

Tracing Boer to Brit in Graaff-Reinet

Jon van den Heever gets some pleasant surprises in the middle of the Great Karoo



One of the self-contained suites at Samara private game reserve, top. A kudu seen on a game drive, centre, and an 800-year-old tree at Samara.

TWO HUNDRED years of war," said my son Alex gravely. "That's what farmers have waged on the Karoo."

We were on a game drive at Samara private game reserve, which is dominated by the dramatically beautiful Camdeboo mountains, a half-hour drive from Graaff-Reinet in the Great Karoo. Alex was setting up a tracking academy on the property and awaiting the arrival of his first eight students.

The environment has undergone a remarkable rejuvenation since British owners Sarah and Mark Tompkins established the 28 000ha reserve.

With the guidance of Samara ranger Michael Jones we were enjoying the sight of the bright green carpet of couch grass that looked as though it had been carefully stitched into the soil after recent good rains.

We were also admiring the magnificent spekboom trees with their succulent leaves and pretty pink flowers – trees that absorb vastly more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than any other.

The spekboom stood among lush acacia trees and diminutive shepherd's trees – one in particular which is barely three metres tall, its twisted branches only hinting at the fact it is an astonishing 800 years old.

In short, what we thought we knew about Karoo vegetation had been shattered in the couple of hours we had been in the veld.

It was the dramatic contrast between this beautiful landscape and the traditional view of the region as irretrievably dry and barren that had provoked Alex's statement.

The wholesale plunder of wildlife, poor farming practices, including overgrazing and the resultant soil erosion, had virtually eliminated an ecologically abundant region where millions of wild animals had once roamed.

Today, Samara visitors enjoy the sight of significant herds of eland moving through the veld, kudu, aardvark, giraffe, black wildebeest, mountain zebra, rhino, buffalo, cheetah and an abundance of birdlife.

On the drive into the mountains the following day we were alerted by the loud barking of kudu that had detected the presence of Sibella the cheetah; the animal appeared in the road just ahead of us then disappeared into the bush again.

We later spotted her resting under a tree, not bothering with the kudu, which would no doubt meet her again later under different and more dramatic circumstances when she was hungry.

Sibella arrived at Samara after being injured and captured by hunters, but has since produced two litters of cubs in the bush.

Back at Karoo Lodge we relaxed in luxurious comfort.

Once an ordinary farmhouse, the building was extended, modernised and restyled, with a spacious wrap-around verandah in the traditional Karoo style.

The lodge is designed for maximum shade from the summer sun, while the interior provides cool lounge, dining and bar areas. In winter, the interior is cosy and warm.

Meals are taken mainly al fresco in summer and couples or family

groups like mine, with Alex and Estelle, can be catered for individually on the verandah, overlooking the mountains as the light fades, paraffin lanterns providing soft country-style lighting.

Later, when most of the lights are out and the lanterns extinguished, the Milky Way sparkles in the sky.

The food is excellent, the table water and white wine consistently chilled and the service outstanding.

There are three additional self-contained suites which are separate from the main lodge, all surrounded by beautifully kept lawns, and a central swimming pool.

A disconsolate old wagon adds to the character of the place.

Good news for isolation-loving South Africans is the Mountain Retreat lodge which, as its name implies, is set high up and fashioned, again, from an old farmhouse and barn. It is marvellously rustic and homely, complete with its own farm-style pool and stone boma.

If you want solace, this is where you'll find it. Full service and daily guided walks are included.

The lodge accommodates 10 guests in five luxury en-suite bedrooms, and if you really need it, there's DSTV and internet access, so you could pretend to be at the office or watch the rugby.

The drive up the mountain called Kondoia was partly inspired by my fascination with Boer War history. This is a region in which Boer invaders and Cape Afrikaner rebels, stung by the goings-on in the Boer republics, harassed the British military and some civilians with acts of guerrilla warfare, train-wrecking, arson and general disruption. The

British would respond by sending in huge columns of mounted troops to chase the Boers across the arid landscape. The rebels would flee into the Camdeboo mountains to rest their horses and themselves.

One of the best known among the rebel leaders was Johannes Lotter, who was eventually run down with more than 120 men, having taken shelter in a stone sheep kraal with a corrugated iron roof. It was one of the coldest winters in history and the Boers were hungry, their clothes in tatters.

They were surprised early the following morning by a British squadron, with another 1 000 troops waiting up on the heights. After a brief battle, the Boers surrendered, with many killed and wounded, the survivors taken into captivity. Lotter was put on trial by the military in Graaff-Reinet and later executed.

Looking down from the heights we could only guess where Lotter and his men had been and we spent some time viewing the magnificent vista of the plains below, the same ones featured in the book *The Plains of Camdeboo* by Eve Palmer.

Graaff-Reinet is an excellent destination for history enthusiasts. It has scores of prominent historical homes, buildings, churches, monuments, memorials, museums, galleries and a famous stone prison. In the centre of town, where Parsonage and Church streets intersect, the famous Dostdy Hotel, Reinet House (once the home of famous clergyman Andrew Murray) and the Dutch Reformed Groote Kerk – said to be closely based on Salisbury Cathedral in the UK – form a sort of central assembly on which the rest



of the town hangs. Across the road from the Groote Kerk is the elegant, low-slung Graaff-Reinet Club, where officers of the Coldstream Guards danced on the bar counter and fired their revolvers in celebration of their departure after the Boer War.

A little way down Church Street you will find McNaughton's Bookshop, with many fascinating books, including the comprehensive

Graaff-Reinet: An illustrated historical guide by Tony Westby-Nunn, a treasure trove of information loaded with priceless illustrations.

Accommodation ranges from the comfortable Drostdy Hotel, through upmarket historical guest houses and B&Bs to quaint self-catering cottages. But be aware, it can get hellishly hot in summer and bitterly cold in winter.

Later, when most of the lights are out and the lanterns extinguished, the Milky Way sparkles in the sky



Reinet House, one of the Graaff-Reinet museums, formerly a Dutch Reformed Church parsonage, became the home of Andrew Murray of Scotland in 1822, top. Historical dwellings in Stretch's Court, or Drostdyhof, which now form part of the accommodation at the Drostdy Hotel, right.

