

go! Karoo

2026

Your guide to slowing down

23

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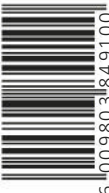
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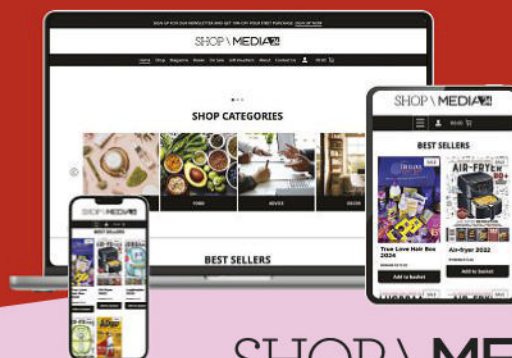


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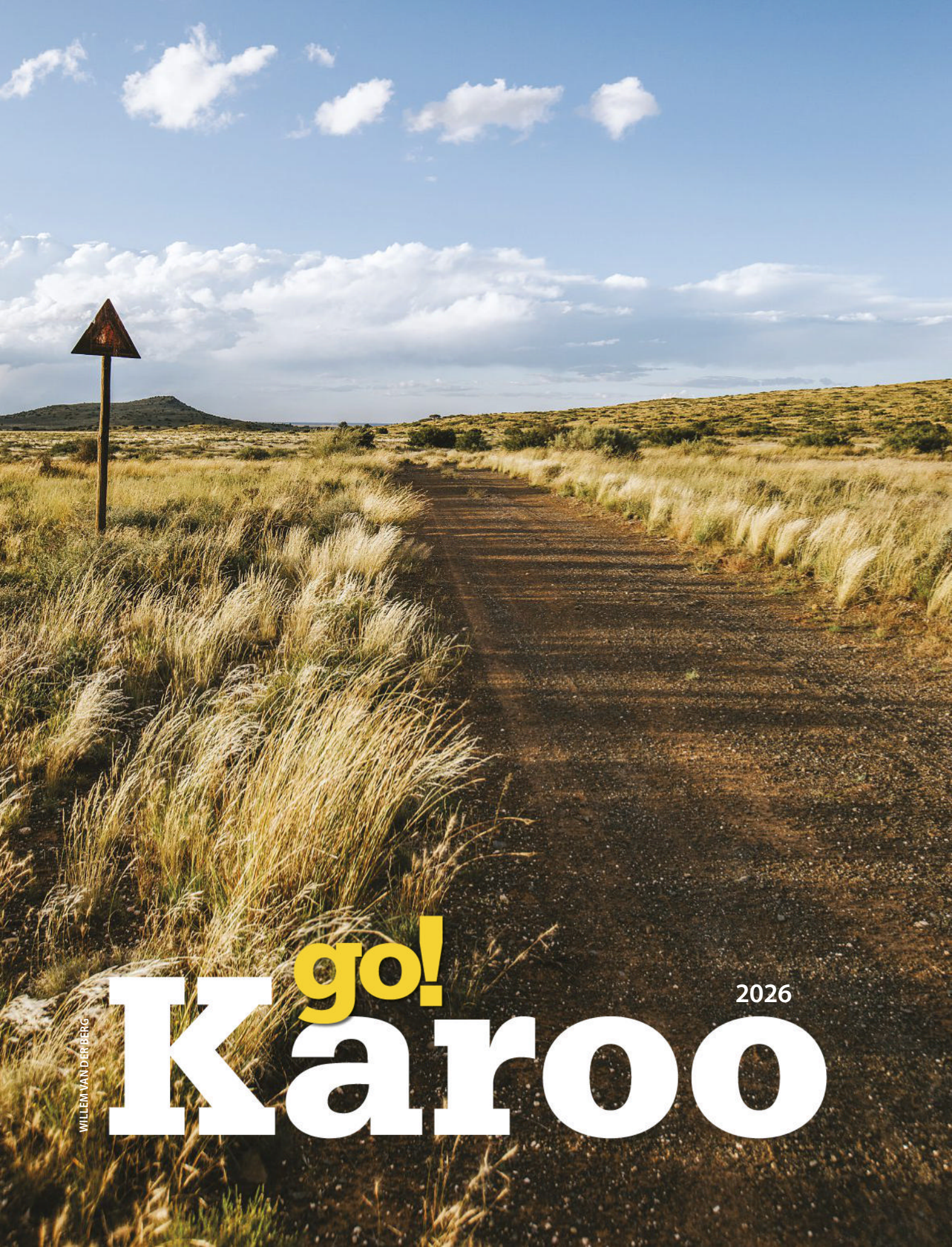


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WILLEM VAN DER BERG

go! **Karoo**

2026

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EDITOR'S LETTER



In the Karoo, the landscapes demand that you look at them differently: some squinty-eyed horizon-gazing here, late-night Amarula-boasted Milky Way watching there... And, if you're open to doing that, you might end up looking at *yourself* a bit differently, too. That's because the Karoo operates on an entirely different time frame to humans.

This self-invented "age" that we're in, the Anthropocene, in which we're mining and polluting and driving animals to extinction? It's only the most recent chapter in the story of the Karoo, which has been around in some form or another for as long as 300 million years. Back then, you could have walked to Madagascar, Australia, South America and even Antarctica – the supercontinent Gondwana hadn't split up yet. Along the way, the Karoo has seen two major extinction events: at the end of the Permian and Triassic periods.

It's safe to say that the Karoo has dealt with change before and has come out the other side just fine. (Although the same can't be said for all the animals and plant life that went extinct...)

I grew up in the Karoo. During the now almost 50 years of my life, I have also seen it change. Some changes are great – there are better coffee shops in every town, for example – but other changes are not so great, such as the constant threat of fracking. And as much as I like the idea of clean wind energy, I have to admit that I really dislike what the hulking silhouettes of wind turbines have done to the clean, crisp outlines of koppies and ridges all the way from the Tankwa to Victoria West.

(Not to mention their blinking lights at night.)

But that's just me being selfish – and nostalgic. I want the Karoo to be the place I remember as a child. Growing up on a farm in the Cradock district imprinted the Karoo on my very being, like a watermark. It's my heartland. It doesn't matter that I now live in the comparatively lush Overberg in the Western Cape – the Karoo is my home.

A visit to the Karoo will touch you, too. Most of us live in cities, or large, busy towns. The Karoo still offers a potent antidote to all of that, with its wide open spaces and silences; a still point against which you can take stock of your own life. How big are your problems, really? Take a walk to the nearest windmill (maybe the silhouettes of windmills irked another guy called Toast three generations ago?) on the guest farm where you're staying. Have a chat to the lopsided prickly pear that has seen better days – and lived. Speak your worries to a lichen-covered rock that has been lying there for hundreds and thousands of years. Listen to the korhaan, calling at sunset – it has a message for you.

See how your life and the Karoo are cosmically intertwined? That's why you go to there: Not to be the person you are on Instagram, or at work, or in a Teams meeting – you go there to be the human you are in the universe.

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go! Karoo

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Published by Media24, a division of Naspers, 40 Heerengracht, Cape Town, 8001

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CHECK THIS!

A gaggle of geese waddle towards home next to the R58 between Norvalspont and Venterstad, close to the Gariep Dam in the Eastern Cape. You never know what surprises await on a Karoo back road!

PICTURE **TOAST COETZER**







Just imagine

Even though **Anelia Heese** now lives in Germany, she'll never forget the landscape of her youth. It's in her blood.

ILLUSTRATION **AIMEE LINDEQUE**

I have been living in Europe for more than a decade now, and I've become used to the oddities of life here. I've trained myself to become irritated when a train is only a minute late; I carry a dangerous amount of cash because most shops don't have card machines; and I always wait for the little green man to appear before I cross a street. You adapt. You even learn to appreciate your new home. But falling in *love* with Germany's villages and their meticulous little houses, or its cities with their insatiable lights? That's a whole different matter.

JM Coetzee is also an expat living abroad these days, but he

was onto something when he was interviewed in 1984 and said: "I do believe that people can only be in love with one landscape in their lifetime. One can appreciate and enjoy many geographies, but there is only one that one feels in one's bones."

To me, that landscape – the roads I travel in my imagination to stave off the darkness – is the Karoo.

It's difficult to write about the Karoo without resorting to clichés. The Karoo is like a Sunday lunch at your parents' house when you're an adult. The familiarity remains cosy, even though you're older, different.

But how can the Karoo compete

with the Allgäu Alps in Germany (so charming!), or the magical forests of Galicia in Spain, the holy rocks of Meteora in Greece, or vast Gippsland in Australia? How can I be so in love with *barrenness*?

Maybe the attraction of the Karoo lies in the transcendental nature of the place. Even experts say the Karoo can't be defined, as if the plains resist certainty. Rather, it's a place of transition: The Karoo starts and ends somewhere at the intersection of rainfall, geology and vegetation – and where the locals decide the borders should be drawn.

But when you enter the Karoo, you know it immediately, whether you're an expert or not. It's the

unobstructed horizon, the *bossies*, the brown rock, the harsh light, the sun-baked road signs, the rickety windmills, the sheep staring over desolate plains while chewing on silvery grass, the terrifying silence, that smell...

My childhood years on a farm near Augrabies in the Northern Cape were characterised by long hours on the road. I suppose you could say the farm was “centrally located” since Cape Town, Joburg and PE were each about a thousand-kilometre drive away. And to get to any of those cities, you had to travel through the Karoo.

To me, the Karoo starts near the single-lane bridge at Neilersdrift, because that’s the last time you see the Orange River. En route to Brandvlei, the plains roll open – outside the car window, and somewhere inside you. When the radio signal drops off, you hope the CD player will handle the scratches on your Gert Vlok Nel album because you need his particular brand of melancholy to see you through.

On the Sak River road, you realise: Now it’s just you, one spare wheel and that jack you probably have no idea how to operate.

Speaking of spare wheels, we once got a second puncture (we’d already used the spare) about 10km outside Williston. Dad had to walk to get help, and Mom bamboozled us into a serious sand-drawing competition, which was judged and rated.

Halfway to town, Dad got a lift from a sheep farmer starting his morning shift, and the local mechanic delivered him back to his stranded family again later that afternoon.

One time in Fraserburg, we

had to wait half a day for a new fan belt. My older brother Gerrie was overwhelmed by a voracious teenage hunger and ate his way through half our consignment of grapes, which we had meant to deliver to a church bazaar near Mossel Bay. Finally back on the road, any grapes that remained – now sour – were chucked out of the windows of our Isuzu KB250 on the Swartberg Pass.

In Britstown, Mom once gave in to tiredness and hunger and took a gamble on a midnight garage pie. On the way to Victoria West, she started to see double. I was the only passenger and she told me to drive, even though I only had a “farm licence”. During one of her many attempts to rid her body of that cursed pie, a truck driver pulled over and offered us water from a two-litre Coke bottle.

In Brandvlei, we once waited an hour or more for fuel because the owner of the filling station – and the only staff member – had taken a siesta until 3 pm.

On the Kliprand road, on the way back from my graduation ceremony in Stellenbosch, my VW Golf gave in. It seemed to be losing water and kept on overheating. Freshly graduated and thus overconfident, I had decided to do the long drive alone. After all, I had Google Maps, which told me that this particular route would be the fastest. It wasn’t. By noon, I was climbing over fences and walking through the veld in my fancy sandals to scoop water from animal troughs with my coffee flask. I saw more than one lamb dead from thirst.

When I reached Pofadder, the petrol attendant gave me a drum filled with water and I managed to limp the rest of the way home to Augrabies.

These incidents sound clichéd, but the Karoo retains its allure because the landscape breaks open the vulnerability inside you; it strips you of all illusions until you’re as naked as the surrounding plains.

When you drive the final 80km into a rural town that was last busy when the railway still worked, you’ve become quite honest with yourself: Maybe it’s time to leave that job, that boyfriend, that box of chocolates...

In an era where we are expected to be connected to the rest of the world at all times (one study has shown that South Africans spend up to 58% of their day on a smartphone), the plains of the Karoo can give us the rare gift of boredom.

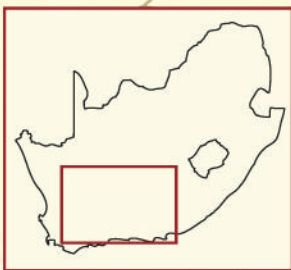
Psychologists are only now starting to understand the impact of screen addiction. Our ability to concentrate is weakening; children expect constant external input at all times – an endless dopamine-driven cycle that negatively influences their ability to process emotion and be creative.

Give children the freedom to be bored! They need a place like the Karoo to practise multiplication tables using telephone poles, to play car cricket, make up ghost stories and think up new rules for Uno.

My daughter was born three weeks ago. I can’t wait to show her the Karoo. When we get there, I hope the iPad battery will be dead and there will be no cellphone reception between Niekerkshoop and Mooidam, just like when I was a child.

Because I’m old and experienced enough to know this fact: If you run into trouble in the Karoo, someone will come to your aid. You might just have to wait a while.

THE KAROO



Northern Cape

UPPER KAROO

HARDEMANS KAROO

HANTAM KAROO

ROGGEVELD

TANKWA KAROO

CERES KAROO

MOORDENAARS KAROO

KOUP

LITTLE KAROO

Western Cape

"Hantam" is possibly derived from the Nama word *heyntema*, which refers to the pelargonium plant, or geranium, which grows in the Hantam mountains. It could also originate from *!han=ami* which means "mountain where red, edible bulbs grow".

In 1774, the Swedish botanist Carl Peter Thunberg named the Roggeveld Plateau after a species of wild rye (*Secale africanum*) – or *wilderog* – that grows there. Due to climate change and overgrazing, the species is critically endangered today.

You guessed it; it's not easy to make a living here. It's only for *harde manne!*

In older writings Koup is often spelled "Goup" or "Ghoup". It's a Khoekhoe word that refers to the specific fat around an animal's organs. Perhaps when you look out over the plains after good rainfall, the lush Bushman grass surrounding the dark dolerite rocks looks like caul fat around an organ.

Locals say the name Moordenaars Karoo has to do with the "murderous" weather conditions – from boiling hot to freezing cold.





Free State FALSE KAROO

GREAT KAROO

DIE VLAK

Eastern Cape

CAMDEBOO

NOORSVELD

The Noorsveld gets its name from *Euphorbia coerulescens*, or *noorsdoring*. The British called this cactus "gorse" after a similar, spiny plant back home. Somewhere along the way, "gorse" became "noors".

Indian Ocean



A photograph of a rusted railway track in a dry, grassy Karoo landscape under a clear blue sky. The track is partially obscured by dense, low-lying vegetation. In the background, there are rolling hills and a utility pole with wires.

Railway to nowhere

It has been a long time since a train ran along
the line between Hutchinson and Calvinia.
We went looking for whispers of that era
blowing across the high Karoo plains.

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**

The remains of the lonely train track near Beyersberg
between Carnarvon and Pampoenpoort.

No one needs to go to Hutchinson anymore. The station buildings in this erstwhile railway town, south-east of Victoria West, are sun-baked ruins. Chickens forage between the tracks.

"A train passes on the middle line every now and again," says Carleton Jonker inside his shop, colloquially known as Jonkies.

The people around here call the town "Hakkieson", and many of the old railway houses still offer people shelter against the Karoo's sun, frost and wind.

As a child, Carleton experienced some of Hutchinson's best years. "It was a neat place," he says. "We were on the main line between Cape Town and Johannesburg. The Calvinia line also branched off here. But the railway has been dead for a long time."

I'll be following that old line to Calvinia over the next few days. I want to see if any stories have been left along the tracks, and I want to meet the people who still make a living in this remote part of the country.

The last train to Calvinia ran in 2001 – a venture by railway tourism pioneer Boon Boonzaaier. His so-called Hantam Safari, which doubled as a flower tour, took a train full of people up the line.

Shopkeeper Carleton Jonker's father was a policeman and his

mother was a teacher. "Both have passed away," he says. "I'm the only one left. I'll stay here until someone chases me off. But it doesn't look like anyone really wants Hakkieson..."

It's late afternoon on Freedom Day, 27 April – a Monday. There's movement on Hakkieson's sports field where rusty rugby posts stand in the scrub and stone, today doubling as goalposts.

A bakkie has just dropped off the soccer team from Victoria West. The Hutchinson side is pulling on their lucerne-green kit – the clothing is much too big for most of the players. Two of them have boots. The rest wear takkies or whatever footwear they own.

"We play better than we look. You'll see," says Jeandré Blom as a small crowd gathers on the sidelines.

The match kicks off. The Hutchinson team attacks like a caracal. Jeandré and his brother Tyron slip past the defenders twice – the score is 2-0. Cheers float on the cool autumn air above the broken roofs of Hutchinson Station.

By halftime, the teams are tied at 3-3. I have to leave, but I message Jeandré later to find out what happened.

"It was a great game," he writes back. "We won 5-3. Thanks for watching."

It's a pleasure, Jeandré. It was good to see something beautiful can survive even in a place that seems hopeless from the outside.

Jan Tieties of the Pramberg

The Calvinia branch line was built after the Anglo-Boer War. The section between Victoria West Road and Pampoenpoort, 63 km north-west of Victoria West, was opened on 1 May 1905. Victoria West Road was then renamed in honour of the governor of the Cape colony at the time, Sir Walter Francis Hely-Hutchinson.

Somewhere in the Pramberg between Victoria West and Pampoenpoort, there are said to be images of the very first steam trains to traverse the Karoo, scratched into rocks. But no one I've asked has ever seen them. The only man who might know something is a farmer called Jan Swiegers, or Jan Tieties as he has come to be known. People tell me he's a bit of recluse – a man who doesn't enjoy leaving his mountain enclave. I give him a call and ask about the engravings. He agrees to meet me the next morning, at a farm called Kweekwa between Victoria West and Pampoenpoort.

My first impression of Jan Tieties of the Pramberg is one I'll never forget. He just appears next to me, as if out of nowhere. His grey hair gathers like thunderclouds around his head and his eyes are squinty and red, like a sunset. There's *kapokbos* in his stubble and the hoarse whisper of the wind in his voice.

"So, jy wil nou klippe loop kyk?"

His son – also Jan – accompanies us, as do their two sheepdogs. We

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: In years gone by, the station at Hutchinson was a meeting place for many a traveller. Carleton Jonker, shopkeeper, knows he won't become a rich man here, but this is his home. The town's brown, gravelly soccer pitch. Trains still pass through, but they don't stop anymore. Hutchinson locals assemble to watch the soccer match against Victoria West. Tyron Blom warms up by doing a couple of pull-ups on the old rugby poles.



UPPER KAROO

drive into the veld in their old Toyota bakkie. Jan calls out every *bossie* by its local and scientific names, and he points out the water level of every borehole we pass. He can tell the story of almost all the farms in the district.

"If I could, I'd spend all my time walking in the veld," he says. "But my hip is not right – I need to go to hospital to fix it. I've never stayed the night in a hospital, except the night I was born, and I can't remember that."

Jan stops in the middle of a wide plain.

"Have a look around here," he says. "There are plenty of trains on these rocks."

It's true! I find engravings of trains with a single wagon, and trains with a series of wagons. There are trains next to station buildings and water tanks. Railway tracks run from dolerite rock to dolerite rock and clouds of steam rise in the sea of bushman grass.

"Back then, people called it the Makadas train," Jan says. "It comes from 'make a dash', because people were always running to catch it."

He never rode the train himself, but he remembers one or two times that his family used the train to transport wool. Jan grew up near Strydenburg, but his family has long had land in the Pramberg.

"*Maar wat*, once trucks became more common, people used them instead of trains. Farmers used to make so much money from wool that they could buy their own trucks. In the 1950s, there was wealth here like we haven't experienced since. Farmers' wives

flew to Cape Town from Victoria West to do their shopping.

Everyone wanted that lifestyle and they overloaded the veld with sheep."

But the Karoo isn't made for that kind of extravagance. "We damaged nature," he says. "We take and take and don't give anything back. It will take 500 years to get our veld healthy again. But try explaining that to someone who just wants to make money."

That's why Jan doesn't buy cars or other material things. He buys land, so that he can conserve as much of the Karoo as possible. Because Jan Tieties is not just a Pramberg farmer; he's as much a part of the ecosystem as the shy aardwolf, the rhebuck on the ridge, the cliffs, the plains and the pale chanting goshawk. His hands feel like *gannabos* and his feet are made of *leiklip*. He is the veld. And that's all he wants to be.

A train for dreamers

The dirt road past Pampoenpoort and onward to Carnarvon runs alongside the Makadas line for most of the way. You can still see the tracks in places. But the line is mostly overgrown.

From Carnarvon, the R63 tar road to Williston hugs the railway line. This section was completed in December 1915. There's a sign for a siding every few kilometres. Some sidings had small stations and others were only a quick stop where people and goods were dropped off or picked up: Biesieslaagte, Heuwels, Droëputs, Goraas.

Then the railway line turns away from the R63 onto the flat

land behind the ridges. Trains don't like rolling landscapes. A dirt road takes me to where the line should be, but there's nothing left except for a strip of ballast – the crushed rock used to stabilise railway tracks.

I follow the line along a jeep track until I find the old Cocopan siding. This is my campsite for the night. I light a fire as the sun sets behind a hill called Stoffelskop. In the distance, I can see pools of water in the Sak River. For a moment I hear the sound of the Makadas approaching.

"*Kerrrak-kerrrak-kerrrak*."

But it's just a korhaan, flapping up towards the evening star.

Someone painted "Railway Bar" on the station building at Williston. Could it be a recent enterprise?

"*Nee wat*, I think the person who painted those words hoped it would become a bar," says AJ van Wyk. He should know, because he and a man called Gert Skippers live right next door to the burnt-out building.

AJ and Gert wish that a train would arrive and pick them up.

"It's too expensive to leave Williston in a taxi," AJ says. "And people don't give free lifts anymore. A train would have been much cheaper. I don't know why things that work are taken away."

"*My broer*, if the train still ran, we could be at the ocean the day after tomorrow," says Gert, joining in the dreaming.

"I'd go to Joburg rather," says AJ. "People say if you want to make money, you have to go there."

Opposite page, from the top: A rock engraving of a locomotive in the Pramberg. There are other engravings too, depicting horses, cars and the names of people. Jan Swiegers, known locally as Jan Tieties, with the Pramberg in the background. "When I'm in the veld, I am healthy," he says.



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Jan "Tieties" Junior with sheepdogs, Lister and Dozer. AJ van Wyk (left) and Gert Skippers in front of the railway house in Williston where their families live under one roof. "We fix it up whenever there are some cents to spare," says AJ. Next door stand the gutted remains of what someone hoped would become a railway bar. Martiens van Wyk from Vrede confirms that things are indeed peaceful on the farm. "It's just the jackals," he says. "They like to give us problems." Koos "Kookwater" Louw prepares to tee off from the Williston golf course.

The full moon rises. It's so quiet I can hear a field mouse sniffing around the nearby sheep droppings.

Next thing, three golf carts come trundling down the railway tracks. It's a strange sight to me, but not to Gert. "*Daai manne* play some serious golf out there," he says.

The golfers are Koos Louw, Andries Louw and Ockie Louw, and their friends Ockie van Schalkwyk and Danie Franken. I meet up with them on one of Williston's oil-sand "greens". Many Karoo courses have putting greens made of a mixture of old oil and fine gravel.

"Our rough is the veld," Andries says as he tries to clear his ball from a clump of *kriedorings*. Danie is rummaging around meerkat burrows for his ball.

Ockie van Schalkwyk farms near the Cocopan siding, where I camped last night.

"We could always hear the train," he says. "But then it started happening less and less, until the railway fell silent. The last time I rode the train was in matric, when I travelled to Cape Town for a cross-country race."

Ockie Louw also farms near the railway line; his farm is called Vrede, west of Williston. He remembers a tannie whose house was right next to the tracks. "When the train driver passed during the day, she'd give him some braai meat. In turn, he wouldn't make too much noise when he came through at night."

Andries has farms closer to Carnarvon – he built fences over the lines when the trains stopped running. "*Jis man*, for so many years after that, I would wake up at night worrying that a train had run into the fences!"

I reach Vrede – Ockie Louw's farm – in the late afternoon and follow a jeep track along the railway line. There are no fences here.

I meet Martiens van Wyk

where he's clearing bits of wire off the road. "The people who removed the tracks left a lot of rubbish everywhere," he says.

He's preventing punctures today, but his main job on the farm is hunting jackals, something that's easier said than done. "They keep me on my toes," he says. "The other day I also found tracks from a hyena, but I have no idea where it lives."

I tell Martiens that I want to camp somewhere and he points towards the border of the farm. "You see that windmill on the hill?"

I look, but I can't see anything.

"There is a bush next to it. You see?"

No.

"Okay, but you will. Just go down the road until you see. It's a good spot to camp."

It takes a few kilometres, but I find everything exactly as Martiens described it: the windmill, the bush and the view of a hill called Jan Swartsberg, named after an infamous sheep rustler who was apprehended in these mountains. The full moon rises. It's so quiet I can hear a field mouse sniffing around the nearby sheep droppings.

A train is a wonderful thing, for sure. But a Karoo night is sacred.

The house with the green roof

Not far from my Vrede campsite, on the other side of the Hoedjies siding, I pass a pretty house with a green roof. It's about two locomotive lengths away from the tracks. Could it have belonged to that tannie that Ockie Louw told me about?

It looks like someone still lives in the house, but it's early on



There's peace and quiet aplenty in the shadow of Jan Swartsberg, on the farm Vrede.

Opposite page, from the top: A certain Klaas Rossouw lies buried under the track ballast at Kootjieskolk. Donovan Victor and Jet the sheepdog in front of the green-roofed house at Hoedjies siding. There isn't much left of the Calvinia Station, but make sure you visit the town museum where you can see one of the old Makadas locomotives.





One of the old railway houses still standing in Kootjieskolk near the Fish River, a tributary of the Sak River.

READ MORE

If you're interested in the history of the railways, look for a book called *Tracks across the veld* (2008) by Boon Boonzaaier – some online second-hand bookstores might have a copy. Boonzaaier was a pioneer in the local train tourism industry. He passed away in 2011.

There's also a comprehensive website about our railway heritage, compiled by Les Pivnic, Charlie Lewis, Bruno Martin and Andrew Deacon. Google "Soul of a Railway" to find it. Some of the dates and information in this article were sourced from this website.

a Sunday morning and I don't think people who seek out such isolation would appreciate a visit. I drive slowly. I look around. No voice calls out, no hand waves me over. I head to Calvinia, but my thoughts still linger at the house's silver gate.

Kootjieskolk Station is 62 km west of Williston, opened on 1 October 1916. Two years later, the last section of the railway line to Calvinia was completed, as well as a 4 km branch line north to the Sak River Station. The Sak River line was built to transport wheat during a short-lived agricultural boom. By the 1960s, crop farming in the area was no more, and the train disappeared. In 1996, this section of line was used to park 18 000 wagons, which were systematically cut into pieces and sold as scrap metal.

Life has drained from the houses in Kootjieskolk, and the graves of people like Piet de Wee and René Rossouw lie buried under heaps of grey ballast. A pale blue gum stands guard.

There are more graves at the Swael siding, including those of two children: Phillipie Brits and Nicky Avenant. Phillipie was 11 days old; Nicky was nine months.

By the time I pull in next to the run-down Calvinia Station, I've decided: I have to go back to that house with the green roof, which is now about 100 km behind me. I have to find out why someone would choose to live in this place of ghosts?

I turn around and drive back. There's a friendly sheepdog waiting for me at the silver gate, as if it was expecting me. A young

man with long, blond hair opens the door. He introduces himself as Donovan Victor.

"I saw you this morning," he says. "It looked like you wanted to stop."

I explain that I didn't want to bother him, but also that I couldn't stop wondering about who lived here – and why.

Donovan smiles an all-knowing smile, like a Karoo Buddha.

"Well, the short answer is that there aren't many other places where you can have this much peace and quiet," he says. "But the longer answer is that life led us here, along many twists and turns."

His father and uncle, who are currently on the neighbouring farm, share the house with him. They're all mechanics and lived in Secunda, Mpumalanga, before moving to Cape Town to look for work. They ended up in Calvinia and started working for the farmers, and they found this little house a year ago.

"You could say we're nomads," Donovan says. "This planet is big and you should see as many places as you can. *Ek hou van haltes, en nie van huise nie* – you can get stuck in a house and stay the same for your entire life, but at each place you pause, you learn new things and you adapt. Change makes life interesting."

He looks at me for a while. "Take this story you're writing. The railway line is interesting to you because it's not the same as it was. *Niks het eintlik doodgeloop nie* – the railway didn't really die, it's just different."

*Life has drained
from the houses in
Kootjieskolk, and
the graves of people
like Piet de Wee and
René Rossouw lie
buried under heaps
of grey ballast.
A pale blue gum
stands guard.*



The poet of Zoar

Born next to Seweweekspoort, in the shadow of the Swartberg, 85-year-old **Hendrik Januarie** has lived many lives, all over the country, and is now back home to tell the stories of his people.

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

When rain clouds gather above Seweweekspoort, locals stand and gaze at them speculatively. Weather shapes life here. The reminder comes from the small, innocuous-looking stream that flows through the poort, criss-crossed 24 times by the gravel road. Most of the time, it's a modest trickle, but as it did during the epic storms of May and June this year, it can roar to life, shifting boulders and smashing trees before it joins the Huis River.

The southern gateway to Seweweekspoort is just opposite Amalienstein and its twin mission town of Zoar, both set along the R62 between Ladismith and Calitzdorp.

This is where the poet and writer Hendrik Januarie lives. His people have a very long association with the poort: His parents and grandparents on both sides of the family lived there, deep in the mountains.

Oom Hendrik was born in Amalienstein in 1941, educated for his first school term at the Lutheran Primary School there, then sent to the English-medium St Agnes in Zoar. His father, also Hendrik Januarie, was a farmer

who never owned land.

I first met Oom Hendrik in April 2025. Reggie Booysen, the foreman at the Lutheran Primary School, introduced me to him. My husband Chris and I were doing research for our latest book, *Klein Karoo Magic*. (You can win a copy! See page 75. – Ed.)

Hendrik and his wife Katrina live in an earth-coloured house in Manuel Crescent, Zoar, where the kitchen is clearly the warm heart of the home. As we enter, there's the inviting smell of biscuits baking in the oven.

Oom Hendrik leads us through to a spacious lounge with a tiled floor, many chairs and some couches arrayed in straight lines along the walls. He holds a church service here every Sunday morning. It's usually just the family, but anyone is welcome.

At one end of the lounge is a large cabinet with a far-from-modern television, the odd framed photograph, a matching coffee serving set, a decorative clock, and to the side, toys, a sewing machine and a Bible.

We settle down to chat with cooldrink and some of Katrina's delicious biscuits.

Oom Hendrik had a varied professional life, working as

a machinist in an embroidery factory in Cape Town, then as a storeman for a Venetian blind company, a nurse at Stikland Hospital, an unqualified teacher in Hutchinson near Victoria West...

But his first love was theology, which he studied for two years at the Chaldo Bible Institute in Cape Town. He became a pastor and worked in Eldorado Park near Johannesburg for a while in the 1970s, preaching in Soweto and Kliptown.

"I gave sermons there among the gangs, held open air services, shared with the gangsters," he says. "There was a time they wanted to kill me. But the Lord prevented it. The problem started over a young man who didn't want to be a gangster. He came and sought sanctuary. He played the guitar at my place."

But for the longest part of his working life, Oom Hendrik was a clerk with the apartheid-era department called Coloured Affairs. His job took him all over the country: Cape Town, Johannesburg, Ebenhaeser on the West Coast, and Beaufort West.

Oom Hendrik met and married Katrina in Beaufort West. "You walk the road as it goes," he says. "Until one day, you walk straight into a woman!"



Hendrik Januarie and his wife Katrina at their Zoar home.

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Zoar and Amalienstein, twin mission towns, retain an old-fashioned feel. In winter, the bitter aloes make the landscapes pop, and provide rich pollen for the bees. Seweweekspoort cuts through the magnificent Swartberg range, part of the Cape Fold Mountains of the Southern Cape. Amalienstein's Lutheran church is next to the primary school where Hendrik first attended classes.

Kiem van 'n Blom

by Hendrik Januarie

*Herinneringe bly blom
in 'n ewige gedagtegang
waar die somer somerder
as somer is, die rotse
rotsiger, die grotte
oper lag, hul bekke
gestroop van baard.*

*Nou, waar die gras
en watergewas
bruin gesweet is
soos heuningtee
gesweet is in 'n pot,
tier die sewejaartjie,
die enigste wat nie tot
verderf kan kom:
die sewejaartjie blom.*

They met through the church, she fresh out of high school and a volunteer caring for the female members of the congregation. They married in 1983, lived for some time in Beaufort West, and in 1987 came back to Zoar to manage the Amalienstein Farm, initially bought by the administration of Coloured Affairs for the community of Zoar.

Amalienstein was then (and now) a mixed farm, with dairy cows, lucerne, vegetables and fruit. Oom Hendrik remembers the fat sultana and hanepoot grapes; the plums, nectarines and naartjies from the farm's orchards.

In 1994, Amalienstein Farm was bought by the Zoar Board of Management. Oom Hendrik became principal clerk, administering the farm for the state. After that, he was chosen as a trustee to manage it on behalf of the community and is still chairperson for the trust. Meanwhile, Katrina worked in adult literacy.

In their house in Zoar, Katrina and Hendrik raised their son, Caleb, and daughter, Deogracia. Caleb also lives in Zoar with his family, and is employed by the government, working on community development and upliftment projects in the Little Karoo and Garden Route. Deogracia lives with her parents and 9-year-old daughter Mischa, commuting daily to Ladismith where she works in early childhood development. While chatting to Oom Hendrik, we can hear Mischa and her grandmother laughing in the kitchen.

Everyone in Zoar and Amalienstein seems to have the urge to grow something. Many backyards are full of orderly lines of veggies. Katrina and Hendrik are no exception. Their backyard features

a fig tree, an apple tree, a trellis full of grapes, mielies, green beans, peas and spinach. There's also a rabbit hutch, with four bunnies named Kasper, Snowy, Milky and Layla.

Many locals remember a time of plenty, when vegetables and fruit were literally there for the picking in the gardens of Zoar and Amalienstein. Neighbours would take turns to share a *karmenaadjie* – a gift of fresh meat in the time before fridges.

In 1989, Oom Hendrik published his first poetry collection, *Pro Rata*, through Perskor. He had been writing and reworking poems ever since his matric year in 1961. In 2007, Kwela published the second volume of his poems, called *NagJakkals*.

He told me that he sees himself as that protagonist – the “nocturnal word predator” or “night jackal of words”. The collection's title poem is short and to the point.

Here's my translation of the poem:

*On fresh ground,
I hunt around,
hunting
through the night,
ears pricked,
eyes fixed
on a chanced-upon
spoor.*

*I don't whimper,
I make no sound,
I scout the night,
breathing in the prey,
the tang
of a white-wool kraal.*

He wrote elsewhere: “I want to farm with words, grow my own cultivars, share them hectare by hectare with every reader.”

After poetry, he took on non-fiction with *Seweweekspoort: Cradle of the Echo*, written in 2019 in English and now out of print. In

the book, part of the history that Oom Hendrik records is that of his uncle and grandfather, both called Michael Mitchell (junior and senior) who worked for Field Cornet Jan van Zyl at the farm Grootkraal from 1940. (Grootkraal was towards the northern part of the Poort, according to a hand-drawn map in the book.) They grew fruit and vegetables on the land that surrounded what was once the Old Toll House, in between working as farriers and blacksmiths.

After Van Zyl died in 1944, Michael Mitchell Jnr took over the job of field cornet until 1977, when he retired due to ill health.

People have forgotten how important field cornets once were – they were basically the law in the most far-flung regions of the country for at least three centuries, starting as the veldwachtmeesters of the Dutch colony. Conjure up an image of the sheriffs of America's "Wild West" and you'd be close.

Field cornets were rural peace enforcers, tax collectors and record-keepers. It was their handwriting on birth, marriage and death certificates. As local officials, they were trusted to hand over parcels and any other post.

In the case of the field cornets of Seweweekspoort, they were also the hand of hospitality extended to strangers.

Oom Hendrik writes: "The kitchen of the residence at Grootkraal was always in preparedness to offer some warmth from an open fire or to supply a mug of fresh made coffee. Some hikers or travellers by one or another vehicle who have been overtaken by darkness or a storm received shelter for the night at Grootkraal. Because of the hospitality of Jan as well as the Mitchell family, few people would pass by without sharing a word or two.





Above, from left: The main economic activity in Amalienstein is farming. Look out for klipspringer in Seweweekspoort.

Opposite page: A view towards Zoar, with the R62 winding through.

THE NAMES OF SEWEWEEKSPOORT

Like Meiringspoort, every landmark in Seweweekspoort has a name. Hendrik Januarie gives the local or traditional geographic names in his book *Seweweekspoort: Cradle of the Echo* (2019).

Some are very descriptive, like Bakoond, which literally looks like a giant's outdoor oven. Others refer to past events, like Tierkloof, where a leopard once lived. White House was indeed once painted white, but is now a ruin.

David's Neck is where a family of the same name once lived. Ou Tronk was where convicts were kept who worked on the road in the 1850s. Geological landmarks include Aartappeldraai (potato bend), Langdraai (long bend), Skerpdraai (sharp bend), or useful places like Rusbos where livestock and humans could rest, back in the days of ox-wagons and donkey carts.



"New Year was usually saluted by a gunshot into the mountain by the head of the house. The echo was followed by clapping of hands and by shouts of 'happy, happy New Year' whilst well wishes followed among themselves."

He writes of two nomads from Aberdeen in the Great Karoo, Jaftha and David Alexander. In the 1950s, they would travel by donkey cart from place to place, plying their trade "making zinc baths, jam tin mugs, finger rings and earrings from copper wire". As a result, they were both simply nicknamed Oupa Ringe (Grandpa Rings).

A few times a year, these artisanal nomads would come to Seweweekspoort and camp near a cave called Storekeeper, selling their goods to the people of the area, who greatly prized their visits.

In his book, Oom Hendrik records how the German Lutheran teachings affected the language that the Zoar and Amalienstein dwellers used, particularly his mother. When referring to carefree days, she spoke of "*prinz tage*", which means "days of the prince".

Hendrik Januarie's poems have appeared in several collections, including school textbooks and in a book called *Water, Stone and Legend: Rock Art of the Klein Karoo* by Renée Rust and Jan van der Poll (Struik 2011).

Much of his poetic imagery and insight into mountain life is shaped by Seweweekspoort. This is a place etched deep into the people of Zoar and Amalienstein. They have farmed in the poort, caught bees in the kloofs, and enjoyed outings and picnics. Everyone had their favourite spot. When petty apartheid laws demanded that the different races should have their own, separate, picnic spots, there was great bitterness and some signs were vandalised.

Now, Oom Hendrik wants to write a history of Zoar and Amalienstein as mission stations. "Zoar was the first, in 1817," he explains. "Back then it was a place of 'Kwas – Attakwas, Hessekwas, Namakwas and Griekwas. And then also freed slaves, like my great-grandmother Augusta Karelse."

Conversation turns to the Namakwa people, who only consider those who are older than 60 to be grown-ups – *grootmense*.

After his many adventures outside of Zoar, Oom Hendrik is content to be a *grootmens* back in his birthplace. "To be back here is to be in a safe haven. It is where I am known, in my familiar environment, among the old families. I can still speak to the youngsters and try to help them. I feel relaxed and free here. I am no longer surrounded by government office walls, but by mountains, rivers and the clear blue sky, all the way to the horizon."



Thunder on Black Mountain

The Swartberg is a realm of soaring peaks and well-watered valleys graced with historic fruit and wine farms. We went exploring the range's southern slopes in the autumn of storms.

WORDS & PICTURES **JUSTIN FOX**

From the Swartberg Pass you can see the Little Karoo down below in all its glory.



SWARTBERG

The Khoisan knew the Swartberg as “Kango” – the water mountains – given the many streams that flow from its crags. This part of the Little Karoo was first scouted by European settlers in the 18th century – initially as hunters, and later grazing their livestock while trying to escape the taxman back in the Cape.

Those settlers eventually put down roots and were followed by pastors, visiting their own scattered flocks and holding services under trees. By the mid-19th century, towns like Ladismith and Calitzdorp were established.

My plan was to reconnoitre the area north of the R62, between Seweweekspoort and the base of the Swartberg Pass. It was late May, in a time of heavy storms. Before departing, I'd heard of farmers who'd lost whole flocks of ostriches, swept downstream and drowned; cattle that had been stuck in the mud and broken their bones. Strong winds had felled trees and torn down pylons. Access to the Cango Caves was blocked by an immense rockfall, Gamkaskloof (Die Hel) was cut off from the outside world and sections of the road through Meiringspoort had been washed away.

Setting off from Cape Town, up the N1, I passed through the just-reopened Huguenot Tunnel and crossed a Breede Valley ravaged by the river tsunami. I snaked through the spectacular Cogmanskloof, officially entered the Little Karoo and drove on past Montagu and Barrydale until I reached Buffelsdrift Farm, just off the R323 south-west of Ladismith.

The manor there is a beautifully restored Cape Dutch home and includes outbuildings transformed into accommodation. I stayed in the old wine store, a double-storey Karoo house painted pink with views over an olive grove.

Owner-architect Greg Truen was on hand to show me around. The lime-washed façade of the main house is decorated with elegant stucco elements and the interiors have poplar floors and yellowwood ceilings, the decor done in an eclectic but tasteful mix of antiques and modern furnishings. The gardens were filled with pomegranate, fig and lemon trees, the paths gravelled with peach pits and the dam alive with weaver-bird industry.

“I came to this corner of the Karoo as a student on a class outing with legendary architecture professor Barrie Biermann – and just fell in love with the area and its buildings,” said Greg. “Eight years ago, I bought Buffelsdrift, which is an 18th-century VOC farm with a manor house dating from 1852, and began renovating. The idea was to keep what I found here as pure as possible.”

Greg led me behind the house to see his olive press, then further up the hill to what looked like a simple, whitewashed worker's *huisie*. Inside the Herders Cottage, there's a low arch in the back wall and we had to crouch to pass through into an adjoining space that quite takes your breath away.

The high-Modernist concrete-and-glass box comprises a living-dining area and bathroom, with a red, conical skylight and elegant interiors. The contrast between the two halves of the cottage could not

be greater, but somehow it works – a testament to Greg's playful creative spirit.

The town of Juana Smith

From Buffelsdrift, I found a back route to Ladismith that was passable in my 4x4 Renault Duster. Many of the roads in the area had also suffered storm damage.

To the north of town lies Towerkop (2 189 m), an imposing sandstone peak with a distinctive cleft down the middle. Local folklore tells of a witch who, one night during a storm, found herself blocked from traversing the Swartberg by this peak. Enraged, she smote the summit with her magic wand, splitting the rocky dome into an eastern and a western pinnacle.

Ladismith was founded in 1852, its erven laid out on the farm Elands Valleij, and named in honour of Lady Juana Smith, the Spanish-born wife of the Cape's governor-general at the time, Sir Harry Smith.

The centrepiece of Ladismith is an all-white Dutch Reformed church (1874), adorned with pinnacles, now serving as the tourist office. (Pick up some brochures and look at the historical photos on display.) The building was designed and constructed by Carl Otto Hager, a German immigrant and great exponent of the neo-Gothic style.

The church features in Sally Andrew's delightful “Tannie Maria Mystery” crime novels, recently made into a television series, which celebrate this corner of the Karoo.

Thanks to the 19th-century ostrich boom, the town is blessed

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: The interiors of Buffelsdrift Farm, near Ladismith, are done in a pleasing mix of Cape Dutch and modern decor. Buffelsdrift offers gorgeous views of neighbouring homesteads, backed by the soaring crags of the Little Swartberg. Ladismith's neo-Gothic Dutch Reformed church, built in 1874, was designed by Otto Hager.



SWARTBERG

with many fine buildings, ranging in style from Georgian and Victorian to Edwardian and Art Deco. Take a stroll and see the graceful Lutheran church (1856) and adjacent parsonage, as well as a lovely Wesleyan church (1909). End your amble at the Old Posthouse, the town's most popular restaurant, which serves hearty fare and sells jams, honey and bric-a-brac.

The seven-week portal

Travelling east along the R62, I took the turn-off to Zoar and Amalienstein, two missionary settlements dating from the 19th century. Both also have handsome churches worth a detour, the former an ochre Cape Dutch beauty and the latter a grand, white neo-Gothic affair with two bell towers and accompanying cypress trees.

From Amalienstein, I headed north into Seweweekspoort, damaged by floodwaters but passable in a 4x4. There are various theories about the origin of the name of the poort, the most plausible being that it refers to Reverend Louis Zerwick (a name the locals struggled to pronounce) of the Berlin Missionary Society, who is thought to have worked at Amalienstein and Zoar.

Other legends suggest the pass took seven weeks for highwaymen to traverse; for brandy smugglers to transport their wares; or for authorities to catch a cattle rustler who hid in this rugged gorge!

The R323 snakes along the valley floor, criss-crossing the stream, with sedimentary sandstone formations towering overhead and contorted into outrageous shapes. The cliffs come in shades of red

and orange, offset with dashes of lime and yellow lichens.

Passing Aristata (a pretty resort with self-catering cottages under repair from the flooding) I came to the heart of the kloof, below Seweweekspoort Peak on my left. (At 2325 m, it's the highest point in the Western Cape.) But since my interest lay in the Swartberg's southern slopes, I didn't press on to the Great Karoo, and turned my Duster around.

Heading east once more, the R62 soared over the picturesque Huisrivier Pass, the name "huis" deriving from the Khoikhoi word "huib" which means willow tree.

Nearing Calitzdorp, I took a left onto a gravel road into wild, hilly country until I reached Matjiesvlei Guest Farm. Pulling up at the homestead, I was greeted by a posse of border collies and owner Selma Nel. "Unfortunately, we don't have electricity at the moment," she said. "The storm took down the Eskom lines."

I asked her about the farm's history. "Matjiesvlei has been in the Nel family for six generations. In 2001, we began a project to restore half a dozen old buildings, some of them from the 19th century, and turn them into guest houses."

I checked into the old Wa-Huis – filled with homemade furniture, kists, paraffin lanterns and a four-poster bed – which offered superb views of the Gamka River.

Most of Matjiesvlei's cottages are strung along the Klein River (a tributary of the Gamka, just north of the Wa-Huis) and present an eclectic mix of styles and facilities, each with a braai and mountain views.

I visited the farm museum, previously a post office serving

the people of Gamkaskloof who'd walk through the mountains to get there. The museum is a treasure trove of farm relics and packed with old typewriters, sewing machines and telephones.

The next day, I drove into Calitzdorp, the port wine capital of South Africa. I parked beside a Byzantine-style, sandstone Dutch Reformed church (1912), flanked by a labyrinth and succulent garden (collect a list of numbered plants in the adjacent tourist office).

The town museum is next door to the church, maintained by dedicated volunteers and housed in the old Standard Bank building (the vault is still there). It focuses on regional history and exhibits a mix of furniture, vintage clothing and town memorabilia. It also has a good second-hand bookshop.

Pick up a historical route map of the town's architectural gems and set off on foot to explore. The streets are filled with ostrich palaces adorned with broekielace fretwork and bendy corrugated iron.

On Queen Street, you'll find diminutive St Mark's, reputedly the second-smallest Anglican chapel in the world. Then have lunch at De Krans Bistro, attached to the wine farm of the same name, which serves tasty local dishes, many of them featuring freshly baked roosterkoek.

Artisans and artists

I pressed on eastward, following the beautiful gravel road that traces the Nels River along the Swartberg's lower slopes, towards the settlement of Kruisrivier. There were scenic views of the Calitzdorp Dam, the road snaking through

Opposite page, from the top: A pair of fine ostriches on Matjiesvlei, west of Calitzdorp, which offers six restored self-catering cottages. Due to the rains, the road hugging the Swartberg foothills from Kruisrivier to Matjiesrivier had turned treacherously muddy. Even this tow truck needed a tow!



stony hills, the trees in autumn livery and the vineyards retaining the last of their scarlet leaves.

The valley has attracted a number of artists and creative folk. That night I stayed at Klipkraal, a renovated cottage belonging to Corrie and Irma Roets. This couple working in the IT industry left Joburg only a year ago and settled on a small olive farm.

Klipkraal is set in a garden enclosed by a drystone wall and was once an ostrich-feed store. It has been restored with raw poplar beams, dark-wood antiques, lanterns and candles, and an inside-outside bathroom with two Victorian bathtubs.

There are fine walks along the river or more strenuous hikes into adjacent kloofs. Evenings are for braaiing on the stoep with a view of domed foothills and serenaded by the sibilant rush of river water.

Further east, in Kruisrivier, you'll find the gallery of Roger Young and his partner, Phyllis Midlane. The gallery is also a tea room, exhibition space and offers accommodation.

"We left Cape Town 20 years ago and bought the old farm school, which we renovated," said Roger, a photographer and bespoke wood craftsman. "We fell in love with this peaceful valley and the good people of the Little Karoo."

Roger showed me around his workspace, the walls lined with evocative black-and-white photos of the region and its people, and a carpentry workshop filled with his creations.

I crossed the road to the main house, where I met retired ballet dancer Phyllis in her studio crammed with animal heads and costumes from the various productions she's worked on,

including the likes of *War Horse* and *Phantom of the Opera*.

"I turn my hand to anything from felt hats and wedding dresses to puppets and giant animals," she said, needle and thread in hand and mounds of cloth piled about her petite frame.

Ascending the Black Mountain

There's a verdant valley branching off the Nels River that has two fine establishments bearing similar names: Groenfontein Guest Farm and The Retreat at Groenfontein. I stayed at the former and dined at the latter.

The guest farm is owned by Hendrik and Martli Oberholzer and comprises two restored houses – a graceful gabled manor (Oupa Piet) set high on the slopes, and a Karoo house (Oom Kleinbaas) in the valley below.

Both have the pleasing colour scheme of the region: yellow walls with white detailing around window- and door frames. Interiors are spacious and filled with antiques, the wide stoep of Oupa Piet offering particularly fine views of the valley. This is a bustling cattle, ostrich and tobacco farm, and the setting is enchanting.

Further up the kloof lies the Retreat, owned by intrepid Swede Marie Holstensson. The manor house is a grand, Victorian-style affair with original iron fretwork.

Meals in summer are served on a big stoep and in winter at a long table in a dining room of yellowwood and Oregon pine. I joined other guests for a homely three-course meal beside a crackling fire. Conversation was lively, guests enthusing about

how they'd encountered eland, kudu and zebra on their afternoon walk up the kloof.

The following morning, the weather grew foul as another cold front swept in. The spectacular gravel road leading east along the base of the Swartberg had turned treacherously muddy and I made my way carefully to the next destination.

Lying in the hamlet of Matjiesrivier, Blue Lily is an attractive guesthouse that looks north over farmland to the imposing massif of the central Swartberg. There's a leafy garden filled with agapanthus and shaded spots for reading, a swimming pool and a well-appointed braai area.

I met owner Juan Lategan who seemed unperturbed even though the power lines were down here, too.

"My oupa bought the place in 1933, but the house dates from 1886," he told me. "Under your feet is the old cellar where they stored meat in the days before refrigeration."

Although it used to be a cattle farm, today Juan cultivates carrot, leek and bunching-onion seeds. "Basically, the farm needs my attention year-round, apart from a small break in autumn. But I love it here: I never feel the need to leave. This corner of the Swartberg is a little piece of paradise."

Later, Juan and I sat beside a fire in the lounge as a storm raged through the valley, felling trees and swelling rivers. Lightning and thunder played about the Black Mountain in godlike anger.

Next day, I headed further east on damaged roads to the famed Swartberg Pass, pulling off for breakfast at Kobus se Gat

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Carpenter-photographer Roger Young of Kruisrivier; Marie Holstensson, owner of The Retreat at Groenfontein; Kobus Lategan, owner of Kobus se Gat Restaurant. The lovely road from the Swartberg Pass to Gamkaskloof. Peter Bayly is the owner of Peter Bayly Wines, situated next to the Nels River on the road between Calitzdorp and Groenrivier; Corrie Roets, owner of Klipkraal Cottage; costume designer Phyllis Midlane of Kruisrivier.



SWARTBERG

(they also offer accommodation). Owner Kobus Lategan came over to lament the closure of the pass and resultant damage to his business.

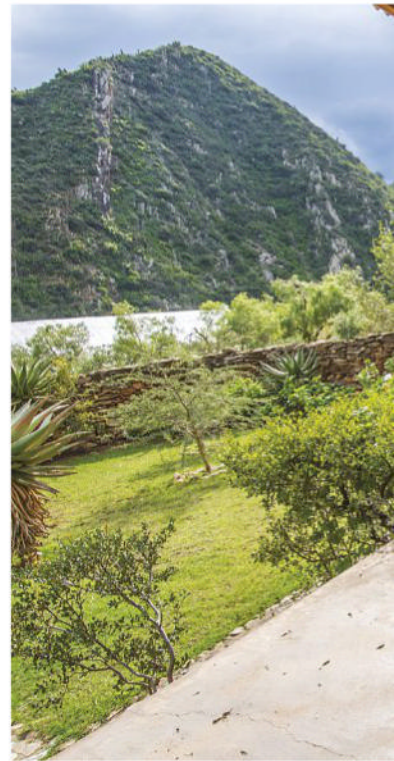
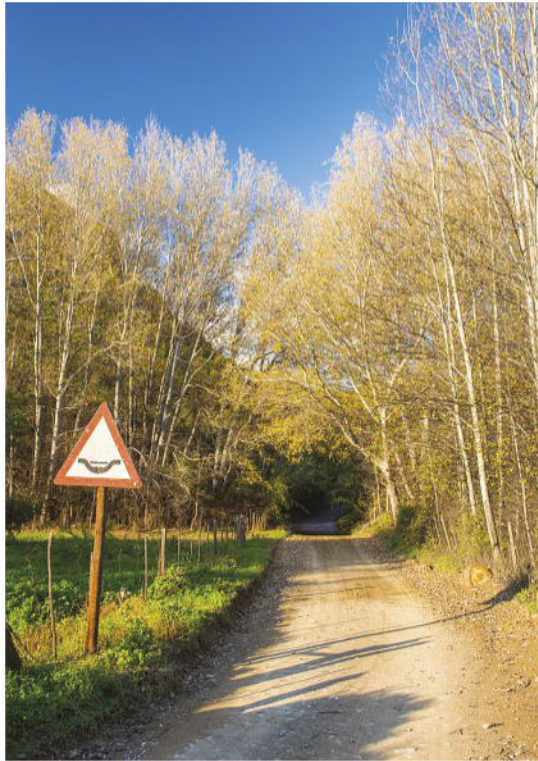
“The pass is a masterpiece of engineering by Thomas Bain,” he said. “Built with pick and shovel, it has stood for nearly 150 years with little need for repairs. At crucial places, Bain built culverts so the water could flow under the road, but the modern okes simply fill in the culverts with their graders so now the water runs in the road, destroying Bain’s careful design. I’ve got in touch with the heritage people to complain: The pass is a national monument!”

Although the route through to Prince Albert was closed for repairs, I pressed on up the pass, marvelling at Bain’s hand-packed stone walls, the slopes richly decked with proteas and watsonias.

Near the top, I got out to admire the view. Storm-tossed clouds played about the heights, rain came in icy squalls and everywhere waterfalls poured from kloofs and gorges.

Looking west – the route I’d come – I was thinking about the allure of this corner of South Africa. With its cultivated valleys and rugged mountains, aloes and spekboom, the Swartberg is a pleasing blend of Karoo, Boland and some Eastern Cape landscapes. It’s a place of orchards and vineyards, lonely cottages and gracious homesteads, flocks of sheep and goats grazing the hills and always the backdrop of majestic peaks. A realm of Cape leopards, soaring raptors and vast baboon troops, of red-stone formations and of spectacular passes and poorts.

But perhaps most of all, it’s the evocative contrast of old farms and historical towns, with their gardens and spires, set against savage mountains holding their wildness, that makes this place so special.



Clockwise from top left: The gravel road that follows the Nels River from Calitzdorp to Kruisrivier is one of the prettiest in the region. Klipkraal is a restored cottage with an old-fashioned Karoo feel. The outside tables at De Krans Bistro in Calitzdorp are a great spot for lunch.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Check local road conditions before planning a trip to the Little Karoo. At the time of going to press, Meiringspoort was still closed for reconstruction after storm damage suffered earlier this year.



EAT HERE

- **The Old Posthouse** in Ladismith (43 Queen Street) offers freshly baked chicken pies, burgers, pizzas and light meals in an attractive setting. ☎072 585 0903
- **De Krans Bistro** in Calitzdorp (at the southern exit to the town) has a big menu with local specialities and cheese platters served under a vine pergola surrounded by vineyards. ☎044 213 3314
- **Salie restaurant** in Calitzdorp (18 Queen Street) offers a short, meaty menu

and wood-fired pizzas.

☎079 902 3790

- **Patat** is the restaurant at Swartberg Country Manor (43 km north-west of Oudtshoorn) – clock in here for stylish dining and gourmet picnics, with an excellent wine list.

☎066 404 2608

- **Kobus se Gat** is at the foot of the Swartberg Pass (39 km from Oudtshoorn) and serves traditional Karoo cuisine, light lunches and any number of roosterkoek variations.

☎064 929 4408



STAY HERE

Buffelsdrift Farm

Their accommodation comprises an elegant Cape Dutch manor house, two separate barns and the old wine store, now an iconic pink guest cottage. (The designer Herders Cottage has just opened.) Rates for the main house (sleeps four) from R4 600 per night; the wine store (sleeps two) from R3 150.

Where? 15 km south-west of Ladismith.

☎021 790 0972

📍perfecthideaways.co.za

Matjiesvlei Guest Farm

The farm has six restored Karoo cottages for self-catering. There's also a picturesque campsite, Die Damrivierkamp (accessed with a 4x4 vehicle), on the banks of the Gamka River, which is an angler's paradise (species include yellowfish, black bass, eel and carp). Matjiesvlei has good hiking and 4x4 trails. Rates from R500 per person sharing; camping is R300 per vehicle per night – no additional per person charge.

Where? 11 km north-west of Calitzdorp.

☎044 050 3346

📍matjiesvlei.co.za

Klipkraal Cottage

This atmospheric Karoo cottage has no cell reception or electricity, but there's Wi-Fi and the kitchen is fully equipped for self-catering with a gas stove

and fridge-freezer. The rate is R1 100 per night (sleeps two).

Where? 13 km north-east of Calitzdorp.

☎082 415 6872

📍lekkeslaap.co.za

Groenfontein Guest Farm

There are two restored houses (sleeping six and four) set in a picturesque valley offering good hiking and mountain biking, braaiing at the river and opportunities to watch the daily farm routine. Rates are R500 per person sharing (braai wood included).

Where? 19 km north-east of Calitzdorp.

☎044 213 3851

📍groenfonteinfarm.co.za

The Retreat at Groenfontein

This gracious Victorian-style manor is pet-friendly and has lush gardens, a pool, dam and great walks in the kloof. Dinner, bed and breakfast from R1 290 per person sharing.

Where? 20 km north-east of Calitzdorp.

☎044 213 3880

📍groenfontein.com

Blue Lily Retreat

This comfortable, well-appointed farmhouse has three en suite bedrooms (sleeps nine), a fully equipped kitchen and covered braai. Rates from R800 per person sharing.

Where? 46 km north-west of Oudtshoorn.

☎084 264 8037

📍bluelilyretreat.co.za



Willowmore for the win!

This Eastern Cape town is a place where many of the attractions are strung out along the main road, so you can cover them on foot. Pull in, park the Fortuner and let Willowmore work its magic.

WORDS & PICTURES SAMANTHA REINDERS



A view down Church Street with the Dutch Reformed church on the left.

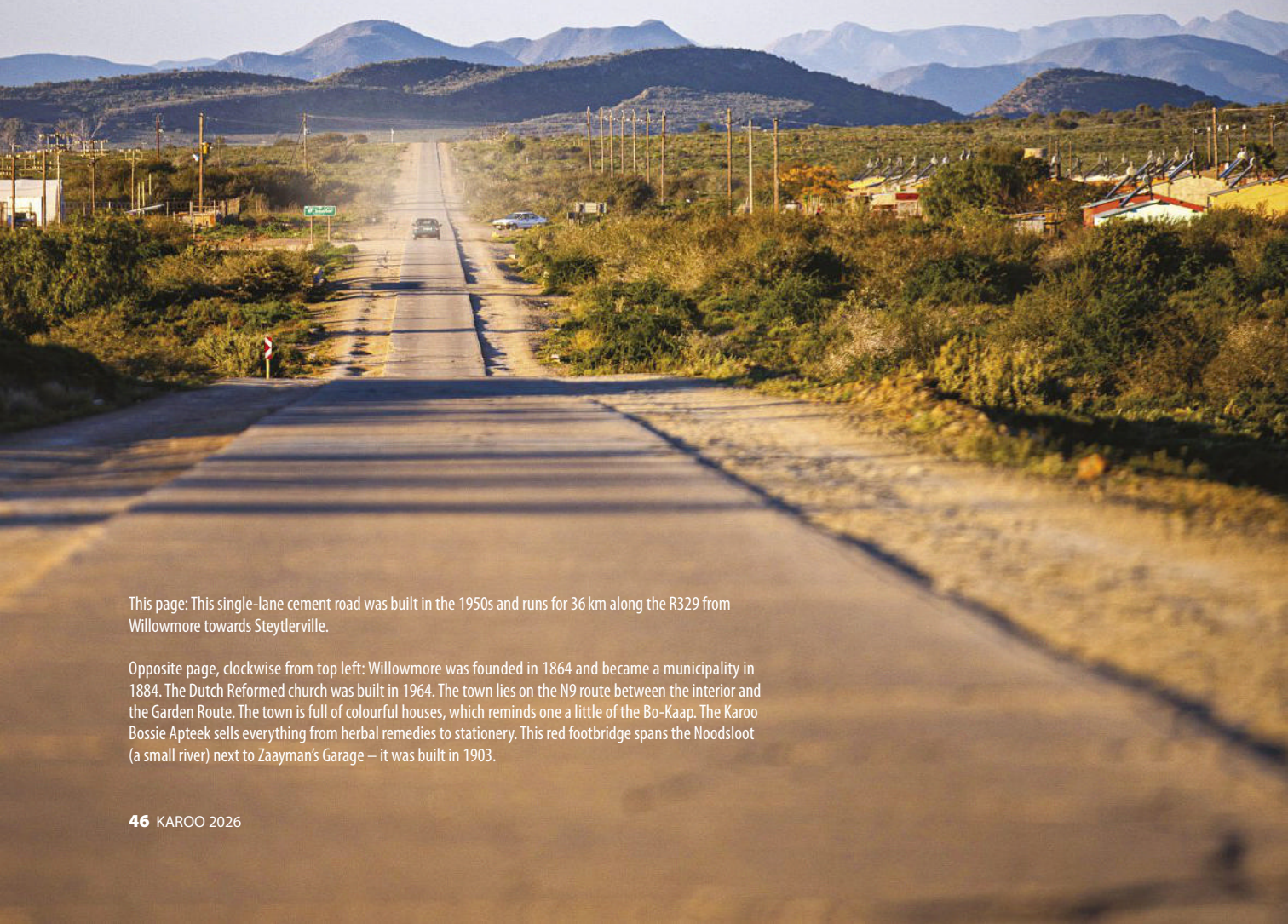
A while back, I attended a mohair auction in Willowmore. I was only there for a couple of hours, but driving through the back streets in the golden afternoon light and looking at all the houses made me want to come back. They were quaint in a way that platteland towns are slowly being renovated away from: broekielace; paint cracking in just the right places; hand-lettered “Pasop vir die hond” signs nailed to gates; pastel walls left in the sun a little too long...

The NG Kerk rose out of the middle of it all in hues of blue and grey, like a crash-landed stalactite out of the Karoo sky. A bakkie went past, loaded to the gunwales with angora goats, cruising the main street in pace with a town that has nowhere urgent to be.

But there are no tumbleweeds here, either. Willowmore serves a busy farming community with its shops (not one, but *two* co-ops), and tourists on the Gauteng-Garden Route highway with its guesthouses and eateries.

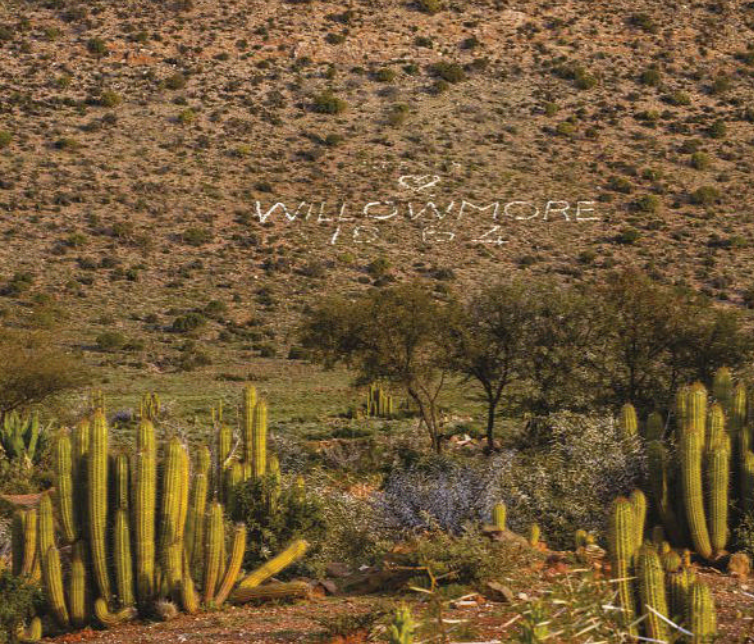
In July 2026, I returned for a longer visit and allowed Willowmore to unveil itself slowly. The people are unaccountably kind – I didn’t pass a single one who didn’t greet me with a tip of the hat or a hand lifted from the steering wheel.

Every hour spent in town turned up a nugget so delightful that my mind boggled a little, and each one opened another avenue, another person to chat to. I’d booked for one night. I quickly booked for another two...



This page: This single-lane cement road was built in the 1950s and runs for 36 km along the R329 from Willowmore towards Steytlerville.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Willowmore was founded in 1864 and became a municipality in 1884. The Dutch Reformed church was built in 1964. The town lies on the N9 route between the interior and the Garden Route. The town is full of colourful houses, which reminds one a little of the Bo-Kaap. The Karoo Bossie Apteek sells everything from herbal remedies to stationery. This red footbridge spans the Noodsloot (a small river) next to Zaayman's Garage – it was built in 1903.



THINGS TO DO



Reynold "Jaffie" George with Suzie and Sweetie

Take a ride on the Willow Limo

For a small fee, the Willow Limo (that is, a donkey cart) will carry you up and down the streets while you do your best Karoo-style royal wave.

Donkeys Suzie and Sweetie are working through a bucket of green grass and apples when I wander over to say hello on the main road (Knysna Street). You can't miss the Willow Limo – it's parked in front of one of the town's many colourful murals. This one is of Oom Jim Makwena, who spent years as the donkeys' guardian. (It wasn't always Suzie and Sweetie, there was another pair before them.)

Reynold George – or Jaffie, as he prefers being called – is in charge of the two ladies these days. He grew up in the Baviaanskloof and came to "the big city" to find work not long ago.

A ride takes up to half an hour. You'll see some of the main road and the odd side street, depending on Jaffie and his donkeys' respective moods.

This is the most laid-back way to see Willowmore, and the kids will love it!

How it works: Rides are available daily (except Monday) from 9 am to 3 pm. It costs R120 per adult and R50 per child – you pay across the road at Belly Deli (40 Knysna Street).



Helve into cemetery stories

The oldest headstone in Willowmore's Historical Cemetery (on the western side of town) is from the 1850s. Walk on, and the town's past unspools around you. There are dates from the Anglo-Boer War and the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic, which didn't spare Willowmore either.

What struck me most, reading the surnames, was how the same Karoo clans – surnames I've seen elsewhere, in other districts – found their way here, too: Steyn, Scholtz, Schutte, Stegmann...

On the northern side of town, you'll find one of the better-preserved Jewish cemeteries remaining in the Karoo. It's walled and locked, but pull up and somebody will come running with a key before you've even switched off the engine. It's a small, quiet monument to the Jewish merchant community that settled here and thrived in the late 19th century.

Where? The Historical Cemetery is on the western edge of town, wedged between the R407 and the N9 (enter from the R407). The Jewish Cemetery is on the northern edge, next to the N9.



See the town murals

Besides the mural of Oom Jim mentioned earlier, there are several others all over town. They're part of a project initiated by a local group called Revive Willowmore, focused on restoring buildings and tidying shared spaces.

There are 14 murals and counting, and they've had the effect of turning Willowmore's walls into something of an open-air gallery: a kudu here, a protea there, angora goats, a donkey, a lion, a steam train; each one painted by a different artist. Fourie Ackermann is responsible for some of them – he's the paintbrush behind similar murals in his home village of Friemersheim near Mossel Bay.

If you're travelling with children, seeing the murals is a great way to explore the town and release some of the pent-up energy from a day spent in a car.

How it works: A free brochure is available at places like the tourism office, Zaayman's Garage, Belly Deli, Kapoet Padstal and The Willow Historical Guesthouse. Scan the QR code on the brochure and you'll access a street map showing the locations of all the murals, who painted them, and a way to donate to the cause if you'd like to see Willowmore become even more colourful.

📱 revivewillowmore.co.za



WILLOWMORE



Left: The Joseph Alfred (Sonny) Goulee and the Jimmy Moore collections can be seen at the Willowmore tourism office.

Opposite page: A set of old letters in the Karoo Bossie Aptek, owned by And  le Jonck.

See the quirky collections at the tourism office

During an innocent visit to the tourism office (which also covers the nearby Baviaanskloof), I ended up spending 45 minutes taking in the Joseph Alfred (Sonny) Goulee Collection.

Sonny was a land surveyor by trade, born in 1919, who earned a medal for bravery during WW2. He lived a colourful life, much of it in Kenya, before moving to Willowmore in 1970. That same year, he bought and restored what's now The Willow Historical Guesthouse as the family home.

Bequeathed to the town after his death, the collection is fairly described as "in need of some love". Even so, it's fascinating: a skull collection (from the tiniest bird to a lioness, and a fierce-looking baboon); bits and bobs pickled in formaldehyde; Stone Age artefacts; old newspapers and photographs; cameras; medical instruments; even a cannon ball!

A second collection of photos and documents is also housed in the tourism office and charts the rugby career of Frederick James (Jimmy) Moore. Born in Willowmore in 1935, farmer Jimmy was, at one point, the owner of the Royal Hotel. He played flank and eighth man for the local club from 1954, then went on to serve as the club's secretary, president, treasurer and selector – the full life cycle of a small-town rugby man.

It's a modest little archive, but shows just how important rugby is as social glue in platteland South Africa.

Where? 49 Knysna Street

Opening times: Weekdays from 9 am to 5 pm (Note: John Korkee, who runs the show, sometimes has to shut up shop for a meeting elsewhere.)

Contact:  049 807 5709;  078 111 4828

willowmoreinfo.com





Browse the Karoo Bossie Apteek

The Karoo Bossie Apteek is not a conventional pharmacy. This bright green building on the main street focuses on herbal remedies like *kankerbos*, buchu, moringa, medicinal charcoal and devil's claw.

There's much more, though: They sell school supplies, groceries and locally sourced meat. But I'm here for their stash of vintage goods... (Are you seeing a trend yet?)

Cabinets are filled with preloved wedding dresses, records, a riding saddle, crocheted doilies, cups and saucers, cookie tins... My favourite find was a stack of old letters featuring neat cursive writing, some addressed to people like "Miss Mathilde Kahn" in Stellenbosch and "Mrs A E Kemp" in Port Elizabeth.

What gets owner Andéle Jonck and I talking is a tattered herbal recipe book I've put on my pile to buy. Andéle apologises – it isn't for sale; in fact, she's been hunting for it herself. (It's easy to lose something in the cluttered shop...)

The book belonged to Louisa Greeff (née Scholtz), the shop's original owner, back when it was a more conventional pharmacy. As a young woman, Louisa worked for a certain Mr F Hemens. In 1932, she bought the business from him and

started selling alternative medicine. Her Scholtz tonics and other bitter drops quickly became popular. But it was her "Five-minute cure for any illness", which she advertised on a small board in the street, and her recipes for herbal remedies (*kruie-doepas*), later compiled into a little booklet, that really caused a sensation. It was that little *boekie* I'd put on my pile.

Andéle shows me Louisa's old ledgers, each the size of a small suitcase, every page filled in by hand in careful cursive – who bought what, what they paid, what they still owed. The same surnames I'd seen out at the cemetery are in here, too: Steyn, Schutte, Stegmann...

Andéle and her father bought the place in the early 2000s, both of them drawn to healing and herbs and alternatives to conventional medicine.

Where? 44 Knysna Street

Opening times: Weekdays from 8 am to 5 pm (closed from 1 pm to 2 pm); Saturdays from 8 am to 1 pm.

Contact: 064 988 9691; "Karoo Bossie Apteek" on Facebook

WILLOWMORE



Alverisha Mpondo and Linique Booysen,
Zaayman's Grab & Go coffee shop



Stock up on mohair goodies

The Cozy Shed is a gift shop where you can buy mohair jerseys, beanies and scarves, plus raw wool if you're more of a DIY person. The best find here, though, is undoubtedly the range of Lanogold skincare products (☎ lanogold.co.za). Korean beauty products, step aside!

Lanolin – the natural oil found in sheep's wool – works its way deep into the skin, healing as it goes, and it has been used since ancient times. Hippocrates recommended it!

Lanogold is made by JC and Angela Stegmann who farm sheep on Kruidfontein not far from Willowmore. (The Stegmanns have been here for 150 years.) I tried the lip balm (R155); it was so good I returned the next day to purchase two more as gifts.

Where? 40 Knysna Street

Opening times: Weekdays from 8 am to 5 pm; weekends from 8 am to 3 pm.

Contact: ☎ 082 371 1110; ✉ thecozyshed@gmail.com



Pull in at Zaayman's

If you're after local delicacies to take home, make sure to pop into Zaayman's Engen garage. Sure, there's petrol, diesel and even an EV charging station, but that's the least interesting part.

The place has been in the hands of the Zaayman family since 1944. Original parquet flooring underfoot and vintage petrol pumps speak of those days. A 1948 Chev farmer's bakkie converted into a hearse takes up a large part of the floor space inside.

Next to the garage stands one of the town's murals depicting Fanie Zaayman, who ran the garage with his family from 1962 to 2016, next to his treasured 1960 Chev Impala.

The place is now run by Ian and Jane Zaayman, who have added a coffee shop inside that pours, for my money, the best cup in town (R36 for a small cappuccino). A menu favourite is the breakfast bun (egg, mince and bacon, R60) plus regulars like toasties (R65 each) and pies, with fillings like oxtail, kudu and chicken.

When a busload of drum majorettes from up north rolled in demanding mochas, frappés and double-whipped caffeine fantasies, the barista on duty kept a surgical calm I've rarely

witnessed in the wild. I didn't mind the wait; watching the situation play out was worth it.

The shelves are stacked with goods from local bakers and makers. There are soaps and other nice-smelling items; Karoo Angels – the decorative angels made in Vondeling village 37 km west of Willowmore (karooangels.co.za); "I Love Willowmore" keyrings; a solid peak cap selection (I went home with a "Be Lekker" one); and even an *Explore Willowmore* colouring book.

It's also where you'll find proper droëwors, rusks (R70 per pack) and local treasures like Duiwekloof's pickled aubergine (R98 for a bottle). Heading into the Baviaanskloof to camp or self-cater? Get your last-minute braai gear at Zaayman's: grid, Blitz, tongs, sorted.

Where? 34 Knysna Street

Opening times: Zaayman's Grab & Go coffee shop is open weekdays from 6 am to 5 pm and weekends from 6 am to 2 pm. These are the times in summer – in winter, they open half an hour later. (The petrol station is open 24 hours, daily.)

Contact: ☎ 083 420 5434



Louretta Lötter, Kapoet Padstal



EAT HERE

Kapoet Padstal

When I pull in at Kapoet Padstal, owner Louretta Lötter in her red puffer jacket (she runs the business with her daughter, Rona) arrives at my table in a flurry to take my breakfast order. (Biltong and eggs? Yes, please!) I watch her work the room like a one-woman factory line: sealing bags of fresh koeksisters at one table; helping serve food at another; in and out of the kitchen with a lemon meringue the size of a soccer ball; then going table to table and greeting every guest like a long-lost cousin.

She pulls up a chair and joins me. Within minutes I have the whole story: how her son bought and restored the building, opening it in 2015; and how a tannie once remarked that the old place was really “kapoet” – finished, done for – and the name simply stuck. *Oh, ja* – she’s also expecting 11 of her grandchildren that evening for their annual school holiday get-together...

Much of their menu is served on a roosterkoek – the sourdough craze hasn’t reached Willowmore yet. There are pies, too. My favourite was lamb (R40 takeaway, R80 sit-down with chips or salad). Kapoet

eggs benedict, served on a roosterkoek, starts at R95.

The fridges are full of preserves made by Louretta and her team, like green fig preserve and apricot jam. If you’re self-catering, get some of their homemade frozen meals like lamb curry or beef pies (R100 each – big enough for two people to share). They also stock other Karoo brands, like Maria’s Coffee from Graaff-Reinet.

On a sunny day, the stoep at Kapoet is a great place to watch the world go by.

Where? 26 Knysna Street

Opening times: Weekdays from 8 am to 5 pm; weekends from 8 am to 3 pm. Kapoet is pet-friendly.

What else? The Lötter family also runs a guesthouse called Lapidaria (named for a Karoo succulent) in Wehmeyer Street. From R500 per person per night, sharing.

Contact: ☎082 781 2426 (Kapoet); ☎083 627 0129 (Lapidaria Guesthouse)
✉info@kapoet.co.za

Belly Deli

Belly Deli is a Willowmore staple with an extensive menu, but it’s best known for burgers (from R105) and pizzas. I had the delicious Belly Deli Favourite, with salami, mushrooms, feta, garlic, olives and jalapeño (R165).

Their resident dog Bella is a gentle beast and will be your bestie by the time you leave. (The restaurant is pet-friendly.) There’s seating indoors and outside facing the street, and the place is licenced.



Where? 40 Knysna Street
Opening times: Daily from 8 am to 3 pm; until 5 pm on Fridays. Public holidays from 8 am to 2 pm.
Contact: 082 741 3888

Die Laaste Watergat

One night I had dinner at Die Laaste Watergat, which is the name of the bar at the Royal Hotel. It felt like stepping onto the set of *Cheers* – where everybody knows your name! And if they don't, they sure will after a drink or two...

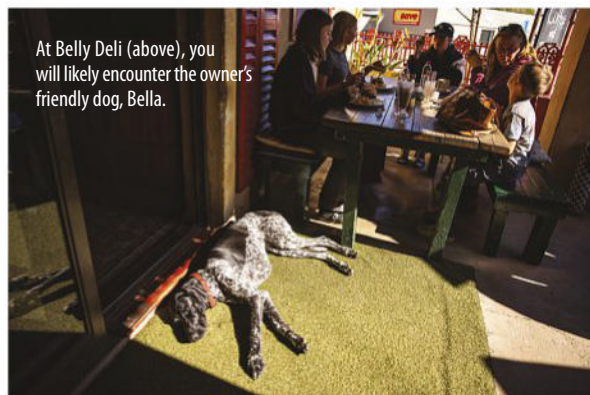
The place is old school: a pool table, a respectable amount of taxidermy, rugby paraphernalia on the walls, a dartboard, kids tearing around the room while nobody so much as blinks, and a well-priced double Olof and Coke for all of R30.

I had steak and chips (R150) without a salad leaf in sight, which is exactly as it should be. Sometimes...

I got talking to a farmer on his way to a merino auction, who excused himself twice to go and check on the sheep in the back of his bakkie before returning to his drink.

Anke Barnard conducted things from behind the bar that evening. Most of the guests were locals, or camo-clad biltong hunters passing through. The whole room hummed with laughter and clinking glasses. *Salut*.

Where? 31 Knysna Street
Opening times: Daily from 10 am until 10 pm.
Contact: 084 360 8380 (Lorna)



At Belly Deli (above), you will likely encounter the owner's friendly dog, Bella.



Die Laaste Watergat, Royal Hotel

WILLOWMORE



The Willow Historical Guesthouse

Now run by El-Anne Smith, this house was built in 1864 in the same year as the founding of Willowmore. Over the years, the property has served as a Dutch Reformed rectory, a girls' hostel, a general boarding house and a grocery storeroom, before it was turned into a guesthouse in the early 1990s.

On the first night of my stay, I chose to have dinner at the guesthouse and discovered that the bar area held one of the best collections of Africana I've come across in a long while. Everywhere I looked, there were old enamel road signs, branding irons, tools and licence plates gathered over decades by El-Anne's father, Pepi.

Sitting there with a glass of red wine, surrounded by all the memorabilia, I felt like I was leafing through somebody's family photo album. And in a way I was – El-Anne grew up in this house.

Besides the (indoor) Africana bar, there's another bar at the pool, looking onto a garden, with a jungle gym for the kids. Breakfast is R130

(full English) and dinner (order by 5 pm) includes starters like liver and *netvet* (or *skilpadjies*) for R110; a beef fillet main that's worth the trip to Willowmore alone (R245, with veggies like your oma made them); and a proper malva pudding for dessert (R105).

The guesthouse sleeps 30 people, across several rooms in the main house and in cottages on the same premises and in the surrounding streets. I stayed in Peperboom Cottage, which was beautiful. They are pet-friendly.

Rates: From R1 530 per room.

Where? 70 Wehmeyer Street

Contact: 076 083 6357

thewillow@igen.co.za

The Royal Hotel

Established in 1897, the Royal Hotel wears its age well. It has long corridors, no-frills rooms, and an Art Deco mantelpiece in the bar that hints at grander decades gone by.

There are 15 rooms in total – a combo of family rooms and double rooms, and even a unit that sleeps seven for bigger parties or biker groups.

The restaurant serves breakfast and drinks in the afternoon, and the bar has the kind of pull that keeps travellers (and locals) coming back for more.

Braai facilities are on hand for those who'd rather do their own thing, and the pizzas

(from R120) seemed to have half the town popping in for takeaways.

Rates: R500 per person.

Where? 31 Knysna Street

Contact: 044 923 1225

084 360 8380 (Lorna)

Finchley Farm Cottages

Joanne and Michael Kroon farm merino sheep, Nguni cattle and savanna goats on the farm Finchley, just outside town. I spent my last night here, and it was a dream. The beautifully restored cottages date back to the late 1800s and sit in a lush garden that feels like a little green miracle in the vast Karoo.

They offer self-catering accommodation in two rooms, plus two self-catering cottages. You can walk through the garden and out to a nearby dam where the birding is apparently very good. Or take a drive up Aasvoëlberg. It's a four-hour round trip if you take it slow, as you should, to appreciate all the views. Set aside a full morning or afternoon to max it out.

Rates: R400 – R850 per person. Joanne offers breakfast (from R100) and a meal of the day (R160) by prior arrangement.

Where? 3 km west of Willowmore, on the R407.

Contact: 082 783 5389

finchleyfarm.co.za





El-Anne Smith from The Willow Historical Guesthouse takes Chutney, Betsie, Chillie, Vlekkie, Sussa, Bella and Erikkie (in the pram) for a walk.



Jody the cat, Finchley Farm Cottages



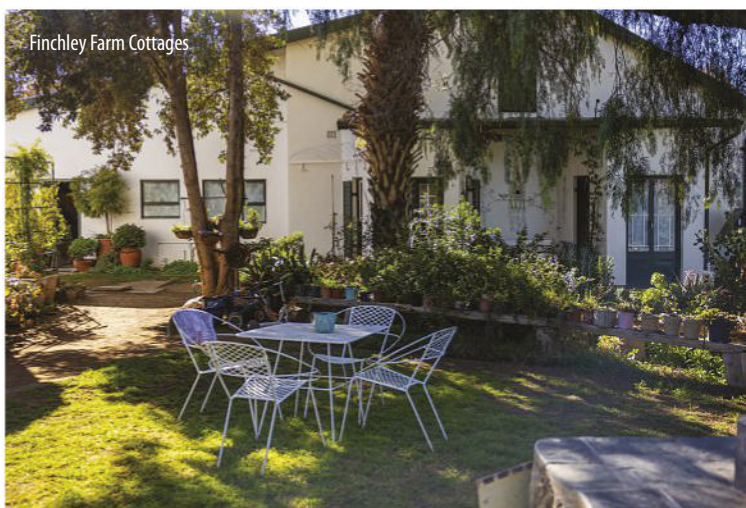
Joanne Kroon



Finchley Farm Cottages



The Willow Historical Guesthouse



Finchley Farm Cottages



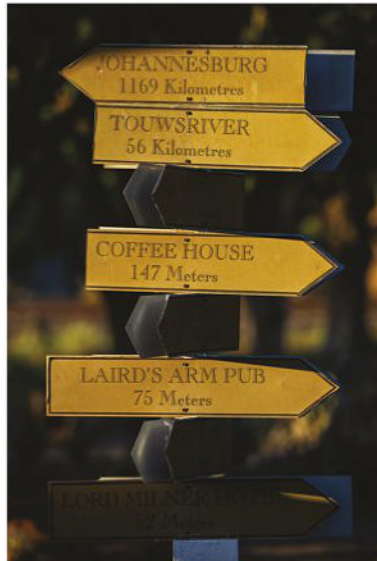
Make friends in Matjies

In the mood for a dose of history and fresh Karoo air?
Then head on over to the quirky outpost of Matjiesfontein,
just off the N1 between nothing and nowhere.

WORDS & PICTURES **JAC KRITZINGER**

You can see the historical village of Matjiesfontein,
and the Witteberge towering behind it, from the N1.

MATJIESFONTEIN



Tiny Matjiesfontein is hard to put in a box. It's part railway town, part historical treasure chest and also just a speck next to the N1.

The old buildings hold something of the glamour and charm of the Victorian era in what was then the former British Cape colony. It almost feels like you're walking around a film set!

Construction on a railway line from Cape Town to the north – first to the diamond fields in Kimberley, then to Johannesburg – had progressed through the Hex River Valley by 1876. It soon passed Matjiesfontein, which became a refreshment station along the route.

By 1884, an entrepreneurial Scotsman by the name of James Logan started to market Matjiesfontein as a health resort to wealthy Britons. Apparently the dry climate of the Karoo worked wonders for lung ailments like tuberculosis. And just like that, the place became famous overnight – a welcome stop on the long train ride through the country. Well-known personalities of the time – like Cecil John Rhodes and Olive Schreiner – came here to enjoy the tranquillity.

The Lord Milner Hotel was completed in 1899, but conflict was brewing in the interior and the new hotel soon became a military hospital for British soldiers during the Anglo-Boer War. There was a British army camp on the site that housed up to 10 000 soldiers. Go and look at the cemetery about 10 km west of town, where some of the fallen are honoured.

Yup, Matjiesfontein is heavy with history, which must be why there are whispers of ghosts in the hotel hallways...

As the 20th century progressed, the village gradually deteriorated. That is, until legendary hotelier David Rawdon bought and restored the whole place in 1968. In 1975, Matjiesfontein was declared a national monument and became a tourist attraction yet again.

It remains the quintessential N1 Karoo stop for people travelling between Gauteng and the Cape. Relax with a drink at the Laird's Arms, and stay the night to savour the experience.

I spent a few days in town and met the people who live and work there. Read their stories on the following pages...

From left: There hasn't been a filling station in Matjiesfontein for many years, but the old pumps in the main street add to the atmosphere. This tongue-in-cheek sign opposite the Lord Milner Hotel will ensure you won't get lost. Olive Schreiner used this post office to send her letters to England.

STAY OVER

All the accommodation options include breakfast and a free sunset tour on the double-decker bus.

Prices in the Lord Milner Hotel start at R1 385 per night for a single room, or R2 290 per night for two people sharing.

Olive Schreiner Cottage costs R2 245 per night for two people. The Old Museum Suite is R4 435 per night for up to six people.

The Matjies Motel offers more affordable rooms: from R1 385 per night for two people sharing, or R940 for a single person. Children aged 2 – 12 get a discount.

All these rates are valid until October 2027. Visit the website for a comprehensive price list and information on restaurants and things to do in town.

📞 023 561 3011; 🌐 matjiesfontein.com

➤ JOHN CEDRAS

Barman and entertainer,
Lord Milner Hotel

I've been living in Matjiesfontein for the last 16 years. It's a safe, peaceful place and everyone knows each other. I started at the hotel in 2022 – the people here call me John Vital because I have so many responsibilities and they wouldn't be able to do without me!

I do struggle to fill the shoes of the late John Theunissen, the previous entertainer. I can't play the piano and sing like he did, although I'm trying to teach myself. But I do know how to tell a ghost story about the hotel! And they're all true...



Clockwise from above: The Lord Milner Hotel's elegant lounge will make you feel like you've entered a manor home. The hotel may appear sleepy in the early morning, but it attracts visitors from around the world. Matjiesfontein's main street (actually, the only street).





From the top: In the late 1800s, one of the first cricket matches between South Africa and England was played on this field. (South Africa won.) Today, every now and then there's a game between hotel guests and locals. At the Transport Museum right next to the hotel you can marvel at the classic Chevis, Dodges, Jaguars and even two Royal Daimlers that were used by King George VI and his daughters Elizabeth and Margaret when they toured the country in 1947. The hotel sitting areas are like a time capsule of Victorian grandeur.

Opposite page, right: There's not much to do in the village if you don't work at the hotel, so a late afternoon stroll is just the thing.



◀ FRANSINA "TOKKIES" MIENIES

Manager, Transport Museum

I was born in Laingsburg. When I was young, in 1982, my parents moved to a farm nearby. Shortly after the move, I started working in the hotel kitchen and ended up at the Transport Museum after a while. I've been here among these old vehicles for 20 years.

Matjiesfontein is small and can be a bit suffocating at times, but where would I go at my age? I'm nostalgic for my childhood. When the feeling overwhelms me, I go for a walk on the plains where I can laugh and cry without anyone bothering me.

I do love my job at the museum. Sometimes I talk too much when we get visitors – not everyone likes my chatter. My colleagues tease me and say, 'Tökkies, you're like a radio – once you start talking, you can't switch off!'





MATJIESFONTEIN

✓ CINDY ANTHONIE

Manager, Lord Milner Hotel

I was born in Matjies, but I spent some time in Swellendam before I came back here. That was about 20 years ago. I'm a Karoo nooi at heart – and now I'm staying right where I am!

I used to sell tickets at the Marie Rawdon Museum and eventually worked myself up to this position. I enjoy my work and the people who visit from all over.

Matjiesfontein is more than just a town, it's an oasis where we can all feel calm and safe. We're one big family – most of the hotel workers' parents were also employed here. We all know and help each other. At the end of the month, we go to Worcester to stock up on groceries. If you can't go along, you give your shopping list to someone else. Our wealth lies in our people.



MATJIESFONTEIN

➤ ANDRIES STOUTER

Handyman

I've been in Matjiesfontein for nearly 40 years. I'm good with my hands, even if jobs are sometimes scarce. But that's the thing about this place: Even when there are no jobs, your stomach is never empty. Everyone helps each other through difficult times.

There is not a single room in this entire town – and I'm talking about houses, the hotel, shops, everything – where I haven't done some work. I know the place like the back of my hand. From my stoep here next to the railway line, I can watch the goings-on in town. No one can hide anything from Andries Stouter!

It's a lekker community, but it's small so you have to watch what you say. Gossip travels fast...



Opposite page, clockwise from bottom left: Once upon a time the Blue Train stopped at the Matjiesfontein station – these days, except for cargo trains, the famous railway running through town is mostly deserted. The “teller” behind the counter in the old Standard Bank doesn’t have much to say. British soldiers who died during the Anglo-Boer War are buried in a memorial cemetery 10 km west of town, next to the N1.

Right: The boarding house in the main road was named after village founder James Logan. It is used as a coffee shop and farm stall.



ANELKE KROUKAMP & MICHAEL GARISCH

Farmers, Jagerskraal Guest Farm

Anelke: My parents are South African but I was born in England and grew up there. I’m happy I managed to snag a boerseun!

Jagerskraal is about 20 km west of Matjiesfontein – it belongs to my parents. We run guest accommodation and also farm pomegranates, goats and cattle. As a city girl, I taught myself to make goat’s cheese, but Michael studied at the Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute and knows everything about farming.

We love the area – it stole our hearts!

Accommodation at Jagerskraal: R350 – R700 per person sharing. ☎ 079 257 5567 (WhatsApp)

🌐 jagerskraalfarm.com

Lightning in a bottle

Witblits is the embodiment of the rebel spirit of the people of the Little Karoo. Come meet the old “stokers” of Barrydale, Ladismith, Calitzdorp and Oudtshoorn.

WORDS & PICTURES **CHRIS MARAIS**





Late summer is harvesting time in the Little Karoo, and the pickers of Boplaas Family Vineyards in Calitzdorp are hard at work.

The beautiful thing about writing a story about witblits culture in the Little Karoo is that you have licence to fabricate, to exaggerate... to conjure up a gripping tale out of a smoky wisp of any long-ago legend.

And because most of the tales about *stokers*, their copper kettles and the long arm of the law come from the deep, isolated folds of the Swartberg, who's going to fact-check you anyway? (*Certainly not me.* – Ed.) You could just say you were caught up in a witblits hallucination!

The bottom line is these stories tend to take the form of the old Road Runner cartoon scripts, where the coyote is constantly chasing the bird, who always gets away. The *stoker* being a road runner and the law being Wile E. Coyote, of course...

Let's take a deep dive into the back story of witblits in the Little Karoo.

The stokers and the lawmen

In 1924, the Koöperatieve Wijnbouwers Vereniging (KWV) was granted control of the production of all wine, spirits and brandy in South Africa. Overnight, the small, independent producers and their copper pot stills in far-off places like the Little Karoo were basically criminalised.

It didn't deter the home distillers for long. They simply moved their kettles from plain sight to distant kloofs, mountain caverns and secret cellars. Instead of stabilising the booze market and collecting taxes, the KWV just drove the *stokers* underground.

So, when I recently read about

witblits in the late Sue van Waart's book *Swartberg en sy Mense* (1989), my eyebrows were raised in astonishment. She relates a story where the cops come out on top for once.

According to Van Waart, there was a certain Sergeant Jan who was sympathetic to the brandy and witblits *stokers* in the Little Karoo – and there were many of them. He reckoned they had the right to raise their hanepoot grapes, stoke them up and sell the white lightning wherever they could.

Sergeant Jan (and this is just me riffing here) seemed to understand that in times of need, when Depression, drought or flood stalked the land, the family stoking kettle was often all that stood between them and abject poverty.

It was, however, his duty to accompany the hawk-eyed KWV inspectors and their customs colleagues on raids onto the brandy farms and mountain hideouts to catch people who distilled a little more than their given quota.

But Sergeant Jan had a system. When approaching the alleged culprit at his still, he would whistle a tune while strolling through the farmyard. That would give the *stoker* enough time to quickly hide the offending kettle, or the extra cans of white liquor, in the nearest haystack or other hiding place.

But one day, when Sergeant Jan was on leave, an eager young policeman led a raid on the farm of a certain Oom Piet. No whistle, no warning. Oom Piet soon found himself in front of a magistrate, with a couple of large witblits cans entered as evidence.

"It's my bathwater, Your Honour," Oom Piet told the beak, according to Van Waart's account.

"How so? I can smell the

witblits," said the magistrate.

Oom Piet then launched into a long and detailed explanation on the various health benefits of witblits. "And so, I bathe in witblits, Your Honour, because it's good for my rheumatism."

The magistrate was highly amused at this passionate diatribe, but he fined Oom Piet anyway and confiscated his witblits. That day, the law won.

Oom Piet had a point, though. In the Little Karoo of old, farms were isolated and the roads were hellish. You couldn't just pop down to the doctor for a diagnosis and a prescription for store-bought medicine. Instead, you relied on the witblits your family kettle produced.

Because of its high alcohol content, it made the basis for the perfect rural home remedy. Grandmothers always kept a bottle or two stashed somewhere, in case Boetman came in with a snakebite (witblits taken internally here would not cure the bite, but it might calm the victim), a bleeding wound from a donkey nip (disinfectant) or a chest cold, where it is taken both internally to settle the stomach and externally as a massage lotion for the chest. (*We should probably add here that absolutely none of this "medical advice" would carry the approval of your modern-day Discovery broker... – Ed.*)

Granny would brew up interesting tinctures by steeping plants in witblits like *wilde als* (wormwood, for chest colds), buchu (good for the kidneys and bladder), *kankerbos* (*Sutherlandia frutescens*, as a general tonic) and *suurvy* leaves (for troubled stomachs).



Pick your poison

If both are made from grapes, what's the difference between brandy and witblits? Brandy is distilled specifically to be aged in oak, where it develops its amber colour and complex flavours over time.

Witblits is the unaged ancestor of brandy made from the leftover skins (some prefer the hanepoot above all other grapes), pulp and lower-grade wine which is then distilled in copper pot stills.

Witblits is usually made to be consumed shortly after distillation, and it has a higher alcohol content than brandy which provides more of a kick. It's distilled, drop for drop, with love and devotion.

The *stokers* of old – like their moonshine counterparts in America's Deep South and the

mampoer men of Groot Marico – would often set up sleeping pallets right next to their pot-bellied kettles, to ensure the correct distillate and ward off any thirsty thieves.

But witblits is so much more than a tough shooter on a night out. It's fireside company on a cold winter's night, it's the rural storyteller's friend and the embodiment of the rebel spirit of the hard people who live in the region.

Witblits stories are part of Little Karoo lore – like this one, which begins in a bar, of course...

One evening in the 1950s, the local KWV inspector was in the Anna Jordaan Bar in the Barrydale Hotel (now the refurbished Karoo Art Hotel), boasting that he knew the Le Granges, owners of

Although only officially proclaimed a town in 1909, by 1854 the Calitzdorp area was already reported as being well settled by farmers, some of whom established the town's early vineyards. (Undated photo, courtesy of the Calitzdorp Museum.)

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: The turn-off to Gamkaskloof (Die Hel) from the Swartberg Pass. Daniel and Rozanne Nel of Boplaas, Calitzdorp, with the old family kettle in the foreground. The northern side of Seweweekspoort, where mountain climber and witblits *stoker* Gustav Nefdt lived. The Anna Jordaan Bar at the Karoo Art Hotel in Barrydale is home to many boozy legends.

“My great-grandfather was one of the best witblits and brandy stokers in the district. One daily tot of our witblits got rid of any varicose veins you might have had...”

– Pieter Joubert, Fontein Farm, Gamkaskloof

Warmwaterberg outside town, were overproducing their quota of liquor. Just after finishing his drink, he'd be heading out to bust them in the act.

An associate of the Le Granges overheard this, slipped out of the bar, jumped on his bicycle and pedalled like the blazes over the mountain and down onto the plains to bring the urgent news to the *stokers* of Warmwaterberg.

Thus alerted, the owners and staff of Warmwaterberg moved the excess barrels into a hidden cellar under the farmhouse. The inspector found nothing and took up lodgings on the farm for the night – right above the cellar where the illegal booze was hidden!

In nearby Ladismith, the name of Gustav Nefdt is usually connected with the first audacious climb of Towerkop, the daunting split peak that looms over the town. However, in *Timeless Karoo* (2007), author Jonathan Deal has unearthed something almost as exotic about Gustav, courtesy of an interview with a surviving relative of the Nefdt clan. Deal writes:

“Later, when Gustav moved to a house at the entrance to the spectacular Seweweekspoort ... he became a notorious producer of high-quality witblits. Seweweekspoort in those days was maintained by local authorities who relied on toll fees, and Gustav always paid his toll with a bottle of witblits.”

A policeman was sent out to catch Gustav and his illegal stash. He was welcomed and housed at the Nefdt home and partied with the family for a few days.

The Nefdts eventually sent the cop on his way with a picnic basket, and, without thinking, a bottle of witblits, which seems to have been part of their usual padkos fare.

(*The best hosts! – Ed.*) Realising what had happened, Gustav chased after the cop with a couple more bottles of witblits in his saddlebags. He found the constable, had another little party with him and surreptitiously replaced the bottle of witblits with a bottle of tea.

When charges were laid, the “evidence” was proudly flourished in court, the magistrate took a sip from the bottle, grimaced and was forced to drop the charges against Nefdt.

Down in Die Hel

In May 2025, my wife Julienne and I booked in at Oupa Piet se Huis in Gamkaskloof – one of the most isolated mountain settlements in South Africa and the very place where famous storyteller and *Klower* Annatjie Mostert Joubert and her 10 siblings were born.

On the first evening, Julienne and I sat around the firepit sipping something bracing – a whiskey and water in this case – while enjoying the isolation of the place.

The next morning, Annatjie's son, Pieter, showed us his beehives. Gamkaskloof honey comes from wildflowers – it's dark, floral and delicious to the tongue. You can buy bottles from his wife, Marinette; they come with the honeycomb inside. There's no better memento, no finer way to taste the essence of Gamkaskloof.

But Pieter also spoke with authority about distilling something a little more devilish...

“My great-grandfather was one of the best witblits and brandy *stokers* in the district,” he told us. “One daily tot of our witblits got rid of any varicose veins you might have had...”

We proceeded to have an impromptu tasting, sampling witblits from Pieter's personal

stash. We sipped thoughtfully to enjoy the smooth punch, with a soft finish and raisins on the tongue.

“My great-grandfather never drank a drop, but he made his money from selling his witblits,” Pieter said. “I still have his kettle today.”

Unfortunately, Pieter hasn’t been able to stoke witblits of his own recently, since his great-grandfather’s kettle has cracks and needs to be repaired.

“In a lot of Gamkaskloof homes, the lady of the house sampled the first batch of witblits that was brought home. Because the Klowers, especially the women, were expert at gathering medicinal herbs, they also took some of the witblits for their tinctures.”

The most detailed ethnographic and lifestyle account of Gamkaskloof was made by Brian du Toit, a South African anthropologist attached to the University of Florida. His thesis was called *People of the Valley – Life in an Isolated Afrikaner Community in South Africa*. Du Toit and an occasional band of researchers visited Gamkaskloof several times in the 1960s, setting up camp along the river and spending long days with the various families.

By all accounts, the men of the valley could hold their liquor. Du Toit recalls a typical New Year’s Eve, when the women cooked and the men held target-shooting competitions. He writes:

“We were told that Koot Cordier (one of characters of the Kloof) was such a fine shot. During the 1964 festivities, the men had, in fact, attempted to get him drunk by sharing their liquor with him in the hope of toppling him from his position as champion.”

To which Koot himself



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Pieter Joubert from Die Hel usually ends his guided tour with a round of witblits. The grape pickers of Calitzdorp are a picture of concentration. Carel Nel, head of Boplaas Family Vineyards. This back road leads from Seweweekspoort to Gamkapoort Dam. Part of the old sanatorium building at the Warmwaterberg Spa. Grundheim estate in Oudtshoorn offers interesting witblits varietals.

When the brandy bubble burst in the 1920s, the Nels of Boplaas simply sent their witblits up country in a brazen manner: by train, in vats labelled “Vinegar”.

apparently added: “I was so far gone that I could hardly hold the rifle, but I still hit the bullseye with every shot.”

Mountain Moonshine

Just off the Huisrivier Pass near Calitzdorp, there’s a little dirt road to Matjiesvlei, another mountain settlement where witblits was part of the local culture.

According to Sue van Waart in *Swartberg en sy Mense*, there was once an old woman (unnamed) who stayed here with her husband (known only as Oupa Jan) in a small dwelling. Oupa Jan was a stoker of witblits and his wife had a taste for the firewater. She often begged him for a bit of the first wash, which was not too strong yet, but still packed a wallop.

Her excuse was normally that she had a headache and wanted to soak her flannel cloth with some witblits and press it onto her forehead for relief. But everyone knew she’d be drinking the stuff. A while later, the old lady would return in a jolly mood and declare that her headache was miraculously cured.

Sometimes, however, she would not return at all... The family members would later find her passed out on the floor next to her bed, clearly overcome by too much “medicine”.

For winemakers, the harvest season between January and April is the most demanding time of the year. During this intricate process of turning grapes into good wine, they must get it exactly right. That involves daily vineyard sampling, organising harvest logistics, receiving and processing grapes at the cellar, pressing and managing the fermentation, not to mention

record-keeping for compliance.

The Nel family of Boplaas, Calitzdorp, has been turning fruit into alcohol since 1880, beginning with brandy exports to London.

“Most of the farmers around here distilled brandy and witblits,” Carel Nel told me – he loves to collect the boozy legends of the region. “At one stage there were more than 40 family pot stills operating around Calitzdorp. The farmers made the long ox-wagon trek through Caledon Kloof to Ladismith and then onward to Cape Town with their produce, which included barrels of brandy and witblits. It is said that the transport riders were partly paid in hard liquor, giving them courage to undertake the dangerous journey.”

At first, everyone made merry. Sometimes too merry, as Nel recounts in his book, *A Journey: Family, Friends and Wine* (2025). He mentions two brothers who used to sample their product at the still all day long, and they’d get *gesellig* (very social) by sundown.

“They played a game that involved sitting with your bare buttocks on the hot still kettle, and seeing who lasted the longest,” Carel writes. “One of them sat too long and the skin of his buttocks was burnt onto the kettle. His brother had to forcibly haul him off.”

When the brandy bubble burst in the 1920s, the Nels simply sent their witblits up country in a brazen manner: by train, in vats labelled “Vinegar”.

Whenever a hidden kettle was found by the law, its copper belly was pierced so it could not work. Welding sorted out that little problem, as you can see on the old Boplaas kettle, which has been duly repaired.

In the 1980s, Boplaas was the



LITTLE KAROO

first South African brandy producer to be granted a distilling licence, and their mass of international awards since then tells you they've never looked back.

Witblits for the win

Next stop on our meandering witblits tour is the Grundheim estate, the heartbeat of the Little Karoo witblits culture, just outside Oudtshoorn. We're privileged to meet Oom Danie Grundling, who has five generations of family distilling in his blood. If the title of Moonshine Man of the Little Karoo existed, it would be his.

Like his father and his grandfather before him, Danie Grundling will not let a drop of witblits pass his lips. He says he has a nose for the good stuff.

"I drink light wine very occasionally, but I only sniff witblits," he declares. "Some time ago, the *stokers* of Ladismith got together around a long table with all their brands on display, and they had a tasting. I did a sniffing. They insisted I couldn't judge witblits with my nose – I had to sip it. I said, go ahead guys; this is my method. If you want to stand and drink the stuff and get clever until you fall over, that's your problem!"

The Grundling family used to be big in ostriches, but with the 1914 crash, they turned to the grape and began to make brandy and witblits.

Back in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the brandy was casked and carted to Mossel Bay, where it supplied sailors from passing ships.

Oom Danie recalls that in "the old days", policemen on motorbikes would come to Grundheim to buy their witblits, riding off with a little cask safely strapped into the seats of their sidecars.

"Sometimes, very important public figures would come out to 'inspect' the witblits – but they were actually on a shopping trip," says the veteran *stoker*.

I ask Oom Danie about the curative powers of witblits.

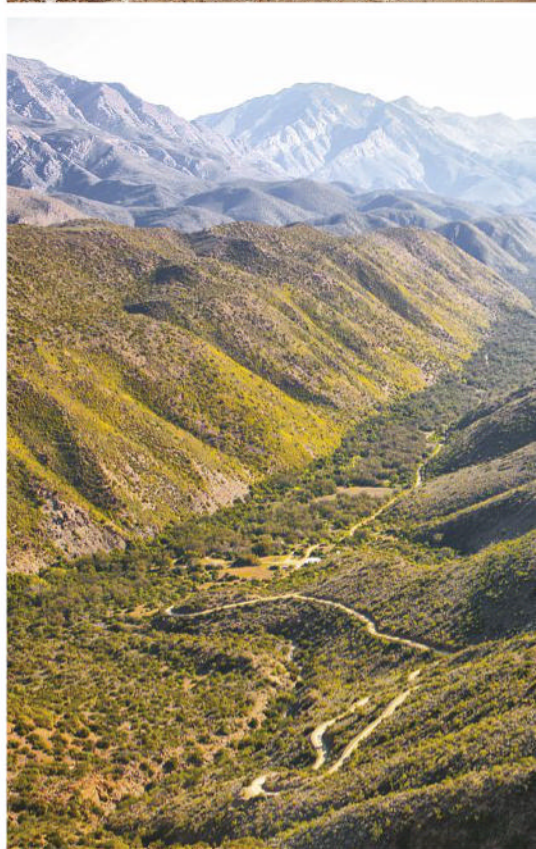
"My mother, who inherited her stoking kettle from her family in Aberdeen, would always keep witblits in the medicine cabinet next to her bed," Danie says. "And when a sheep had a sore leg, you would rub some witblits on it, wrap it up and send it on its way."

Modern Grundheim offers a wide range of witblits flavours (buchu and chilli, for example), but they also make great brandy, wines, gin, rum and vermouth. Grundheim has always been street-legal with its distilling.

"In 2007, we became the first estate to legally be able to sell you a bottle of witblits," Oom Danie says. "Before that, all trade in witblits was illegal – you distilled it under the table, and just for your family."

A rare distinction, and nothing to sniff at.

Whether you drink it or nose it, witblits is the renegade spirit of the Little Karoo, matching the grit of the people who keep their kettles, their stories and their legends close for future generations to enjoy – and occasionally, to sample.



Clockwise from top left: A witblits mural at Grundheim – full of the joys of spring. Oom Danie Grundling is the keeper of the stories at Grundheim. You have to navigate the tricky and dramatic Elands Pass to reach Gamkaskloof.



SHOP FOR A DROP

Grundheim Wines

About 16 km west of Oudtshoorn, off the R62.

Opening times: Weekdays 9 am to 4.30 pm; Saturday by appointment only.

☎ 044 272 6927

🌐 grundheim.co.za

Boplaas Family Vineyards

2 Saayman Street, Calitzdorp

Opening times: Weekdays from 9 am to 5 pm; Saturday from 9 am to 4 pm; Sunday from 10 am to 3 pm.

☎ 044 213 3326

🌐 boplaas.co.za

Domein Doornkraal farm stall

About 10 km west of De Rust, next to the R62.

Opening times: Monday to Thursday from 8.30 am to 4 pm, Friday from 8.30 am to 5 pm; Saturday from 8.30 am to 3 pm; Sunday from 9 am to 3 pm.

☎ 082 895 5009

🌐 doornkraal.co.za

Ouma Sannie se Winkel, Fontein Guest Farm

Gamkaskloof (94 km from Oudtshoorn)

Opening times: The shop is open daily from 7 am to 5 pm; kitchen open from 7 am to 10 am.

☎ 072 355 9623 (WhatsApp only); 🌐 gamkaskloof.co.za

Karoo Vine

At the Astron Energy filling station, Ladismith.

Opening times: Daily from 9 am to 5 pm; until 4 pm on weekends.

☎ 067 095 8327



WIN A BOOK!

We're giving away five copies of *Klein Karoo Magic* by Chris Marais and Julianne du Toit. Send an e-mail with your name, surname and contact details to

📧 toast@gomag.co.za by 30 September 2026 to qualify for the lucky draw. Or buy the book directly from the authors: R400, including courier within South Africa; 📧 julie@karoospace.co.za



Victoria House (this photo), and Victoria Manor (below), both in Cradock.



Hantam Huis, Calvinia



Tony Jackman in Market Street, Cradock.

Tony's Karoo feast

Journalist, playwright and foodie, **Tony Jackman**, shares five recipes from his new book, *Retro Karoo Food – 80 Nostalgic South African Recipes*.

Get your friends together and make it a celebration!

PICTURES **SEAN CALITZ**

When I lived in Chichester in the UK for a few years in the early 2000s, my British colleagues couldn't understand why I missed gem squash so much. I think it is a perfect South African starter dish and I'm eagerly watching restaurant menus to see where and when it will appear as exactly that.

For this article, I've selected five recipes I felt would resonate with readers of *go! Karoo*. My signature gem squash dish (p 78) is slathered with melted butter and lashings of grated Parmesan...

Lamb done any way is a favourite for me, but my cumin-butter shoulder of lamb (p 78) is maddeningly moreish. Put it on a dinner party menu, but be warned: either cook two or three shoulders (to feed 8–10 people) or make sure it's a small party! Or, cut to the chase and simply have two lamb or mutton dishes on your menu. And a pot bread to accompany them...

Soutribbetjie (p 80) can be made with lamb or mutton rib, and it needs time and patience. This is a staple of the very old days and deserves a place in our modern food repertoire. I think it's the ultimate South African slow food.

I chose my tomato braai bread (p 81) to go with these dishes, though there are others in the book,

like chimichurri braai bread. And when it came to picking a satisfying sweet ending, it had to be something cold yet soothing. What else but Peppermint Crisp tart (p 83)! Who else in the world will appreciate this chocolatey, minty wonder like South Africans do?

This book has been a long time coming. I first posited the idea to the late and lamented cookbook publisher, Lannice Snyman in the late 1990s. In 2024, publisher Beverley Dodd invited me to submit a manuscript to Penguin Random House South Africa.

I wanted the photographs for the book to be shot in my favourite Karoo locations: Hantam Huis in Calvinia, the Lord Milner Hotel in Matjiesfontein, and Victoria Manor and Tuishuise in Market Street, Cradock. The publisher readily agreed that photographer Sean Calitz (who flew out from London at his own expense) should join me on the road trip and capture some of the landscapes in between.

We set out in June 2025, criss-crossing the Karoo to get to all three locations. Accompanying Sean and I were Helen Henn (production), Caro Gardner (stylist) and Elizma Voigt (assistant). Every member of the team brought their best work to create a beautiful cookbook that also celebrates the Karoo.

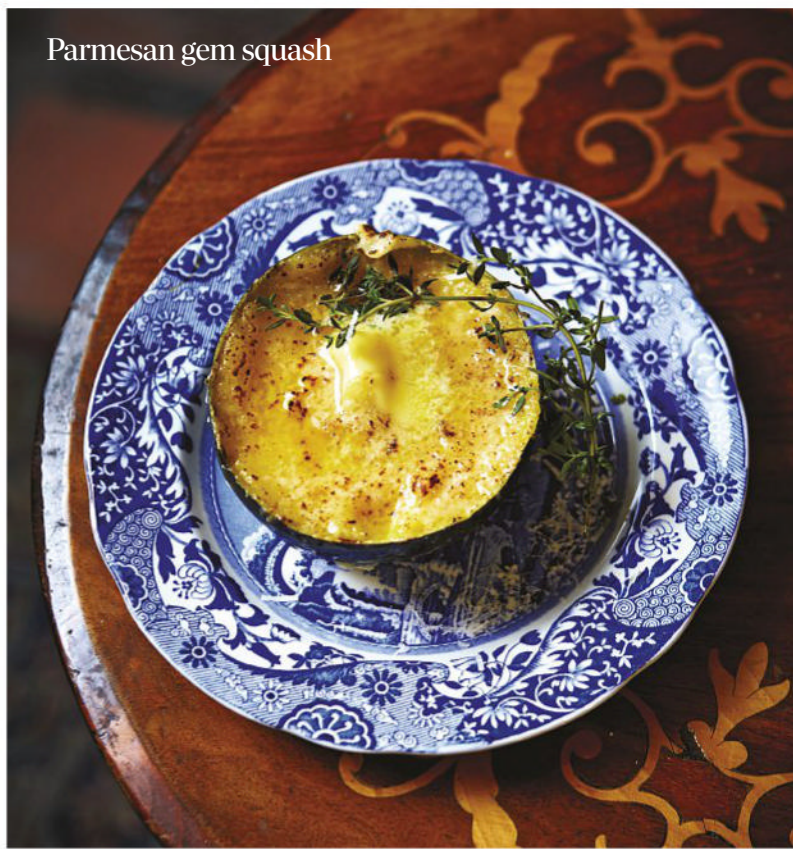
I hope you enjoy it!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Veteran journalist, playwright and food writer Tony Jackman was born in Oranjemund in 1955. He lived in Cradock (now Nxuba) from 2014 to 2025 but now lives in Durbanville, Cape Town. He's the food editor of *Daily Maverick* and the author of *foodSTUFF* (Human & Rousseau, 2017) and plays like *An Audience with Miss Hobhouse*, *Cape of Rebels* and *The Knocking*.

Parmesan gem squash



Parmesan gem squash

Gem squash is the perfect South African starter and my signature vegetable dish – serve these golden gems in their shells as a very South African showpiece at the beginning of a dinner party.

Here's how it works: One gem squash makes one serving, but the flesh of the whole squash fills only half of a squash shell. What you don't want is a halved squash that's soft, limp and irregular, so you need to start with raw halves, hence the need to scrape the flesh out of the raw squash before cooking.

The recipe below makes one half, but the ingredients can be multiplied as needed.

Serves 1/makes 1 gem squash half

You need

- 1 gem squash, to be served in one half-shell
- 2 Tbsp butter
- 2 heaped Tbsp finely grated Parmesan

- Salt and white pepper, to taste
- Extra melted butter, to serve
- Extra Parmesan, to serve
- Sprig of thyme, to garnish

Here's how

Slice the gem squash in half – that is, halfway between the top and the bottom, not side-on. Using a spoon, remove the seeds and discard them. Carefully scoop out all of the flesh and place it in a steamer, or in a colander over a pot of boiling water.

Retain the best, neatest halves to serve the squash in. Steam the yellow flesh for about 15 minutes or until it is soft. Drain. Scoop the cooked flesh into a medium-sized bowl. Add the 2 Tbsp butter and the 2 heaped Tbsp grated Parmesan and combine. Season the mixture with salt and pepper to taste.

Spoon the mixture into a half-shell. (One half-shell will be big enough for the contents of a whole squash, so multiply

as you need to: two gem squashes will fill two half-shells, etc.). Sprinkle some more Parmesan on top, then pour some melted butter over the grated cheese.

If you're using an oven, place the gem squash under the grill and bake it until the topping turns molten and golden. If you're using an air fryer, bake the squash at 200 °C for 8 minutes or until the Parmesan topping has turned golden brown. They're ready when you swoon on sight of them.

Serve each half gem on a small plate, garnished with a sprig of thyme.

Roast shoulder of lamb with cumin butter

Lamb takes on spices very well, and cumin is the best spice for it, especially if you toast the seeds first. In my estimation, a lamb shoulder is a meal for two. It's a generous meal, to be sure, but if you cooked one for four people, the portions would be on the miserly side. Three is manageable.

Cumin, butter, salt and pepper drive this dish, but I did add white wine (red would alter the flavour profile too much) and stock while reducing the pan juices. I used chicken stock as I didn't want to mask the lamb flavour, but you could use vegetable or lamb stock – just not beef.

Serves 2 generously, 4 at a push

You need

- 1 shoulder of lamb
- 2 tsp cumin seeds
- 4 Tbsp butter
- Dash of extra-virgin olive oil
- Coarse sea salt, to taste
- A liberal sprinkling of black pepper
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 200 ml chicken or vegetable stock
- Green vegetables (such as mangetout), to serve

Here's how

Preheat the oven to 220 °C.

In a heavy ovenproof dish (suitable for the lamb shoulder), toast the cumin seeds on low heat for 1 – 2 minutes.



Roast shoulder of lamb
with cumin butter

Soutribbetjie



When the seeds are nicely toasted (you'll smell it and perhaps see a bit of smoke emitting from them), turn up the heat and add the butter. Let it melt, add a dash of olive oil, add the lamb and brown it well for 3–4 minutes on all sides, until you can see that no pink is showing.

Season the meat all over with the salt and black pepper, then transfer the dish to the oven, uncovered, and immediately turn the heat down to 170 °C or 160 °C. (My gas oven is best at 170 °C, but ovens differ.) Roast the meat slowly until it is fall-apart tender, about 2 hours. Move the shoulder to another receptacle and let it rest in a warm place for a few minutes, or cover it lightly with foil.

To the juices that have remained in the ovenproof dish, add the wine and stock and place it back on the stovetop. Reduce it by half on high heat. (This should take 5–10 minutes, but it's ready when about half of it remains, and it has thickened.) Strain the sauce into a jug and then pour it back into the dish to reduce it a little bit more on the stove. It should have the consistency of gravy.

When serving lamb shoulder, don't be all coy about slicing dainty slivers of meat. It breaks off naturally in chunks, and biting into that natural texture is a part of the joy of it. Just pour that delicious sauce over and get stuck in. Serve it with potatoes dauphinoise and sautéed green vegetables such as mangetout.

Soutribbetjie

The Voortrekkers bequeathed us the ultimate slow food, long before that term became the movement it is today: salt rib. Days or even a week in the making. In the olden days, even two or three weeks. Or, maybe, for as long as the trek required and as long as the meat remained edible.

The meat is cured in salt, air-dried, then soaked and/or boiled and finally grilled

over hot coals. This is not for those who want an instant meal; it is for those who have the patience of the stoic.

The old recipes tended to use mutton for soutribbetjie, lamb having become more popular in our times.

Serves 4 – 6

You need

- 1,5 kg lamb rib rack or part of a mutton rib rack, intact, and bones cut through (your butcher can help)
- 2 ml coriander seeds
- About ½ cup salt
- 2 ml saltpetre
- 2,5 ml white pepper
- 2 ml ground allspice
- 2 ml dried thyme
- 2 ml brown sugar
- ½ cup brown vinegar

Here's how

In a pan on medium heat, toast the coriander seeds for 1 – 2 minutes, then crush them on a board using a rolling pin or with a mortar and pestle. In a bowl, mix the salt, saltpetre, white pepper, allspice, thyme and brown sugar together, add the crushed coriander seeds and set it aside.

Using a very sharp knife, score the fat of the whole rack of ribs crosswise, then rub the salt mixture into the meat, making sure to rub it all over. Place the rack in a suitable dish and pour over the vinegar. Refrigerate it for 2 days, turning once a day. (Or 6 days, if you're forgetful.)

After the ribs have been cured, remove them from the dish, rinse them, pat them dry with a clean cloth or tea towel and leave them to hang in a suitable place, such as a biltong dryer, the rafters of a coolish room (such as a garage or shed), in the kitchen chimney if you're old-fashioned like me, or "behind the fridge" as the late Lannice Snyman once told me. Two days should be enough.

When you're finished drying the rack, place it in a large pot and pour cold water over it to cover, then leave it for 3 or 4 hours. Drain it and replace with fresh water.

Bring it to a boil then cook it on low heat for about 45 minutes. Drain the water again, pat the ribs dry with a clean tea towel or cloth to mop up all the excess water, then leave the meat to dry in an airy spot while you prepare your braai coals.

Finish the ribs over hot coals, fat-side down, until beautifully golden and crisp; it will take about 3 – 5 minutes. Serve it with a potato side such as potatoes baked in foil in the coals. Have a glass of wine with it.

Roasted tomato braai bread

This is one of my favourite braai breads. The tomatoes and the onion are roasted in the oven first, then incorporated into the dough before being baked in a pot alongside hot coals.

Makes 1 large loaf

You need

- 2 Tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 large ripe tomatoes, in big chunks
- 1 large white onion, in big chunks
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 kg white bread wheat flour
- 1 x 10 g packet instant yeast
- 4 tsp sugar
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 cups lukewarm water and a little more, if necessary
- Extra-virgin olive oil, to grease the pot

Here's how

Preheat the oven to 220 °C.

Grease a medium roasting pan with 2 Tbsp olive oil. Place the tomato and onion chunks cut-side down in the oil and season with salt and pepper. Roast them for 1 hour or more until they're

golden and soft. Remove it from the oven, set it aside and turn off the heat. Remember to close the oven door so that you can prove the dough in the warm oven later. If the oven is cool when it's time to prove the dough, reheat the oven and turn it off again.

Sift the flour into a large mixing bowl. Add the yeast and sugar and use a wooden spoon to stir it very well. Only stir in the 1 tsp salt after this, so that it does not neutralise the yeast.

Add the lukewarm water a little at a time and mix the dough until it is all combined. Work the roasted tomatoes and onion into the dough with your hands. Add the olive oil and the juices left over in the pan (in which you roasted the tomatoes and onion) and knead that into the dough, folding and kneading until it is a nice plump ball that is not too sticky. Keep kneading for 5 minutes. Work in a little more flour if the dough is too sticky or a little more water if it's too dry.

Leave the ball of dough in the bowl, cover it with a slightly damp tea towel and put it in the oven for 20 minutes. While you're waiting for the dough to prove, grease a heavy-bottomed cast-iron oven (or bread) pot with some olive oil.

Remove the dough from the oven and knead it again for a 1 – 2 minutes, folding and turning. Place the dough in the centre of the greased pot, cover it again with a damp tea towel, and place it in the centre of the middle rack in the oven. Close the door and leave the dough in the warmth for its second rise for 40 minutes.

Check that you have braai coals. After the dough has finished proving, place the pot containing the dough in the braai and immediately arrange hot coals all around the base and on top of it. Keep replenishing the coals at the base and on the lid for 1 hour.



Roasted tomato
braai bread

Peppermint Crisp tart

Peppermint Crisp tart is a relatively new invention, dating back to the 1960s when the whipped cream substitute, Orley Whip, was introduced. A recipe for such a tart was included on the packaging and it slowly took off to turn into a staple of the South African dessert repertoire.

In fact, Peppermint Crisp tart contains two household brands: Peppermint Crisp chocolate, and Nestlé Caramel Treat, although there are other brands. While the “cream” in the original version was Orley Whip, many modern versions are made with dairy cream, so the dessert has matured, in a sense.

Serves 8

You need

- 1 x 200 g packet Tennis biscuits
- 125 g butter, melted
- 2 tsp gelatine powder
- 2 Tbsp cold water
- 2 x 360 g cans Nestlé Caramel Treat™
- 1 x 230 g tub cream cheese
- 1 cup cream
- 7 x 49 g bars Peppermint Crisp

Here's how

Crush the Tennis biscuits until fine. (I use my hands, but they can be crushed with a rolling pin too.) Place in a mixing bowl, add the melted butter and combine. Push the biscuits into the bottom of a tart dish of about 20 cm in diameter, then refrigerate for 30 minutes or more to set.

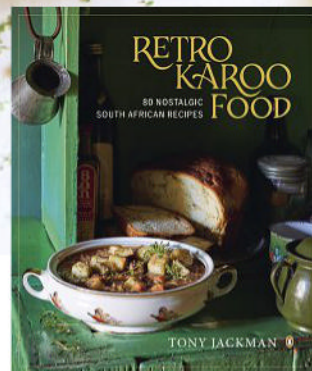
In a ramekin, soak the gelatine in the water until it turns spongy – it should take about 2 or 3 minutes.

Use a rolling pin to bash five of the Peppermint Crisp bars in their foil wrapping on a wooden or plastic board until finely crushed.

In a medium bowl, beat the caramel and cream cheese with a wooden spoon until well combined, then stir in the crushed chocolates until well combined.



Peppermint Crisp tart



WIN THE BOOK!

We're giving away two copies of *Retro Karoo Food – 80 Nostalgic South African Recipes*. E-mail your name, surname, contact details and address to toast@gomag.co.za by 30 September 2026 to qualify for the lucky draw. Or buy a signed copy directly from the author by e-mailing jackmanwrites@gmail.com (R420, excluding courier cost).



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Heuningland and go!
present three tours in 2027
– all under the leadership
of experienced 4x4 guide
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On the Karoo and Namibia (Kunene Region) tours, Toast Coetzer joins as photographic guide, ensuring that you get the best shots possible.

These tours are aimed at travellers who want to enjoy nature and get to know the landscapes more intimately. Photographers and non-photographers are equally welcome. Clear your diary for next year – adventure awaits!

KAROO

16 – 21 April 2027

- Explore back roads and storied farmyards around Nieu-Bethesda and Graaff-Reinet.
- See unique rock engravings at Nelspoort, visit a “secret” collection of vintage cars outside Murraysburg and soak in the silences of the farm Theefontein.
- In Nieu-Bethesda, visit the Owl House, the Stone Folk of Ongeluksloot and the Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre.
- Self-drive tour (4x4 required), maximum 12 guests.
- Formal accommodation on guest farms, home-cooked meals included.

R18 850 per person sharing.

NAMIBIA'S KUNENE REGION

27 May – 8 June 2027

- Explore the north-west of Namibia: Damaraland and the Kaokoveld, plus the Kunene River and Etosha National Park.
- Take photos at iconic settings like the Rock Arch at Spitzkoppe and Epupa Falls. We also visit a Himba kraal.
- Look for desert elephants in the dry riverbed of the Hoanib, and black rhinos (if we're lucky) in the Palmwag Concession.
- Campfires every night!
- Self-drive tour (4x4 required), maximum 16 guests.
- Camping tour (we supply and pitch your tent), meals included.

R37 850 per person sharing

CAPRIVI STRIP AND ZAMBIA'S LIUWA PLAIN

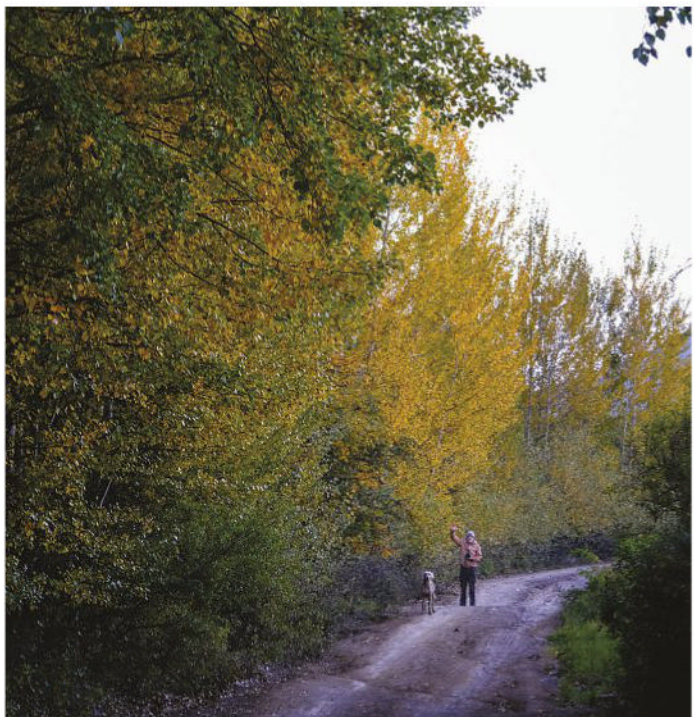
19 – 30 November 2027

- Explore Namibia's wildest national parks: Bwabwata, Mudumu and Nkasa Rupara.
- Travel further north into Zambia, following the course of the Zambezi to Sioma Falls, then head to Liuwa Plain National Park.
- Bring your binoculars – the birding is exceptional on this tour!
- Self-drive tour (4x4 required), maximum 16 guests.
- Camping tour (we supply and pitch your tent), meals included.

R42 950 per person sharing

BOOK YOUR PLACE!

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



Stay here

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION SECTION

Facilities • Rates • Activities Contact details

In planning this section of the guide, we gave our journalists free rein to explore any district or area they fancied. Our writers are people who love a good road trip, and they know exactly what kind of guest farm will appeal to *go!* readers. They look at things Al knows nothing about, like what makes one stoep more lekker than another; or whether a farm dam is good for a dip; if the tree you park your car under is a karee or a wild olive... That's the kind of detail that makes this compilation different from whatever you might find online.

Willem van der Berg lives in Bloemfontein, but more often than not, his phone will be turned off and you'll find out later that he was somewhere in the Upper Karoo having the time of his life. He took his beloved Isuzu bakkie to the Strydenburg and Britstown districts in search of guest farms where you can truly feel like you're in the middle of nowhere (p 88).

Samantha Reinders is a Prince Albert local who is always looking for an excuse to explore the surrounding farming district, often with her parents Pete and Meg, and her dog, Monty. She visited four guest farms (some also have camping facilities) where a stroll in the veld comes standard – and the stoeps all carry her approval (p 98).

And finally, when Jac Kritzinger (who lives in Sandbaai, Hermanus) dropped a hint that he hadn't been to the Tankwa for a while, we said, sure – off you go! He tackled the long gravel roads of this barren region in a Mahindra Scorpio-N – see page 116 for his impressions of this capable SUV. The guest farms he found at the end of those lonely roads all offer good value and minimum fuss (p 108). Take the right attitude to the Tankwa (and maybe a second spare wheel) and the landscape will soothe your spirit twice over.

We hope you enjoy this round-up. And if you think that we've missed your personal favourite, please drop us an e-mail and we'll go check it out for the next guide.



Cellphone signal is patchy in the Karoo, and people don't sit at their laptops all day waiting for your e-mail. Send a WhatsApp message instead of calling. And be patient – you might only get a reply after sheep shearing is done for the day. Always check rates and road conditions when booking, since these are subject to change.

JAC KRITZINGER



Snyderskloof, Tankwa Karoo



The Upper Karoo, by decree

The Karoo has many different regions, and some of them don't get much attention – like the Upper Karoo in the Northern Cape, around Britstown, Hopetown, Strydenburg and De Aar. But you'd be missing out if you didn't stay over at one of these quiet escapes.

WORDS & PICTURES **WILLEM VAN DER BERG**



We all have things that we feel strongly about, especially when it comes to travel. Going on a trip takes a big bite out of your calendar, not to mention your savings account... You want the time to be special and filled with memorable moments.

Here's a road trip decree to live by: Make the drive feel like a part of the holiday. Don't always take the fastest route. Turn off where you'd normally drive straight on, like here in the Upper Karoo, along the N12.

The back roads you'll discover in this region will calm you down and make your journey an adventure. Who knows, they might even lead to experiences you'll never forget.

The four places in this article will surprise you, and one of them might even end up being your main destination!



MEET THE AUTHOR

*Before **Willem van der Berg** lived in Bloemfontein, he lived on a farm in the Carnarvon district, where he fixed windmills, hunted jackals and did ultrasounds on sheep. The stories of the Karoo inspired him to become a travel writer. Follow him on Instagram: @veldstories*

If this view of Hidden Karoo Cottage won't lure you to the Upper Karoo, nothing will.

STAY HERE

Witgatboom

I always feel a hum of excitement when the road to an overnight stop turns into a jeep track that leads me deeper into the solace of the veld. By the time you reach Sonja and “Klonkie” Wiid’s farmhouse and drive the final 6 km to their guest cottage, Witgatboom, you’re very far away from everything, with only bontebok, springbok, gemsbok and shepherd’s trees for company. And some sheep, which graze in a shimmering sea of bushman grass.

This house is so well hidden that you only notice it when you pull over under some karee trees and get out of your vehicle. The realisation hits soon thereafter: You’ll want to stay here longer than planned.

Tranquillity is as abundant as the generous shade, and the views are as vast as the Milky Way above your fire at night.

Early morning, open the folding doors and let in the sun and birdsong. Witgatboom is not *in* the veld, it’s a part of it.



Facilities: The house has two bedrooms, one with a double bed and the other with two single beds. There’s one bathroom with a gas geyser. The kitchen has a fridge and a two-plate gas stove, and there’s solar power for the lights and to recharge your electronics. There’s no Wi-Fi, but fairly good cellphone reception.

You can watch the sunset (or grazing antelope!) from the outdoor shower. It only has cold water, so probably best in summer... The small dam near the house is another perfect place to cool down on a hot day.

What else? There’s a viewpoint about 500 m from the house (the path there is marked). Go at sunrise or sunset and look

for kudu and grey rhebuck.

You can hike or ride your mountain bike anywhere on the farm.

Order a braai pack beforehand – R120 for two mutton chops, a sosatie, sausage and a ciabatta roll with cheese and jam. A bag of firewood costs R40.

Where? 50 km east of Strydenburg; 44 km south of Hopetown. You’ll mostly drive gravel roads to the farmhouse where Sonja lives. From there, it’s 6 km along a jeep track – a vehicle with a high ground clearance is recommended. Sonja will send you detailed directions when you book.

Rates: From R300 per person.

Contact: ☎ 083 297 7362 (Sonja); “Witgatboom Verblyf” on 📧 lekkeslaap.co.za



There’s a photo in the main bedroom of the house surrounded by scorched earth. A fire burnt right around the house a few years ago, leaving it unscathed. Here’s another Karoo road trip decree: Love a place, and it will show you mercy.





STAY HERE

Hidden Karoo Cottage

When you pull up to Hidden Karoo Cottage for the first time, the “hidden” part suddenly makes sense. It’s as if the Karoo guards over it: Rocky ridges rise all around and clouds look down from an otherwise blue sky. A breeze ruffles the scrubland. It feels like you’re the only human on earth.

That’s exactly what owner Almé Beukes wants you to feel. She believes that humans should honour the silence and isolation of the area.

The cottage is only 800 m from the farmhouse where Almé lives with her husband Jacques, but you can’t see it. The only thing in your line of sight is the nearby dam, where a lone steenbok might be drinking. Maybe a thunderstorm is rolling in, or the sun is slowly setting – take it all in...

Big windows allow you to watch the landscape from inside. Go on, invite the moon to join you around the dining table.

The cottage is the perfect getaway for a group of friends or a family in search of some proper Karoo bliss.



Facilities: There are three bedrooms and one bathroom – the house sleeps six in total. It’s well equipped with cutlery, crockery, a stove, oven and fridge. There are two braai areas – indoor and outdoor – and a small splash pool near the stoep. There’s Wi-Fi and enough solar power for all your needs.

What else? You can hike

or ride your mountain bike on the farm roads. Order fresh mutton and delicious roosterkoek beforehand from Almé. Wood: R130 per bag.

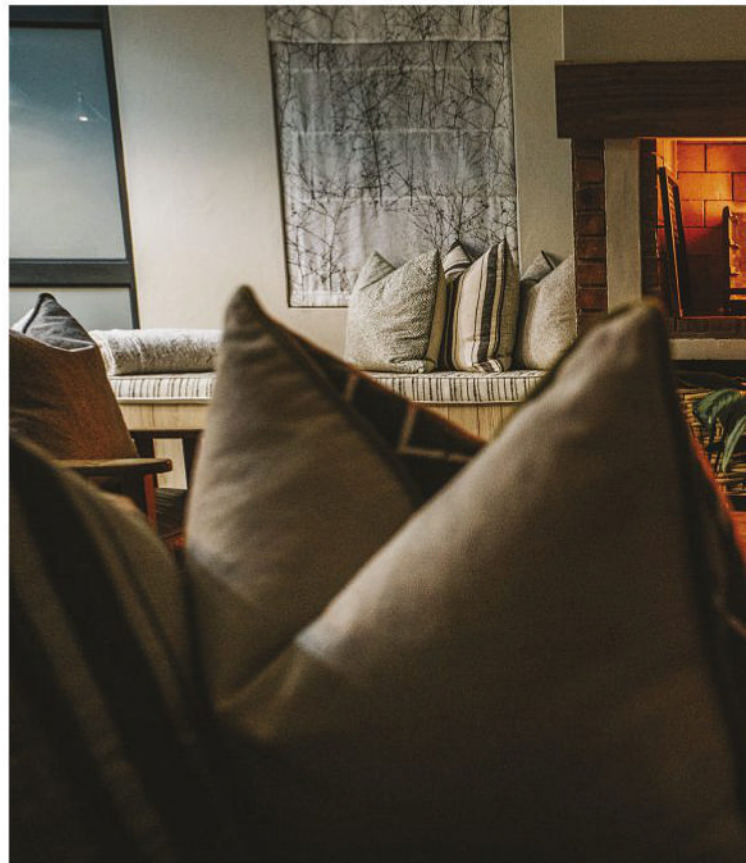
Where? About 42 km south-east of Strydenburg via a gravel road.

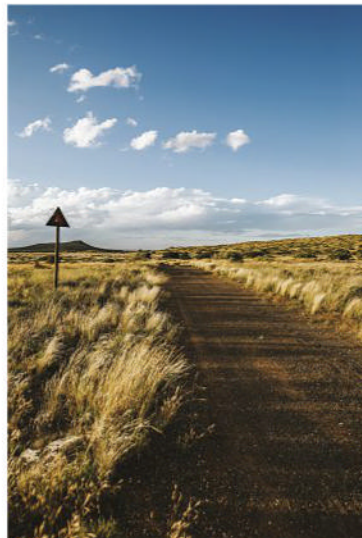
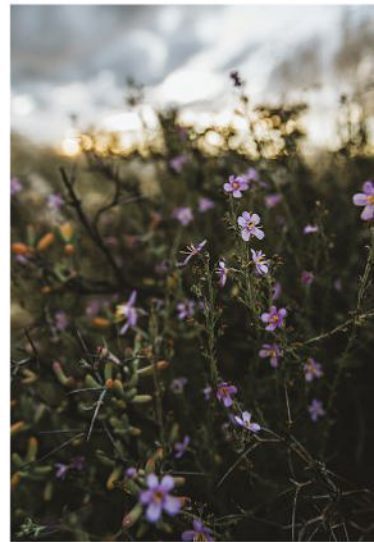
Rates: From R430 per person.

Contact: ☎ 083 652 1552 (Almé); “Hidden Karoo Cottage” on Facebook and Instagram



The dirt road from Strydenburg to Hidden Karoo Cottage is traversable in any vehicle with fair ground clearance, unless there has been heavy rainfall in the area.





STAY HERE

Sweetfontein

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to be pampered," says Jan Sauer Lambrechts, owner of Sweetfontein Boutique Farm Lodge. Everyone needs some luxury in their life, and Jan provides just that. "The Karoo doesn't have to be a dusty experience. It can also be a lavish treat."

When he first started working on what would eventually become the lodge, his own mother thought he'd lost his mind! Who would drive all the way to Britstown for a fancy place to stay?

"Now we get lots of guests who say they chose their route specifically to include a stop here," Jan says. "Especially if they're on their way back from a camping holiday in the Kgalagadi or Botswana, or some other wild place. They rest here before they return home. That's why we don't really have self-catering options. At Sweetfontein, you can sit back and enjoy yourself without worrying about making your next meal."

The beautiful garden and peaceful stoep make Sweetfontein a real oasis.



Facilities: There are various en suite rooms, all elegantly decorated. Some are in the Manor House and others are separate units. You can eat at the restaurant or in your room; the rooms are not equipped for self-catering, but you can make use of the communal braai area.

The menu changes four times a year, according to the fresh produce available. Popular options include sheep tails and roosterkoek as an appetiser (R125), and main

dishes like Karoo lamb chops (R230) and wild mushroom gnocchi (R195).

What else? There are two swimming pools and several hiking and mountain-bike trails. You can even get married here...

Where? Next to the N10, about 15 km east of Britstown and 35 km west of De Aar.

Rates: From R740 per person (without meals).

Contact: ☎ 060 381 8753 (reception)

🌐 sweetfontein.co.za



Fancy yourself a potter? While you're there, you can do a three-hour pottery workshop (R450 per person), or one of their more advanced three-day workshops (R1 200 per person excluding accommodation).





STAY HERE

Karooorus

For years, Wilma Strauss's Kambro Farm Stall near Britstown on the N12 has been a popular place for travellers to break their journey. Many people also overnight in the chalets or in the caravan park next to the farm stall – Kambro is exactly halfway between the Cape and Gauteng.

But not everyone knows about the little house that the Strauss family has prepared for guests, which is further away from the road, deep in the Karoo. Yup, at Karoorus you can do just that: relax in peace away from the hustle and bustle.

Take a walk – you can go in several directions – ride your mountain bike or do a 4x4 trail. There's also a natural spring in a kloof about a kilometre from the house where you can swim. After good rains, there is even a small waterfall...

This reminds me of another Upper Karoo travelling decree: Don't just stay one night at a place like Karoorus, otherwise you might miss out on a surprise like a waterfall in the Karoo!



Facilities: Karoorus has three bedrooms and sleeps six people in total. There's one bathroom. Firewood is supplied for the donkey boiler, which you stoke yourself. The kitchen has a braai area, gas stove, microwave and fridge. There's solar power and fairly good cellphone reception.

What else? There are two stands in Waterfall Camp if you'd rather sleep in a tent – the camp is not too far from the house. Each stand has a thatched A-frame roof and its own (neat!) bathroom. A donkey boiler supplies hot water.

There's also a big communal *kuier* area where you can braai as a group. Get your meat, braai wood and side dishes at the farm stall.

Where? Kambro Farm Stall is next to the N12, about 20 km north of Britstown. To reach Karoorus, you have to drive 6 km along a jeep track – high-clearance vehicle required.

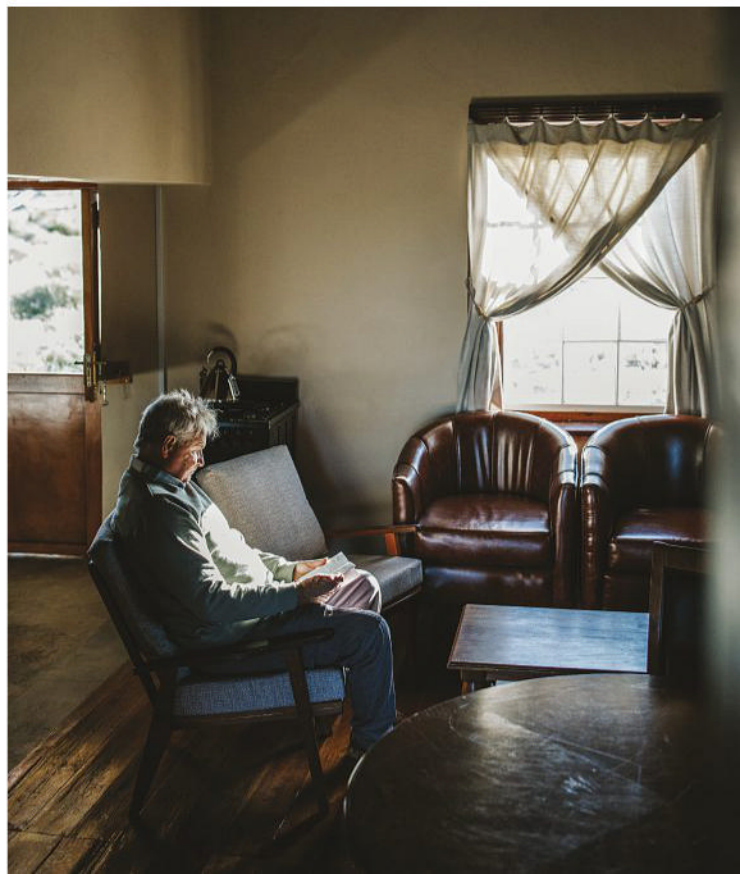
Rates: Karoorus from R600 per person; Waterfall Camp from R325 per person; chalets near the farm stall R300 per person; caravan park R145 per person.

Contact: ☎ 083 800 0014
✉ kambroaccom.co.za
"Kambro Accommodation and Farmstall" on Facebook



Kambro Farm Stall's popular pies (springbok, mutton and chicken) cost R40 each. Other delicious dishes on offer include lamb crackling with pap or bread (R120), lamb curry (R180), and lamb chops served with vegetables or salad (R180). They also have fantastic milk tarts (R28 each). The farm stall is open every day of the year except Christmas Day.

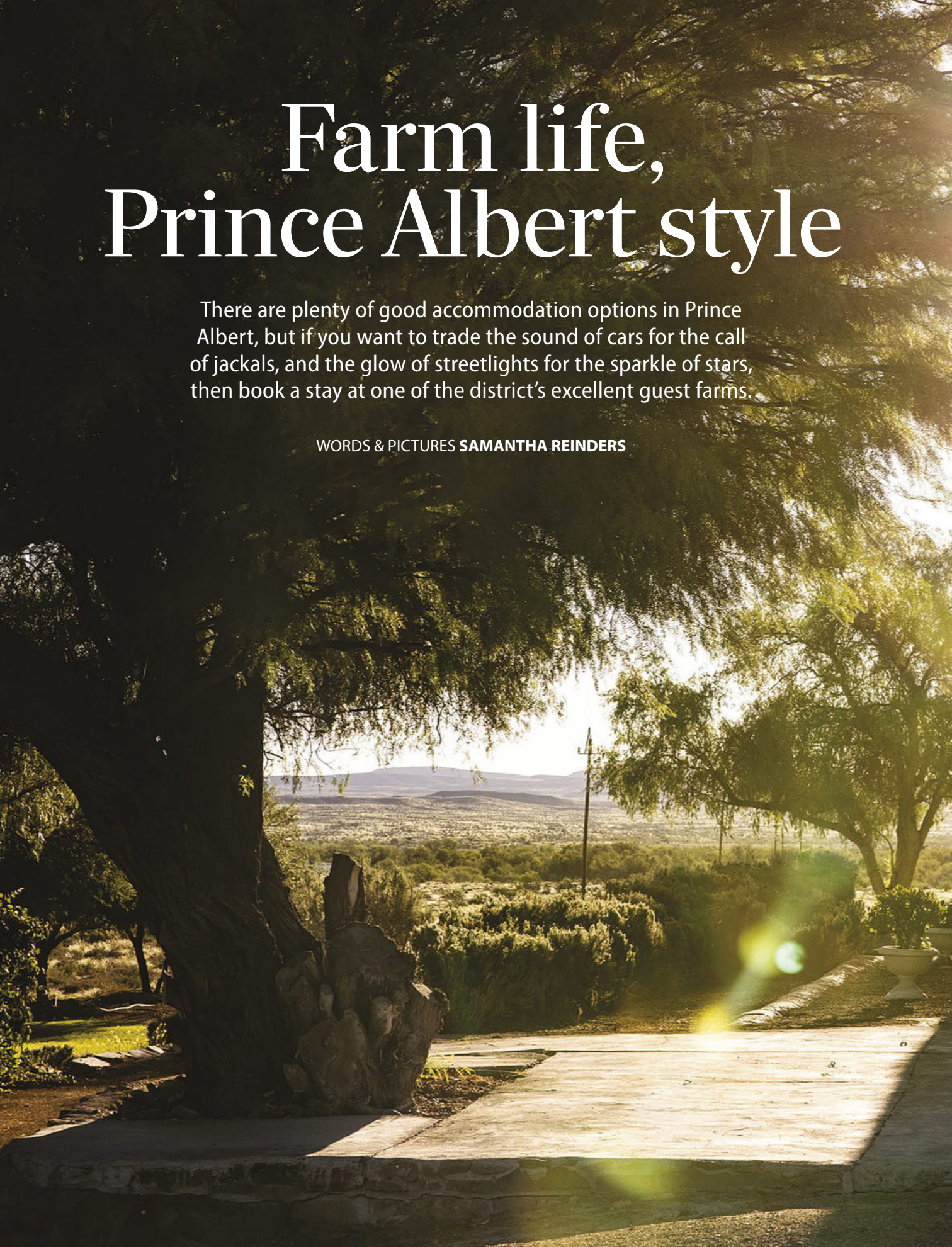




Farm life, Prince Albert style

There are plenty of good accommodation options in Prince Albert, but if you want to trade the sound of cars for the call of jackals, and the glow of streetlights for the sparkle of stars, then book a stay at one of the district's excellent guest farms.

WORDS & PICTURES **SAMANTHA REINDERS**



Prince Albert has a way of turning up in conversation these days: someone's cousin moved there; someone's aunt swears by cheese from Gay's Guernsey Dairy (get yours from The Dairy Shop at 4 Church Street); and design magazines have featured the town's stylish Karoo homes.

But there's more to Prince Albert than the town. On guest farms in the district, you get the real gist of the place: night skies thick with stars, silence not available in a city, and days with nothing on the agenda but a stoep chair and a view of the Swartberg.

Staying on a guest farm offers you the best of both worlds. Because, when the silence gets too much, or when the bread runs out, you're close enough to town for a shopping trip, or to go feel social at one of the coffee shops.

Here are four of my favourite farm escapes, each of which showcases the essence of this part of the Karoo.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Reinders is a photo-journalist. She travels the world with her camera but calls Prince Albert home. Some of her favourite things: a well done lamb chop; a gravel road; and her beloved dog, Montgomery Archibald von Biscuit. See more of her photos on Instagram: @samreinders and @thelandofbeginagain

The Farmhouse is the biggest of the self-catering units at Abrahamskraal.

STAY HERE

Weltevrede Fig Farm

One night at Weltevrede feels like a week away. It's equally beautiful whether you arrive in the heat of summer or wrapped in a Karoo winter. What I love most is that each cottage is furnished with proper antiques – not just the kind you buy at a shop dressed up to look old. These pieces have been handed down through six generations of Weltevrede farmers.

One of the best things to do at Weltevrede is plan, cook and eat generous, lazy meals around the long tables, or out on the stoep. Add a stack of board games, a good book and a walk in the foothills of the Swartberg, and you have all the ingredients for a weekend of bliss.

Weltevrede has been farmed since 1853 – with the Koorts family at the helm for most of that time. Liezl de Klerk (née Koorts) is sixth generation here; her children the seventh. Continual reinvention is the secret to the longevity of Weltevrede, Liezl says. It began life as a dried-fruit farm – peaches, apricots and figs, laid out to dry and shipped off however the era allowed, first by wagon, later by rail. Liezl's grandmother, Ouma Sienie, headed that operation. There's a 100-year-old fig tree still standing on the farm.

Liezl's parents, Pieter and Suzelle Koorts, shifted the focus to fresh figs, most of which are sold to Woolworths and anxiously awaited each year by fig fans countrywide. Today, there are some 2 000 fig trees on the farm: mostly Adam figs (the big, purple variety) which are perfect for drying or eating fresh, and the smaller Cape brown figs, which are destined for green fig preserve and other jams. These preserves are all made to the original family recipe.

It was Liezl's parents who first opened the farm to guests, somewhat reluctantly – her father told her that nobody would want to come all the way out to the farm. How wrong he was!



Facilities: Of the five self-catering cottages, Klein de Hoek is the smallest, with two bedrooms and one bathroom (suited to two adults and two kids). It has an outside shower but no pool.

De Hoek is a larger house with three bedrooms (sleeps six in total) – it has a pizza oven, fireplace, stoep and a dining table built for feasts.

Vredenhof sleeps six across three bedrooms and is shaded by the biggest fig tree you've ever seen, with a stoep wrapping two sides, and a pool.

Bo-Vredenhof is the largest house – it sleeps six across three bedrooms. It has a wide stoep, plus a pool.

Fonteinskop, the newest addition, sits privately on a hilltop and is the pick for a romantic getaway. It has one bedroom (sleeps two), a splash pool and fireplace. Note: You'll need a 4x4 for the last 100 m to Fonteinskop.

What else? None of the cottages have electricity – by design. Instead, you get paraffin lamps; and gas fridges, geysers, ovens, and heaters (in winter). If you need to charge a phone, an e-bike battery or lights, stroll over to the farm coffee

shop, which also has the only Wi-Fi on the property. Their fig tart is the perfect accompaniment to an inbox check.

The coffee shop is open Monday to Friday from 9 am to 4 pm and Saturdays from 9 am to 2 pm. It stocks a limited food menu plus curated gifts and farm produce (fresh figs in season, preserves all year). Fresh fig season runs from late January to the end of April, with *voorvye* (the early crop) from mid- to late December. In the lead-up to and during fig season, including Sundays, you might hear farmworkers in the distance shouting to chase off the birds. Weltevrede is pet-friendly.

Where? About 25 km west of Prince Albert along a decent gravel road. Exit town at the old cemetery and continue past the equally old farms Damascus and Vrisch Gewagt.

Rates: Klein de Hoek from R1 500 for two people; De Hoek and Vredenhof from R3 200 for a base of four people per night; Bo-Vredenhof from R6 000 for four; Fonteinskop from R3 200 for two.

Contact: 087 095 6229
weltevrede@figfarm.co.za



The farm dam at De Hoek

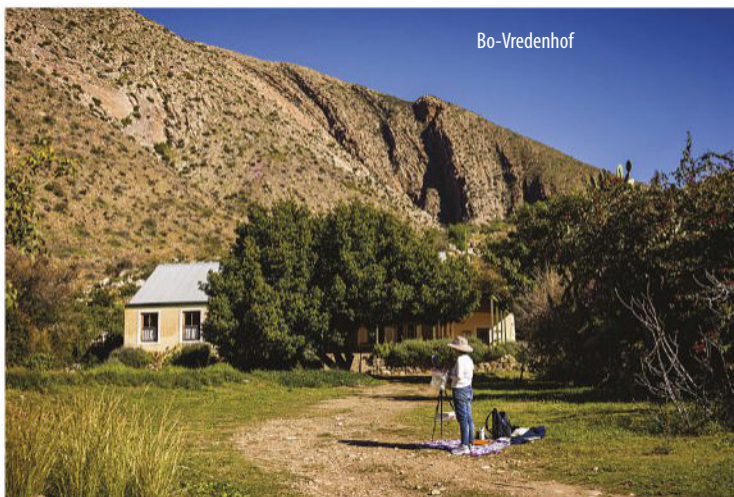


Weltevrede is a paradise for birders. You might see a Verreaux's eagle soaring over the Swartberg. I saw a brown-hooded kingfisher in his element – dining on worms on the farm soccer field after it had been mowed.

Vredenhof is shaded by a massive wild fig tree.



Vredenhof



Bo-Vredenhof



Liezl de Klerk



STAY HERE

Grootwaterval

Danie and Narina le Grange are fifth-generation farmers – and viral TikTok stars. Yes, you read that right!

Opening an eco-tourism business and accompanying guesthouse has been just one of many projects over the years, to sustain the family's farming enterprise in this drought-ridden area. A friend helped them post their first TikTok video in 2023. Footage followed of cute *lammetjies* and pretty Karoo veld, and et voilà! A couple of million views later, the Le Granges were the winners of Netwerk24's "Smaakmaker van die Jaar" (Tastemaker of the Year) award in 2024.

My pooch Monty, my parents and I all piled into the Le Grange bakkie and took a Sunday drive into the veld with Danie and Narina. We stopped for coffee and rusks under the windmill at the campsite and Danie enchanted us with 150 years of his family's history on this piece of land. He stopped every so often to pick a *bossie* in the veld – *ankerbos* here, *vergeet-my-nie* there – and brought it back to the bakkie for us to smell or taste. A better Karoo tour guide you will struggle to find.



Kalkfontein Cottage



The campsite at Grootwaterval



Facilities: All their units are self-catering and run on solar power (lights, fridge, charging points for your phone); solar geysers, too. The units are scattered around the farm: Gemsbok Cottage (sleeps six with a wood-fired hot tub), Ribbok Cottage (sleeps five), the Honeymoon Suite (sleeps two), Kalkfontein Cottage (sleeps two) and Grootwaterval Lodge (sleeps up to 12). The latter has a farm dam shaded by trees, plus an indoor fireplace and Aga stove for winter.

Their campsite (no electricity) has a tidy ablution block and hot water. It's close to Kalkfontein Cottage, so if part of your group wants to camp but a couple would prefer the comfort of a Sealy Posturepedic, you can book them together. Both

are flanked by a gorgeous windmill and farm dam setup. Bring your own power bank to charge devices.

Where? About 45 km north-east of Prince Albert (follow signs from the R353). If you're coming from the north on the N1, turn left onto the R353 just past Leeu-Gamka and follow the signs.

Rates: Ribbok, Gemsbok and the Honeymoon Suite R400 per adult sharing; R200 per child under 11. Kalkfontein Cottage R1 000 per night. Grootwaterval Lodge can only be booked for a minimum of two people staying for two nights or more. It costs R400 per adult sharing; R200 per child under 11. Camping R100 per person.

Contact: 083 444 3869
grootwaterval.co.za
TikTok and Instagram:
@grootwaterval



Grootwaterval is pet-friendly – they charge R50 per dog per day, whether you're in a cottage or camping. My dog Monty loved being able to roam the fenced garden, without his mother stressing about him bothering the sheep.



The wood-fired hot tub at
Gemsbok Cottage



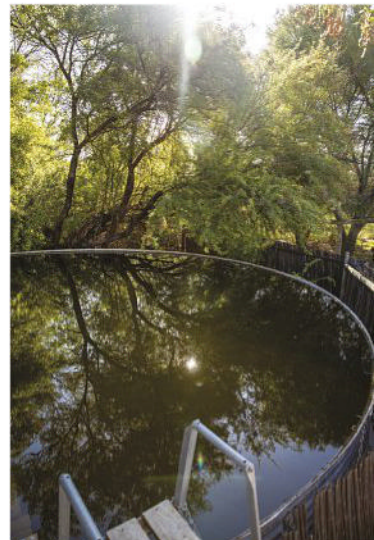
Kalkfontein Cottage



Danie and Narina le Grange



Gemsbok Cottage



STAY HERE

Abrahamskraal

Staying at the main guesthouse at Abrahamskraal feels like a trip back in time. The floors creak, the decor speaks of yesteryear (although you have all the comfort and utilities you need), and the old photographs and framed newspaper articles make you feel like you've stepped into a story – a story that you're now a part of! My kind of place.

The owners, Johan and Hestie Fourie, live in Prince Albert but farm out here; they're Karoo commuters, in a way. When I asked if I could stray beyond the guesthouse, the answer was: "Of course! Just close the gate behind you for the sheep."

When I visited back in June, abnormal late summer and early winter rainfall had turned the veld Jurassic Park green. While on a walk, the quartz rocks caught the light like scattered diamonds, and the distant Swartberg was dressed in pinks and purples in the late afternoon light. Braai time back at the guesthouse brought its own company: flying ant lions the size of my hand, a dung beetle minus its load, and a spider hard at work on its web. Everything alive and thriving.

Paging through the guestbook – an entry almost a hundred years after the first one described Abrahamskraal with just one word: "Bakgat".



Facilities: There are three self-catering units that sleep up to 20 people in total: The Farmhouse (four en suite bedrooms); Struben's Place (three bedrooms, two bathrooms); and the Farm Cottage (three bedrooms, two bathrooms).

There's a farm dam-style pool, and a campsite (six stands) with power, hot water and shade. The campsite is an oasis of green grass in an otherwise dusty

landscape and is set just in front of the gabled main farmhouse. This makes it easy for a big group to book out the whole place – some can camp and the others can stay in the house.

Where? Next to the R353 gravel road, about 36 km north of Prince Albert and 21 km south of Leeu-Gamka.

Rates: Camping R200 per stand; self-catering from R900 per person sharing.

Contact: 082 649 4235
abrahamskraal.co.za



Palaeontologist Robert Broom (1866 – 1951) praised Abrahamskraal's fossils in his writings. A newly discovered therocephalian called Pristerognathus vanderbyli was named after an early farm manager, William van der Bijl.

The farm later lent its name to official South African geology: the Abrahamskraal Formation (260 million years old) is the lowest rock layer of the Beaufort Group in the Karoo Supergroup.



The campsite at Abrahamskraal is in front of The Farmhouse.

Abrahamskraal through the ages

The farm has been in the Van Vuuren family for three generations. Its centrepiece, the gabled Cape Dutch farmhouse that still serves as the main guesthouse, was built in 1912 by farm manager William van der Bijl. Its elaborate gable is a close copy of the 1840 Rhenish church in Stellenbosch.

During the 16 years that the Van der Bijls lived in the house, some notable names signed the visitors' book: brothers Fred and Leicester Struben, discoverers of the Witwatersrand gold reef, visited on 27 December 1912; later visitors included palaeontologist Sidney Haughton, botanist Rudolf Marloth, politician and gold miner Alfred Nicholson, and opera singer Cecilia Wessels.

William and his wife Debora developed a real expertise of their own in palaeontology and botany. Some of Debora's vygie (*mesembryanthemum*) specimens went to Kew Gardens for identification and the unknown ones came back named after her and her children.

At its peak, the farm employed 350 workers and had its own shop and school. When William retired as farm manager, the owner at the time divided the land into smaller erven, resulting in the 3 000 hectares of sheep country it is today.

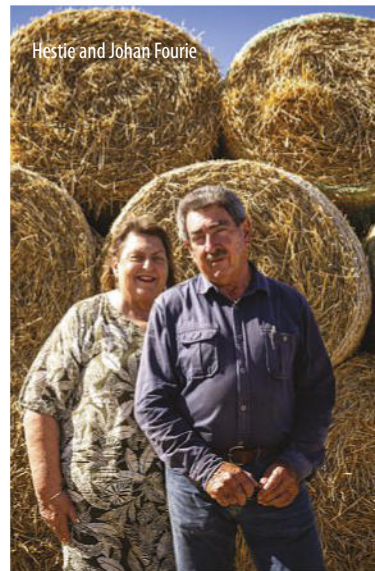
Current owner Hestie Fourie's grandfather, Dirk van Vuuren, bought the land in 1945. The family lived there for some years but the farmhouse stood empty for three decades before Johan and Hestie began restoring it in 2002, turning the house and farm cottage into guesthouses, and the old schoolhouse into a wedding venue.



The Farmhouse



An ant lion in its flying stage.



Hestie and Johan Fourie

STAY HERE

Wolvekraal Guest Farm

Wolvekraal doesn't make a fuss of itself. Owners Berlinda and André Nel haven't filled the place with designer furniture or grand gestures. Instead, they've built four thoughtfully pared-back cottages and a campsite, and placed each one exactly where it should be: far enough from the next unit that your neighbours disappear into the veld.

The cottages have everything you need, and it's often the small touches that linger: handmade wooden boxes filled with board games, birdseed left out for the feathered locals, fireplaces for winter evenings, and braais for summer nights.

There isn't a television in sight. Instead, your evening entertainment comes courtesy of the stars and the night birds. The Swartberg is your backyard and the 4 000 ha farm is a hiker's paradise. The cycling community has already discovered what Wolvekraal offers in abundance: farm tracks and single-track trails where hours disappear beneath your wheels without worrying about traffic.

And if you want a break from farm life for whatever reason, Wolvekraal is only a few kilometres from Prince Albert should you feel like a sit-down dinner in town.



The campsite at Wolvekraal has an adjacent building featuring a kitchen, bathroom and multi-purpose room.



Facilities: There are four self-catering cottages: Granaatbos, Soetdoring, Vygiebos and Olienhout. Olienhout has two bedrooms; the others are open-plan units. All sleep between three and four people. Each has braai facilities and an indoor fireplace.

The campsite is out of sight from the cottages behind some koppies. It features a small kitchen for washing up, an amazingly clean ablution room, and another multi-purpose room you can use to sit in or even pitch a two-man tent in if the weather turns sour. The braai area is adjacent, which is open to the stars but enclosed by a reed screen.

Anyone who has camped in Prince Albert knows the infamous summer wind –

affectionately known as the town's air conditioner. It cools the afternoon but can flatten a lightweight tent and turn a braai into an endurance event. The extra shelter at the campsite therefore makes good sense.

What else? The campsite has a splash pool – a square of water that can turn camping into glamping on a scorching afternoon. The campsite's kitchen and bathroom are solar lit – bring a power bank for charging gadgets.

Where? 10 km north-west of Prince Albert next to the R407 (towards the N1).

Rates: Accommodation in the cottages from R700 per person; camping R700 per stand (max six people).

Contact: ☎ 072 177 0844
🌐 wolvekraal.co.za

go!
says

The Nels have compiled a guide to the plant species found on the farm (see their website), turning every walk into a treasure hunt. Before long, you'll find yourself stopping to identify shrubs you'd normally have walked straight past. Pair your newfound interest with a guided walk by Prince Albert botanist Sue Dean (☎ 082 770 0206) and the veld begins to reveal itself in an entirely different way.



Soetdoring Cottage



The sheltered braai area at the campsite.

Where the silence sings

The wide plains of the Tankwa are tonic for tired city souls. If you're passing through or looking to spend more time in the region, these four guest farms are well worth visiting.

WORDS & PICTURES **JAC KRITZINGER**

The Tankwa Karoo looks like Mars, minus the orange glow. Hard-baked veld stretches into the distance all around, with the odd koppie shimmering in the heat. But when it rains and the mighty Tankwa River starts to flow, the veld comes to life, almost overnight. Green shoots pop up among the rocks, and fields of wildflowers blind you with their colour.

The Tankwa River is what separates the so-called Ceres Karoo from the Tankwa proper – the latter is north of the river. But for the sake of simplicity, we'll just say Tankwa when we refer to either of these regions.

The dirt roads here are known for shredding tyres, but I explored carefully in a Mahindra Scorpio-N 4x4 and didn't have an incident. (*See page 116 for Jac's impression of the vehicle. – Ed.*) Cellphone reception is scarce, and sometimes you'll bump along a corrugated road for hours without seeing another soul.

That's why it's so exciting when you finally see a sign for a guest farm in the distance...

The Tankwa National Park is a good option if you're looking for a base, but I went looking for other offerings outside the park, for the sake of variety.

Check in, and let the timeless Tankwa make you feel human again.



MEET THE AUTHOR

Jac Kritzinger is a photographer, writer and wanderer, in no particular order. After he completed an honours degree in film studies and visual media at Stellenbosch University, he worked in the film industry before turning to photography and writing full-time.

He lives in Hermanus with his wife and his dog. Visit jackkritzinger.com for more of his work and follow him on Instagram: [@jackkritzingerphoto](https://www.instagram.com/jackkritzingerphoto) and [@halo_portraiture](https://www.instagram.com/halo_portraiture)



Tarentaal Cottage at Elandskop, with the Mahindra Scorpio-N 4x4 parked next to it.



Skooltjie and Meulhuis are next to each other, in the same building.



Meulhuis



Alene and André Cloete



Pa se Engel Oppi Plaas

Hartebeesfontein is a sheep farm on the plateau about 20 km west of Sutherland. The two cottages (Skooltjie and Meulhuis) are in the farmyard about a hundred metres from the main house, near a big shed with a rusty corrugated iron roof.

"We keep the rusted roof because we want it to look old," says owner Alene Cloete with a sparkle in her eye. "It gives a proper Karoo feel to the place."

But no need to worry: When you enter the cottages, you'll see they're comfortably furnished with everything you'll need. Skooltjie used to be the local farm school building, which Alene's father-in-law attended in the 1940s. (Hartebeesfontein has been in the Cloete family for three generations.) Meulhuis used to be a mill, back when wheat was grown in the area about a century ago.

Both cottages have been minimally restored to retain the original character. Small details like enamel plates in the kitchen cupboard, and an old bellows at the fireplace, transport you back in time.

The place was named after Alene's own father, "Pêllie" Ellis. He used to have a coffee shop in Sutherland called Pa se Engel, and he gave Alene the big wooden angel that used to decorate his shop. Alene had a guesthouse in town for a few years, also Pa se Engel, where the carving became something of an institution.

When Alene and her husband André opened the cottages to guests in 2020, they decided to call them Pa se Engel Oppi Plaas.



Facilities: Skooltjie has a cosy living area, kitchen, two bedrooms and a loft – it sleeps six in total. Meulhuis sleeps four.

Wi-Fi is available, but there's no cellphone reception. Each cottage has an outdoor braai, fireplace and smart TV, and the kitchens have gas stoves and microwaves. The bathrooms have showers. You can bring your dog, but arrange it in advance.

What else? In summer, sit outside by the fire and stare at the night sky. When winter dusts the landscape in white, you can move indoors to the

fireplace. Birders should keep an eye on the farm dam – I saw the regulars like red-knobbed coot and spur-winged goose, but flamingos have been known to drop in.

Where? About 20 km west of Sutherland via the Bo-Visrivier and Rheebofsfontein dirt roads. (You'll get directions when you book.)

Rates: R1 400 per night for up to two people; plus R200 per extra person.

Contact: ☎ 082 503 3964
✉ pa.se.engel@gmail.com
"Pa se Engel Selfcatering Cottages" on Facebook



Sutherland is a half-hour drive away if you need something from the shops.

Snyderskloof

This little bit of paradise is on the south-eastern edge of the Tankwa, towards Matjiesfontein. It's a place where nothing and no one will bother you.

"I recently had someone here from the Netherlands who couldn't believe how remote this place is," says owner Emmarie Terblanche. "He sat on the stoep completely starkers for two days – doing nothing!"

The stately stone cottage looks like it has been here forever, but it was actually built in 2014. The Terblanches farm sheep on about 1 700 hectares, but the veld has been left undisturbed so nature can take its course.

To get to the cottage, you have to take the Keurkloof dirt road, then a 10 km farm road through five gates. When you finally arrive, the silence is all-encompassing. The Terblanche residence is hidden away to the north – you feel as if you have the place to yourself.

The romance of isolation is strengthened by the fact that there's no electricity, although there is a solar-powered charging station for your electronics. For light, there are candles and paraffin lamps – and gas in the kitchen for cooking. At first it's a bit of an adjustment, but once the lamps are lit and you're settled in front of the fireplace, you can feel your soul being soothed.

The back deck is the highlight. There are comfortable armchairs with views of the mountains, plus a swimming pool, stargazing nets and a hammock strung up between two pepper trees. The cherry on top is the old clawfoot bathtub in the corner of the yard behind a reed screen.



Facilities: The cottage has three bedrooms and a sunroom with two single beds – it can sleep eight in total. There are two bathrooms and a cosy dining and living area.

There are indoor and outdoor braais, and a gas stove and gas fridge in the kitchen. The bathrooms have showers, and there's an outdoor bath. There's cellphone reception, but no Wi-Fi. Pets welcome on request.

What else? If you want to stretch your legs, you can

climb the koppies behind the cottage – there's a faint path through the riverbed that shows the way. Bring your mountain bike and follow the winding path past the main house.

Where? About 25 km north-west of Matjiesfontein. (You'll get directions when you book.)

Rates: R2 200 per night for two people; plus R350 per extra person (max eight). No children under six.

Contact: ☎ 083 462 0850
✉ snyderskloof.co.za



Go in a vehicle with a high ground clearance because the farm road can be rough, especially if it has rained.



Emmarie Terblanche



STAY HERE

Elandskop

At this guest farm on the western side of the Tankwa, you can see herds of eland, springbok and blesbok – even water buffalo imported from Italy!

There are several accommodation options, from five standalone rooms (Springbok, Jakkals, Eland, Donkie and Blesbok) to the Vierhoring Damara house and Tarentaal Cottage, which is further away from the other accommodation.

The tourism offering at Elandskop is relatively new – Joria Groenewald, a Paarl local, opened the doors in late 2025. “I travel to the farm almost weekly to make sure everything runs smoothly, but it’s actually the perfect excuse to get out of the city,” she says. “I’m a *Karoomens* at heart.”

You can hike, ride your mountain bike or go on a game drive and look for antelope. The Doring River runs through the property – it’s mostly dry but occasionally has water in winter.



Facilities: Each of the rooms sleeps two.

Each has a stoep and braai, but they’re not very private – more suited to a group travelling together. Each room has its own wood-fired hot tub with a reed awning – you can soak away the dust and watch the animals ambling past. There’s also a small swimming pool in the farmyard.

Vierhoring Damara, also known as Plaashuis, has three bedrooms and sleeps up to eight people. It’s far from the rooms, in the upper corner of the farmyard, and is more private. It also has

a wood-fired hot tub, plus a braai and a fireplace in the kitchen. You have to stoke a donkey boiler for hot water.

Tarentaal is a comfortable one-bedroom cottage that sleeps up to four people. It has a wide stoep and a wood-fired tub where you can warm up or cool down depending on the season.

All the kitchens have gas stoves. The bathrooms have showers, no baths. Wi-Fi is available, but no cellphone reception. There’s also an airfield, and Joria is planning a campsite – enquire if you’re interested. Pets are welcome on request.



Eland in front of Tarentaal Cottage

What else? Elandskop is only 3,5 km south of the famous Tankwa Padstal, where you can buy basics and get a hot breakfast or lunch.

Where? Next to the R355, about 80 km from Ceres, 172 km from Calvinia and 160 km from Sutherland. (You’ll get directions when you book.)

Rates: R1 000 per night in a room for one person; R1 700 for a couple. Vierhoring Damara R3 600 per night for up to eight people. Tarentaal Cottage R1 700 per night for up to four people.

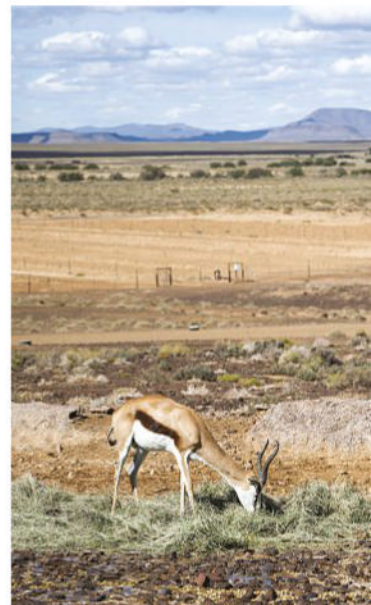
Contact: ☎ 082 657 5667
🌐 elandskoptankwa.com



View from Tarentaal Cottage



Look out for Koffie and Toffie, two miniature donkeys that like to roam around the yard at night. Don’t get a fright if you hear them at the door!



STAY HERE

Skoorsteenberg

This guest farm is named after the mountain (1 235 m) that you can see rising behind the farmyard.

"We have one of the longest driveways in the world," owner Werner Steenkamp says from his motorbike outside the main house. "You're just in time – I was about to go out and look for you."

The Tankwa roads can be deceptive and I misjudged the travelling time to Skoorsteenberg. I arrived later than we'd arranged. I'm not the first guest to have done this – the challenging roads and lack of cellphone reception have sent Werner out on many occasions to find guests who failed to arrive on time.

About that long driveway... Once you've turned off at the Skoorsteenberg sign, it's another 17 km to the farmyard, which is HQ for the 5 000-hectare farm. I drove slowly to appreciate the springbok, ostriches and donkeys in the veld.

"Don't worry, you made it," he says as we shake hands. "Now you can relax."

Skoorsteenberg is indeed a place where you can unwind. Accommodation is offered in two spacious, modern cottages – Olive and Date – and there's a campsite a few hundred metres from the farmyard.

The mountains are the real attraction here – you can hike, mountain bike or drive your 4x4 along a rugged road into a kloof, where you'll also find three wild campsites. In summer, it's best to go out early in the morning or late in the afternoon to avoid the heat.



Facilities: Olive and Date both have three bedrooms and each sleep a maximum of six people. Each unit has a wood-fired hot tub and braai facilities; the kitchens have gas stoves and microwaves. The bathrooms have showers.

The campsite has five stands with power points, braai facilities, ablutions and a swimming pool. The three wild campsites have no braai or ablution facilities – you have to be self-sufficient.

Skoorsteenberg is pet-friendly and has Wi-Fi, but no cellphone reception.

What else? Are you a pilot? You can land at the Skoorsteenberg airfield! The Aerodrome Café is run by the Skoorsteenberg team – it will soon offer accommodation for pilots, and for guests who arrive here by road.

If you fly in, Werner or his co-owners Hermann and Elsa Geldenhuys will transport you to your cottage. AfrikaBurn is held on the neighbouring farm, Quaggafontein. Lots of Burners land here and are taken to the event by the Skoorsteenberg team.

Where? East of the R355, about 100 km north of Ceres.

Olive Cottage looks out over the plains of the Tankwa where AfrikaBurn is held every year.



(You'll get directions when you book.)

Rates: From R1 120 per night for two people, and about R550 per extra person on a sliding scale – the rate is lower per person the more people stay. If all the rooms are full, a cottage costs R2 728 per night. (Rates increase on weekends.)

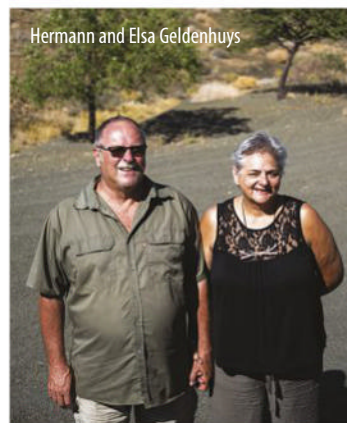
Camping costs R390 per stand (for two people), plus R195 per extra person. Wild camping (4x4 only) costs R324 per stand (for two people), plus R162 per extra person.

Contact: ☎ 082 330 7333
📧 skoorsteenberg.co.za

View from Olive Cottage



You're very far from everything out here – at least 120 km from Ceres, Sutherland and Calvinia. Make sure to bring everything you'll need.



A balanced beast

The Mahindra Scorpio-N looks good on paper – and pretty good in the flesh, too. But can it handle the infamous gravel roads of the Tankwa?

WORDS & PICTURES JAC KRITZINGER

The first thing I notice when I climb into the Mahindra Scorpio-N is its size. It's a seven-seater SUV, available in 4x2 and 4x4 models, and it's 4,6 m long, 1,9 m wide and 1,9 m tall.

It's big! And that gives it a certain "presence", especially when you're driving around a city. It also turns heads for another reason: The bold design is pleasing to the eye.

Once you leave the tar, it feels like you can tackle anything. I spent a few days driving around the Tankwa Karoo, known for its tyre-munching gravel roads, deceptive "dry" riverbeds, and mountain passes. I explored from Sutherland in the east to the Doring River and the Cederberg in the west, while researching my article on the best guest farms in the area. (See page 108. – Ed.)

The trip started in Cape Town. I jetted up the N1 and then took the R354 to Sutherland. The Scorpio's 2.2-litre mHawk diesel engine and six-speed automatic gearbox gobbled up this stretch for breakfast. The engine generates 129 kW of power and 400 Nm of torque.

If you need more packing space, you can fold the back seats down. The interior finishes feel luxurious and well-made, and I really enjoyed the sound system, which is easy to connect to iPhone or Android.

I had to get used to the relatively aggressive lane-assist function, which constantly tried to keep me in my lane. When going around a bend, it felt like I had to fight the steering wheel against the autocorrect function. Eventually, I managed to figure out how to deactivate it.

Once I arrived in Sutherland, I filled up the 57-litre tank (drive modestly and you can easily get 700 km on a tank) and checked the spare wheel. The spare is mounted underneath the vehicle and lowered in the standard

fashion. I had to make sure the spare was in good order before I set out, because friends had warned me about the Tankwa's gnarly gravel roads. I was on my own and I didn't want to take chances in an area that doesn't have much cellphone signal.

As it turns out, I had nothing to worry about. During the 300+ km I covered in the Tankwa, I followed the advice of locals who have apparently figured out a way to minimise flat tyres. I was told to either drive slower than 60 km/h or faster than 80 km/h (when the road surface allows). Apparently, at that in-between speed of around 70 km/h, the front wheels can kick up sharp stones that land under the back wheels and often end up causing punctures.

But regardless of my speed, the Scorpio-N's suspension system, called Frequency Dependent Damping (FDD), kept me solidly on the road. FDD automatically adjusts the suspension and provides a more cushioned ride, no matter how bad the corrugations get. It doesn't just save your bum from extra pummelling, you also feel much safer and in control of the vehicle. As a result, you can relax a bit and let your eyes soak up the amazing landscape.

I never really needed to test the Scorpio-N's 4x4 abilities, since I didn't drive any of the Tankwa's white-knuckle passes like Ouberg or Katbakkies, but I felt like I could handle any road that came my way. The official ground clearance is 18,7 cm, but unladen it's actually closer to 22 cm.

And of course, because it's a Mahindra, all of that off-road capability comes at a very good price compared to its competitors. All in all, I found it to be an excellent road-trip vehicle.

Thank you to Mahindra South Africa for providing us with a vehicle to test.





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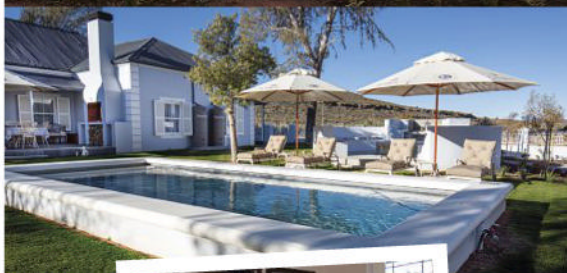
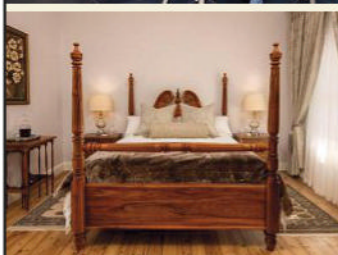
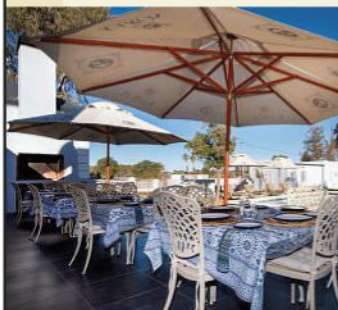
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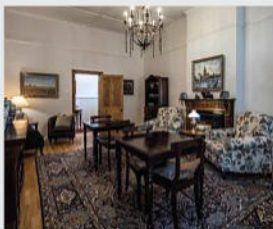
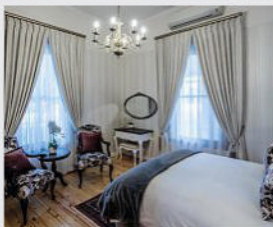
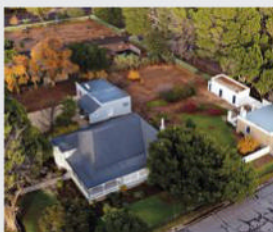
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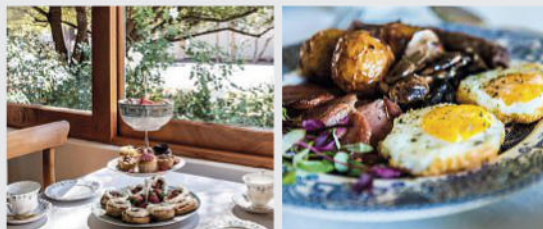
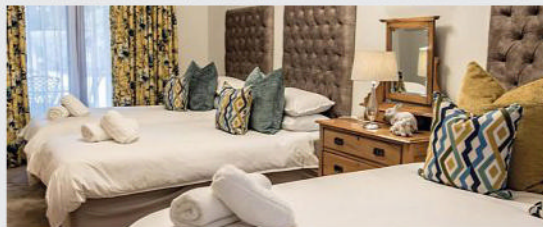
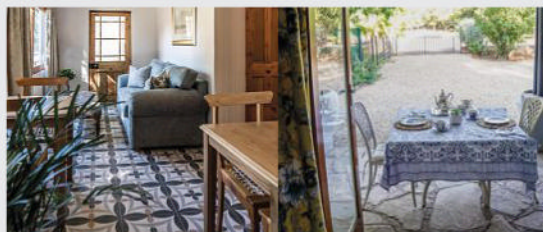


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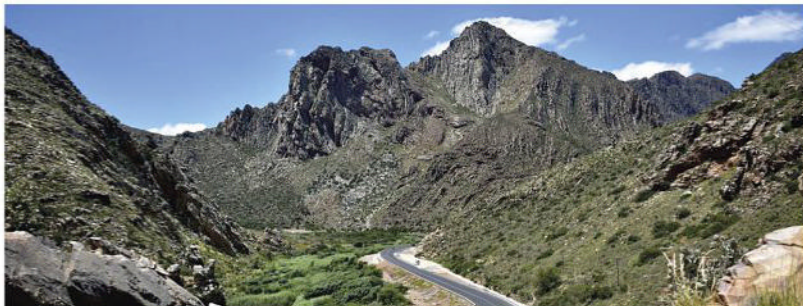
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Montagu: Where Adventure Meets the Little Karoo

Two hours from Cape Town on the iconic Route 62, Montagu is the adventure gateway to the Klein Karoo—where slow moments and bold exploration meet. Framed by towering mountains, fertile valleys and wide blue skies, the town blends outdoor pursuits, natural beauty and warm country hospitality.

Renowned as one of South Africa's top rock-climbing destinations, Montagu's sandstone cliffs offer hundreds of routes for seasoned climbers and beginners guided by local experts. Prefer solid ground? Hiking, trail-running and mountain-biking routes weave through rugged mountains, vineyards, orchards and indigenous fynbos, each trail revealing sunrise vistas, hidden valleys or peaceful solitude. Quiet country roads and dramatic passes reward road cyclists, while horse riding, birdwatching, 4x4 routes and scenic drives expand the adventure options.

Montagu also makes an excellent base for exploring the wider Klein Karoo—an area of dramatic scenery, rich history and warm hospitality. From here you can visit charming villages, award-winning wine estates, olive farms, local markets and artisan producers, all linked by one of South Africa's most celebrated road-trip routes. Often, the journey is as memorable as the destination.



After a day outdoors, Montagu invites you to slow down. Soak in natural hot mineral springs, sample locally inspired cuisine at welcoming cafés and restaurants, or stroll streets lined with preserved Cape Georgian and Victorian architecture. Boutique galleries, farm stalls and family-run wine estates add to the town's unmistakable charm.



Each season brings its own appeal: spring's wildflowers, long summer days, autumn's golden vineyards, and winter's crisp air—ideal for hiking and cosy evenings by the fire.

What sets Montagu apart is its blend of adventure and authenticity. Visitors don't just pass through—they connect with the landscape, the people and the gentler rhythm of country life.

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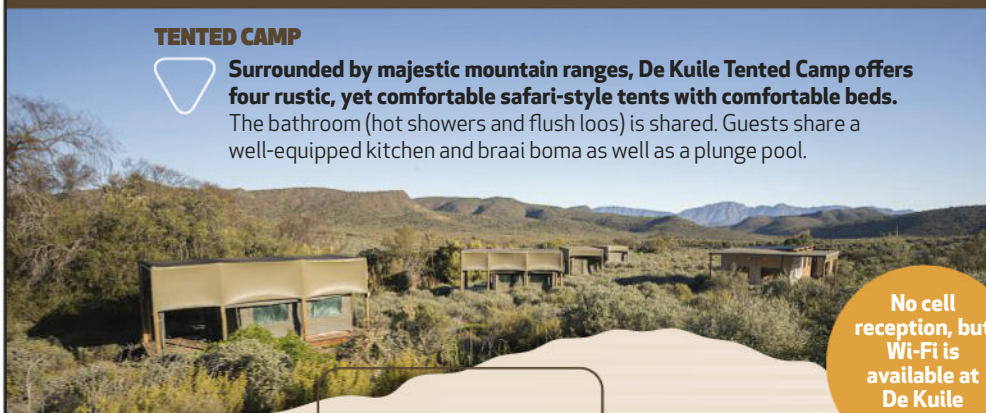
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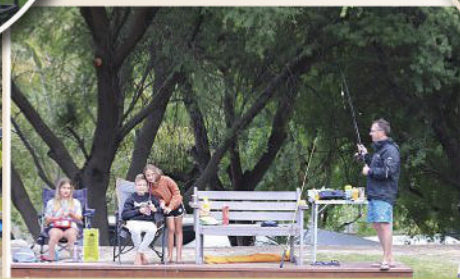
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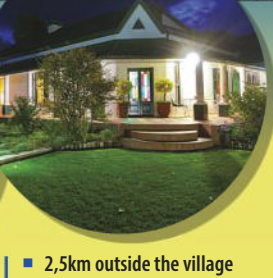


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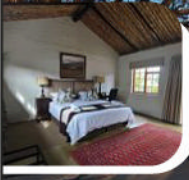
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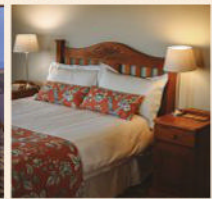
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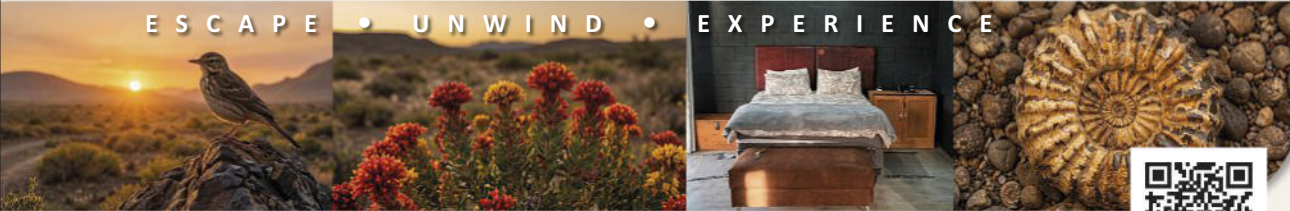


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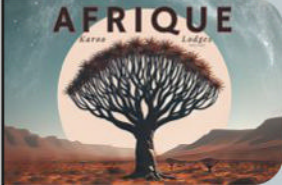
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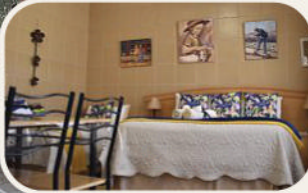
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ENQUIRIES: Ingrid Schöfmann 084 7090 218 | ingrid.loxton@gmail.com



Herbalist Antoinette Pienaar lives on a farm in the triangle between Beaufort West, Murraysburg and Aberdeen. **Sophia van Taak** went for a visit.

I sit down in the veld and everything seems quiet. But after a while, I notice the tinny creak of the listless windmill in the farmyard and the rustle of a breeze in the thorny thickets. Also – crows flapping down and landing next to the carcass of a lamb.

My thoughts drift back to my arrival here. Why do we struggle to do nothing? Doing nothing is why I travelled to Antoinette Pienaar's farm Theefontein in the first place. I wanted to get away from daily life; get out of my head and into my body; live from day to day, like an animal.

Like Gys, one of the roosters in the farmyard: It was still dark this morning when he and two other roosters – Jupiter and Aanstap Rooies – started crowing.

I asked Antoinette about it over our morning coffee. "Animals have a different internal clock," she said. "The roosters and the other birds have to squawk and whistle and sing long before daybreak."

Apparently the vibration of the birdcall tells the plants in the veld that another day of photosynthesis is on the way. "It gets the plants in the right mindset, you see? And by the time the sun rises, everything in creation shouts with joy: 'We're ready for you!'"

Then, once again, everything lives at full tilt without worrying about tomorrow.

"If only we could be more like that," Antoinette mused. "Imagine waking up every day in the same way, getting out of your bed and into your shoes, for a day filled with possibilities!"

Good thing Gys isn't human, because he'd have been sick with worry. The hens don't want him anymore – they're all after Jupiter, who is big and bold.

Jupiter and the equally imposing Aanstap Rooies enjoy humiliating poor Gys. If he gets too close, they puff up their neck feathers. If he doesn't get out of their way, they kick him. According to Antoinette, it will only get worse because chickens maintain a strict pecking order.

So, Gys will be slaughtered.

What a strange thought. My chicken is a nameless packet of meat sold in Pick n Pay. But now I'd developed a soft spot for a rooster that unknowingly crowed his last crow this morning.

Instead of witnessing his demise, I went for a walk. But my ears were restless – they kept listening for the last panicked cackle in the farmyard before the axe came down.

Winter nights on Theefontein are long. Yesterday, Antoinette and I gathered kindling at sunset and disappeared into our respective houses to blow life into the hearth before the cold crept in. I went to bed early, so maybe I was already half awake when I heard it. Or perhaps my idle brain was uncomfortable in all that silence and emptiness and went wandering.

My first, stuporous thought was that there was something on the roof. But then the sound pierced the night again, from a distance, somewhere out in the Karoo. This time the whine was so thin, so pathetic, that I immediately knew it had to be a young animal. Maybe a lamb. Its panic almost palpable.

Why was it crying? How far away was it?

Theefontein is wedged between what Antoinette calls Manberg and Vrouberg. These mountains don't just amplify sound, they seem to amplify feeling, too – echoing your thoughts back to you, just when you think you're done with them.

I wish I'd gotten up to help, but where would I have gone to search for the sound? And what if I had found the lamb – what then?

I sit still for a long time. The crows start tearing strips of flesh from the crumpled heap of wool – the lamb killed last night.

I think again of Antoinette's words after I fled the scene of the chicken slaughter earlier: "Death is inevitable. *Jou streep word getrek die dag wat jy gebore word.* But do you think us humans can ever make peace with it?"



Winter of plenty

The Beervlei Dam between Willowmore and Aberdeen is usually dry, but in July this year, **Deon Meyer** from Vanderbijlpark lucked out and saw it full to the brim.

While on a two-week tour of the Karoo in July, we drove from Prince Albert to Nieu-Bethesda. At Willowmore, we joined the N9 and headed towards Aberdeen. I knew that the Beervlei Dam, about 30km from town, had overflowed after storms in May, but I was surprised to see that it was still overflowing.

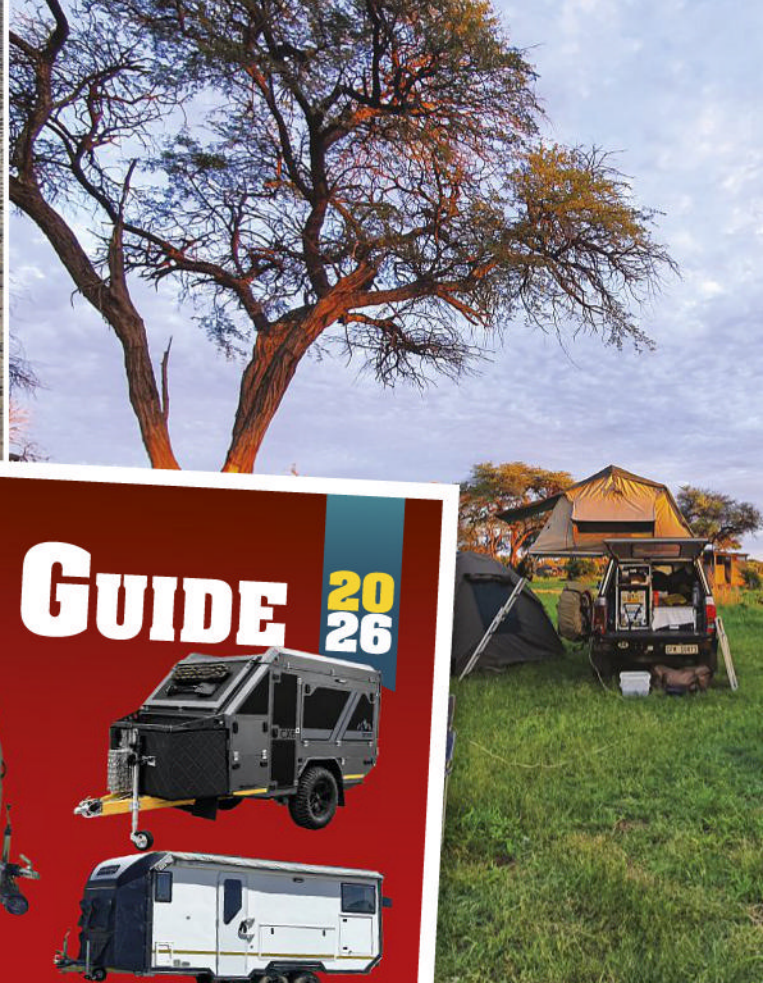
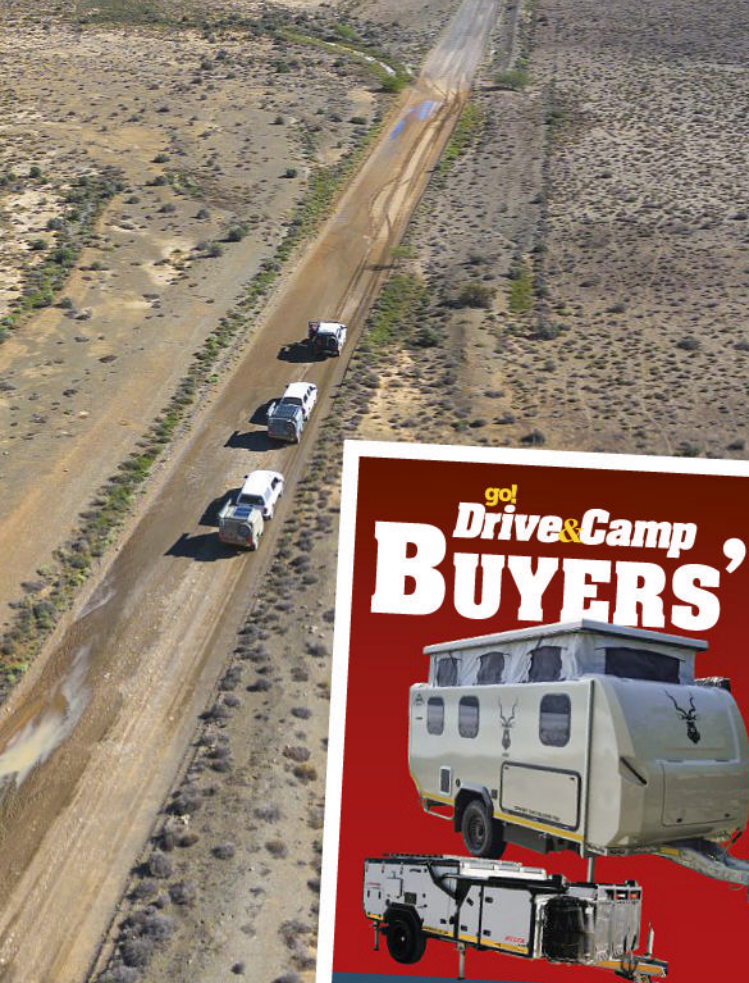
On all my previous travels here, the dam was completely dry. Of course, I had to pull over and take some photos. It was one of those rare happenings I might never experience again.

Beervlei, built in 1957, is a flood-control dam, so it's actually supposed to be empty. It's meant to pull the "hand brake" on a flood coming down the Kariega and Sout rivers. These

merge to become the mighty Groot River below the dam, which eventually joins the Gamtoos River.

According to one of the info boards at the picnic site just below the dam wall, Beervlei can slow an inflow of 3,2 million litres per second to just 1,6 million litres per second. When I stood on the dam wall, I began to get an idea of just how much rain had fallen in the Karoo north of there!

I was with my wife, Marisca, and our son Reyner (16), plus friends of ours from Vanderbijl – Heinrich and Elma Holt. Since 2018, we've done three extensive Karoo road trips, but this was the first for Heinrich and Elma (not counting the N1 dash from Gauteng to Cape Town). It was great to show them some of our special Karoo spots!



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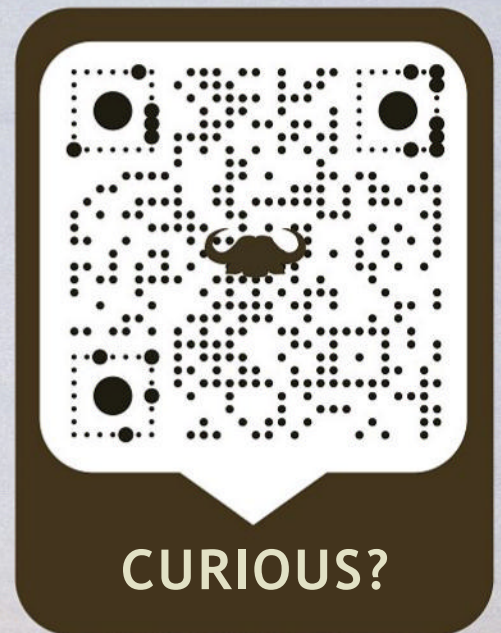


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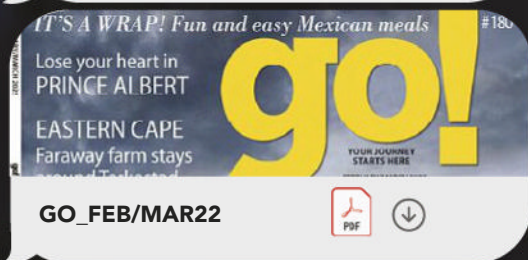
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