

Preserving the little known history of the Eastern Cape

An amazing life changing and wonderfully calming experience awaits tourists as they discover the Plains of Camdeboo, nestled in an amphitheatre of mountains in the Eastern Cape of South Africa where wildlife have found safe haven, writes **Chantal Matthee** of **Lloyd Orr Communications**.



The greatest migration on earth, known as the Great Springbok migration took place on the Plains of Camdeboo. Recorded by Dr David Livingstone as well as other early explorers, this historic migration took place in the Samara Private Game Reserve's land, which extends over 70,000 acres. Years later, farmers settled in the area put up fences and completely destroyed this migration by killing the springbok and exporting their skins, and also chasing the natural predators away such as the leopard, lion and cheetah. When the owners of Samara, Mark and Sarah Tompkins, learned about this special part of history, they bought 11 farms over a period of time and dropped the fences. With the consultation of scientists, they left the land to heal naturally for 8 years before they embarked on a dedicated land restoration programme and a plan to re-introduce all the game and plants that were once indigenous to this area.

The Plains of Camdeboo was also once home to the Khoi-san people and their rock art can still be viewed. Perhaps one of the most interesting paintings is that of cheetah which is very rare as these people did not usually paint cheetah. This is thus proof that cheetah once roamed these vast plains. Now, Samara is proud of their cheetah. Sibella, one of the females, was re-introduced into the area after she was rescued from the hands of farmers who tortured and nearly killed her. Sibella has since become a mother to 18 cubs in three litters, some of which are still on the reserve and others which have been relocated to other parts in South Africa to diversify the gene pool. There are now 10 cheetah roaming the plains and mountains. Sibella is collared for research purposes but this also enables guests, in the company of their experienced ranger, to track her on foot and experience an awesome encounter with this very special cat.

Early Exploration

One of the first of the early explorers in this region was the world famous and extraordinary ornithologist, heroically named Francois le Vaillant. After having arrived in Cape Town in 1781, le Vaillant had only the clothes on his back after the British destroyed the ship on which he was traveling. With the generous assistance of Colonel Gordon, he set forth on the long journey inland. Upon reaching the vast open Plains of Camdeboo, le Vaillant set up a fortified camp on the Plat Rivier, which runs through Samara Private Game Reserve. Here he experienced many adventures and witnessed sights he had never imagined. Starting in Cape Town and ending at Samara, guests can follow in Francois le Vaillant's footsteps, experiencing the unique wilderness of the Karoo, as he did, with its distinctive sights and sounds, but in modern comfort. The historical value of Samara continues on in many forms, but remains the heritage of the reserve.

Thinking Safaris are a big drawcard to tourists, where rangers guide guests on a journey to see fossils dating back to pre-dinosaur times and right

up to present day ecological projects. Samara has been compared to the Masai Mara of East Africa, but it is right here in South Africa where you can experience the vastness of the Karoo, the breathtaking night skies and the majestic mountains which tower at 1200m above sea level.

Another attraction is the chance to explore history by bringing back the skills of the Khoi-san. This is achieved with the Tracker Academy, the only one in South Africa. The Tracker Academy is a partnership

between the South African College of Tourism (SACT) and renowned Senior Tracker, Alex van den Heever. Sponsored by Samara and the South African College of Tourism, 16 students under the guidance Pokie Bernadie, a Master Tracker, stay at Samara for six months while learning the skills of tracking. The sessions focus on interpreting animal behaviour from the tracks seen, as well as lessons in conservation ethics, ancient culture and personal leadership. A further six months are spent in the lowveld.

Carbon Sequestration

Research indicates that pristine thicket areas within South Africa hold more carbon compared to transformed or over-grazed land. The carbon sequestration programme is another way in which Samara is preserving the history of our land but also ensuring the future for generations to come. Specific plant species have particularly effective levels of absorption under semi and arid conditions. One of the most effective plants is the spekboom, *Portulacaria Afra*, which grows predominantly in the Eastern Cape. The region is rich in spekboom habitat and Samara has launched a project to facilitate the re-generation of previously over-grazed land in the reserve through the planting of spekboom.

The historical value that is the Plains of Camdeboo, continues on in many forms, but remains the heritage of Samara reserve who take pride in the heritage that helped achieve what the reserve stands for today. Years of tales of explorers and adventurers who found a 'second home' on the plains of the Karoo, passed on to future generations, revealing the true magic of that which is paradise, 'a home away from home.'

For more information on Samara, contact reservations on reservations@samara.co.za

