

THE SUNDAY TIMES

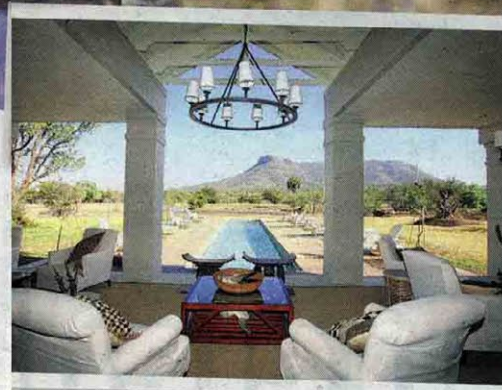
JANUARY 22, 2012

South Africa



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Bewitched by the majesty of Karoo

Nigel Tisdall sees the Samara reserve's brave vision unfold

There's a sign at the entrance to Samara Private Game Reserve that asks drivers to slow to 40kph — and “leave the speeding to the cheetahs”. It's a witty reminder that in this 28,000-hectare sanctuary, a few of these vulnerable bullets of the bush are now lucky enough to live in regal isolation. Two hundred years ago, the Great Karoo — the stark, elemental semi-desert that covers a third of South Africa — teemed with wildlife. There were leopard, rhino, hippo, wildebeest, buffalo and the now extinct Cape lion and zebra-like

quagga. Early travellers wrote of million-strong herds of migrating springbok.

Hunting, farming and settlement put paid to all that, but at least here in one brave corner of the Eastern Cape the destruction is being reversed. Founded 15 years ago by the UK-based conservation philanthropists Sarah and Mark Tompkins, Samara is a vast, pioneering reserve formed of 11 reclaimed farms where wild cheetah have been successfully reintroduced, along with other species including giraffe, eland, kudu, white rhino and Cape mountain zebra.

Just drive north from Port Elizabeth, over the Klein Winterhoek mountains, and you reach an uplifting world of empty roads, big skies and historic towns with streets built wide enough to turn around an ox cart. If you want to tour in South Africa and go beyond Cape Town and the Kruger, it could now be time to heed the call of the Karoo.

Be warned, though. The gates to Samara should also carry the sign “Please adjust your mind-set”. It is one of the five largest

private eco-reserves in South Africa. There are no tour groups, no minibuses, no traffic jams at the waterhole. What's more, there's no mobile phone signal, no television and no bright lights after dark — just the massed flickering of hurricane lamps and a night sky like a shower head of stars.

The reserve accommodates a maximum of 38 guests, spread over three locations. There's the luxurious Manor House, with towering jacaranda trees and a 21-metre swimming pool. Karoo Lodge is a colonial-style home with antique riempie furniture and towering jacaranda trees and a 21-metre swimming pool. Karoo Lodge is a colonial-style home with antique riempie furniture and towering jacaranda trees and a 21-metre swimming pool. Karoo Lodge is a colonial-style home with antique riempie furniture and towering jacaranda trees and a 21-metre swimming pool.

This is a reserve where guests get their own private piece of Africa to play in, but it is only now that this visionary project is coming to fruition. The Tompkins are

striving to do nothing less than rehabilitate a complete landscape. Farms have been closed, fences ripped up, the land left to become a paradise of centuries-old shepherd's trees and rampant spekboom, whose name means the “bacon tree” on account of its fat leaves.

The vastness of Samara means that guests as well as animals have a rich variety of habitats to enjoy. Vervet monkeys are having a swinging time down in the valley bushveld. Troops of baboons yomp across the savanna. Bat-eared foxes are busy tunnelling under the Nama Karoo. Up on the plateau grasslands, gnus, zebra and blesbok are grazing in the evening sunlight.

Once you get deep into the Great Karoo, time takes on a new meaning: 240m years ago, this was a massive swampland — something similar to what is now Botswana's Okavango Delta.

It was in Karoo towns such as Cradock and Graaff-Reinet that the Afrikaners prepared for their Great Trek of the late



1830s. The great missionary Livingstone called the latter “the prettiest town in all Africa”. It rests on a horseshoe-shaped bend in the Sundays River, a 50-minute drive west of Samara. Elegant Cape Dutch and Victorian buildings gather round a Dutch Reformed church, while beyond lies the

Stars of Samara: a cheetah, a bull kudu, zebra, the Manor House and 28,000 hectares of wildlife to explore

Camdeboo National Park. Here the chief attraction is the Valley of Desolation, where sunset views are terrific.

Predators that were once hunted are today being treasured, including slinky beasts such as Sibella, a cheetah who has given birth to several cubs and is now a star attraction at Samara.

When I go cheetah chasing, I spot Sibella prowling near a dried-up river bed. My guide and I are just 30 metres away — so close, in fact, that when our eyes briefly meet I feel I should say “Hi” and give her my business card. Thank you so much for inviting me, I really love your coat... But luckily I'm no juicy young springbok, so I am instantly dismissed. The new queen of the Karoo is holding court, and I'm just a humble, and very lucky, spectator.

■ **Africa Travel** (020 7843 3583, africatravel.co.uk) has five nights' full-board at Samara Private Game Reserve from £1,995, including BA flights and Budget car hire