

HOLIDAY SPECIAL

Classical music feast in Oudtshoorn

THE Klein Karoo Klasseike in Oudtshoorn this weekend combines a top class symphonic opera gala programme, moving sacred classical choral works, chamber music performances, and vocal music ranging from the early baroque to highlights from

classical and romantic repertoires. Art exhibitions, regional food and velvet-smooth wine are also part of the recipe. Friedel Mitas (pictured), who grew up in Oudtshoorn, will be performing in the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra Gala Concert. Contact: (044) 203-8606



Chance to improve art of photographing lion

TUNINGI Safari lodge, in the North West province's malaria-free, Big 5 Madikwe game reserve, has put together a package for photographers of all levels for the weekend of September 5 to 7. It combines Grant

Marcus's infectious enthusiasm for nature and his discerning photographic eye with the seemingly endless wildlife offerings of the game reserve. The specific aim of the three-day adventure, is to perfect the art of lion photography. The

cost of the weekend – inclusive of the photographic safari, partner spa treatment, all meals, accommodation, professional guidance and park fees – is R8 500 per person, sharing. Bookings: (011) 805-9995



TRAVEL TALE

ENTREPRENEURS in the eastern Chinese province of Anhui are poised to open a tourist attraction that (sort of) lets visitors pillage and mortar bomb just like a Japanese Imperial Army soldier. The unlikely open-air role-playing game, dubbed "Red Actual Combat", invites guests staying at the resort in Tanjiaqiao to play the part of their choice in the re-enacted sacking of an average Chinese peasant village from the 1930s. The package, decried by many Chinese internet users as an "insane attempt to make money", advertises vivid blast effects and authentic looking farmhouse hovels. – The Times

WEEKEND AWAY: Samara Private Game Reserve

Five star adventure, and luxury

With her personal "bucket list" containing the rather obscure wish to see an aardvark in the wild, ESTELLE ELLIS and photographer FREDLIN ADRIAAN went on safari to look for this elusive animal, and found a beautiful world of understated luxury, several surprises and a moving anthill.

HERE are certain things one has, over the years, come to expect when hearing the words five star and private game reserve in the same sentence. At Samara Private Game Reserve, this promise of luxury and understated opulence is also bolstered by a bold assertion that it is one of the best places to see the highly elusive aardvark in the wild.

As we arrived, on a gorgeous winter Karoo morning, a discreet sign points visitors away from a washed-away bridge to an easier route through the Melk River.

Good rains, almost three times more than the normal annual downpour, has turned the arid Karoo landscape into lush, green plains.

To our right, as if on order to welcome guests, a gorgeous eland bull watches us while chewing slowly.

A short drive further we arrive at Karoo Lodge, where we are warmly greeted and escorted to our gorgeous rooms. Samara gets 100% on all the checklists: from the genteel luxury of good linen to the friendly, attentive staff welcoming guests with homemade iced-tea and warm washcloths to wipe away the dust of the Karoo roads. Our suitably rugged-looking ranger, Wayne Reed, introduces himself and offers the first caution about the aardvark. "They are notoriously shy and difficult to see," he warns when told of my bucket list wish.

I, however, remain hopeful, though somewhat cynical.

After lunch and a little rest, our first stop is to see if the first lady of the game reserve, a cheetah named Sibella, wished to receive guests. Reed tells us Sibella was tracked to the hill behind the lodge earlier in the afternoon. Some of the cheetahs in the reserve are fitted with tracking collars. Reed explains that if she is not in the mood for company, we should back away slowly. "Whatever you do, do not run," he says. However, he later tells us, guests never listen to him, and once when a more bad-tempered cheetah clearly indicated it was not in the mood to pose for photographs, Reed was left standing alone while his guests hot-footed it back to the game-viewing vehicle.

Sibella, it turns out, was quite happy to see us and after a yawn, a stretch and a pose for photos, quietly turned around and walked away.

She is also quite a character, with Reed explaining she once came right up to Karoo Lodge where she caught a kudu on the tennis courts. It was all done so quietly that the first he knew about it was when lodge staff who were walking home, came running back to the lodge screaming that there was a "cheetah on the tennis court".



FIRST LADY . . . Sibella was the first rescued cheetah to be released at Samara Private Game Reserve.

Pictures: FREDLIN ADRIAAN

Unperturbed by the scene she caused, Sibella left her carcass there for days, before returning to eat some more.

A few minutes later we see her again sitting on an incline, looking over the Karoo plains before her. We leave her contemplating supper, while Wayne shows us the rest of the reserve.

Samara's accolades are many. It constantly features in top-lists compiled by travel magazines, including a mention as one of the 15 best safari experiences in Africa, and one of the most romantic destinations in the world.

As the sun goes down, we enjoy a glass of wine, and a spectacular view of Tandjesberg. As we turned around, we saw the moon rise over the mountains on the other side of the reserve. No aardvark yet.

It was on our return, however, that I began to understand what sets Samara apart from the mahogany row of Five Star Game Reserves dotted along the Eastern Cape's major routes.

On return to my room, the beautiful, deep Victorian bath has been filled with

hot water, fragrant bath salts and bubbles. The room has been warmed up, small lamps switched on, overhead lights suitably dimmed and the towels are warm and fragrant. I am in seventh heaven.

After a glass of very decent red wine at the fire, we have a wonderful four course dinner in the formal dining room. Shortly afterwards, Wayne joins us to discuss the next day. He leaves with a mysterious grin and a promise to meet us just after breakfast.

On return to my room, I find that reveling in all that luxury is an exhausting business, and just before I fall asleep I discover that some very thoughtful person had placed a hot water bottle in the bed. (I did check. Finding something warm and fluffy in a bed on a game reserve is not always good news.)

Outside the jackals are having a serious conversation with each other, which is the

last thing I hear as I drift off to sleep . . .

Breakfast the next morning is no ordinary grab-a-slice-of-toast affair, but with my little heart set on seeing our elusive friend the aardvark, I am more excited to see Wayne.

On the drive out we see a waterbuck and some spectacular birdlife.

As we slowly make our way up the mountain, Wayne pauses to point out a gemsbok buzzard here, a jackal there. The decaying skeleton of an eland bull lies on the side of the road. "I saw him one morning, when I went up the mountain," Wayne says. "He was very old. When I came back down he had died."

Halfway up a steep, muddy road he stops. Looks down. Grins. Buffalo, he says, with twinkly eyes. "Maybe we will meet them on the way up."

To my relief, the reserve's pair of buffalo evade us, but around the corner another surprise awaits.

A lone black wildebeest (or white-tailed gnu) grazes by himself on a grassy hill. On closer inspection it's clear he has a growth deformity in his horns, causing one of them to cross in front of his face. As we watch him, young bulls from a nearby herd bolt up to him before running away, kicking up dust as they go along.

"Now you can see why they call them the clowns of the bush," Wayne remarks dryly.

The next leg of our journey takes us past some zebra and gemsbok to our next stop, Eagle Rock. This lookout point provides an eagle-eyed view of the mythical plains of the Camdeboo.

From our vantage point you can see the homestead on the farm Cranemere, where Eve Palmer, author of the book *Plains of the Camdeboo* grew up.

As I stand, looking down over Samara I think of her words: "Let us remember that the Karoo is one of the world's oldest

deserts. To the casual traveler it is an arid desolation, without life and without charm. To those who know it, it is a land of secret beauty and infinite variety, sometimes fierce, sometimes hostile, but exercising a fascination that makes the rest of the world seem tame."

Wayne, who is not a man of many words, fiddles with his binoculars. Then he calls me over. Giraffe he says, pointing several hundreds of metres down. After a few moments, mistaking the huge aloes for the long-necked animals, I see them at the bottom of the mountain. Something disturbs a troop of baboons and we watch them running circles through a dusty clearing in the bush.

On our way back from Eagle's Rock, Wayne suggests we stop for "coffee and ruks".

Turns out our ranger is a master of understatement. On a little clearing overlooking the plains, a whole buffet is prepared for us, with a beautifully set table, a washbasin filled with warm water and divine-smelling Charlotte Rhys handwash soap. We are each handed a glass of bubbly from Eikendal, before enjoying the wonderful buffet.

We then go in search of the giraffe. Unlike the aardvark, they're not hiding.

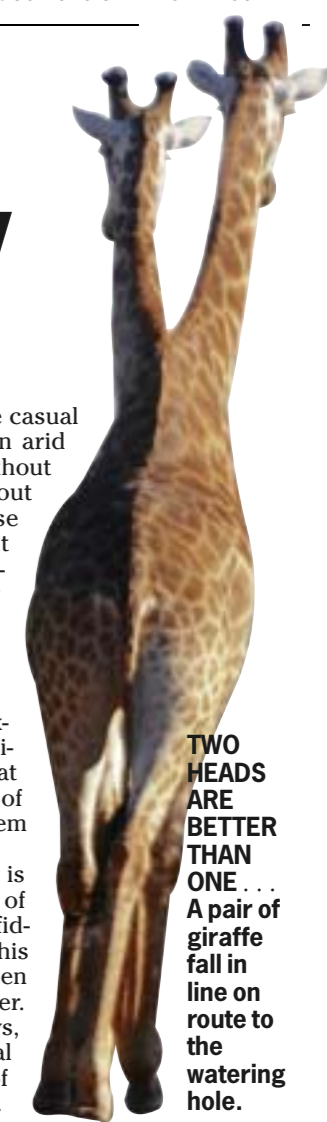
In the late afternoon, as we drive along keeping our eyes peeled for rhino, I suddenly see an anthill moving. "It cannot possibly be . . . Can it? Could it be our elusive friend the aardvark?" I think to myself.

Then my eye catches Wayne removing his sunglasses, taking a closer look at the anthill. He stops, points, grabs for the radio – very excited. "Aardvark," he whispers. We all look, seeing the moving anthill uncurling itself and trotting in our direction. It looks like it's muttering.

It regards us for a few minutes and then turns around and bolts in the opposite direction. Bolts being the operative word as it was really surprising to see a creature that looks like it was built for comfort and not speed, can disappear that quickly.

As we drive back watching one final sunset over the beautiful reserve, I cross the aardvark off my bucket list and sit there smiling, pampered, spoiled and never wanting to leave.

The end of a perfect day.



TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE . . . A pair of giraffe fall in line on route to the watering hole.

WHAT TO EAT



FAMOUS LAMB . . . Mama Samara's take on roasted lamb.

A culinary safari of note

KAROO Lodge executive chef Iris Adams, aka Mama Samara, and her team provide visitors to the reserve with a culinary safari of their own, with her masterpieces continuing to delight and thrill visitors.

"We love spoiling our guests," Adams says as she dishes up a picnic lunch for four, on top of a mountain, with wildebeest grazing less than 500m away. "Nothing is too much trouble."

Breakfasts are carefully prepared and range from scrambled eggs and smoked salmon, an omelette made with fresh tomato, to full English. All are wonderfully flavoured and pretty. And the coffee is great.

Our first lunch, shortly after arriving, was chicken pasta and fresh salad.

While warming ourselves with a cup of

coffee before our first game drive, Iris served a milk tart. (It was here that I noted it would be a good plan to go on a very strict diet for a few days before my next visit, or buy some bigger clothes.)

On our first night, we savoured world renowned Karoo lamb, roasted to perfection, as was our second night's venison steak.

Every plate that left Iris's kitchen was beautifully decorated, but not overly pretentious. The vegetables were fresh, which must be a challenge given the presence of some prolific vegetable-eaters like aardvark, warthog and bush pig in the reserve. And last, but definitely not least, the decadent desserts were reminiscent of both gastronomic luxury and the comfort of my grandmother's kitchen.

Survival of Sibella, the cat

ARGUABLY the first lady of Samara, the survival and recovery of Sibella, the reserve's first cheetah, is an enduring love story dedicated to the reserve.

It is a story that moved me to tears and gave me renewed admiration for her resilience and beauty – especially after we saw her in the bush, stretched out in a little clearing, clearly enjoying the winter sun, lazily yawning, stretching and then gracefully padding away looking for an evening snack.

In 2003, Sibella was rescued from a farm in the North-West province, where she was tortured and severely injured by hunters and their dogs. When they discovered her, veterinarians said she had less than a week to live. She was taken to De Wild, where her injuries were stitched up and

after a few months of rehabilitation, she was moved to Samara – a fitting home for the feisty animal.

Rare rock art was discovered on the farm showing that cheetahs had reigned on the plains of the Camdeboo since ancient days and well before extensive hunting saw the last cheetah disappear from the area, 125 years ago.

Our ranger, Wayne Reed, who clearly has a great passion and love for the big cats, said despite Sibella's horrific treatment at the hands of humans, she remains a friendly cat who does not seem to mind visitors coming close to her.

Reed explained that even though Sibella is an exceptional mother, the cubs, once they were more grown-up, were given to other reserves to stop genetic inbreeding.



FINE FARE . . . The dining room at Karoo Lodge.



GRAZING FREELY . . . After good rains, Samara boasts healthy herds of blesbuck.

Restoring Camdeboo plains

FROM what once was an over-grazed goat and sheep farm (with a rather unglamorous name of Monkey Valley), Samara Private Game Reserve is now a lush 28 000 hectare sanctuary dedicated to re-establishing thriving herds of the animals that once roamed the plains of the Camdeboo.

Since 1997, owners Mark and Sarah Tompkins and their dedicated reserve team, have created a safe place where birds, plants, trees and animals are allowed to thrive – with careful efforts aimed at restoring the once mythical plains of the Camdeboo as close to their former glory as possible.

If they get it right – to join the estate to the Camdeboo National Park – they would have assisted in creating the biggest conservation area in South Africa.

A number of species including blue crane, the cape mountain zebra and cheetah have been reintroduced to the reserve.

The springbok, black wildebeest, zebra, gemsbok, eland and blesbok and kudu can once again

run freely on the beautiful plains. Samara also has a special programme aimed at schools, to rehabilitate the spekboom grove on the farm.

So far, spekboom has been identified as the number one way for humankind to fight global warming, as it absorbs more carbon dioxide than any other tree.

The reserve also has an established tracking academy training – the rangers of the future – and a volunteer programme to allow youngsters to come work there for a year.

It is hard work, as they sometimes involve tasks like trying to catch an aardvark at 4am.

It troubles me greatly to think that Samara lies in the heart of the area targeted by several companies for fracking.

The Tompkins have succeeded – twice before – in keeping gas exploration companies away from the area.

The new application for fracking excludes the 28 000 hectare farm but the environmental effects will undoubtedly be felt by the reserve.