winter rain to shatter the monochromatic rust and ochre into a thousand fragments of colour.

My journey of documenting this transformation began in what was then my hometown of Springbok. What started as a small photography project expanded into a 20-year expedition through the diverse ecological treasures of Namaqualand, and later into other flower regions like the West Coast, Nieuwoudtville and the Hantam Karoo.

As a photographer with a background in fashion design, I've always been drawn to texture, light and the way a silhouette can tell a story. In Namaqualand, the "fashion" is dictated by the elements. The plants here are survivors; they've evolved in marginal environments, perfecting a life cycle that's as unusual as it is beautiful. They proliferate, bloom and perish within a few short weeks, leaving their seeds to wait in the soil – sometimes for years – until

the optimal conditions for life return.

This article is a distillation of those decades spent behind the lens. It's a visual and narrative guide to the region's floral highlights, intended to help you navigate a landscape where no two years are ever the same.

The timing is a delicate dance: The season typically commences at the end of July, peaks in August, and occasionally whispers into September. It's a world where the fragrance of wildflowers can be intoxicating, and where a single square metre of soil might host a dozen species that exist nowhere else on earth.

To visit Namaqualand is to engage with ancient history. This is the "Nama-kwa" – the land of the Nama Khoe people. It's a place where archaeological hand axes from *Homo erectus* lie near the copper deposits that drew European explorers like Simon van der Stel in 1685. Today, the mining industry has left behind ghost slopes and small towns that have come to rely on the brief annual "gold rush" of the spring bloom.

This is not merely a "flower show" – it's a powerful, sudden burst of life that completely transforms the landscape. For the traveller, the experience is equally transformative. Standing in a field where the horizon is blurred by a haze of orange, purple and white shows you just how resilient nature can be.

Come, let me show you!





Springbok

Tucked away in a narrow valley of the Klein Koperberg, Springbok serves as the unofficial capital of Namaqualand's floral empire. Originally named Springbokfontein after the herds of antelope that once gathered at its springs, the town is now the gateway for travellers seeking botanical treasures.

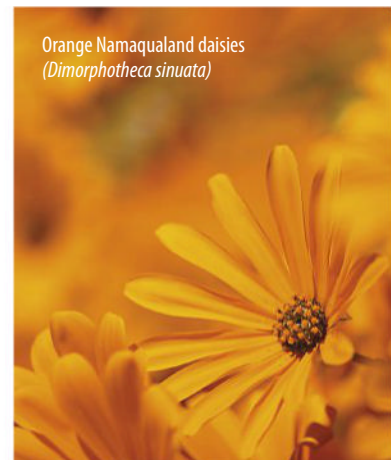
Some of the grandest flower displays are found just minutes from the town centre. About 3 km from town on the Airport/Goegap road, you'll see the local golf course on your right. During peak season, this landscape is carpeted in vibrant shades of orange, yellow, pink, purple and white.

Venture further north on the Airport/Goegap road, carry on past the airport turn-off, and take a slight right on the R355 towards the farm Silwerfontein for some more great flower viewing.



What to look out for: You'll find the veld adorned with early morning daisies (*Osteospermum spp.*), Namaqualand daisies, *gousblom* (*Arctotis spp.*), *Gazania spp.*, vygies (*Mesembryanthemum spp.*) and various succulents.

On the road to Silwerfontein, you'll also see *hongerblomme* (*Senecio*) and *Pietsnot* (*Grielum humifusum*).



Orange Namaqualand daisies
(*Dimorphotheca sinuata*)

NAMAQUALAND

Goegap Nature Reserve

Goegap Nature Reserve is a 150 km² marvel, just 15 km south-east of Springbok. “Goegap” means “waterhole” and is a global biodiversity hotspot: Nearly a quarter of the plants found here exist nowhere else on earth, with almost 600 indigenous flower species!

The Hester Malan Succulent Garden (near the reserve office) houses a collection of rare endemic succulents, including *halfmens* (*Pachypodium namaquanum*) and various crassula species.

For those in a sedan, the 17 km circular route offers accessible views of sandy plains and rocky hills, with a great cross section of the reserve’s habitats.

If you have a 4x4, Goegap’s other trails reveal even more secluded wonders. (Maps are available at the tourist office upon entry.)



What to look out for: Extensive sheets of orange and yellow African daisies (*Osteospermum spp.*), Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca spp.*), gousblom (*Arctotis spp.*), Gazania spp., kapokbos (*Eriocephalus spp.*), sporrie (*Heliophila spp.*) and various succulents.

You’ll also see quiver trees (*Aloidendron dichotomum*) and various vygies (*Mesembryanthemum spp.*).



GOEGAP TRAILS

Scenic hike (6,5 km): Enjoy granite domes and valley views.

Myers Trail (2 – 8 km): This is an easy walk, great for wildlife sightings such as springbok, gemsbok and ostrich.

Carolusberg (6,3 km): A challenging climb to the reserve’s highest peak, which rises to 1 345 m.

4x2 trail (17 km): This gravel road is accessible to regular vehicles (decent ground clearance required) starting from the Hester Malan Succulent Garden.

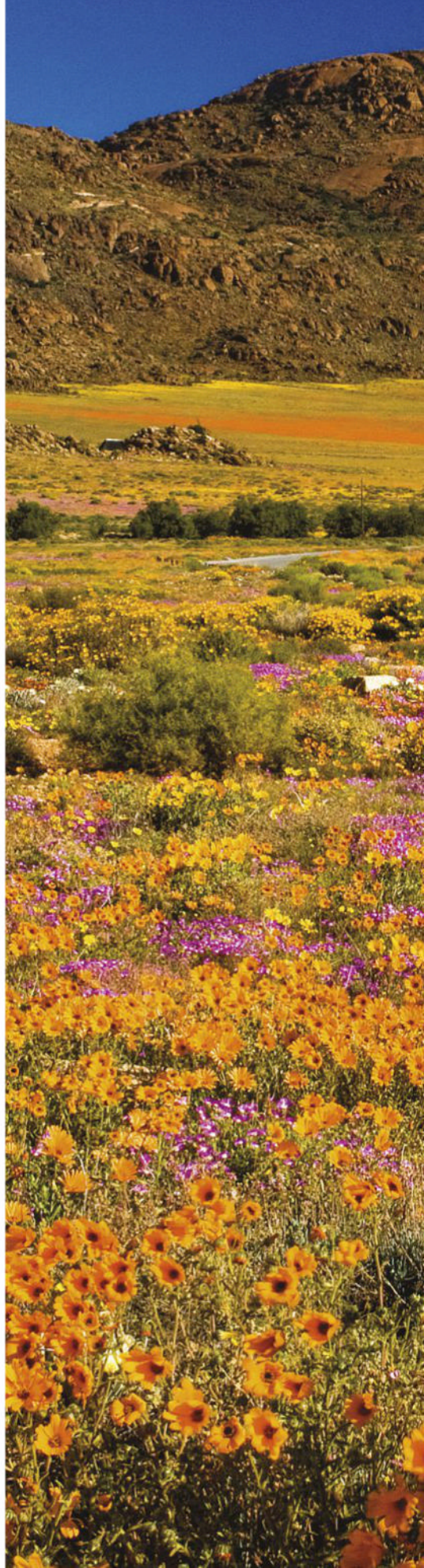
4x4 trail (35 km): Drive a route through the Carolusberg area. R340 per vehicle.

Mountain-bike trails (30 km or 60 km): There are various tracks winding through the flower fields. R315 per person.

ENTRANCE FEES

R40 per adult, R20 per child aged 6 – 17; free for children under 6; R18 for pensioners (ID required). You get a free map at the entrance.

White *knopiesopslag* (*Cotula laxa*)



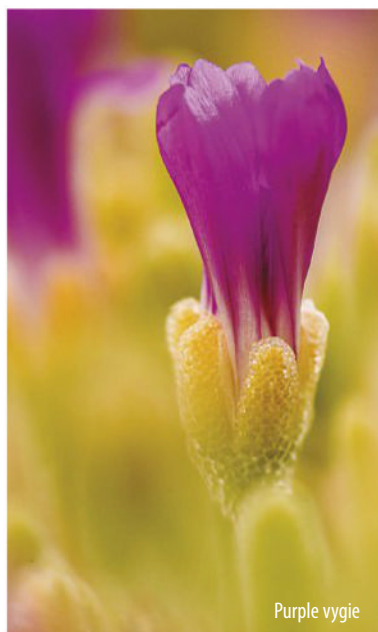




Okiep

To fully appreciate Namaqualand, one must understand its copper heart. Towns like Okiep, Concordia and Nababeep are living museums, where industrial history and natural beauty collide. For a perfect day trip, drive the “flower loops” that connect Springbok with Okiep, Concordia and Nababeep.

In Okiep (5 km north of Springbok), landmarks like the Cornish Pump House and the Old Smelter Smokestack (both built in 1882) can be seen next to the Okiep Country Hotel.



Purple vygie



What to look out for: Sandy plains and towering granite koppies serve as a dramatic backdrop for a high-contrast floral show all around Okiep. You should see a mix of orange and yellow, mass-flowering Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca spp.*), gousblom (*Arctotis spp.*), and hardy vygies (*Mesembryanthemum spp.*) that saturate the landscape in electric neon pink and purples.

Go down on your knees and you'll find a hidden world of delicate bulbs and geophytes, plus cheerful flashes of *surings* (*Oxalis spp.*) and beetle daisies (*Gorteria diffusa*).

Concordia

Established as a Rhenish mission station in 1852, Concordia holds its own secrets. The Nama people extracted copper here long before Europeans arrived.

About 6 km along the tar road from Okiep towards Concordia, on your left and sometimes to the right as well, is a local secret: a flower area known as Groot Hoog.



What to look out for: Common at Groot Hoog are large fields of orange *bittergousblom* (*Arctotis fastuosa*), Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca sinuata*), white sporrie (*Heliophila* spp.), vygies (*Mesembryanthemum* spp.) and Pietsnot (*Grielim humifusum*).

Nababeep

Nababeep, once called “Lelykepad” (ugly road), underwent a rebranding. Its name now is a Nama word referring to the “hump of an animal”, or a “small spring”. In July and August, small, deep-orange Namaqualand daisies blanket the dark, rocky earth.

This glorious monoculture grows right up to the remnants of the mining heaps, transforming the town. The orange blazes into cracks in the rocks in a way that makes Nababeep’s spring show unique among the mining towns around Springbok.

“Clara”, the narrow-gauge steam locomotive that once hauled ore to the coast, has found her final resting place at the Okiep Copper Company Museum (near the Usave supermarket) – it’s visible from the street.

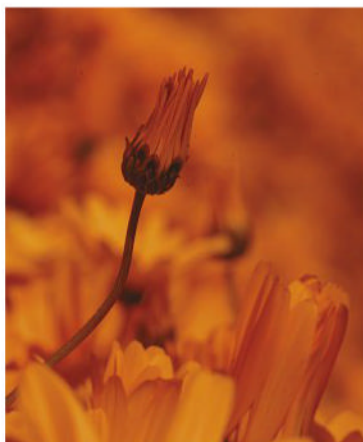


What to look out for: Mainly ursinias, *gousblom* (*Arctotis* spp.), *Gazania* spp., vygies (*Mesembryanthemum* spp.), beetle daisies (*Gorteria diffusa*) and *hongerblomme* (*Senecio* spp.).



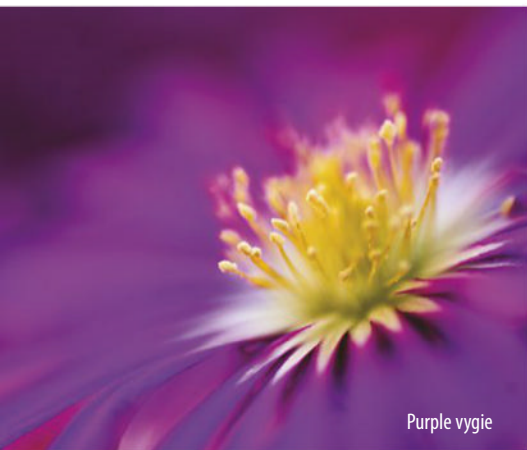
TOP TIP

Flowers in Namaqualand open only in the warmth of the sun, typically between 11 am and 3 pm. If it’s cold or overcast, the petals stay closed. Drive away from the sun, keeping it behind you. This ensures the flower heads are facing your camera lens.



Namaqualand *gousblom* (*Ursinia*)





Purple vygie



Sambreeltjie (*Felicia* spp.)

Naries Namakwa Retreat

Naries Namakwa Retreat is a romantic hideaway on the edge of the rugged Spektakelberg, about 27 km west of Springbok along the R355 towards Kleinsee. You can enjoy the flowers here without the crowds. Spend the day hiking through sandstone and quartz, and the evening sipping fine wine by the fireplace.

Their most popular hike is the Yellow Trail (6,4 km), which leads to a great viewpoint. Note: You must stay over at Naries Namakwa Retreat to enjoy their hikes; they don't allow day visitors.



What to look out for:

Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca* spp.), yellow katstert (*Bulbinella* spp.), succulents (various species), astertjie/sambreeltjie (*Felicia* spp.), pink and purple vygies (*Mesembryanthemum* spp.) and white vygies (*Monilaria obconica*). Also look for pelargoniums and a variety of bulbs.



STAY HERE

Naries Namakwa Retreat offers luxury self-catering cottages from R3 845 per night for four people. Manor House R2 540 per person sharing; Mountain Suites from R3 960 per person sharing (Manor House and Mountain Suites rates include dinner and breakfast).

📞 076 238 2934; 🌐 naries.co.za



Komaggas

Located along the banks of the Komaggas River (a tributary of the Buffels River) lies the historic town of Komaggas. Originally founded as a mission station by the London Missionary Society in 1829, the town's spiritual care passed to the Rhenish Missionary Society before being overseen by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1936.

Its name, a tribute to the local landscape, means "place of many wild olive trees".



What to look out for:

To visit Komaggas after the winter rain is to witness a transformation. The road into town is a tapestry of Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca* spp.), gousblom (*Arctotis* spp.), vygies (*Mesembryanthemum* spp.) and sporrie (*Heliophila* spp.).



Rooifontein quiver tree forest

Kamieskroon

The town of Kamieskroon sits near the twin peaks of the Kamiesberg (highest point 1 706 m). The name “Kamies” possibly derives from the Nama word for “two”, referring to the peaks.

Stop at the recently renovated Kamieskroon Hotel for the latest flower updates before heading out on the gravel road that leads to the east. Past Pedroskloof farm, you’ll drive through the settlement of Rooifontein – few tourists ever see the hidden fields of flowers that can be found here. There’s also a quiver tree forest near Rooifontein.



What to look out for: Quiver trees with their golden bark and forked branches stand sentinel over fields of *hongerblomme* (*Senecio*).

There are various species of succulents and aloes, plus *botterblomme* (*Gazania spp.*), Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca spp.*), *gousblom* (*Arctotis spp.*), vygies (*Mesembryanthemum spp.*), sporrie (*Heliophila spp.*) and *meidesterte* (*Lapeirousia silenoides*).



Varkiesknolle (*Conicosia elongata*)



STAY HERE

Pedroskloof Guest Farm (25 km north-east of Kamieskroon) has self-catering units. Most of them sleep two, except for Bossiegeur and the new Môreson unit, both of which sleep four. Fully equipped units from R550 per person sharing; units with a kitchenette (coffee station, microwave and bar fridge) from R500 per person.

Camping (hot showers, power points) R200 per person. Meals are available at their famous Taaibos farm restaurant. ☎ 082 785 7242; 🌐 pedroskloof.co.za

NAMAQUALAND

Namaqua National Park

If there's one place that defines the "carpet of flowers" experience, it's the Skilpad section of this national park. Located near Kamieskroon, Skilpad is on a ridge about 700 m above sea level. Its high altitude catches more mist and rain than the lowlands, making it the most reliable spot for photography, even in drier years.

Approaching the Skilpad section, you are greeted by a heavy, herbal-honeyed scent, and the steady hum of birds and bees creates a symphony across the veld. Look out for malachite sunbirds and Cape long-billed larks.

Climb up to the "Roof of Africa" viewpoint on the dome-shaped granite hill to view the Kamieskroon mountains.



What to look out for: Endless blankets of Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca spp.*), gousblom (*Arctotis spp.*), Gazania spp., vygies (*Mesembryanthemum spp.*), sporrie (*Heliophila spp.*), sorrel (*Oxalis spp.*), babianas (*Babiana spp.*), yellow katstert (*Bulbinella spp.*), kalkoentjie (*Gladiolus alatus*), meidesterte (*Lapeirousia silenoides*) and sambreeltjies (*Felicia spp.*) as you descend toward Soebatsfontein.



Yellow katstert
(*Bulbinella spp.*)



TRAILS & ROUTES

Skilpad Walking Trail (5 km): This circular route puts you right in the middle of the orange ocean.

Korhaan Walking Trail (3 km): This trail meanders through bushier areas – perfect for spotting species like blue sporrie and white sporrie.

Skilpad Flower Loop (5 km): A self-drive circular route suitable for any car with decent ground clearance.

Skilpad to Soebatsfontein 4x4 trail (27 km): This is arguably the most famous and prettiest route in the region. It leads from the Skilpad section down towards Soebatsfontein.

Ask at the park reception office for maps of these routes and trails.

PARK FEES & ACCOMMODATION

Entrance fee to Namaqua National Park costs R62 per adult per day, R32 per child aged 2 – 11; free with a Wild Card. The four self-catering chalets at Skilpad Rest Camp start at R953 per night for two people during low season (until 31 July 2026) and from R1 597 per night during peak season (1 August to 13 October 2026). There are several basic campsites at the coast: R250 per person per night. ☎012 428 9111

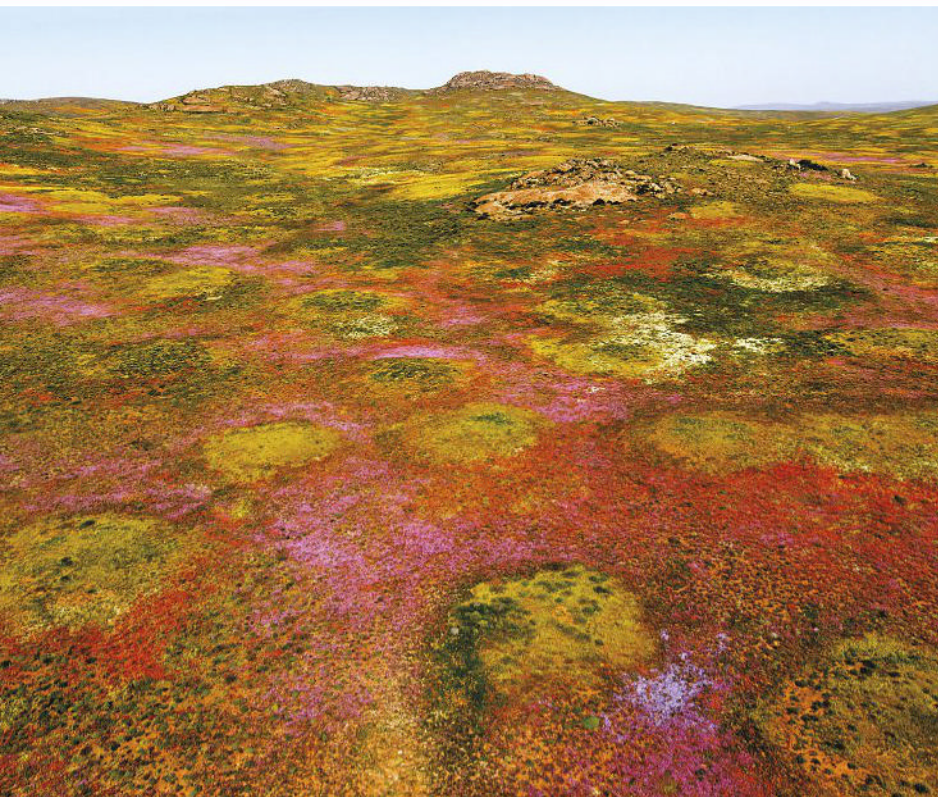
🌐sanparks.org

A luxury camp aimed at flower lovers will be set up at Groenriviermond in the coastal section of the park, from 14 August to 13 September, operated by Chiefs Tented Camps. Rate: R9 290 per night for two people, dinner and breakfast included. 🌐flowercamps.co.za





NAMAQUALAND



Soebatsfontein

At the base of the dramatic Kamiesberg escarpment, Soebatsfontein has a sombre history that dates back to 1798. Local legend tells of Hendrik Stievert, who, after being captured by a group of San, pleaded for his life at the central spring – hence the name, which translates as “pleading fountain”.



What to look out for:

While many visitors come to Namaqualand for the famous orange carpets, Soebatsfontein is where you go for variety. Once the initial wave of daisies has peaked, the landscape shifts into a more intricate display of colour and form, with Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca spp.*), gousblom (*Arctotis spp.*), Gazania spp., vygies (*Mesembryanthemum spp.*), sporrie (*Heliophila spp.*) and knopiesopslag (*Cotula spp.*).



Garies

Garies sits at the foot of granite-domed mountains and serves as the southern gateway for flower travellers. Long before colonial boundaries were drawn, the Nama people knew this land as “Th’aries”, a name that pays homage to the resilient couch grass that thrives along the local stream banks. Over the decades, the Khoikhoi phonetics softened into the name we use today: Garies.

The modern story of Garies began on Goedeverwagting Farm, which was donated to the Dutch Reformed Church in 1845.



What to look out for: In the surrounding areas, you’ll see massed fields of gousblom (*Arctotis spp.*), Gazania spp., vygies (*Mesembryanthemum spp.*), sporrie (*Heliophila spp.*), kapokbos (*Eriocephalus spp.*), and mauve manulea (*Manulea spp.*).



Tulips (*Moraea miniata*)



TOP TIP

Stop at the Garies tourist stall (in the main road, opposite the fuel station) for an up-to-date map of the best flower locations.

☎ 027 652 1220



Shades of yellow gazanias

Hondeklip Bay Road

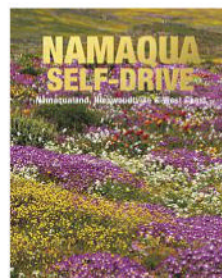
Head west out of Garies in the direction of Hondeklip Bay. The roadside often explodes with colour, especially around the settlement of Wallekraal. This is a gravel road, usually passable in any vehicle – but one with good ground clearance is best.



What to look out for: Morning daisies (*Osteospermum spp.*), Namaqualand daisies (*Dimorphotheca spp.*), white rain daisies (*Dimorphotheca pluvialis*), sambreeltjies (*Felicia spp.*) and hongerblomme (*Senecio spp.*).



Bittergousblom (*Arctotis fastuosa*)



GET THE BOOK!

Namaqua Self-drive (HPH Publishing, 2025; R895) by Helène Venter is a comprehensive guide to the floral spectacle of Namaqualand, the West Coast, Nieuwoudtville and the Hantam Karoo. Order from:

📧 photographicworkshops@gmail.com

In the Kingdom of Koingnaas

Have you heard of Koingnaas? If you've ever been to this desolate mining town, you've probably met nature guide **Dudley Wessels**...

WORDS & PICTURES **JACQUES MARAIS**

There's a man I know who lives on the coast of Namaqualand, miles and miles away from the madness of the world. His name is Dudley Bruce Wessels, but everyone knows him as Dudley, or Oom Dud.

He and his wife Aletta live in a quiet street in the town of Koingnaas, about 5 km from the ocean. To get there from Cape Town, you follow the N7 north to just before Kamieskroon and turn off on back roads to the coast; past Genoembies and Wallekraal towards Hondeklip Bay, and then you're there, in Dudley's "Kingdom of Koingnaas".

Koingnaas (also spelled Koiingnaas on some road signs) is said to mean "rock of sweet water", named by the Khoekhoen people who came to drink rain-water from a natural hollow in a granite dome. All the other water in the area is brackish;

as is the big aquifer under the dunes.

Modern-day locals have nicknames for all the towns along this part of the coast. Hondeklip Bay is "Die Hond", while Alexander Bay is shortened to "Die Baai". Komaggas goes by "Die Gaz"; Port Nolloth is "Die Port"; and then you get Koingnaas, also known as "Die Koning".

This diamond-mining town feels like a fictional settlement in Deon Meyer's book *Fever*: post-apocalyptic, with quiet streets. People who don't know and appreciate the desolation of this region usually just fill their tank in Koingnaas (because "Die Hond" still doesn't have a filling station) and head back to the N7.

But real *Namakwalanders* notice the beauty of this monochromatic landscape. Small conophytums, candelabra flowers, kukumakranka, tsammas, gemsbokvygie, red babiana... Yes! Crouch down and take a closer look. That's when you'll discover the wonders of this arid land.



Dudley Wessels at the wreck of the
SS Piratiny, a Brazilian ship that sank
near Hondeklip Bay in 1943.



“There are so many other beautiful plants... The window plant is special, and the spider lily. There are too many to count in Namaqualand!”

Oom Dud wasn’t born in Namaqualand – he grew up in Namibia – but his love for nature and the landscape made him put down roots here.

“The first thing that struck me was the amazing granite mountains, solid stone domes that rise from the earth like cathedrals,” he says. “I think I saw this region for the first time in 1964, when our family travelled from Windhoek to Cape Town on holiday.

“I found it incredibly beautiful, especially in the Springbok area, where I couldn’t get enough of the dramatic mountains and rocks. Later in life, I explored further, all along the West Coast south to Cape Town and back north to the Richtersveld.”

During his childhood years in Namibia, he was bitten by the desert bug. He first attended a small English school in Otjiwarongo and later went to boarding school in Tsumeb before he ended his school years in Windhoek. Military training and infantry school followed, and then he worked as a geologist for the Samancor mining group.

“I eventually settled in Hotazel, right in the middle of nowhere,” he says. “*En wraggies*, that’s where I met Aletta! The day she arrived on the farm where we were braaiing, she said: ‘I’ll marry the man who lives here.’ It took me three years to convince her it was the right decision, but here we are.”

Dudley and Aletta married in 1981 and bought a house in Koingnaas in the late 1980s.

My path first crossed with Dudley’s around 2015. I was doing a nighttime mountain-bike stage race in the |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier

Park called Desert Knights. We were on Akkedis Pass just after midnight. I was lost in my own world: The jeep track wound ahead in the light of my bicycle light. Later, with the full moon on the horizon, I descended to Hakiesdoring Camp and that’s when I saw it: a light in the hills up ahead.

It was Dudley and Aletta and their Toyota double-cab, with the tailgate open and a gas stove hissing like a moody puff adder. “Coffee?” he asked once I’d overcome my surprise.

That cup of coffee was the cornerstone of our friendship. In 2016, my wife Karyn and I went back to visit the couple in Koingnaas. Since then, Dudley and I have drunk many beers and coffees together, throughout Namibia and the Northern Cape, and as far afield as Rwanda.

But it’s in Namaqualand where I enjoy his company the most, especially when we’re in the veld. A walk with Dudley is never a quick outing because there’s something interesting to see every few metres.

One of his favourite places is the dune field near Koingnaas, where he offers 4x4 nature tours. Dudley has a bunch of keys the size of Eben Etzebeth’s fist and there aren’t many gates in Namaqualand he can’t open.

During my visit, I head into the dunes with him. The track starts at one of these gates; we turn off and stop a few kilometres further, where the first small dunes start to hunch their backs.

“Just look at how beautiful the babiana is,” he says, pointing at *Babiana thunbergii* waving in the breeze at the foot of the dunes. “These bulbs turn the plains red after good rain – they’re one of

the most elegant flower species around. And then there's the *perdeblom* – *Didelta carnosa*... I have to say, it's even prettier than the *babiana*..."

Dudley pauses for a second, almost like a father when asked which child is his favourite. "There are so many other beautiful plants... The window plant is special, and the spider lily. There are too many to count here in Namaqualand! That's what makes this region so unique: Without these amazing plants, the Northern Cape would have been a barren desert."

And then he gets heated: "That's exactly what the mining companies don't understand; plants take almost a decade to grow again where the soil has been disturbed. Without them, tonnes upon tonnes of topsoil will blow away with the wind. Plant poaching is also a problem. Botanist Pieter van Wyk from the |Ai-|Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park has been telling us for years to cultivate, cultivate, cultivate. This is especially true for endemic plants – there's a massive market worldwide. Cultivate these plants so there are millions of them, so they're easily accessible and so people don't have to go steal them from the veld."

I can see it's a sore subject for Dudley, so I steer the conversation in a different direction. I ask him about his unforgettable nature moments in Namaqualand.

"Jong, one day my neighbour in Koinaas knocked on my door and told me to come look: His cat had caught an unusual little snake. You won't believe me – it was a Fisk's house snake. This is very rare and something people have been searching for in the area for years. Conservation teams



From the top: Dudley (left) and Densen Magaisa, a fellow photographer and nature lover, look at lithops. Densen holds a great white shark tooth to illustrate its size alongside a tooth from the extinct megalodon (right), discovered by Dudley during his time working at the diamond mines near Koinaas. Dudley with the author, Jacques Marais.

PETER VAN KETS

PROFILE

have come here looking for this snake for weeks, but couldn't find it. And then my neighbour's cat brought one home!"

Dudley's 4x4 tours include some of his favourite places. He particularly loves his shipwreck tour, where he regales guests with stories about the wrecks rusting along the inhospitable Atlantic coast.

"I don't think I'll ever leave Namaqualand – or even Koringnaas," he says. "My roots are deep in this *dorsland*. And one thing is certain: When I have to say my final goodbye, I hope it's while I'm diving for crayfish or staring at the stars."



GO ON TOUR WITH DUDLEY

Dudley's shipwreck day tour starts from R2 000 per vehicle; his Koringnaas dunes day tour starts at R1 500 per vehicle. Rates are subject to change depending on the fuel price.

📞 083 305 2569 (Dudley)

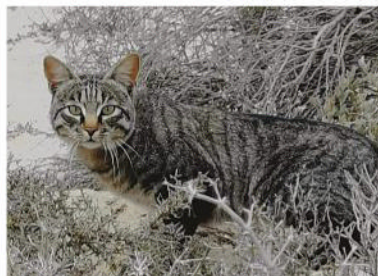
✉️ peebs@kingsley.co.za

DUDLEY'S TOP 5

There are many unique plants, insects, birds, reptiles and animals in Namaqualand – here's a list of Dudley's favourites.

African wildcat (*Felis lybica*)

This small predator (also known as a *groukat*) looks a lot like a domestic cat and is active during the day and at night. It mostly hunts mice, rats, moles, birds and occasionally a snake or lizard. Wildcats are fairly shy – consider yourself very lucky if you get to see one. Drive slowly and keep your eyes peeled.



Spider lily (*Ferraria crispa*)

The spider lily is also known as the *aasuintjie* or *inkpotjie*, and usually flowers from July to October. The plant can be up to 40 cm tall and the flowers are about 35 mm in length – they bloom for a day and smell like rotten meat to attract insects to pollinate them.



Southern spiny agama (*Agama hispida*)

You won't often see this agama on rocks because it mostly hunts in the branches of shrubs. During mating season, the males turn a grassy green, which helps them stay camouflaged in the veld.



Window plant (*Fenestraria rhopalophylla*)

Surely Namaqualand's cutest succulent; also known as baby toes. The tip of each leaf has a nearly square epidermal "window" that lets light in for photosynthesis. Look for the bright yellow flowers among the sand and stones.



Red babiana (*Babiana thunbergii*; new name: *Babiana hirsuta*)

Many people know the babiana lily as the *bobbejaantjie* or *rooihanekam*. The dune field near Koringnaas is a paradise from July to October when these bulbs bloom, with malachite sunbirds drinking the nectar. The plants bear scarlet flowers which have no scent and grow to a height of 50 cm.



DUDLEY WESSELS

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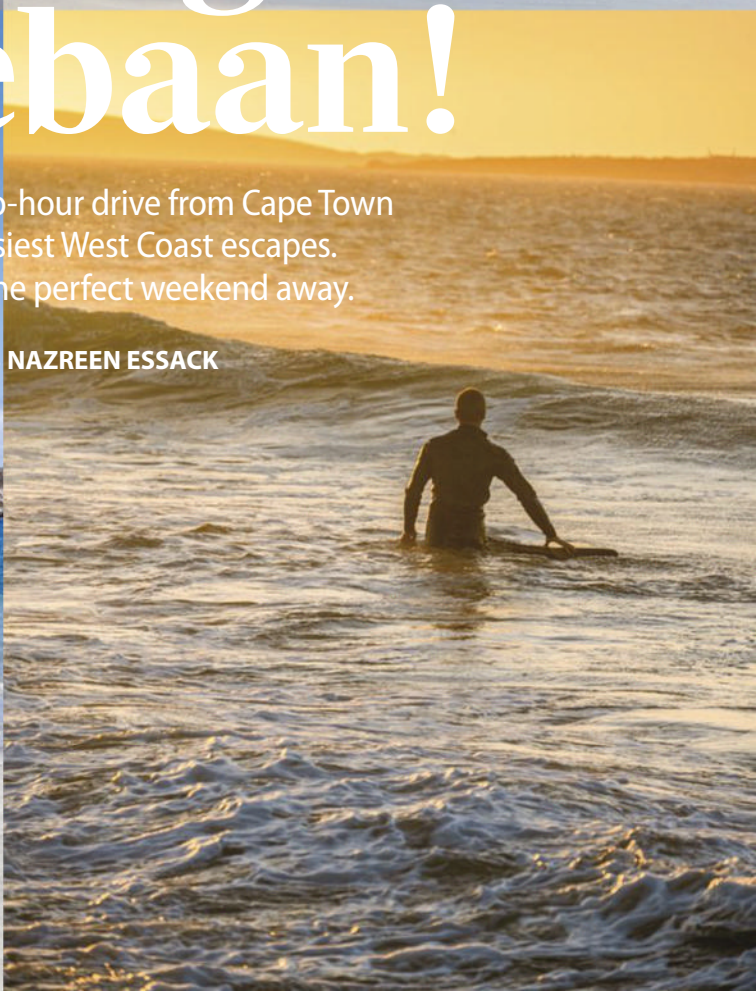




Loving Langebaan!

Langebaan is less than a two-hour drive from Cape Town and offers one of the easiest West Coast escapes. Here are some ideas for the perfect weekend away.

WORDS & PICTURES **NAZREEN ESSACK**



My first proper encounter with Langebaan was years ago, when I did a photoshoot for The Farmhouse Hotel. I was charmed by the friendliness of the staff back then, but it was the view of the lagoon from the hotel stoep that cemented future visits for our family.

My 15-year-old daughter, Alia, and 11-year-old son, Reza, both love the beach. Unlike the busy Cape Town beaches, it's usually quiet in Langebaan, plus the water is shallow and – big bonus – relatively warm.

In this article, I outline how the three of us like to “do” Langebaan. Use it as a starting point to plan your own family weekend. Enjoy!

FRIDAY

THE PLAN

Cape Town's Friday traffic begins early, so get going by noon if you can. Starting your road trip timeously will destress you from the get-go – and leave time for that en route pit stop! Take the R27 through Milnerton and Blouberg – once you pass through Melkbosstrand, the city drops away and your eyes can wander to the horizon without interruption.

Look out for the white dunes at Atlantis, popular with 4x4 enthusiasts. You can see them from the R27 to your right, just about when you pass the turn-off to the town of Atlantis.

A landmark our family never misses is the **Weskus Padstal**, which is really a small complex of shops. Besides food and coffee, there's also the Tikka Earth Nursery, which sells plants like star jasmine for R95, or *sandroos* (*Anisodonteia scabrosa*) for R80. My kids love the play area and petting zoo, with parrots, goats, alpacas, rabbits and guinea pigs to ooh and ah at.

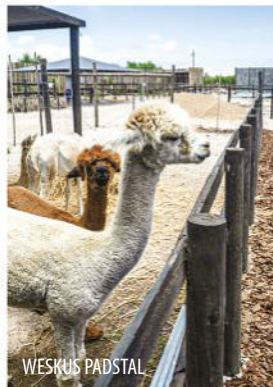
I always grab a caffè latte (R44) at the Baa Baa Café. Alia and Reza usually prefer the novelty of feeding the alpacas – rather than feeding themselves! However, they never turn down a salted caramel milkshake (R50). Alpaca feeding is only allowed during school holidays and on weekends. Packets of pellets cost around R20.

Weskus Padstal

Where? At the junction of the R315 (from Yzerfontein) and the R27.

Opening times: The farm stall is open daily from 8 am to 5 pm while Baa Baa Café is open 8.30 am to 4.30 pm. (Opening times for other tenants vary.)

Contact: 021 065 1867; weskuspadstal.co.za



WESKUS PADSTAL



WESKUS PADSTAL



THE FARMHOUSE HOTEL



ROCKIBEACH RESTAURANT



STAY HERE

The Farmhouse Hotel has a wide range of luxury rooms. Visit their website to see the different rates. They often have deals for longer stays. For example, a three-night stay in a Lagoon View Room for two people costs R5 964, including breakfast.

Our favourite treat is the tea and scones served at 4 pm on the stoep with its views over the lagoon. The cost of the tea is included in your accommodation. What's not to like?

Where? 5 Egret Street, Langebaan

Contact: 022 772 062

thefarmhousehotel.com



EAT HERE

Try **RocXiBeach** at the Langebaan Waterfront for dinner on your first evening in town. Sit inside on the upper or lower deck, or outside on the benches. Kids can play on the beach while you wait for your food.

My kids usually order vegetarian nachos (R120) and a margherita pizza (R95), while I'm all for the fish and chips (R135). A reservation is essential as it gets quite busy – and festive!

Where? Bree Street, Langebaan Waterfront

Opening times: Daily from 8.30 am to 11 pm.

Contact: 022 880 0969

rockibeach.co.za



SATURDAY

THE PLAN

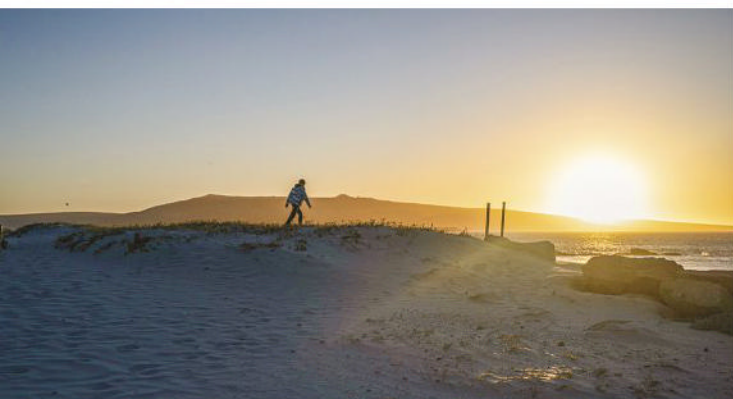
After a good night's rest and a delicious breakfast at The Farmhouse Hotel (don't skip the flapjacks), we often tackle the 1,3 km **Shark Bay Cliff Walk** in a southerly direction. The walk starts directly in front of the hotel and offers vistas from Saldanha Bay in the north to Kraalbaai across the lagoon. The trail is easy and is a great way to get the kids off their screens. On a few occasions, we've encountered tortoises – and we always try to identify the different birds.

You're here to relax, right? I often head to the spa at The Farmhouse Hotel for a **massage**, which starts at R300. The massage room is near the games room, which is adjacent to the reception area. The youngsters can play pool, read or play board games while you get your massage.

Our favourite swimming spot is **Langebaan Beach**, at the end of Bree Street in the central part of town. The kids love watching the kitesurfers, or rambling along the boardwalk and scouring the shoreline for sea life. There are a few shops nearby to buy fishing nets and other beach paraphernalia, in case you forgot yours.

Just 500 m inland from Langebaan Beach you'll find **Sunnypark**, where the kids can enjoy waterslides, heated swimming pools and activities like paintball, trampolines and putt-putt.





EAT HERE

A classic West Coast thing is to clock in for a (four-hour!) session at **Die Strandloper** beach restaurant at the northern end of town. Their 10 courses include black mussels, crayfish, grilled harders, roosterkoek and *moerkoffie*. You can bring your own drinks (no corkage) or order from the bar.

If you manage to finish all your courses, you might not even need dinner tonight. Stretch your legs after the meal by heading to the beach. By now it will almost be sunset...

Still in need of dinner? Head to **Kokomo Beach Bar**

for gourmet milkshakes (R70) and rustic fries (R55). Kokomo is a family-friendly restaurant with a play area visible from the deck. Pizzas average around R180, while starter portions of West Coast mussels cost R115, and deep-fried calamari R105 – order a couple of these to share instead of a main meal.

It's also a good place for sundowners – you can sit outside and watch the surfers catch the last waves of the day.

Die Strandloper

Jon Olafsson Road, between Langebaan and Leentjiesklip.

Opening times: Lunch sitting starts at 12.30 pm; dinner at 6.30 pm.

Cost: R440 per adult (includes half a crayfish). Children aged 5 – 11 years pay R100 each (excludes crayfish). Note: They don't have card facilities; you have to pay cash or by EFT.

Contact: 083 227 7195

strandloper.com

Kokomo Beach Bar

121 Main Street, Langebaan

Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 10 pm.

Contact: 022 772 1600

kokomolangebaan.co.za



DO THIS

Sunnypark

1 Padrao Street, Langebaan

Opening times: Saturday and Sunday from 10 am to 5 pm, Friday from 1 pm to 5 pm (also open during public and school holidays).

Cost: Full-day pass R190 per person; half-day R140 (2 pm to 5 pm). This covers use of the Super Tube, four pools, trampolines and pedal karts. Other activities cost extra.

Contact: 082 379 0450

sunnypark.co.za

LANGEBAAN



SUNDAY

THE PLAN

Unless you're having breakfast at wherever you're staying, head to **The Shark Bay Shack** for brunch. (It's in the parking lot at Shark Bay.) The kids can splash around in the shallows while you enjoy your last day in paradise. Reza is fond of using his net to catch and release tiny fish, while Alia prefers to chill on the beach.

If you're not in a rush, driving home from Shark Bay via the **West Coast National Park** is a beautiful way to end your weekend. We always try to see who can spot the first mountain zebra. Alia is an avid painter and finds inspiration in the colourful floral landscapes you can see here during late winter and early spring. Reza is our resident information gatherer; quick to correct me on local biodiversity facts and figures!

If time allows, consider a swim at Die Preekstoel. There's a braai area next to the beach, too. For older kids, the water at Kraalbaai is a bit deeper to swim in.



EAT HERE

The Shark Bay Shack

The upstairs deck is one of the best spots to take photographs and to enjoy your soft-serve (R35 for a sugar cone) or caffè latte (R40). They sell sandwiches like egg and cheese (R40), plus pies (R30) and sausage rolls (R30). There are clean bathrooms and there's ample free parking.

Hire a beach umbrella for R100 per day – the umbrellas are half-price after 2 pm. Explore the lagoon on a SUP (from R150 for one hour) or in a double-seater kayak (from R250 for one hour).

Where? Stompneus Drive,



TSAARSBANK, WEST COAST NATIONAL PARK

at the southern end of Langebaan.

Opening times: Tuesday to Friday from 8 am to 3 pm; Saturday and Sunday from 8 am to 5 pm.

Contact: 083 305 4340 (WhatsApp only)

Strandkombuis

Consider pulling in at Yzerfontein (about 55 km south of Langebaan) for a buffet lunch at Strandkombuis. (Because you haven't eaten enough already!) Dolores Eriksen, the accommodation manager, will welcome you with the friendliest smile. To make space for dessert, go for a brisk stroll on the salt

pan directly opposite the restaurant, or on the beach.

Where? Northern end of Yzerfontein.

Opening times: Sunday: The bar opens at noon and the buffet lunch is served from 1 pm. Friday: Gourmet pizzas and live music are on the menu for dinner; bar opens at 6 pm and food is served from 7 pm.

Cost: Sunday buffet R475 per adult; less for children under 12. Friday pizza: R190 per adult; less for children under 12.

What else? They also offer accommodation – see their website below.

Contact: 022 481 1003
strandkombuis.com

MORE PLACES TO STAY

See the article by Justin Fox on page 108 for other recommended accommodation options in Langebaan, and also his story on page 72 for interesting historical sites to visit in and around Langebaan and Saldanha.



MEET THE AUTHOR

Nazreen Essack grew up in Fordsburg, Johannesburg, but now lives in Cape Town. She works as an editorial and stock photographer and has a passion for photographing “faces, places and spaces”. For more of her work, follow her on Instagram: @nazreenessack



The pool under Ouberg Waterfall near Vanrhynsdorp. This photo was taken in the dry season – turn the page to see the falls in full flow.

Ready, set, get wet!

From seasonal waterfalls in the mountains near Vanrhynsdorp to secret snorkelling pools near Strandfontein, here are our favourite water-based adventures in the region.

WORDS & PICTURES **JACQUES MARAIS**



ADVENTURE

GIFBERG

Unexpected waterfalls

Gifberg, which looms over Vanrhynsdorp and the southern edge of the Knersvlakte, is named after an evergreen fynbos shrub called *boesmangif* (*Hyaenanche globosa*), which is endemic to the mountains here. Its toxic fruit was used by the San as arrow poison.

During winter months – rainy season here – Gifberg sports a few prominent waterfalls, none of which is more impressive than Ouberg Waterfall. My first encounter with Ouberg came in 2017 when I covered an adventure race that passed through the area. On a freezing winter's morning, I found myself walking up a trail towards the falls. Ahead, I could hear a thunderous roar, like a cargo plane revving its turbines for take-off. The scene was almost ghostly in the low morning light and I knew I had to return another time to see the waterfall in the light of day.

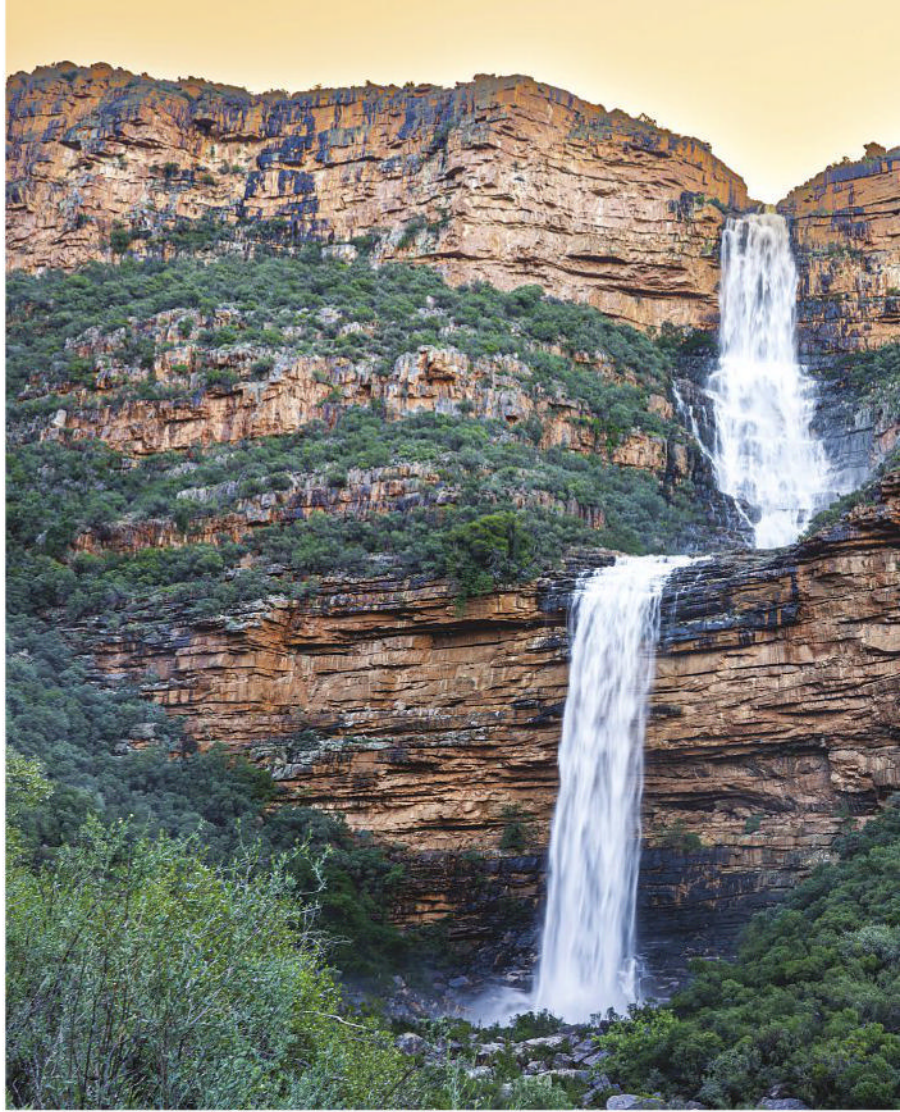
I eventually did, in 2024, when Monika de Jager from Namaqua West Coast Tourism called me up: "It's been raining for a week, come and see the waterfall!" she said excitedly.

Winter rain transforms the usually fickle rivers and streams in this landscape – and the normally dusty back roads... I ploughed through muddy pools in my Isuzu X-Rider bakkie, caffè latte-coloured water chuting sky-high on either side.

I reached Waterval Resort an hour before sunset on a grey and monochrome day, and immediately hiked to the waterfall, which is on the upper Troe-Troe River. From a kilometre away, I could see the horsetail plume of the highest of Ouberg's three-tiered drop. In total, the water plummets about 380m over different tiers from the top of the mountain into the lower part of the kloof.

As I approached, the sound swelled in volume and it was properly pounding inside my skull by the time I'd set up my tripod on the edge of the pool below the cascade.

While I dialled in my slow-shutter speed shot, two rock pigeons missed overhead and disappeared into the dark overhang to the side of the falls. I sat on a wet rock for a while, then took off my clothes and slipped into the freezing water. Got to do it, right?





Clockwise from left: Ouberg Waterfall at its winter peak. The Papkuilsfontein Waterfall plunges over the escarpment. Monika de Jager (from Namaqua West Coast Tourism) and her son, Simeon, at one of the smaller falls in the Troe-Troe River.

I WANT TO GO! The return hike to Ouberg Waterfall is about 6 km in total. It starts at Waterval Resort and can easily be done as a solo adventure. The route is well marked and accessible to anyone with a good level of hiking fitness, but please take care on the slippery rocks as you approach the waterfall pool. Hiking poles are a good idea.

The waterfall is a no-show in summer – you must come in winter.

Note: Google Maps will lead you astray when showing the route to Waterval Resort – rather follow the directions on their website. 📍 watervalresort.co.za

Cost: Day visitors R50 per person; there's an honesty box at reception.

WHAT ELSE? There are several other waterfalls that plunge down the escarpment in this area during the rainy season. Besides Ouberg, the two other best-known ones are at Nieuwoudtville and Papkuilsfontein.

The Nieuwoudtville Waterfall (90 m) is 7 km north of town next to the R357, towards Loeriesfontein.

The entrance to Papkuilsfontein Guest Farm is about 24 km south of Nieuwoudtville. The waterfall at Papkuilsfontein is about 100 m high.

📍 papkuilsfontein.com

Contact Christie Koch at Matzikama Hiking Club to arrange a more comprehensive outing to these and other falls along the plateau edge.

From R150 per person, depending on the number of people and duration of the hike. ☎ 079 636 8179

📧 christiematzihiking@gmail.com



ADVENTURE

BEAVERLAC

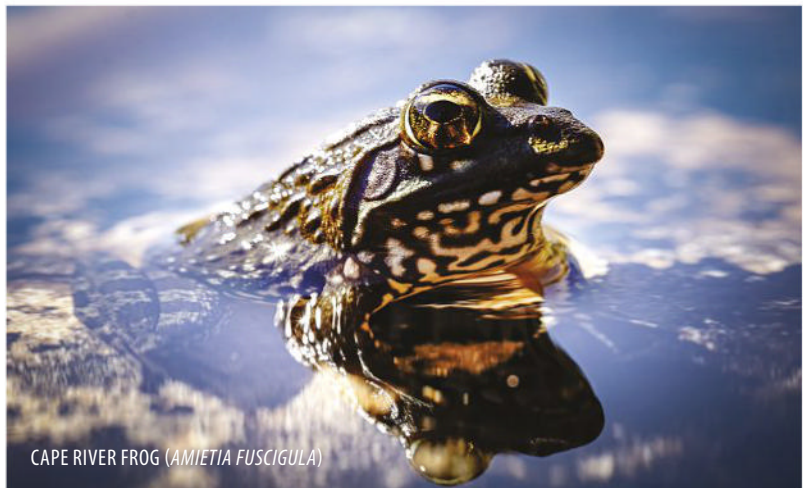
Cooltest of pools

Beaverlac is the first option that pops into most Capetonians' minds when you ask about top camping getaways within a couple of hours from the Mother City. It's a superb spot to pitch your tent and – even better – from which to explore the glorious and wild Olifants River catchment area.

Accommodation options include basic cabins and shaded campsites. There's no electricity, but the ablutions are good.

Beaverlac is a paradise for wild swimming. The Ratel River is a tributary of the Olifants River and full of big, clear pools. Main Pool is an easy five-minute walk from camp, and the (not so) Secret Pool is a 10-minute walk.

The aforementioned pools can get crowded during peak holidays, which is when I go looking for the dozen less accessible pools along the 9 km Leopard Trail on the Ratel River, or in the Olifants River itself. The pools on the Leopard Trail are a bit smaller; the Olifants boasts larger pools and deeper water.



CAPE RIVER FROG (*AMIENTIA FUSCIGULA*)



I WANT TO GO! Main and Secret pools are both easily accessible to hikers, along a level trail perfect for family outings. The 2 km Flatrock Trail has a “stone temple” feel, with gorgeous views into the valley, while the Leopard Trail delivers tranquillity and refreshing cascades.

There's a map on the Beaverlac website (download this to your phone as there's only intermittent signal). Please note: No day visitors allowed; you must stay over to enjoy the pools.

STAY HERE: They offer a range of accommodation options. Camping R90 per adult, R60 per child aged 3 – 17. R40 per vehicle, once-off. You can even bring your dog – R50 per dog per night. Woof! ☎022 931 2945; 🌐beaverlac.co.za



STRANDFONTEIN

Wave(s) and smile

Namaqua surf missions are not really for beginners, my bru. The breaks are burly and in-your-face, with unpredictable waves and icy ocean temperatures.

Every now and then, though, the surf gods bless you with a flawless day, granting an easy paddle into a peeling left, with a pod of dolphins frolicking alongside as you carve down a glassy face. It's those unforgettable days that keep me coming back to the West Coast, specifically beyond Brand se Baai, which is north of the Olifants River mouth.

You can still camp wild here, and tuck into barrels with nobody else around but the members of your crew. You'll need that crew because it's foolhardy to paddle out into that kelp-tentacled land of fat lips and heavy slams without friends who have your back.

But it's also about more than waves. Even if you're not a surfer, come for the Kodachrome blue bowl of the sky and the agoraphobic view to the hazy horizon. Simply being here will make you feel like an explorer!



I WANT TO GO! There are no surf tours on the Wild West that far north, as no true surfer would push traffic to his or her secret spot. But there's always a Plan B, and this one is tailor-made for first-timers in search of a West Coast surfing fix: Go to Strandfontein and paddle into the beach break.

On most days you'll get an A-okay wave here, with no major rips or currents, and a combo of lefts and rights shaping along the mostly sandy bottom. Chances are you won't have to share the backline, but if you do bump into a local, they'll be friendly and keen to share tips.

Here's one: Once you've graduated from the beach break, walk a couple of kilometres up the beach for an even better wave...

WHAT ELSE? Protect the West Coast is an NGO that does amazing work in this area, with a range of community and awareness projects critical to protecting the ocean and marine environment. They serve as a bulwark against rampant prospecting and illegal mining in the Namaqualand region. 📞 protectthewestcoast.org

ADVENTURE



OLIFANTS RIVER

Cast a line

Vicus de Jager (husband of Monika from Namaqua West Coast Tourism) is a very keen fisherman. That's putting it mildly. He'd probably trade his inheritance for an oven-warm musselcracker.

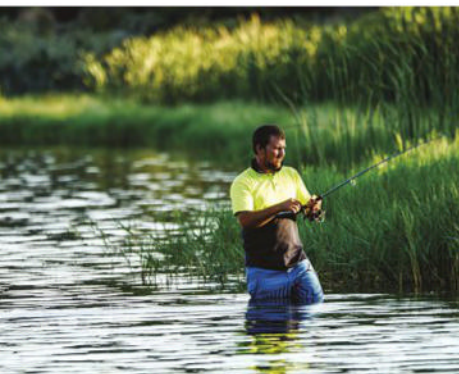
"The snoek come in March, like clockwork," he tells me. "Then you catch snoek all the way from Port Nolloth in the north, past Doringbaai and Lambert's Bay to Elands Bay.

"At other times of the year, the guys go after yellowtail and bonito, especially out to sea in boats. But there's also great shore fishing to be done – at the Olifants River mouth at Papendorp you can try for steenbras, stumpnose and, at specific times of the year, kabeljou. Even shad and garrick." Vicus ticks off the species on his fingers as he talks.

"As you go upstream from the mouth of the Olifants, the water becomes fresher and fresher towards Lutzville. You can try for large- and smallmouth bass here with spinners, and even Clanwilliam yellowfish if you have the patience."

I WANT TO GO! At Papendorp there are still fishermen who use traditional methods to catch harder – you'll see them go out into the lagoon in their small boats early in the morning, that's when they put out their nets. Namaqua West Coast Tourism can set up an outing for you if you'd like to join them to see how it's done. ☎ 082 608 7554

Fishing from a kayak works well if you want to try for bass or other freshwater species upstream towards Lutzville. "Artificial lures like Rapalas are very efficient, especially when you trawl close to the reedbeds," Vicus says.



LARGEMOUTH BASS





PAPENDORP

Go birding on a paddleboard

If you were a pelican, you'd see the full beauty of the estuarine channels at Papendorp, as they wind through wetland sedge and salt pans, edging onto the little fishing village. The Olifants River loiters wide and slow here, where it spills into the Atlantic Ocean, and in the process it morphs into a veritable "Bay of Plenty". A good half dozen adventures await, from birding and angling to kayaking, paddleboarding, surf-skiing and even open-water swimming.

Combine two activities and navigate the narrow channels on a stand-up paddleboard in search of birds – sightings are generally excellent because of your higher point of view. One of my most pleasant afternoons here was spent on an inflatable paddleboard, slowly blading around the protected wetland, while flamingos whirled against the sky like a cloud of confetti.

Look out for African spoonbill, eastern white pelican, various egrets and multiple waders. Add warblers and larks, plus avocets, cormorants, coots, gulls and ibises, and you have a twitcher's dream come true. (Both the Namaqua warbler and Cape long-billed lark are endemic to the area.)



I WANT TO GO! There's an easy put-in spot for kayakers and paddleboarders below the stone labyrinth at Papendorp (GPS: S31.68304 E18.20600), with vehicle access onto a raised dirt slipway. From here you have about 30 km of the river course to explore. (This would be upstream to the low-water bridge, just outside Lutzville.)

A kayak is the more stable and efficient option, with the added advantage of being able to carry a fishing rig and some storage holds. On a SUP, though, you get a higher vantage point for birding. There are no local SUP or kayak rentals in the area – bring your own. Please note that no motorised watercraft are allowed.

WHAT ELSE? For birders keen to tap into local knowledge, contact Salome Willemse from Vanrhynsdorp. She's one of the top birding guides in the Namaqua West Coast region. ☎ 072 471 4083



Vicus de Jager spearfishing at Jesus se Gat near Strandfontein.
Opposite page, middle: Vicus shows off a crayfish before releasing it again.

STRANDFONTEIN

Snorkel spots

Doringbaai and Strandfontein locals say they're torn between declaring favourites. It's a biblical duel between a pool called Die Hel, and one called Jesus se Gat. Fortunately, both spots are "*sommer net lekker*".

One would assume that Die Hel would be daunting and unpleasant, but not so much – it's a stunning hidden bay at the southern urban edge of Strandfontein, and a firm favourite for sundowner drinks and afternoons of lazy sunbathing.

Just 300 m further south is Jesus se Gat. The best way to find both is to drive (or walk) to the labyrinth, which you can find at this location: GPS: S31.76101 E18.22304.

Die Hel is to the north of the labyrinth, between where you're standing and the first row of houses you can see. Jesus se Gat is to the south, hemmed in by low rocks and the sea cliffs – protected from the surging swell.

Jesus se Gat is a deep and clear ocean pool, and one of the best snorkelling locations on this section of the coast. On still days and at low tide, there's hardly any water movement in the pool and underwater visibility can easily reach 20 m. Anemones, starfish, rock lobster, giant limpets, bronze bream, octopus, and dozens of other marine creatures hide here from the tempestuous ocean.

There's great spearfishing in the open ocean adjacent to Jesus se Gat when the weather plays ball, but make sure you stick to all marine regulations and have the necessary harvesting permits.

The cliff viewpoint (at the labyrinth) is a good place to watch dolphins and whales – a range of species visit the West Coast at different times of the year.

Thank you to Monika de Jager from Namaqua West Coast Tourism for her assistance with this article. (Monika is pictured right, with Jacques the author.) Visit visitnwc.com for more information about the area.



I WANT TO GO! Plan your visit for low tide and watch your footing on the slippery rocks. Die Hel is easier to access, but the scramble down to Jesus se Gat is steep and technical – be careful. You'll need a backpack to carry your snorkelling kit.

Snorkelling is an easy DIY day out; a wetsuit will take the edge off the chilly Atlantic.

WHAT ELSE? If you'd rather keep your feet dry – take a stroll along the well-marked Viswater Trail that runs from Doringbaai via Strandfontein to Papendorp (16 km). You can download a map from visitnwc.com.

Christie Koch offers guided coastal hikes (and other hikes throughout the region) – rates from R150 per person per day, depending on the number of people and duration of the hike.

☎ 079 636 8179 (Christie)

✉ christiematzihiking@gmail.com



PETER KIRK

Paddle up!

A kayak tour around Cape Columbine near Paternoster on a perfect day will make you remember all the reasons you love the West Coast.

WORDS & PICTURES **TOAST COETZER**





The Cape Columbine lighthouse was built in 1936 and sits on an outcrop called Castle Rock. The lighthouse was named after a British barque called the *Columbine*, which sank off Castle Rock in 1829.

PATERNOSTER

The day could not have been more perfect. I'm in the Tietiesbaai campsite in Cape Columbine Nature Reserve near Paternoster. The sea is calm, the sky is blue and the sun is warm without being nasty about it.

I manage to get into my yellow kayak without tipping it over. It's been a while since I've been in one, I realise. And this is the first time ever that I'm going to paddle in the ocean. Andrew and Marie-Louise Kellett from Gravity Adventures are already in their kayaks and they're 20 or so metres into the protected bay.

Unsure how to properly put on the splash cover (which keeps water out of the hold of the kayak), I gingerly paddle over to Andrew who shows me how to do it. At least it's clear to all that I'm a rookie.

"Full disclosure," I tell Andrew. "I also get seasick. Even when the sea is flat..."

In anticipation, I popped a motion-sickness pill this morning over breakfast, and I can feel its effects. I feel slightly groggy and I imagine I'm talking slower than usual.

"Don't worry," Andrew says with a laugh. "We're just going to take a quick paddle around the corner here." He gestures to the south. "There's a gully there that I want to show you."

The original plan was to join Gravity on their two-day paddle, which starts further south at Jacobsbaai. On the first day, you paddle north for about 16 km, then you beach the boats at a remote spot where you camp for the night. On the second day, you paddle a similar distance towards where we are now, around Cape Columbine, and you

finish just outside Paternoster.

Sadly, bad weather scuppered our plans, so we decided to make the best of a short window of good weather and do a section of one of their shorter trips, called the Columbine Explorer. It's late April and the first of the Cape's winter storms has just moved over this area, with another one coming soon.

The West Coast can be windy, hot, cold and generally unspectacular – at least if you don't know what you've come here to appreciate. But today, even the most hard-nosed critic would melt at the charm of the place. I feel like doing many things simultaneously: eating a big bowl of mussels at Die Gaaitjie Restaurant in Paternoster; parking off in a camping chair here at Tietiesbaai and drinking six Darling Brew Bone Crushers while I keep adding logs to the braai fire; reading a Lawrence Green book on the stoep of a guesthouse... You get the idea. I want all of the best West Coast things, and I want them all *today*.

Paddling around Cape Columbine is one of those things, even if I don't realise it yet. How does this kayaking thing work again?

"You're holding the paddle upside down," Andrew says patiently, demonstrating which side of the blade needs to scoop into the water.

And just like that, it's easy. I'm no Oscar Chalupsky, but because the sea is so calm, even I make steady headway, although sometimes at crab-like angles. I follow Andrew and Marie-Louise at a safe distance around some rocks and we enter another little bay, where Andrew shows me the narrow gully in the rocks that we're aiming for.

"I'll go first, then I'll signal when you can come in," he says,

and paddles off effortlessly.

The Kelletts – who also operate popular paddling trips on the Orange River and (seasonally, in winter) on the Doring River, among other places – are paddling legends. I'm sure they've spent more hours in kayaks and canoes than I've spent doing anything useful behind my laptop.

Andrew has now pulled out his kayak on the shingly beach and holds his paddle aloft – it's my sign to come forward.

I paddle over some kelp arms that wave at me from below the glossy blue water, and then I'm into the narrow, sloshy chute, pushed along by a surging wave. Then the bottom of the kayak scrapes onto the small beach, and I get out. Next comes Marie-Louise.

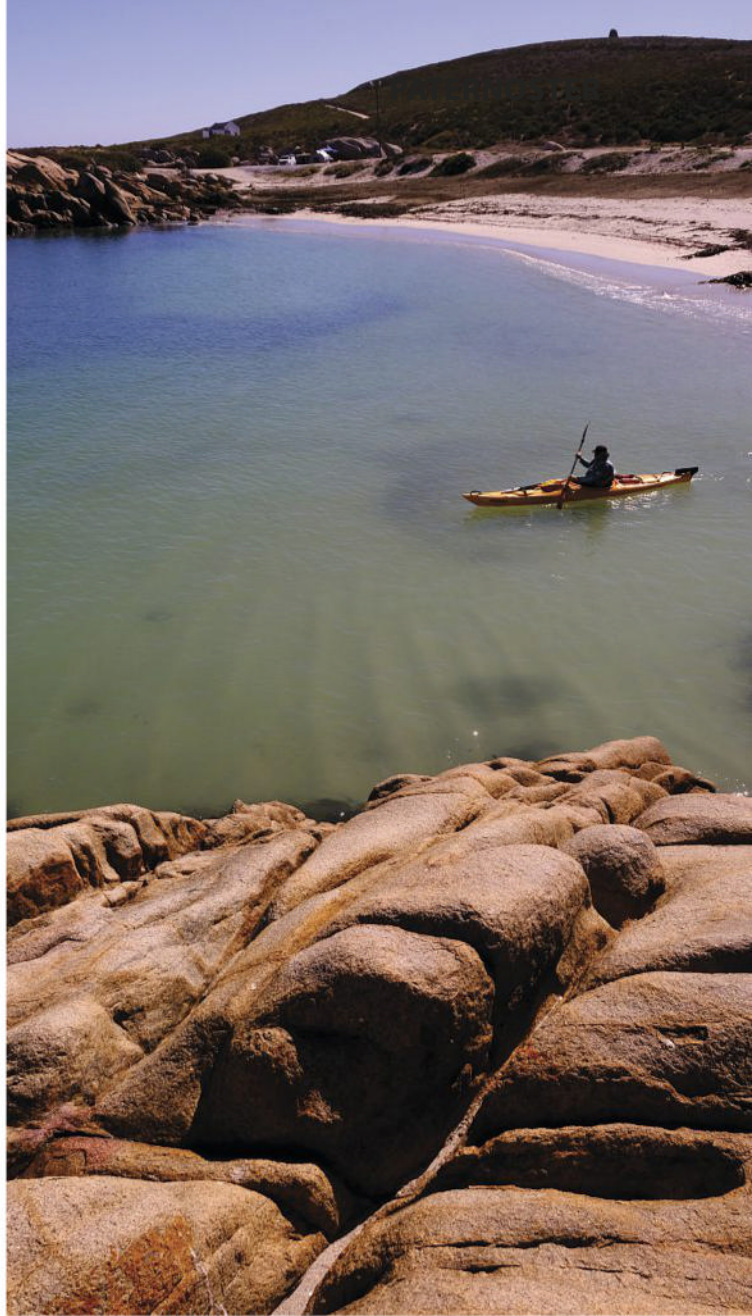
When we're all on dry ground, Andrew points out a few landmarks to the south, such as Trekoskraal, and the distant beach halfway between here and Jacobsbaai where they camp during the two-day trip.

After a short rest, we return to the sea and head north, back past the Tietiesbaai campsite. We're now heading for the rocks that form the outer part of Cape Columbine.

A flock of Caspian terns fly about, and some dive headfirst into the water every now and then. I catch a glimpse of a small, silvery fish in the beak of a bird as it surfaces and flies off.

It's roughly at this point that I realise our small mission is about to face a significant logistical issue if I don't mention it immediately. Earlier, I met the Kelletts at the entrance gate to Cape Columbine Nature Reserve. I left my Subaru in the parking lot there, and got into their Isuzu double-cab for the drive

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Andrew Kellett from Gravity Adventures unties a strap to offload kayaks. The paddle started at Tietiesbaai beach in the Cape Columbine Nature Reserve. Sunset over big boulders off Cape Columbine where Cape fur seals keep a colony. Pitch your tent right on the beach at the Tietiesbaai campsite. Visit the Cape Columbine lighthouse on weekdays between 10 am and 3 pm – it costs R20 per person; arrange with lighthouse keeper Wayne Brown in advance (☎ 062 154 8814).





INSIDER INFO

MARIE-LOUISE AND ANDREW KELLETT Owners, Gravity Adventures

Marie-Louise: *"Cape Columbine is steeped in history, with lots of shipwrecks. It's renowned for a wild and exposed coastline with limited landing options, making this kayak trail suitable for paddlers with some previous experience who want to see the West Coast from a different perspective."*

Andrew: *"Whether you join a day tour exploring Cape Columbine, or an overnight wilderness experience starting at Jacobsbaai – camping wild and leaving no trace – you'll be among a small group of people who have really experienced this unique coastline up close."*

to Tietiesbaai, where we put the kayaks into the water. The plan was to paddle to where my car was parked, and then I'd drive Andrew back to Tietiesbaai so that he could collect the Isuzu.

But I just realised that I left my Subaru keys in Andrew's Isuzu! So, if we paddle all the way back to my car, I won't be able to unlock it.

I blame the sedative effect of the motion-sickness pill for this particular brainfart.

Andrew takes the news in his stride. "No problem," he says. "I'll just paddle back to the bakkie and you guys can continue on your own. I'll meet you there."

We're almost in line with the block-like tower of the Cape Columbine lighthouse, and Andrew realises it will make for a cool photo if I or Marie-Louise paddles past and he gets a shot with the lighthouse in the background.

We make a couple of passes, paddling through a large patch of foam. The sloshing sound of the water is suddenly muffled – it reminds me of the hush associated with a snow-filled landscape.

Andrew disappears towards Tietiesbaai with brisk strokes of his paddle, and Marie-Louise and I putter forth, sedately. The sun is warm. I'm beginning to feel the onset of seasickness (there's a minor swell now), but it soon dissipates as we round Cape Columbine and enter even calmer water towards Paternoster. The sea soon becomes glassy smooth, and the textures on the water are mesmerising.

Sometimes, patterns of foam return, which makes me think of a Russian word for a specific kind of windswept snow: *sastrugi*. The sea foam reminds me of that. Maybe there are entire collections of words in some or other oceanic language

like Polynesian, which describe different kinds of sea foam?

We paddle between large, round boulders. Off to the left, I first hear a seal colony then see the animals. Some of them are perched on impossibly high and smooth rocks – I wonder how they got there?

Then a massive flock of several hundred, maybe a thousand, Cape cormorants fly right towards us and land on the water. They paddle furiously and dive down. Bubbles break the surface in stringy curtains. Sometimes a bird accidentally surfaces quite close to my kayak, and eyeballs me before it frantically swims off again.

I did bring my camera along, but I decide to leave it safely in the dry bag between my feet. This sighting is best enjoyed without a camera anyway. I sit back in the kayak and lightly hold the paddle across my knees. Marie-Louise is off to my side, doing the same. We're floating through a large, living mass of birds busy doing their thing – diving, catching fish and flying off again in salvos; their webbed feet and tails dragging behind them in the water before they become airborne.

We paddle past the Sea Shack, a great little place consisting of small cabins and a shared *kuier* area. I remember coming here a few years ago with a friend. It's a proper hide-out, and I imagine it would make a good place to have your 40th birthday party – or something lekker like that.

Marie-Louise gestures with her paddle – it's Andrew's bakkie, driving towards the parking lot where I soon make out my Subaru, too.

I drag the kayak onto the beach. What a dream of a day – why must it end? Hopefully I can return for the two-day mission sometime soon...



Three yellow kayaks are pulled onto a small beach just outside Cape Columbine Nature Reserve.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Paddle power. The **Columbine Explorer** costs R1 250 per person, (half-day, includes a light lunch) for groups of a minimum of six people. Touring kayaks are supplied but bring your own snacks and drinks.

Gravity Adventures' **two-day overnight paddle** from Jacobsbaai to Paternoster costs R3 500 per person and includes meals, the use of a kayak, and the service of an expert guide. This is for a group of two to three people. If you can get four to 12 people together, the rate drops to R2 950 per person. Under 18s pay 10% less.

See the Gravity Adventures website for shorter excursions offered at Langebaan Lagoon, and info about their longer river trips elsewhere. ☎ 082 692 4399; 📧 gravity.co.za

Visit the reserve. If you'd prefer to stay on dry land, explore **Cape Columbine Nature Reserve** by car or on foot. This relatively small municipal reserve was established in 1973. Day visitors pay R35 each.

Camping at Tietiesbaai costs R237 per stand for up to six people – this rate goes up during peak holidays from November until Easter. ☎ 022 752 2718 📧 Ronnie.Martins@sbm.gov.za

Stay here. If you want to stay over in Paternoster the night before (or after) your paddle, consider **Jongnooientjiesfontein self-catering cottage**. It sleeps two people and costs R900 per weeknight, or R1 000 per night over the weekend.

It's at 4 Pikkewyn Street, Paternoster. Contact Elmarie Els: ☎ 082 686 7584

Eat here. After the paddle, we tucked into calamari and chips (R160 for a portion that won't leave you hungry!) at **Seekombuis**, which is right next to the sea at the entrance to Cape Columbine Nature Reserve. They're open daily (except Mondays) from 11 am to 5 pm. 📧 seekombuis.co.za

From fossils to frontlines

Langebaan, Saldanha Bay and the West Coast National Park are full of evocative historical sites that tell tales of ancient humans, naval combat, industry, empire and more. Here are nine highlights.

WORDS & PICTURES **JUSTIN FOX**



A derelict boathouse on Churchhaven beach.



HISTORY



From the top: At the West Coast Fossil Park you can see statues of short-necked giraffes (made from recycled wood), outdoor pits showing exposed fossils, and this skull of a sabre-toothed cat.

1 Prehistoric giraffes

There's no better place to get a glimpse of the region's ancient past than West Coast Fossil Park. Phosphate mining in the 1960s at the town of Langebaanweg uncovered one of the richest fossil sites in southern Africa. The bones of nearly 300 species have since been found, many of them new to science.

Five million years ago, this coast was far lusher than today. Wandering through the excavations with a guide, I was shown piles of fossilised jaws, teeth and leg bones of seals, hippos and rhinos that had been deposited by an ancient version of the Berg River, probably during a catastrophic flood.

The visitors' centre, which opened in 2018, comprises an exhibition hall, restaurant, shop and amphitheatre. Displays offer insight into some of the creatures that once roamed here, including a sabre-toothed cat, a buffalo with horns spanning four metres, the ferocious African bear, and five types of hyena.

The centrepiece of the park is the Sivathere Hall, which features the most common large-mammal fossil collected from the site: a short-necked giraffe known as *Sivatherium hendeyi* that weighed up to two tonnes. Wall panels depict scenes from a single day, from dawn to dusk, and trace the ancient river from its source in the Franschhoek mountains to where it reached the coast at a time when the sea level was about 30 metres higher than it is today.

The displays are a wonderful combination of digital art, graphic works and photography, and include three magnificent life-size sivatheres sculpted by Egon Tania using "found" alien wood.



Opening times: Daily (except Mondays) from 9 am to 3 pm.
Entrance fee: Museum entry R80 per adult; R50 per child under 15. Guided tour R120 per adult; R70 per child. Museum and guided tour combo R170 per adult; R100 per child.
What else? For lunch bookings at their popular restaurant, call 079 873 1526.

Where? R45, Langebaanweg (20 km north-east of Langebaan)
Contact: 022 766 1606; fossilpark.org.za





PREEKSTOEL

2 In the footsteps of Eve

Eve's Footprint is the popular name for a set of fossilised impressions discovered in 1995 on the Kraalbaai shore near the Preekstoel rock formation. They're thought to be those of a female from about 117 000 years ago, making them the oldest known footprints of an anatomically modern human.

The impressions were made on a steep dune during heavy rain, after which dry sand blew over the wet indentations. The sand and accompanying crushed seashells hardened like cement into sedimentary rock, thereby protecting the footprints.

I was led to the site by SANParks section ranger, William Brink. Near the Preekstoel, we came to a halt. "That's were geologist David Roberts from the Council for Geoscience found the three footprints back in 1995," said William, pointing at a slab of grey rock halfway up the side of a low cliff. "The archaeologists cut out the limestone and a helicopter carried it to the parking lot. I was in charge of stopping the public getting too close. It was a helluva thing."

The preserved prints were moved to the Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town for preservation and protection, and a concrete replica was mounted in the park reception office at Geelbek farm – which is where I next went to pay my respects to the famous footprints.

In one foot impression, the big toe, ball, arch and heel are clearly discernible – about a shoe size six. Roberts surmised that the prints belonged to a female, who was about 1,5 metres tall.

The team later found evidence of stone-tool use (a core, scrapers, cutting blades and a spear point) in the same area and believed to date from the same period.



Where? The site of the footprints' discovery is 30 m south of the Preekstoel formation, at the southern end of Kraalbaai. A display of the footprints can be viewed in the reception building of Geelbek farm near the entrance to the West Coast National Park.



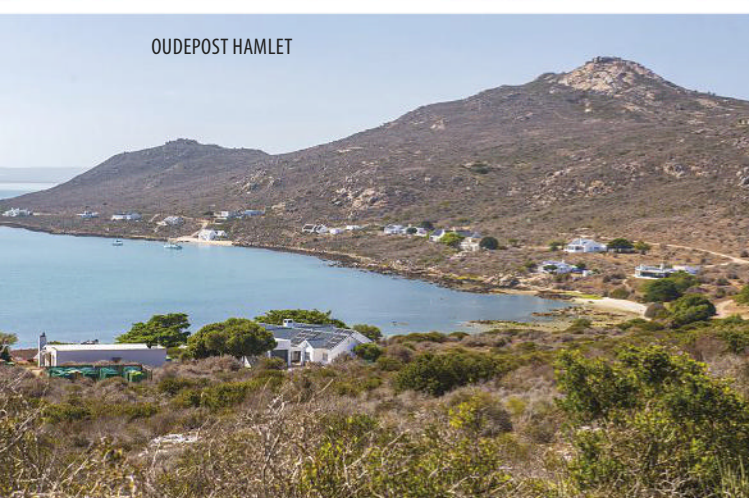
WILLIAM BRINK, SECTION RANGER



VOC FORT, KRAALBAAI



OLD POSTHUIS, OUDEPOST



OUDEPOST HAMLET

3 An outpost of the empire

Section ranger William Brink picked me up in his Land Cruiser and drove me into the Postberg section of the West Coast National Park, only open in flower season, and then into a section that's never open to the public.

We stopped beside a promontory on the north shore of Kraalbaai to view the remains of a VOC (Dutch East India Company) station dating from the 17th century. William showed me the little fort's walls, set just above the high-tide line.

The history of this coast tells of a continuous search for water. In 1648, French sailors reported finding a spring here – and elephants! – which led to a VOC station being established in 1669. A cannon was mounted on the hill behind to signal ships or sound the alarm in case of attack.

In 1730, a second station was built about 2 km north, at a site with a better water source and closer to the main anchorage in what is today the hamlet of Oudepost. To reach it, we drive on, following a gravel road along the rim of the lagoon. Oudepost consists of a cluster of private holiday homes dotted along the shore. In their midst stands the old Posthuis. During the Battle of Saldanha in 1781, the Posthuis building was set on fire, but was later rebuilt.

"It served as a refreshment station to supply passing ships and for military observation," said William. "But it was also a post office for the VOC to communicate with Table Bay – the same reason this whole peninsula is called Postberg."

We stopped to look at the gracious Cape Dutch house with its stone sign on the lawn that reads, "1730 Die Posthuis".

The building (now a private holiday home) is flanked by wild date palms with fronds decorated with weaver nests. Behind the building, I found enormous fig trees, stone kraals and a windmill.

Looking down from the hill at the old house and lagoon anchorage, I was struck by the tranquil beauty and by the long and rich history of this magical spot.



Where? Oudepost is out of bounds to the public. You can view the houses with binoculars from across the lagoon on the Langebaan beachfront.

4 Old farms of the lagoon

Entering the West Coast National Park from the Langebaan side, you pass a handful of farms strung along the lagoon's edge. The buildings, some of them sadly in disrepair, hark back to a time when this was the northern frontier of the Cape Colony and farmers eked a meagre existence from its parched land.

First up on your right is Oesterwal, dating from 1723. The farm was an important watering point for sailing ships as it possessed the region's best spring: Gietingmelkfontein. Oesterwal is private property, but some years ago I arranged to visit the farm to see its picturesque lime-washed and gabled buildings. There was a cannon pointing at the lagoon, an old anchor and the ship's bell of the *Thermopylae*, wrecked off Mouille Point in 1899.

Further along the lagoon road, you'll spot the remains of the Bottelary farmhouse, built in 1831, although grazing rights had already been granted to Hendrik Jacob Cloete as early as 1745.

Next door is Seeberg farm, with a quaint white cottage – today a SANParks information kiosk – set atop an enormous granite boulder. The cottage was built by Dutchman Bollie Prenz, who planted a garden just north of the hill, where he cultivated prickly pear, fig and quince trees, some of which are still there to this day.

The original Geelbek homestead, which lies at the south-eastern corner of the lagoon, was built in 1761. Just over 20 years later, Governor van de Graaff instructed that a VOC beacon be erected on the farm to demarcate the company's northern boundary. The beacon is still there.

Early in the 20th century, Geelbek was known for its superb wine cellar and famous parties. The manor house is the hub of the park and was beautifully restored in the 1980s, but on my recent visit I found it in a sorry state, the rooms boarded up, windows smashed and pigeons the only ones having a party inside.



Facilities: Seeberg cottage and the park offices at Geelbek are open to the public. (The manor house is dilapidated, but I was assured that plans for renovation were in the pipeline.)

Where? Seeberg and Geelbek are both just off Langebaan Road on the eastern side of the lagoon.

OESTERWAL



GEELBEK



SEEBERG



HISTORY

JEAN TRESFON



5 The Battle of Saldanha

This famous naval action took place on 21 July 1781, during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War. British Commodore George Johnstone had secret orders to capture the Dutch Cape Colony, but the French learnt of his mission and Admiral Pierre André de Suffren was sent to frustrate it. As a result, Johnstone found the Dutch settlement well defended when he arrived in July, and he decided not to attack.

Dutch Governor Joachim van Plettenberg had, as a precaution, directed the westbound VOC merchant fleet, richly laden with goods, to go into hiding in Saldanha Bay and wait for a French escort. The East Indiamen duly anchored in Hoedjiesbaai, in the lee of Marcus Island, where they were under orders to burn their ships if the British attacked.

One of Commodore Johnstone's frigates intercepted a Dutch merchantman that had left the bay a few days earlier. The vessel surrendered and the British were able to glean the whereabouts of the VOC fleet.

Johnstone entered Saldanha Bay flying French colours, then raised the British ensign and opened fire, catching the Dutch completely by surprise. Unable to escape, the merchantmen cut their cables, drove their vessels ashore and set them alight, but the British took to their boats and succeeded in extinguishing the fires. Only one Dutch ship, the *Middelburg*, burnt furiously and then blew up when flames reached her powder magazine.

Casualties on the Dutch side were minimal, if any, and there were no British casualties.

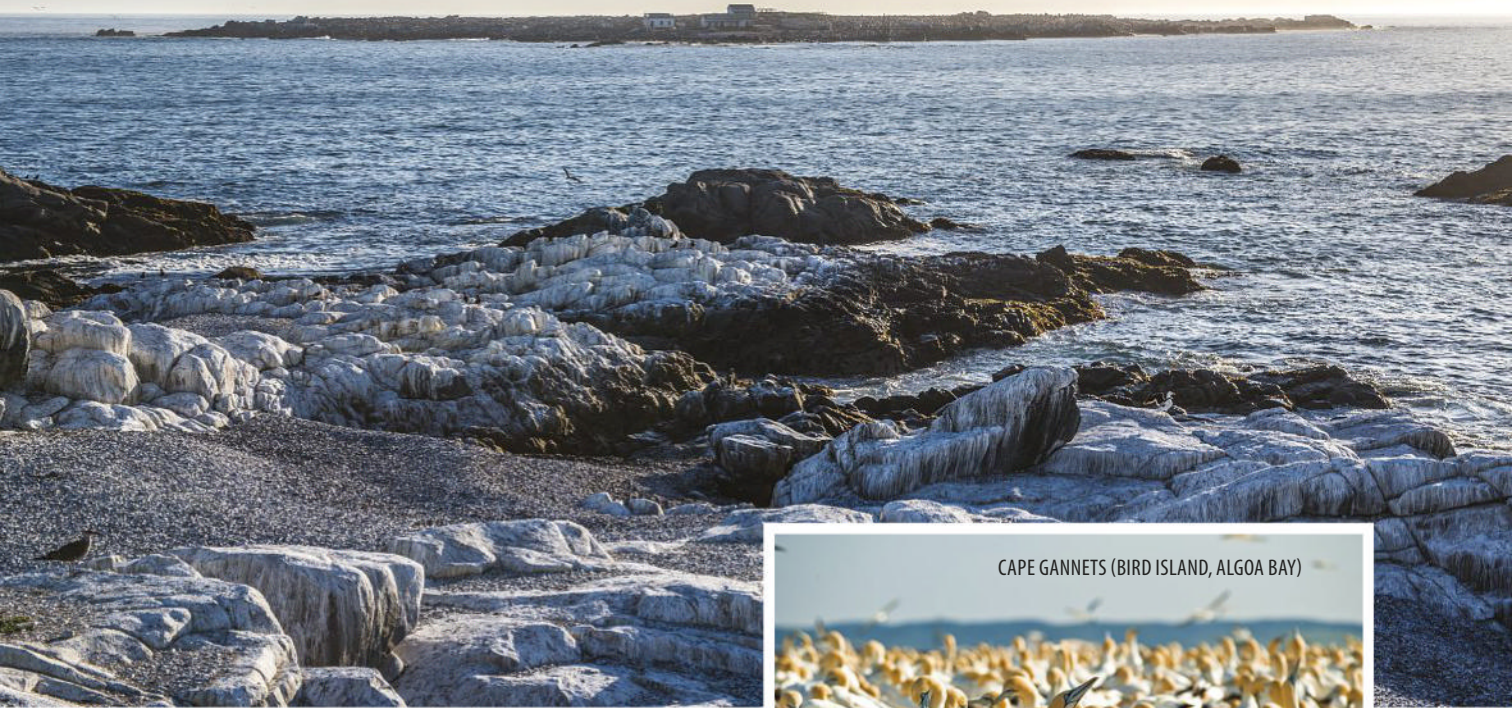
THOMAS LUNY



What else? Sadly, the *Middelburg* wreck site was never properly dived and recorded. Then in 1976, Portnet built a breakwater between Hoedjiespunt and Marcus Island which effectively buried the *Middelburg*, placing one of South Africa's best-preserved shipwrecks beyond the reach of salvors and archaeologists.

Where? Great views of the bay can be had from the lookout point in the Postberg section of the West Coast National Park (open to the public in August and September); from Malgaskop in Saldanha Nature Reserve; and from anywhere along the shores of Saldanha Bay and Langebaan.

From these vantage points, you can see all the locations of the battle.



6 The guano wars

The islands of Saldanha Bay played host to one of the strangest episodes in Cape history. During the Great Saldanha Guano Rush of the 1840s, hundreds of ships were sent to harvest the “white gold”, which was much sought after as a nutrient-rich fertiliser in Europe. Some deposits, particularly on Malgas Island, lay up to ten metres deep and claims were pegged out for each ship.

In his book *The Coast of Treasure*, Lawrence Green records that “for some time Malgas Island presented the aspect of a fair, with tents, scaffolding and a boisterous crowd of men. Grog vendors and young ladies from the Cape hurried there to get a share of profits. Tent houses of business were erected, each sporting some flag with fanciful names such as ‘Wapping’, ‘Sheerness’ or ‘London Docks.’”

Conditions were harsh, with brawls and riots commonplace, and at one stage a warship was sent from Cape Town to restore order. Soon, the supply of odorous treasure was exhausted, ships ceased to call, and the seabirds could return to their former, devastated roosts, now reduced to bare rock.

Guano continued to be collected intermittently until the 1960s. You can still see the (now derelict) accommodation used by the harvesters. Today, the islands of Saldanha are important seabird sanctuaries and therefore closed to the public.



CAPE GANNETS (BIRD ISLAND, ALGOA BAY)



Where? For great views of Jutten and Meeu islands in Saldanha Bay, try the lookout point on top of Postberg. Schaapen Island lies a few hundred metres off Langebaan Beach, while the best view of Malgas Island is from Malgaskop in the Saldanha Nature Reserve; so too Marcus Island, although it's no longer an island having been linked to the mainland by the construction of a harbour breakwater. The best place to get a decent view of Vondeling Island is from the beach at Tsaarsbank on the western shore of the Postberg peninsula.

Visit: The Postberg section of West Coast National Park is only open to the public in flower season (August and September). Saldanha Nature Reserve lies in a military area and can be visited only with prior permission. Contact the Military Academy's communication officer, Major Marinda Hechter:

☎ 022 702 3004; ✉ hechter@sun.ac.za

Contact: 🌐 sanparks.org



7 A slice of heaven

The village of Churchhaven captures the spirit of the lagoon of old and has retained its charm. There's still no electricity (other than solar) or piped water, or even a shop. The locals fiercely protect their patch of lagoon and visitors are not permitted unless they have an invitation or are renting a cottage, such as Jo-Anne's, which is managed by SANParks.

The original community developed a way of life that was marked by modesty, self-reliance and environmental sustainability. They built homes using local materials, dug wells, cultivated their own gardens, gathered *veldkos*, hunted and fished.

The old-time lagooners are a fascinating breed. Their bloodlines are mixed with sailors and runaways, whalers and deserters, and vestiges of languages from faraway shores have filtered down the generations. There were the Barsbys from England, Caswells and De Montforts from France, Meyers from St Helena and Lloyds from America. Strange customs and traditions have been handed down through the families. There were traditional dances and curious burial ceremonies, secret herbal remedies and exotic recipes – like breast of flamingo!

The village consists of a simple church and graveyard, and three clusters of whitewashed, limestone cottages, most of them on a bluff overlooking lagoon beaches where boats and kayaks are drawn up on the sand. The older buildings, many dating from the 19th century, have large-end chimneys, window frames and rafters fashioned from the timbers of wrecked ships, reed ceilings and interiors decorated with antiques, flotsam and lagoon memorabilia.

Churchhaven has strict architectural controls, so the village remains a harmonious blend of old Cape styles and tasteful new designs, mostly in keeping with the vernacular. Every house faces the blue-green water, a balm to the eye after the harshness of the southeaster-whipped veld.



Accommodation: Stay at Jo-Anne's Beach Cottage. See details on page 112.

What else? To get a flavour of the old lagoon and the characters of Churchhaven, scour second-hand bookstores for titles by Lawrence Green such as *A Giant in Hiding* and *Eight Bells at Salamander*.



DONKERGAT AND THE SANDF SPECIAL FORCES BASE

8Thar she blows!

SANParks section ranger William Brink and I stood on top of Vlaeberg gazing at the panorama of Saldanha Bay and Postberg. Due north lay the inlets of Donkergat and Salamander Bay. Today, this area is a SANDF Special Forces base, but earlier in the 20th century it was a busy place centred around the industrial slaughter of whales.

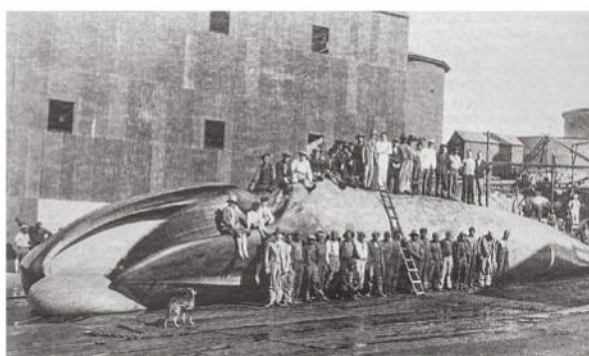
Donkergat whaling station was opened in 1909, and the three little ships first employed there were the forerunners of South Africa's whaling industry. Johan Bryde (the Norwegian consul to South Africa, after whom the Bryde's whale is named) established the Saldanha Bay operation and soon whalers from all over the world (and especially from Norway) were using his factory.

Sperm and sei whales were the most sought after by the ships, which fired 50 kg explosive harpoons into their prey. The carcasses were then towed to Donkergat and winched up the slipway for flensing, the blubber being removed and placed in huge boilers to be reduced to oil. Meanwhile the *lemmers* (butchers) would cut away the meat to be used for pet and human consumption (whale-pork meatballs were a West Coast delicacy), and the bones were sawn up to make bonemeal.

The Great Depression brought the industry to a halt, but the slaughter resumed after World War II and the whaling business boomed once more, with as many as 2 000 carcasses being landed at Donkergat in one season. Dragging their bleeding catch into Saldanha, the ships attracted plenty of sharks, resulting in a number of attacks on swimmers in the bay.

The gruesome nature of the enterprise aside, the whaling industry played an important role in the economy of the region and created considerable employment, while surrounding farms prospered from providing fresh produce, meat and water to the station.

Whaling declined significantly in the 1960s and the factory closed in 1967.



ARCHIVE MATERIAL



Where? Donkergat is a Special Forces regiment base (many of the whaling-era buildings remain) and closed to the public, but you can get a good view of it from Postberg and the shores of Langebaan.

HISTORY

9 U-boats and raiders

During World War II, Allied convoys took refuge in Saldanha (mostly as overflow from the Table Bay anchorage) and the bay needed protection from attack by enemy U-boats and surface raiders. To this end, a number of strong defences were constructed, a minefield was laid at the entrance to the bay, and floating booms were put in place to control access.

To find out more about the war period, I contacted military historian Prof Evert Kleynhans, who offered to show me some of the sites. We met in Saldanha Nature Reserve and drove to the summit of Malgaskop to explore the fortifications on foot. Just below a now defunct radar station, we came to a concrete bunker and control room, centrepiece of the defences. Lower down the slope we found North Battery's two breech-loading, six-inch guns – enormous artillery pieces that still aim their barrels at the Atlantic, waiting for a foe that will never come.

"Malgaskop, Baviaansberg, North Head and South Head on the opposite shore are honeycombed with interlocking defences," explained Evert. "If you go exploring, you'll find trenches, lookout posts and smaller-calibre gun positions. You must remember that at one stage of the war, there was even the fear that the Japanese might send a fleet to attack the Cape..."

Scrap metal thieves have caused considerable damage to the sites, but the overgrown fortifications, complete with bunkers, ammunition stores and camouflaged accommodation, still offer an evocative picture of what it must have been like in those dangerous days of a world at war.



Where? There are a number of sites in Saldanha Nature Reserve, especially around Malgaskop (Malgas Street) and North Head (walk in a westerly direction on a well-marked hiking route from the parking lot at the south end of Thys Boonzaaier Street). There's also a concrete lookout post on North Beach.

In the West Coast National Park, there's a concrete bunker (possibly for ammunition storage) close to the beach at Tsaarsbank, on the north side of the road.

Visit: As Saldanha Nature Reserve lies in a restricted military area, you need prior permission to enter. Contact the Military Academy's communication officer, Major Marinda Hechter:

☎ 022 702 3004; ✉ hechter@sun.ac.za

WEST COAST NATIONAL PARK

Entrance costs R82 per adult; R41 per child under 12; free with a Wild Card.



Clockwise from top left: A concrete lookout post stands sentinel above the beach at North Bay, Saldanha. One of the two breech-loading, six-inch guns on Malgaskop. Prof Evert Kleynhans is an eminent military historian. This World War II control tower sits just above the pair of six-inch guns.



HISTORY



GET IN ON THE ACTION

Justin Fox is an editor, photographer and author of more than 20 books. Among them are his Jack Pembroke novels – a series of World War II naval thrillers that follow a young British officer on a South African ship, the HMSAS Gannet. Hence his interest in the history of our coastline! See more at justinfoxafrica.wordpress.com

Tuna run!

Join us aboard the *Slice of Life* on a deep-sea tuna-fishing adventure off the Cape coast.

WORDS & PICTURES **JAC KRITZINGER**

Charter boats generally target tuna in deep water, up to 100 km offshore at the edge of the continental shelf. There's no way you can throw an anchor out here, so the *Slice of Life* bobs on the swell while the fishermen wait for their lines to sing.



FISHING

It's still dark in the Hout Bay harbour when skipper Morné Oosthuizen from the Slice of Life Charter Company gathers us around for a briefing. "Fishing for tuna is an unpredictable business," he says. "We never know where we'll find them, and even if we do find them, they might not be in the mood to eat... Hold on!"

The two Suzuki 140-horsepower engines roar to life and the nearly eight-metre RapidCat sets off. Morné's boat is officially named *Nina*, but everyone calls it the *Slice of Life* because the company's name is on the side. There are seven of us aboard today – four fishermen, crewmen Morné and Warren Wood, and me.

Jan-Hendrik Hollenbach Snr – who paid for the rest of us to do this excursion – is a cattle farmer from Buffelsbaai on the Garden Route. His son, Jan-Hendrik Jnr, lives in Randburg. To confuse matters, Jnr's cousin from Langebaan is also Jan Hendrik Hollenbach ("without the hyphen", he says with a laugh) – he and his brother-in-law Jacobus Pansegrouw from Honeydew complete the foursome.

Morné guns the throttle and we all hang on as the boat punches through the incoming waves at 40 km/h.

It takes more than two hours to travel the nearly 110 km (60 nautical miles) to where the African continent falls away into the deep blue ocean. The water is warmer and clear here – prime tuna territory. There's no land in sight and we all fall silent as we contemplate our featureless surroundings.

Eventually, Morné locates a big school of tuna on his sonar and switches off the engines. The prevailing sensation of seasickness subsides as the adrenaline kicks in. (I swallowed two motion-sickness pills before we set off, just in case.)

Morné cranks up some AC/DC as the morning sun breaks through the haze. "That's a good sign," says Jan-Hendrik Snr as he stands up a little shakily and squints at the bright sky. "Today is the day!"

Morné grew up in Alexander Bay and now lives in Langebaan. He used to be the manager of a popular club in Cape Town and still likes his rock music. The Offspring follows AC/DC, ringing out over the grey-blue expanse.

Fleets of fishermen head out into the deep off the Cape coast every year between October and May, hoping to catch tuna. Species of these predatory game fish include bigeye, longfin, yellowfin and Atlantic bluefin – the biggest of the lot, often weighing more than 100 kg. Yellowfin are renowned for putting up a serious fight. Morné tells us that it sometimes takes more than an hour to reel one in.

The biggest tuna are usually caught when the boat is drifting and anglers cast using live sardines or mackerel as bait. Sometimes, smaller tuna are hooked while trawling – towing lines with lures behind the moving boat. Since tuna hunt in schools, there are often multiple strikes at once. When more than one reel starts singing, it's chaos: Lines get crossed as the fish swim wildly to avoid capture. Morné and Warren are always ready to help, and they provide only the best professional equipment – everything from rods and lures to harnesses and reels. All you have to bring is medication for seasickness if you're prone to it, something to eat and drink, and a good dose of optimism.

Jan-Hendrik Snr's words prove to be prophetic: The group lands a 30 kg longfin and three yellowfins, each of which weighs about 60 kg.

After 13 hours at sea, the *Sentinel* looms into view, marking our return to Hout Bay. The team throws anchor in front of Chapman's Peak and we take photos with the fish, aching muscles and queasy stomachs forgotten.

I ask Jan-Hendrik Snr what he plans to do with his catch. "We'll eat what we can, freeze the rest and give parcels to friends and family," he says. "The main thing for me is the experience I had out there with these *laaities* today. You don't make memories like these very often..."

Clockwise from top left: Sardines or mackerel are cut up and thrown overboard to attract tuna to the boat.

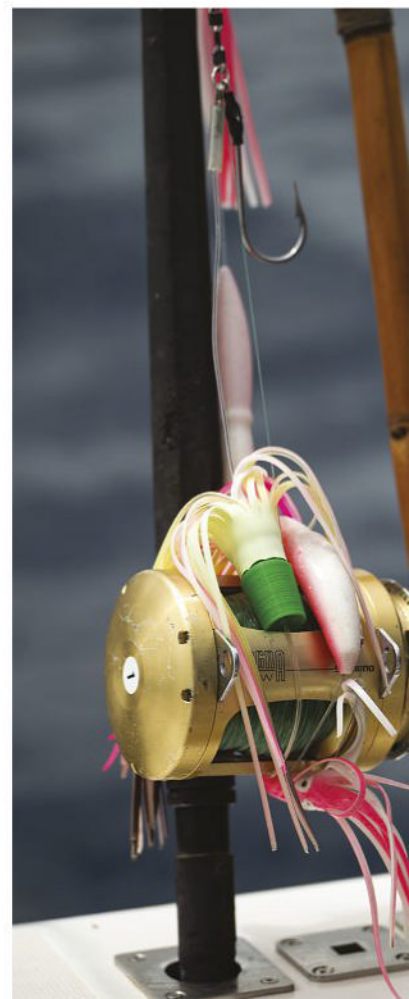
The various fishing boats communicate using two-way radios to ensure a catch for their clients. While we were out on the water, we occasionally saw other boats, and a few cargo ships in the distance.

Bait in the water attracts seabirds like albatrosses (this is an Atlantic yellow-nosed albatross), as well as other pelagic species like petrels and jaegers.

The navigation equipment onboard works with GPS. Underwater sonar is used to locate fish in the depths.

Artificial lures are trawled when the boat is on the move, but when the engines are cut, casting with live bait is the best way to go.

When the boat reaches its deep-sea destination, experienced skipper Morné Oosthuizen runs anglers through the fine art of tuna fishing before they cast their lines.







FISHING

When the boat is trawling, Morné Oosthuizen is usually on deck to lend a hand. Then his right-hand man, Warren Wood, is at the helm of *Slice of Life*.



FISHING





Clockwise from left: Returning to land means you travel with the swell, not against it, which makes the ride much less bumpy. Everyone can sit back and let their tired bodies relax.

Morné casts an artificial lure, designed to mimic a small fish struggling near the surface.

When a tuna has been brought close enough to the boat, it's hooked with a gaff and killed before being hoisted aboard.

These enormous fish sometimes barely fit into the cooler boxes, but it's essential to keep them fresh and out from under the anglers' feet.



THE DETAILS

A one-day charter costs R20 000 per group for a maximum of five anglers. There's no minimum number.

Contact Slice of Life Charter Company:

☎ 072 136 3330 (Morné)

🌐 sliceoflifecharters.co.za



KRAALBAAI,
WEST COAST NATIONAL PARK



An aerial photograph of a coastal town, likely in South Africa, showing a bay, a peninsula, and surrounding hills. The town is built on a peninsula, with a beach and some buildings visible. The water is a light blue-green color. The hills in the background are hazy.

Stay here

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION SECTION

Facilities • Rates • Activities Contact details

Finding a good place to stay for your long-deserved holiday isn't easy. And one person's idea of "good" can be very different to the next person's. We each have our tastes and preferences and deal-breakers. To me, a lumpy mattress can be offset ten times over by a stoep with a spectacular view. All is forgiven (even the toaster that burns one side of the bread) if I can sit and gaze out over a grand slice of South Africa while having my morning coffee.

The West Coast and its adjacent regions have no shortage of stoeps with views. But they don't all come easy – first you have to find out where these places are, and then comes the long drive.

The internet (and your new bestie, ChatGPT) will be all too happy to churn out any number of options. But we prefer to list tried-and-tested places. Our journalists actually travel to the places we feature. They spend a night, build a braai, take that walk up to the viewpoint at sunset. That way, we can be sure that a place is "our kind of good" – not just Instagram-influencer cool, or stylish-looking on those airbrushed website photos.

The accommodation options assembled in this Stay Here section were put together by two of South Africa's most experienced travel journalists, Jacques Marais and Justin Fox.

Justin is a long-time fan of the Langebaan Lagoon and shares four of his favourite self-catering stays (p 108). Two are in Langebaan itself and two are in the West Coast National Park. (Also read his story about historical sites on the West Coast – p 72.)

Jacques Marais travelled far and wide to choose his six favourites – from the Cederberg to Vanrhynsdorp via Lutzville and Elands Bay at the coast (p 94).

Every option featured is a soulful escape, where you can really get a feel for the area. Try out a few of them when you next take a holiday, and let us know what you think!

– *Toast Coetzer*



REMEMBER: Rates can change unexpectedly – always contact an establishment in advance to make sure you have the correct details.

COMPILED BY: JUSTIN FOX & JACQUES MARAIS

Stars and space

This road trip tracks the Cederberg's easterly ranges to the mighty Matsikamma massif, then follows the Olifants River to the sea. The binding themes? Stars aplenty and good people by your side.

WORDS & PICTURES **JACQUES MARAIS**

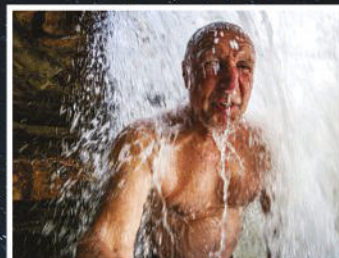
One of my favourite back roads goes from the plains of the Tankwa Karoo along a series of sidewinding curves, up and over Katbakkies Pass. When you judder onto the summit, a 360-degree view across the inland plateau will completely kapow your brain. The distant skyline shimmers in the afternoon haze, etched with a dozen or more Cederberg peaks. Here and there, waboom proteas cling to sheltered kloofs as Verreaux's eagles swoop against the high cirrus clouds.

From this point on the map, the Cederberg rumples north to where the might of the Matsikamma massif lies belly-up in Namaqualand. Somewhere out west, the mist-shrouded Atlantic Ocean seethes quietly.

The places to stay I've selected lie scattered across this view – I hope you enjoy them!



STAY HERE



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacques Marais would love to qualify as a Namaqualand local, but he still has to learn how to handle all those double brandy-and-cokes... He also has to practise throwing another armful of wood on the fire just before midnight, while shouting, "Nou gaan ons AMPER braai!"

See more of his work at jacquesmarais.co.za and on Instagram: [@jacqmaraisphoto](https://www.instagram.com/jacqmaraisphoto)

KAGGA KAMMA, CEDERBERG

STAY HERE

CEDERBERG

Kagga Kamma

Follow the corrugated gravel track beyond Katbakkies Pass and you'll discover a place of tranquillity. This is Kagga Kamma ("The Place of Water") a private nature reserve with a premium eco-lodge and spa.

"Our flora is what really draws the botany boffins, thanks to the fusion of three biomes here at Kagga Kamma," explains Paul Avenant, head guide and assistant manager. "Karoo, renosterveld and fynbos all come together here."

A range of hiking trails take you deep into this off-grid natural playground, on everything from a slow meander to a harder run that will clear your headspace. There's a mountain-biking trail too, which will test your endurance as you crank the dusty and often sandy gravel tracks.

"The main event at Kagga Kamma is the night sky," says Paul. "Stargazing is at the heart of the guest experience and draws people from around the globe."

Guests can bring their own telescopes and experience conditions that rival top dark-sky reserves anywhere.



Facilities: You can camp or stay in proper luxury. Swartrug is the main campsite – it has five stands (max six per stand). Klipspringer also has five stands (max six per stand), and Bobbejaanskrans is one large stand for up to eight people. The latter two are more remote and for 4x4 vehicles only. None of the campsites have electricity. Only Swartrug and Klipspringer have ablution facilities.

Camping wild allows you to escape any light pollution and set up your camera or telescope in total darkness, with only the calls of nightjars and black-backed jackals as company.

There are also self-catering chalets that sleep either six or eight, plus more luxurious options like Hut Suites and Cave Suites. Accommodation is offered on a bed and breakfast basis; a dinner, bed and breakfast basis; or full board (certain activities are also included).

But the highlight is sleeping in luxury *outside*... Upgrade to an Open Air Suite and your room will be set amidst dreamy rock formations under a ceiling of stars.

What else? Kagga Kamma's self-guided Blue Trail (4 km) is one of my favourite short hikes in the Western Cape. You get a couple of hours of guaranteed nature immersion along this trail, which winds between spectacular sandstone outcrops.

Where? Budget at least four hours to drive from Cape Town. From Ceres, you can either go via the Gydo Pass and Op-die-Berg, or via the Tankwa Karoo and up Katbakkies Pass. For both routes, you'll need a car that can handle a gravel road.

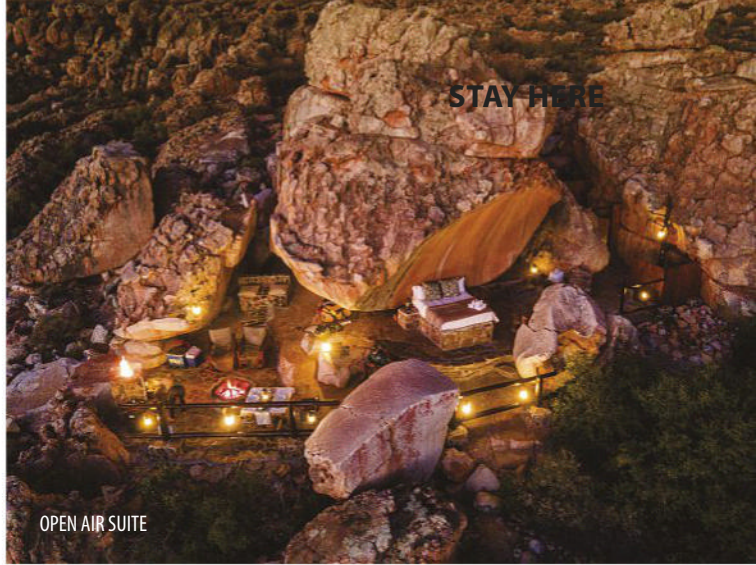
Rates: Camping from R200 per person. Self-catering chalets from R1 900 per night for a six-sleeper. Luxury options like Hut Suites and Cave Suites from R2 320 per person B&B in low season. See the website for more rates.

Contact: ☎ 021 872 4343; 🌐 kaggakamma.co.za



There's excellent rock art at Kagga Kamma. Go on a two-hour guided walking tour to see some of the best paintings: R500 per adult; R350 per child under 12.





OPEN AIR SUITE



BONTEBOK



GUIDED ROCK ART TOUR

STAY HERE

VANRHYNSDORP

Maskam Guest Farm

The mythical Gifberg rises like an African Uluru from the Knersvlakte immediately south of Vanrhynsdorp. Just before the eponymous pass that leads up to the plateau, Maskam Guest Farm awaits...

Co-owner Ancarene van der Westhuizen is firmly rooted in this place. Signs of her handiwork can be seen everywhere: I had bottles of local olives in my chalet, available to purchase; and some of Ancarene's peach jam and buttermilk rusks. The organic rooibos on offer is also from the farm.

She and her husband Awie invited me to join them at the braai. Ancarene was scurrying around getting things organised, so Awie and I spoke farmer stuff. "You'll see our herd of fat-tailed sheep up on the mountain slopes," he said, pointing the braai tongs in that direction. Although the Knersvlakte is a dry place, the sheep have plenty of good stuff to eat up there.

All around, the landscape is suffused with a minimalist beauty. Indeed, once you lose yourself in the shadow of Gifberg and the other peaks of the Matsikamma massif, it becomes impossible to ignore the attraction of this wild space.

Come spring, the monochromatic greys and browns morph into multi-hued bursts of colour with the arrival of the wildflower bloom.



Facilities: Choose between three two-bedroom cottages, or stay in a smaller chalet that sleeps two. The well-equipped kitchens are spot on for self-catering, but you can also book dinner (from R240) or breakfast (R140 per person) at the Koekemekranka Farm Kitchen. (Advance booking is essential.)

They have a swimming pool; kids can enjoy themselves on the trampoline and get to know the farm animals.

What else? Farm activities include hiking up Gifberg, birding and mountain-bike trails.

During spring, make sure to explore their Flower Route – there are two walks (5,6 km and 7,8 km), or you can just drive around in your own vehicle (high ground clearance required). A guided tour (one hour) costs R350 per person, otherwise it's R40 per person to explore the route on your own. Add a picnic basket for R250 and make the most of the experience.

Pets are welcome, but you must arrange beforehand. No more than two small, well-behaved pooches are allowed per unit, at R50 per dog per day – please pick up their poop.

Where? About 12 km south of Vanrhynsdorp, just before the start of Gifberg Pass. Directions on the website.

Rates: The open-plan units (Kokkewiet and Suikerbekkie) sleep two each and cost R1 300 per night. Three other units sleep up to five people – they have two bedrooms each. Berggans costs R2 700 per night (for five people), Piet-my-vrou R2 500 (five people) and Klaas Skaapwagter R2 500 per night. These prices are for the peak flower season of August to October 2026. (It is cheaper until end of July 2026.)

Contact: 📞 076 119 0242; 🌐 maskamguestfarm.co.za



Take a full day to explore the nearby gravel passes (best to drive a 4x4): Gifberg, Ouberg and Tierberg. See if you can spot a Verreaux's eagle or a klipspringer.



GIFBERG PASS



KROKODIL SE KOP, GIFBERG



STAY HERE



DUDLEY WESSELS AND SALOME WILLEMSE

VANRHYNSDORP

Botuin Cottages

"You have to look up," says Salome Willemse, pointing at the night sky. "Once the sun sets, that's when I'm in my happy place."

Salome owns Botuin Cottages, which are set amidst olive groves on the banks of the Troe-Troe River in Vanrhynsdorp.

"There's almost no light pollution," Salome continues. "Which is perfect for stargazing and astrophotography. Nocturnal tourism, you could say!"

Salome holds forth to a small group of "noctourists" as we gaze into the heavens, following her laser pointer as she shows us Orion's Belt, Sirius, Venus, the Pleiades, the Milky Way...

And when morning comes, so does the dawn chorus. Salome is also a respected bird guide – top of her list for the area includes LBJ specials like Namaqua warbler (resident in the garden at Botuin), Cape clapper lark and Cape long-billed lark, plus bigger birds like Karoo korhaan and black harrier.



Facilities: Botuin has three cottages, Kalamata (sleeps three), Mission (sleeps four; one on a sleeper couch) and Frantoio (sleeps four). The cottages are all open-plan, with well-equipped kitchens and private braai areas. There's a swimming pool and free Wi-Fi. Pets are allowed by arrangement; breakfast is also available on request.

What else? Explore the back roads on your mountain bike or in a 4x4. You can also buy their olive oil and table olives.

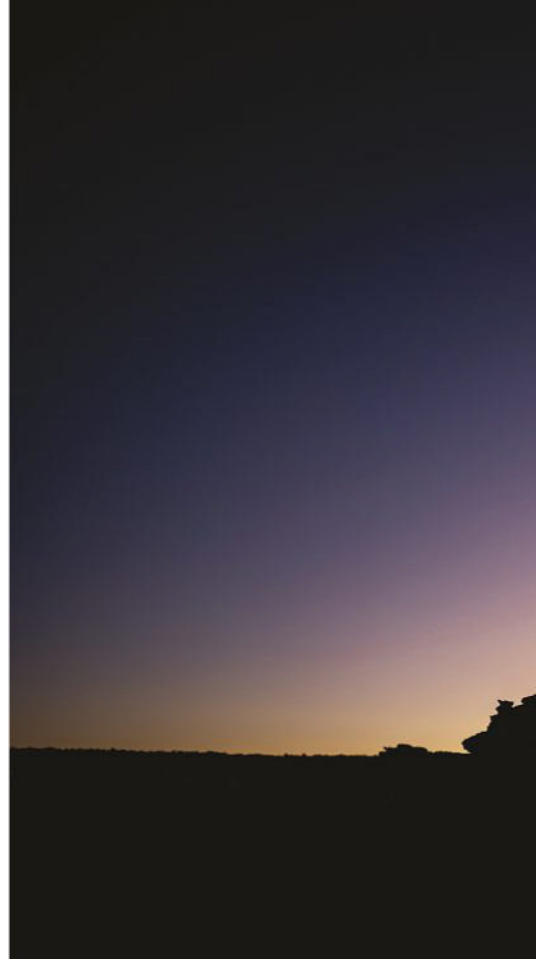
Where? Follow Voortrekker Street east out of Vanrhynsdorp until you cross the Troe-Troe River, then turn right to Botuin.

Rates: R1 000 per night for two people; R600 per person single rate.

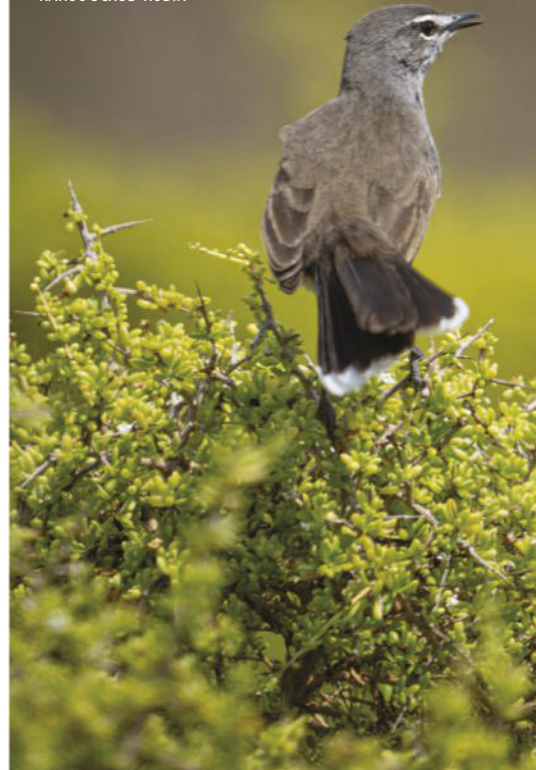
Contact: 027 471 4083; botuin.co.za



Ask Salome about her "Shy Five" list, which includes aardvark, bat-eared fox, elephant shrew, antlion and the rock grasshopper. All are resident in the area – you might see one on a walk or a drive.



KAROO SCRUB-ROBIN





AFRICAN STONECHAT



SALOME WILLEMSE, OWNER



STAY HERE

ELANDS BAY

Vensterklip Guesthouse

Vensterklip Guesthouse has always been one of my favourite getaways – my go-to stayover whenever I'd sneak off in search of a wave. The farm-style accommodation hugs the sedge-lined edge of Verlorenvlei, within easy reach of the legendary point break at Elands Bay.

The landscape is serene and dramatic at the same time, with sandstone outcrops mushrooming here and there along the edge of the vlei, before abruptly scattering onto the Atlantic's icy shoreline.

At sunrise, light bathes the estuary, which cycles through shades of blue, green and brown during the day.

"Yes, the Sandveld can be savage *and* gentle," says Vensterklip proprietor Jane Frances Louw. "It keeps the folks who live here *plat-op-die-aarde*."

Jane brings an earthy style to Vensterklip, where your stay ends up being more of an experience rather than an anonymous visit. "Refined but unpretentious," she says with a laugh, waving her arm across the entire enterprise, which includes the accommodation and campsites, plus a restaurant and Die Rooi Stoor Farm Stall.

It's no wonder artists, wanderers and nature lovers congregate here. Hike into the hills (ask Jane to show you the window-shaped rock formation that gives the place its name), or just gaze out at that undefined line where earth, water and sky meet.



Facilities: You can camp, self-cater in a chalet, or book a stay with meals included. Louw's Manor is a historic farmhouse with a wide stoep overlooking Verlorenvlei, while Scott House is a smaller, private cottage, also with stunning views. Pelican and Fish Eagle are two adjoining cottages, set further back and without the vlei views.

Campers can choose between one of the six larger private stands, each with private ablutions, and one of the five smaller sites with shared ablutions (hot showers and flush toilets).

All sites have braai areas and electricity, and are individually screened for privacy. The campsite is laid out on the grassy verge adjacent to Verlorenvlei.

Die Rooi Stoor Farm Stall sells bric-a-brac, home bakes, local produce, jams and more, while Vensterklip Restaurant serves up delicious West Coast-style cuisine.

What else? Visit Diepkloof Rock Shelter (15 km south of Vensterklip) to see rock paintings depicting an eland, early settlers and red handprints. The shell midden found at this Unesco World Heritage Site during an archaeological excavation points to human habitation going back 15 000 years. Contact Barbara Steyn at the Elands Bay Museum to book a tour: ☎ 083 500 7189. R150 per person, minimum two people.

Surfers, rejoice! Elands Bay boasts a superb left point break, but you must be experienced (and preferably goofy) to handle this fast and steep wave.

Where? Vensterklip is about 5,4 km inland from Elands Bay, off the R366.

Rates: Louw's Manor sleeps up to 10 people; R3 025 per night. Scott House sleeps three; from R1 650 per night. Fish Eagle Cottage sleeps four; R1 400 per night. Pelican Cottage sleeps three; R1 250 per night. (See the website for more rates.)

Private campsites from R360 per night for two people; campsites with shared ablutions from R290 per night for two.

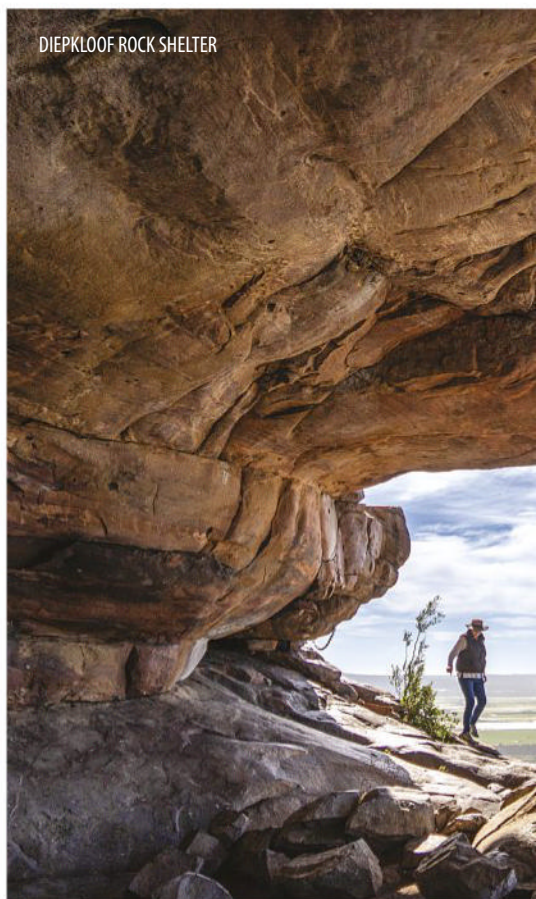
Contact: ☎ 079 500 3335; 🌐 vensterklip.co.za



Verlorenvlei is a protected RAMSAR wetland and sometimes supports thousands of birds, including waders of at least 11 different species. Look out for pied avocet, black-winged stilt, curlews, common sandpiper and little stint.



VERLORENVLEI



DIEPKLOOF ROCK SHELTER



STAY HERE

LUTZVILLE

Lutzville Hotel

Billy Joel's hit song "Piano Man" always pops into my mind when I walk into the Lutzville Hotel's country-style *kroeg*. (There's no way you can call it a "bar", *swaer*...) You can picture the scene: the regular crowd; the old guy "making love" to his brandy and coke; the other oke who is quick with a joke...

Yup, the *kroeg* at the Lutzville Hotel offers equal parts hard times and high fives, but in the end, it's the kind of place where everyone knows your name.

The town of Lutzville unravels languidly along the banks of the Olifants River at the heart of a busy wine-producing region. There are fruit farmers here too, but vineyards blanket most of the area – mostly chenin and sauvignon blanc, which benefit from cool breezes drifting in off the Atlantic.

"I came here 30 years ago – a young girl fresh out of hotel school," says Marileze Fox. She and her brother Boetie own and manage the hotel. "It wasn't always easy, but after three decades here, I've got a thousand stories to tell and dozens of friends who pull in here regularly for a *jol*."

The *kroeg* is a great place to watch a big rugby game. Rise with the rest of the patrons as the national anthem plays before a Springbok test. The bring-and-braai atmosphere makes Loftus seem like a church bazaar – the indoor fireplace is nearly big enough to park a bakkie in!



Facilities: Long passages lead to a dozen en suite rooms, accommodating up to 24 guests in comfortable double beds. Each room has different decor, but all offer quality linen, a tea and coffee station, fans or air conditioning, and a TV with DSTv.

The well-kept garden makes for a relaxing space, while the Foxy Lady Restaurant comes alive at night, serving a range of traditional and local favourites. There's a laundry service and secure parking, too.

What else? Take a drive to the Papendorp estuary, where the Olifants flows into the sea. The estuarine system is a prime birding area, home to flamingos, pelicans, spoonbills and a range of waders.

The hotel often serves special meals, especially around events like Mother's Day. Check their Facebook page for details: "Lutzville Hotel".

Where? In the middle of town at 12 DF Malan Street.

Rates: R1 500 per night for a twin room; R1 000 single rate. Rates include breakfast.

Contact: ☎ 027 217 1513; ✉ mannet@netactive.co.za



Lutzville Vineyards (close to the hotel) offer an excellent wine-pairing experience at their Tasting Room Restaurant, which is open for breakfast and lunch daily (except Sunday). ✉ lutzvillevineyards.com





STAY HERE

LUZVILLE

RuaWilla Guest Cottage

It's a nice and "cool" summer's evening (just 33 °C...) when my son Robert and I pack the bakkie. We've been spearfishing with my friend Vicus de Jager at Jesus se Gat near Strandfontein (see p 65). Being in the water helped us cool down a bit.

It's the last night of our trip in the Namaqua West Coast region and it's hard to say goodbye, as always. We've had a full week of adventure, hearty meals and big belly laughs. I send the Isuzu in the direction of Lutzville, but drive past town towards Vredendal, looking out for the turn-off to RuaWilla Guest Cottage.

Owner Braham de Swardt meets us at the gate to Klipheuwel farm, with his daughter Helene-Mari and Jack Russell (Lexi) with him in the car. After checking in, Braham drives us to his nearby tomato fields so we can pick a few fresh ones. (He also shows me where they dry raisins.)

RuaWilla came about after Helene-Mari was born in 2021. His wife Helena quit her job as a teacher to be at home with their daughter, and they built RuaWilla as an extra source of income for the farm.

When Robert and I light the fire for our braai on the cottage's covered stoep, a hush descends on the farmland. It feels peaceful and safe – "homely" is a good word.

We have to leave very early the next morning, but when we pass the farmhouse I see the lights are already on. These farmers aren't shy to do a bit of work!



Facilities: RuaWilla Guest Cottage is a cosy self-catering getaway, perfect for a couple keen on a farm escape. The cottage consists of an open-plan bedroom with a king-size bed. The en suite bathroom has a large shower, and there's a fully equipped kitchen with a fridge-freezer, gas hob and microwave.

The comfortable living area comes with a flat-screen TV, a fireplace for winter and air conditioning for summer. There's good Wi-Fi, braai facilities and secure on-site parking.

What else? Guests can hike or mountain bike in the vineyards. During harvest season, you can pick tomatoes and grapes. Get up before sunrise and walk along the farm roads. Listen to the roosters and dogs as they wake up at nearby farms along the Olifants River, and take in the earthy aroma of dust, tomatoes and vineyard dew. Ah, farm life!

Where? RuaWilla is about 5 km from Lutzville and 20 km from Vredendal, next to the R363.

Rates: R1 259 per night, including breakfast.

Contact: ☎ 084 515 1004 (WhatsApp); ✉ braham@vintrioboerdery.co.za
"RuaWilla Guest Cottage" on Facebook

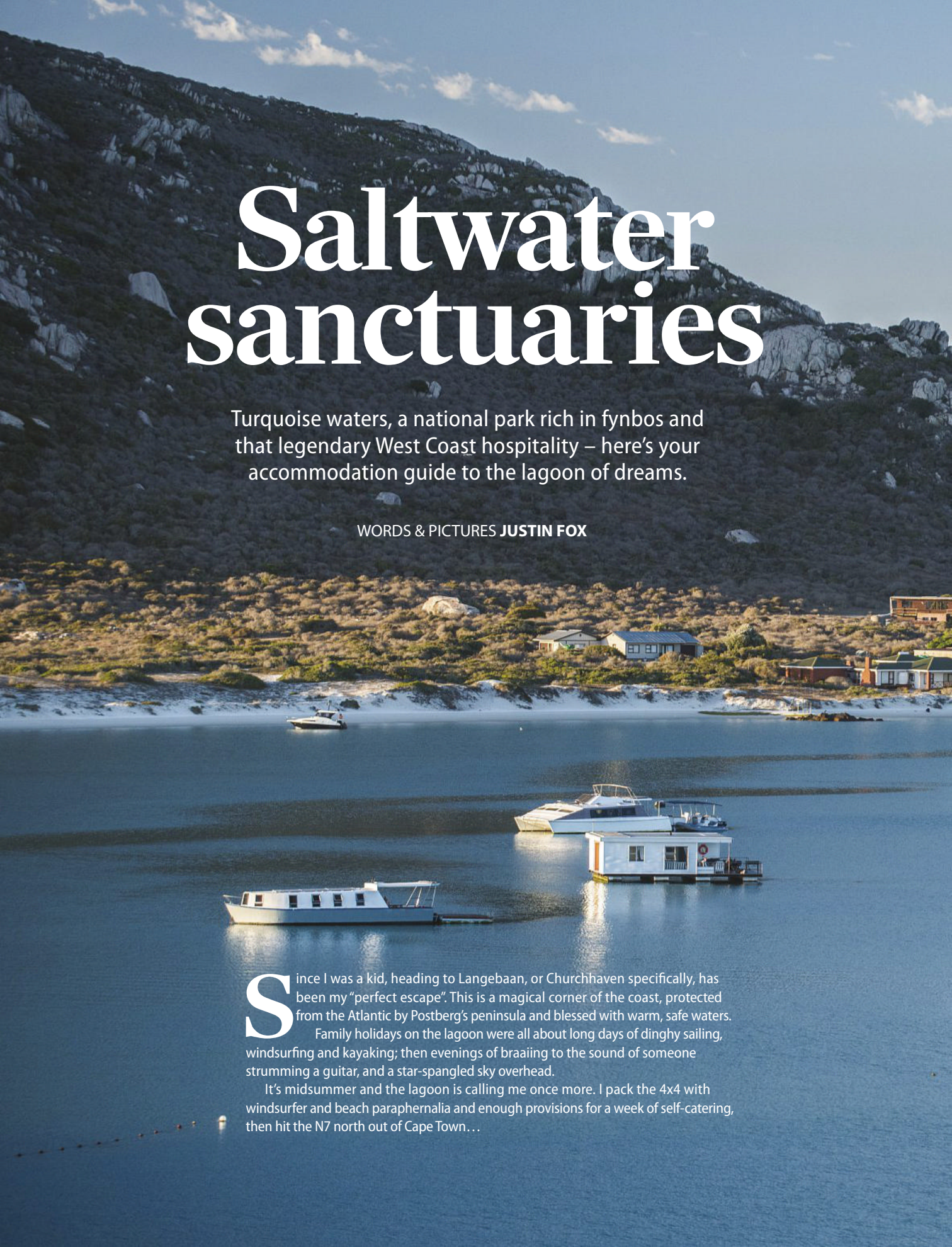


Strandfontein and Doringbaai are less than a half-hour drive away, as is the Olifants River and Papendorp area for birdwatching, water sports and seasonal wildflower viewing.





BRAHAM DE SWARDT, OWNER



Saltwater sanctuaries

Turquoise waters, a national park rich in fynbos and that legendary West Coast hospitality – here's your accommodation guide to the lagoon of dreams.

WORDS & PICTURES **JUSTIN FOX**

Since I was a kid, heading to Langebaan, or Churchhaven specifically, has been my “perfect escape”. This is a magical corner of the coast, protected from the Atlantic by Postberg’s peninsula and blessed with warm, safe waters. Family holidays on the lagoon were all about long days of dinghy sailing, windsurfing and kayaking; then evenings of braaiing to the sound of someone strumming a guitar, and a star-spangled sky overhead.

It’s midsummer and the lagoon is calling me once more. I pack the 4x4 with windsurfer and beach paraphernalia and enough provisions for a week of self-catering, then hit the N7 north out of Cape Town...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justin Fox grew up in Cape Town. While studying at UCT, he'd head to places like Langebaan to dinghy sail or Elands Bay to surf.

After studying further at Oxford, he returned to South Africa and joined Getaway magazine, eventually becoming the editor. These days, he divides his time between freelance travel writing and penning World War II novels. Follow him on Instagram (@justinfoxafrica) or Facebook ("Justin Fox, Author").

STAY HERE

Clockwise from top left: Sunset braai on *Harmony*. A pontoon ferries guests to and from the houseboats. Hartlaub's gulls hang out on the Kraalbaai jetty. Cobus Basson manages the six houseboats. There's a lovely beach at the adjacent Preekstoel. The largest Kraalbaai houseboat can accommodate 20. Four cabins lead off the kitchen-living-dining saloon on *Harmony*.

WEST COAST NATIONAL PARK

Kraalbaai Lifestyle Houseboats

Rounding a bend in the West Coast National Park, the beautiful sweep of Kraalbaai lay stretched out before me with its pod of bobbing houseboats. It's a sight that never fails to lift my spirits.

I was collected at the jetty by Cobus Basson, manager of the six houseboats operated by Kraalbaai Lifestyle Houseboats. "I live in Langebaan, but I'm originally from Paarl," Cobus told me as we puttered on a pontoon towards my accommodation. "When I first moved up here, I wasn't that keen on fishing. Man, did that change! Now I just want to be out on my boat every night. I tell you, this lagoon, it gets under your skin."

Cobus dropped me off at *Harmony*, a floating white box that sleeps eight guests in four cabins, two of which are en suite and all of them with big windows for those sweeping views. There's a wood-panelled living area with a fully equipped kitchen and an aft deck with braai facilities and a lounge. The lounge is exactly where I retired to, with a book and a tall drink, punctuated by swims off the deck in the heavenly lagoon.

If you want to return to shore, simply phone Cobus or one of his team, who reside on a nearby catamaran, and they come to collect you.

Alternatively, there are kayaks and SUPs for hire to get you to the beach or to explore the coastline, sheltered in the lee of limestone cliffs.

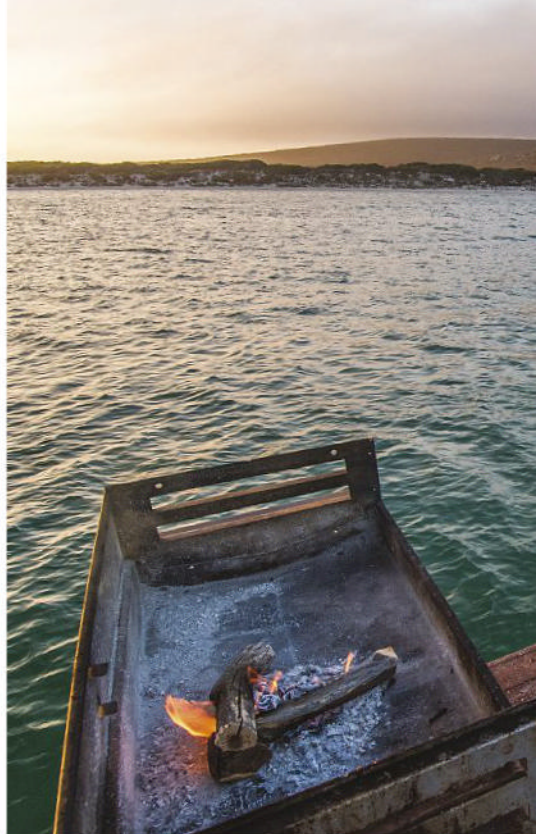
Late afternoon, I was ferried to the beach for a walk to Preekstoel. After the park gates close, you can be alone on this stretch of sand. The birdlife is prolific, with any number of gulls, terns, egrets, flamingos and sacred ibises frequenting the shore.

Back on the boat, I lit the braai as the colours of the lagoon and sky dialled through the spectrum, the granitic crags of Postberg looming above. A glass of crisp Darling Cellars sauvignon blanc and a last swim in the dying light, then chops sizzling on the grid. Later, after watching the stars mirrored in the lagoon, I went to sleep to the houseboat's gentle rock with water lapping beside my pillow.

I woke early to the splashing of a seal slapping its octopus breakfast on the water. Fog had rolled in and my boat was cocooned in utter stillness. The thought of leaving was almost too painful to bear. But later, there came Cobus, bobbing out of the mist to collect me.

"Did you go fishing last night?" I asked.

"Ja, of course! We caught so many shad and white stumpnose that I didn't want to come in... could have stayed out all night!"



Facilities: Kraalbaai Lifestyle Houseboats offer six boats, sleeping anything from two to 20 people. They're all fully equipped for self-catering.

What else? There are SUPs, kayaks, e-foils and fishing rods for hire, and the birdwatching is superb. If you get cabin fever, spend the day on the beach or go explore the park (your car will be parked beside the jetty). Excursions to Tsaarsbank or some of the bird hides are highly recommended.

Where? West Coast National Park

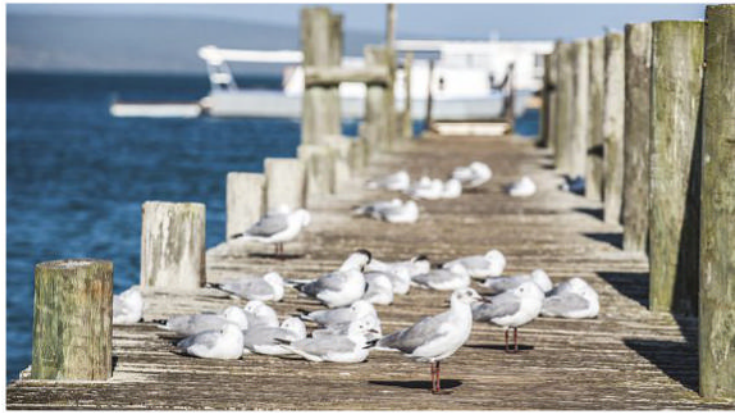
Rates: From R3 800 per night for two people sharing. Park entry costs R82 per adult; R41 per child under 12; free with a Wild Card.

Contact: 076 017 4788

kraalbaailhb.com



Bring your beach toys in summer (beach bats, kayaks, kitesurfers, lilos...) as the lagoon is warm, safe and inviting.



STAY HERE

Clockwise from top left: Jo-Anne's consists of two units set on a dune overlooking the lagoon. Prevailing southeasters make for good windsurfing. Braai and sundowner time. The accommodation is comfortable SANParks style. West Coast National Park's section ranger, William Brink, is a Langebaan local. The lagoon views from both units are stunning.

WEST COAST NATIONAL PARK

Jo-Anne's Beach Cottage

The hamlet of Churchhaven is in a restricted section of the West Coast National Park. Jo-Anne's comprises two adjacent SANParks cottages (Jo-Anne's A and Jo-Anne's B) lying south of the village, isolated on a ridge above a sweeping beach.

I checked into the smaller of the two cottages (Jo-Anne's B) on a perfect summer's afternoon. The tide was out and the sandflats were dotted with waterbirds, including the large pink stain of a flamingo flock.

The cottage is standard SANParks fare: neat, clean and comfortable with an equipped kitchen, leather sofa and armchair. Cottage B has a larger front terrace than A, and a bigger braai area with dreamy views of the lagoon.

A path leads from the cottages through fynbos to the beach. After a swim in the shallows, the southeaster started building, so I rigged my windsurfer and glided out across the lagoon. Back and forth I sailed, between Churchhaven and the bird-thronged sandbanks of the eastern shore.

That evening, section ranger William Brink came by for a chinwag. He's been working for SANParks since 1989 and has spent his career protecting the lagoon environment, first as a land-based ranger on the park's western flank, then as a marine ranger fighting poaching and other threats.

"This place has such a unique quality," he said. "It's mostly still in its natural state – and the restricted areas, like Postberg and Churchhaven, and the no-boating and no-catch zones, help keep it that way. It remains... how can I say... pure."

Bats threaded the evening sky; a spotted eagle-owl hooted nearby. I went to sleep with the windows wide open, listening to the surf booming over the dunes to my nook beside the placid lagoon.

I was up at sunrise to go exploring, walking north to Churchhaven, my feet crunching on a white, limestone path, guinea fowl and Cape spur fowl kicking up a racket in the fynbos on either side. Cottages sat clustered around the old church, with its pretty white belfry and bench set in a graveyard above the beach.

North of the village, I came to marshland thronging with waterfowl, and a lone black harrier swooping up and down on hunting forays. Bontebok grazed and kudu browsed along the ridge, unconcerned by my passing.

Fishermen had just returned from a night in their boats and unloaded the catch on the sand. I stopped for a chat, then ambled back along the beach, the day already growing warm and the myriad blues and greens of the lagoon beginning to work their daily seduction.

Back at the cottage for breakfast, it was clear that Jo-Anne's is something of an avian Heathrow. Eating my muesli on the patio I was surrounded by birds – robin-chats, spur fowl, bulbuls, sunbirds, canaries, mousebirds and weavers, and a black-shouldered kite and a striped mouse, possibly on the kite's breakfast menu.



Facilities: Jo-Anne's comprises two units equipped for self-catering. Cottage A sleeps up to eight in three bedrooms and Cottage B sleeps four in two bedrooms. Both have fully equipped kitchens and braai facilities.

What else? The lagoon is safe and warm, so bring your water gear. The summer southeasters provide a steady cross-shore wind most afternoons, ideal for kitesurfers, windsurfers and wingfoilers. Kayaking and dinghy sailing are also popular, and there's excellent birdwatching, hiking and mountain biking in the park.

Where? Churchhaven, West Coast National Park

Rates: Jo-Anne's A from R3 861 per night; Jo-Anne's B from R2 487 per night. Park entry R82 per adult; children under 12 pay R41. (Free if you have a Wild Card.)

Contact: ☎ 012 428 9111

🌐 sanparks.org



Your day next to the lagoon is largely determined by the tides. At low tide (when the sandbanks are exposed) it's best to do land activities like birding and hiking. Swimming and water activities are better at high tide.



STAY HERE

Clockwise from top left: Black Eagle's Rest lies on a ridge above Club Mykonos at the northern end of Langebaan. Take an evening stroll in picturesque Sandbaai. The brand-new units are comfortably appointed – the complex is the brainchild of Rudi Erasmus. The units' patios are great for evening braais. There are also plunge pools, and mopeds for hire.

LANGEBAAN

Black Eagle's Rest

This brand-new self-catering complex is in Oliphantskop Private Nature Reserve, overlooking Saldanha Bay. True to its name, a pair of Verreaux's eagles (black eagles) frequents the property, offering the possibility of close encounters.

Set on a two-hectare site, the complex has seven apartments, stylishly done in muted greys with all the mod cons: fully equipped kitchens, big-screen TVs and a braai patio with fine views of Club Mykonos and the bay beyond, as well as two plunge pools to cool off on hot summer days.

Black Eagle's Rest is about 5 km north-east of Langebaan centre. It was high season during my visit and the town was heaving, so it was nice to be able to escape the bustle.

Guests spend the evenings on their private patios, tending to braai fires and watching the sun cast a golden path across the water as it sinks behind the Saldanha peninsula. Slowly the lights start coming on around the rim of the bay, the eagles return to roost, the last boats make for home and the stars start filling the sky.

Alternatively, head into town for a sunset stroll along Langebaan Beach, which is usually thronging with dog walkers and evening swimmers; or amble into picturesque "old Langebaan" along the Sandbaai shore. Here you'll find the gracious homes of a bygone era, perched on the water's edge with boating equipment of every kind on the lawns.

Dinner? Pick an old favourite like Pearly's, Friday Island or Die Strandloper, which is right on the beach and offers views of the channel and the Postberg peninsula. Or buy seafood straight off the boats to cook at home, and wash it down with a crisp white wine from a West Coast vineyard like Groote Post or Fryer's Cove.

Arriving back one evening, I met Black Eagle's owner Rudi Erasmus, who invited me up to one of his large apartments with views of the bay. "We're still expanding," he said. "There's a big swimming pool to come and a hall at the back that can be used as a wedding venue or the like – and another three units."

"How did you find this spot?" I asked.

"It was actually my daughter who discovered it; she brought me up here during Covid times. I knew immediately that it was a place of healing. I had a scrap-metal business, with outlets all over the Western Cape, but stepped away from the dealership to develop Black Eagle's Rest. It's a little slice of heaven."



Facilities: There are seven units – three twin-sleepers and four four-sleepers – each with a kitchen and braai.

What else? There's a mountain-bike trail in the nature reserve. You can also hire a moped, a jeep or a boat.

Where? Just off the MR559 (towards Mykonos), north of Langebaan.

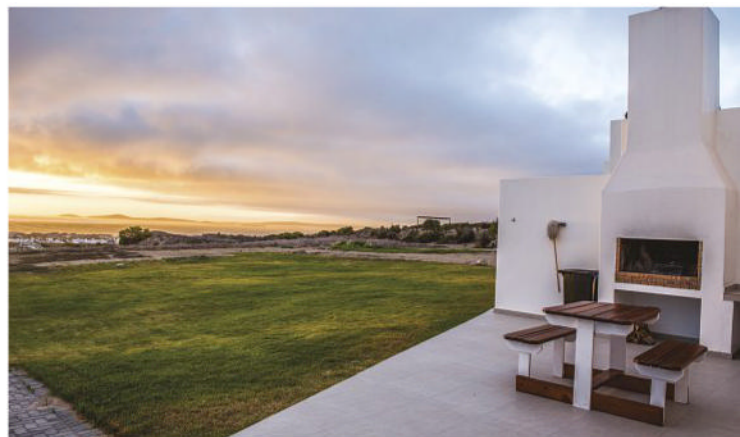
Rates: Low season R1 500 per night for a twin-sleeper and R2 200 for a four-sleeper. R1 890 and R2 800 in high season, respectively.

Contact: 082 553 6160

blackeaglesrest.co.za



Bring a pair of binoculars and see if you can spot the resident Verreaux's eagles. Owls are also active on the property at night.



STAY HERE

Clockwise from top left: The house and fynbos garden sit right on the beach. A library, sofas and armchairs invite evening reading. The kitchen and covered braai area are decorated in Afro-surfing chic. Drag your beach toys straight from the basement onto the sand. The bedrooms are filled with Cape antiques. Book a guided kayak trip with Gravity Adventures.

LANGEBAAN

Indigo Blue Beach House

Just metres from the water's edge, in the heart of old Langebaan, you'll find this beautiful beach house in a garden of fynbos. The interiors are tastefully done in blues and whites, with antique furniture and decorative elements that include surfboards, fenders, buoys and even an old brass foghorn.

Owner Andrew Kellett grew up holidaying in Langebaan – fishing, water-skiing and diving for crayfish – back when the lagoon was surrounded by undeveloped farmland. His parents had always been keen to buy a house of their own in the area and everything fell into place in the early 1990s when they sold their home in Camps Bay and bought the beachfront property that was to become Indigo Blue.

For many years, the house was the Kelletts' much-loved family holiday home. As time went on, however, the cost of owning the property increased dramatically and it became clear that the house would need to be sold.

That's when Andrew stepped in, did some renovations and transformed the place into an open, light-filled space with an Afro-beach vibe.

The lounge (with a library of books about the region and a great selection of novels) overlooks the beach. With the front doors open, you can let the colours, sounds and scents of the lagoon into the house. The big kitchen is a wonderful place for entertaining, with a long wooden table, Bluetooth sound system, wood-fired stove and longboards in the rafters.

Outside, there are hammocks, swings and hanging chairs, and a KolKol wood-fired hot tub and shower. The house also has four outside dining areas, each for different light and wind conditions, including a large, covered courtyard with a braai at the back to escape the southeaster.

The basement is filled with beach gear, and the doors open right onto the shore. I grabbed one of the kayaks and went exploring, first paddling south past Langebaan Yacht Club to where fishermen cast their lines from the rocks; then north to Schaapen Island where kitesurfers flashed back and forth in colourful flight.

Also on the property is Baby Blue, a studio flat above and behind the main house and decorated in a similar style. Guests make use of the same facilities (kayaks, SUPs etc.) as Indigo Blue.

In the evening, after a last swim in the lagoon, I sat in a wooden armchair on the terrace with a book (appropriately, *A West Coast Odyssey* by Gabriel, Louise and Nikolai Athiros & Mike Turner, 2008) from the house library, with the French doors wide open, a glass of wine at hand and the lapping waves of the incoming tide just metres away.



Facilities: Indigo Blue sleeps six to eight people in three bedrooms. Baby Blue is an adjacent open-plan studio flat that sleeps two, with a small loft for children.

What else? Guests can hire the semi-rigid inflatable *Balega* (with a skipper) for lagoon touring, fishing or water-skiing. If you bring your own boat, you can use the Baby Blue mooring in front of the house.

Where? Basson Street, off Lagoon Crescent, Langebaan

Rates: Indigo Blue from R7 750 to R9 500 per night, depending on the season. Baby Blue from R1 950 to R2 550 per night.

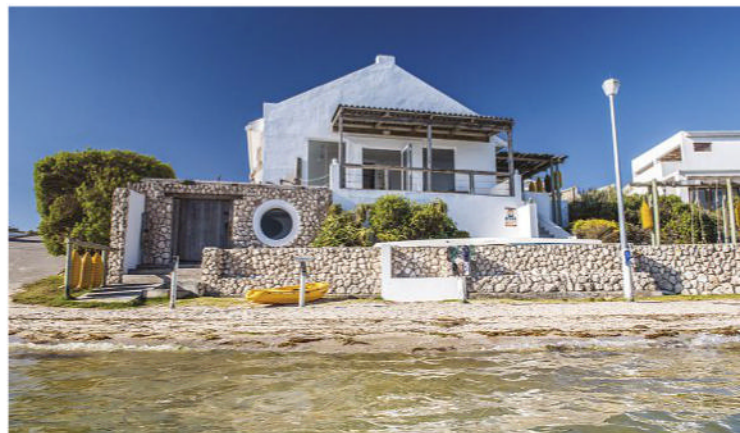
Contact: 021 683 3698

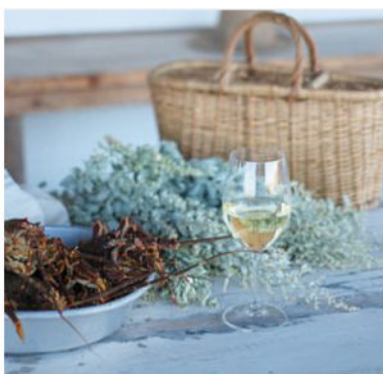
082 692 4399

adventure@gravity.co.za

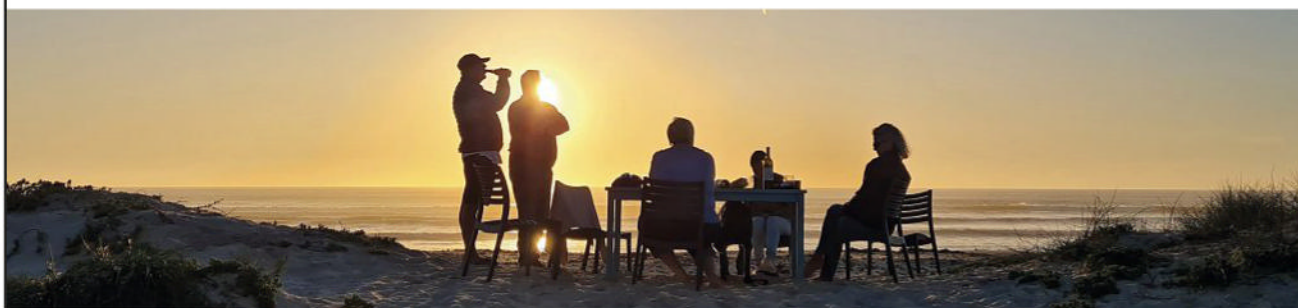


Book a guided kayaking trip with Gravity Adventures at a discounted rate for Indigo residents.
Contact Hugo: 083 662 2571





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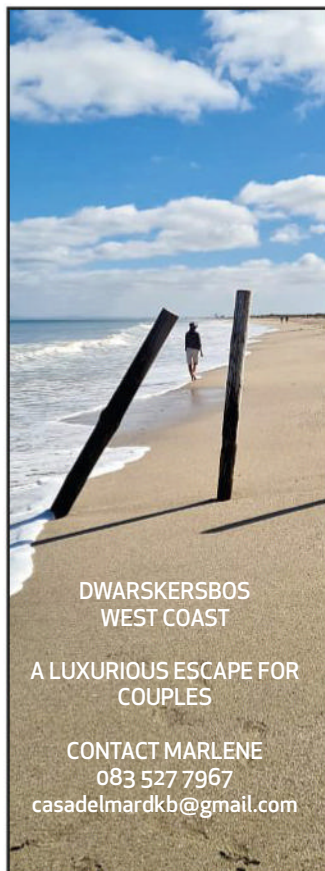
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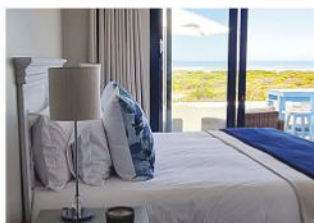
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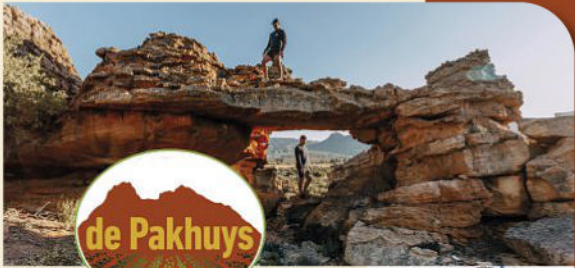
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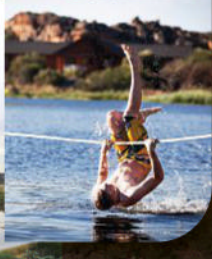
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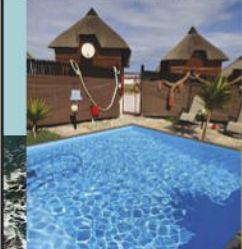
Situated approximately 300 meters from the beach. Here visitors are free to meander along a picturesque 14 km shoreline.




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The campsites consist of **10 camping stands**, each with their own braai facilities, a tap with running water, electrical points and lights and 2 communal ablution facilities.

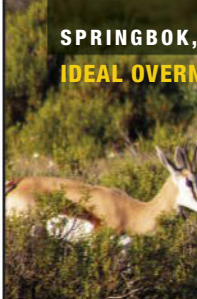
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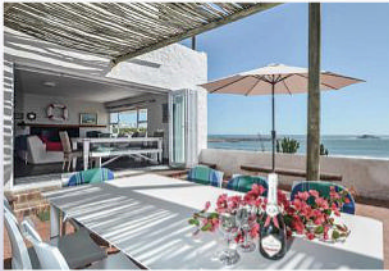
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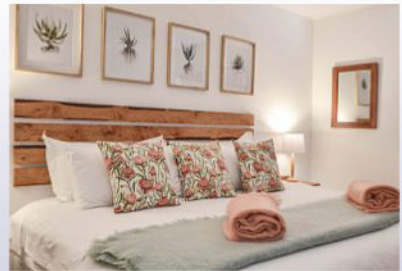
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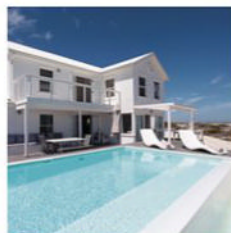
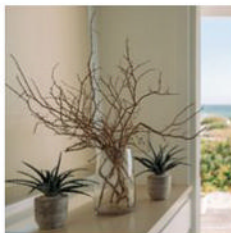
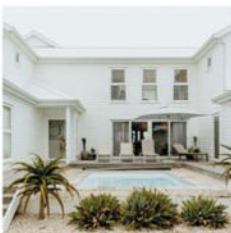
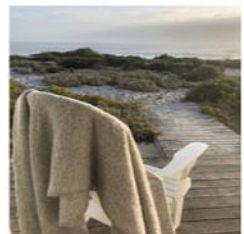
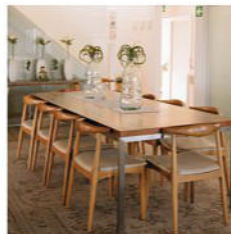
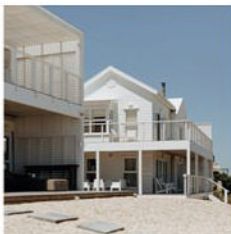
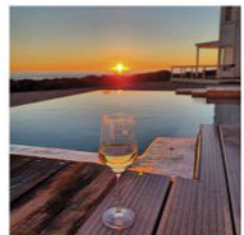
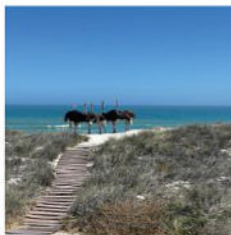
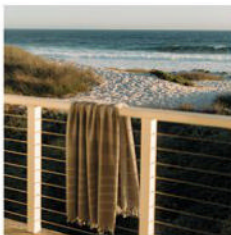
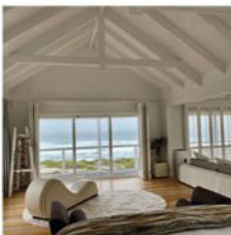
Self-catering for 8 guests | Atlantic beach front with a view of picturesque Yzerfontein harbour | Walking distance from coffee shops | Indoor braai | Open-plan kitchen and living area | All rooms have a sea view | You might spot whales in season and are bound to see dolphins playing in the surf in front of the house!


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 Yzerfontein - Let's Connect:
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Taking a wrong turn can be a good thing, writes **Biënne Huisman** from the Swartland town of Darling.

What struck me at the Darling Museum was a floral dress with wispy lace panels, lace-trimmed sleeves and a dainty, knotted *tjaalie*. I'd wear that! An adjacent panel announced that the pretty frock – just slightly threadbare – was a “voortrekker dress and fichu made for the opening of the Voortrekker Monument in 1949”.

Pastorie Street (devoid of ox-wagons these days) runs next to the Darling Museum and leads to Evita se Perron and Boerassic Park, the town's renowned railway station theatre and satirical garden. Sun beating down, I ambled along the road past the wide Victorian stoep of the Darling Lodge Guest House, and the Wippelvoetjies kindergarten. I had set off with the intention of doing the Darling Museum's “Mystery Trail” – with riddles and audio notes hidden at historic points around town – but I was now veering off.

Earlier in the day, I'd woken up in Yzerfontein. Drinking my morning coffee, breathing lungfuls of salty air while watching ostriches graze from the back door, a plan took shape. Driving the 25 km to Darling, I had been sure of my mission.

It was the weekend and I wanted tickets for a Pieter-Dirk Uys show at Evita se Perron. The new year was just starting – 2026 – and the world seemed to be imploding with chaos and fearful headlines. In times such as these, our sole prophets are the satirists: those capable of teasing humour from horror to shape the truths that guide us. Yes, I thought. To a Pieter-Dirk Uys show I must go.

Now 80 years old, Uys has done his part poking fun at politics and life. During a Zoom interview soon after Covid, he told me the story of Evita se Perron. Turns out it all started with a wrong turn on a road trip on 27 April 1995 – the anniversary of South Africa's historic election

and our very first Freedom Day – and a chance encounter with a shattered Victorian house with skew shutters. “Like an old lady without teeth,” in his words.

Uys relayed: “I looked at it and thought: Oh my God. I've got to buy this house!” Renovations over six months were hampered by snakes, which were trapped by local snake catcher Oom Jopie and released “in the gardens of men from the Broederbond”, Uys recalled, laughing.

At an initial rent of R50 per month, the town's old railway station became the home of his alter ego, Tannie Evita, a colourful diva soon engrained in the Darling community. For example, Tannie Evita once famously emerged from an HIV-testing trailer and crooned to the assembled crowd: “I'm not pregnant!”

During the 2020 lockdown, Evita se Perron was in trouble. Queuing in Darling's Spar, clutching toilet rolls for stockpiling, Uys started chatting with Frits van Ryneveld and Hentie van der Merwe, the founders of Darling Sweets: “At the time the Perron was closed and I'd had to retrench everybody. It was hard. Hentie and Fritsie said, if you ever think of selling, talk to us. I said to them: I'm talking...”

And so, the historic property with its anti-apartheid memorabilia found new keepers, with Tannie Evita's shows continuing.

On that hot summer's day of my visit to Darling, a kindly woman at Evita se Perron informed me that alas, there were no shows that weekend as Uys was out of town.

Ouch.

I left, endeavouring to be back. And to book on Quicket next time.

A different kind of truth emerged at 1910 The Old Forge Bar & Restaurant a few blocks away in Lang Street. On the shaded lawn, local maths teacher Glyn Lewis performed renditions of Dolly Parton and Sixto Rodriguez, as the restaurant's large ginger cat purred at my feet.

Later, at Darling Lodge Guest House, it was quiet. In a succulent garden next to a swimming pool, even the weavers hushed as the sky's edges turned pink, twilight silhouetted against blue gum trees.

I sipped a Darling Brew Slow Tortoise beer. Also seated by the pool were two German guests. I watched the man adjust a cushion behind his elderly mother's head. A moment of utter peace.

While my mission had gone rogue, the reconfigured route had turned out beautifully. That day, a joyful wispy dress, a well-fed marmalade cat and a gentle German seemed to be markers that everything might be okay. Could there be a lesson here? Maybe this: How to take a wrong turn and keep on turning, but exuberantly.

EXPLORE DARLING Get your ticket and trail map for the Mystery Trail at the Darling Museum (R35 per person); darlingmuseum.org.za. To book for shows at Evita se Perron, see quicket.co.za. Upcoming shows include Evita@90, Tannie Evita Praat Kaktus and The Echo of A Noise. Biënne stayed at Darling Lodge Guest House: darlinglodge.co.za.



Under the radar

In March this year, I was heading back to Cape Town in my AutoGyro MTOsport gyrocopter, after attending the Springbok Fly-In – an annual gathering of around 50 planes from around the country. Fellow Capetonian Martin Venn (who also flies commercially for Safair) flew in formation with me, in his Scheibe SF-25 Falke motor-glider.

Both aircraft have similar cruising speeds (130 – 160 km/h), which made air-to-air photography easier. We left Springbok early and flew across Namaqualand to Hondeklip Bay. From there, we kept to the coast. We landed at Doringbaai for breakfast (and to refuel), before continuing south.

As we came around Baboon Point at Elands Bay, Martin dropped low over the water just behind the backline, giving me a lovely composition with the plane and its shadow visible through the turquoise water.

In total, we spent about four and a half hours in the air. We were back in Cape Town well before sunset.

All flights along the West Coast are special, but this one I'll remember for a long time!

– Jean Tresfon

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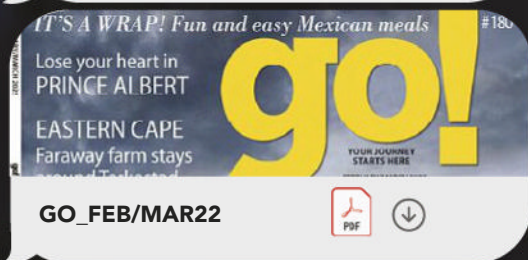
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