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INNER PEACE

LEAVING BEHIND THE BUSY COAST OF SOUTH AFRICA'S EASTERN CAPE, PETER BROWNE EXPLORES

THE QUIET TOWNS AND WIDE OPEN SPACES OF THE GREAT KAROO. PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOOK
IN GRAAFF-REINET I COULD HAVE DONE CARTWHEELS DOWN THE STREETS WITHOUT DISTURBING ANYONE

murdered by Apartheid-era security-brutal policemen in 1985. We drove to the nearby hot springs, a municipal complex of pools and chalets, and to the building site of a more promising-looking tourism development on the outskirts of town: a monument to Xhosa culture with traditional mud-and-thatch rondavels for visitors to stay in.

Cradock's most visited monument is the Schreiner House. Although Olive Schreiner (1858–1920) is virtually unknown outside South Africa, the writer, feminist and political agitator is a respected literary figure in her homeland, and the house where she lived in Cradock in the 1860s was restored 20 years ago (with the help of Sandra Antrobus) and opened as a museum.

Schreiner began writing her most famous novel, The Story of an African Farm, as a teenager working as a governess on isolated Karoo farms in the Cradock area. First published in Britain in 1883, it was singled out for addressing 'difficult' subjects such as agnosticism (Schreiner was a 'free thinker') and the treatment of women. She attacked Cecil Rhodes for his position on 'the native question', and embarrassed her brother, William, prime minister of the Cape Colony, by criticising the British for their harsh treatment of the Boers. In 1894, Schreiner married Samuel Cronwright, a handsome Cradock ostrich farmer, and although they lived apart for most of their lives, she is buried with him, their one-day-old child and her favourite dog, in a stone sarcophagus at the peak of Buffelskop Mountain outside town.

FROM CRASECOND I headed north, deeper into the heart of the Great Karoo.

It is difficult to imagine now, but about 250 million years ago this bone-dry panorama was muddy marshland, thick with foliage and crawling with mammal-like reptiles and herbivores. It is now considered one of the world's greatest fossil sites, and geologists and scientists come here from far and wide. A number of sheep farms have opened B&Bs to accommodate them, and one or two have created impressive fossil museums.

My next stop, the town of Nieu Bethesda, is famous as the part-time home of South African playwright Athol Fugard and for the Owl House, one of the most peculiar and disturbing museums you will find anywhere in the world.

There are no tarmac roads into Nieu Bethesda, which lies hidden in the shadow
I turned my back on the Indian Ocean and headed inland. The road ahead looked infinite, a grey-velvet ribbon of tarmac undulating through tawny scrubland punctuated by flat-topped hillocks and mountain ranges, a landscape as vast and haunting as the American Wild West.

The Great Karoo, in South Africa's Eastern Cape, does not flaunt its attractions. It takes time to reveal itself, and even then not everyone will appreciate its bare beauty, or submit to the appeal of its brooding silence and often icy winds, far from the pounding surf and whistling sand dunes of the region's glittering coast.

But this seemingly blank landscape has an indelible place in the hearts of South Africans: it was the setting of the Frontier Wars of the 18th century, which led to the arrival of British settlers in 1820, shipped in to prop up the Queen's colony against Xhosa incursions; and it is where the Great Trek began, triggering the dispersal of Afrikaners across the country. It is also where Nelson Mandela was educated and politicised, and where the anti-Apartheid movement flourished, and was often brutally put down.

South Africa's main motorway, the N1, which links the cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town, slices through the Great Karoo. Many who have driven along it will have stopped at one of the little towns that serve the local sheep-farming communities: pit stops on the way to somewhere less disconcertingly empty, somewhere with more people and fewer sheep. For a long time, it has been an 'in between' place, although that is changing.

As I sped away from the coast, the Winterberge Mountains rose before me, purple bruises against the bleached-blue sky. The road, serviced by concrete picnic tables every few kilometres, followed the course of the railway line from Port Elizabeth and also, more loosely, that of the Great Fish River, where Dutch farmers moving north from the Cape of Good Hope in the 1700s had met the Xhosa people migrating south, and which had become a blood-soaked frontier for a century or more. After a couple of hours, I drove into the Winterberge foothills and over a roller-coaster pass before descending into the green-smudged valley of the Great Fish River and the farming town of Craddock.

Craddock, which started out as a military fort in 1814, is one of the oldest towns in the Eastern Cape, along with Graaff-Reinet, with which it maintains a semi-serious rivalry as contender for principal town in the Great Karoo. As with all such Karoo settlements, the town's skyline is dominated by the spire of its Dutch Reformed church, built here in the 1860s as a replica of London's St Martin-in-the-Fields using plans by Christopher Wren. (If I tell you that the Dutch Reformed church in Graaff-Reinet is modelled on Salisbury Cathedral, you will understand something of the competition between the towns.)

There are some beautiful Victorian streets in Craddock, all built wide enough to turn an ox-wagon. Perhaps the finest is almost entirely composed of restored workers' cottages from the 1840s, collectively known as Die Tuishuise. They are owned by Craddock resident Sandra Antrobus and rented out as holiday accommodation. Antrobus also owns the only hotel in town, Victoria Manor, a study in Karoo Victorian presided over by courteous Afrikaans ladies, where I was invited to have dinner with Sandra and her husband Michael. The long-serving barman, Amos, doubles as the restaurant's only waiter, and dinners are served buffet-style from a hostess trolley laden with Karoo lamb shanks, grilled chicken, potatoes and creamed spinach.

Over dinner, Michael Antrobus was volunteered by his wife to take me on a tour of Craddock. So the next morning we set off to explore its quiet streets, stopping at The Craddock Club (where women were barred until 11 years ago); the restored houses and little churches on Bree Street; the stately Dutch Reformed church whose steeple was used as a lookout by occupying British forces during the Anglo-Boer War; a granite monument to the Craddock Four, black activists...
Mozart, one of 12 cheetahs on the Samara Private Game Reserve
which is wonderfully preserved thanks to a wealthy benefactor, the late Anton Rupert. The business tycoon was born in Graaff-Reinet and invested heavily in its upkeep, creating a foundation to help restore the town's original Cape Dutch buildings and squares. The results are everywhere evident, but to get a sense of the town in its vast Karoo setting, it is best to drive to the wonderfully woeful-sounding Valley of Desolation, a mini Grand Canyon known as the ‘Cathedral of Mountains’ just outside town, from which there are heart-racing views across the endless, silent plains of Camdeboo.

Before the settlers arrived, these open plains and fertile valleys were rich in wildlife. There are tales of springbok migrations in the 19th century involving thousands of antelope; of herds of elephant and Cape Mountain zebra, of plentiful kudu, black wildebeest and eland. Outside the national parks, they are all long gone, dispatched in industrial numbers to satisfy European and Eastern markets for pelts and tusks. But recently, with a decline in sheep and goat farming, a number of game farms have opened, the worst being no more than overstocked zoos for pot-shot hunters, or roadside tourist traps, but a number of which are genuine outfits with sound ecological credentials, such as Samara Private Game Reserve.

When British financier Mark Tompkins and his South African wife Sarah bought a farm in the Milk River Valley outside Graaff-Reinet 12 years ago, they decided to one day reintroduce wildlife to the Great Karoo in significant numbers. So they asked Graham Kerley, director of the Centre for African Conservation Ecology in Port Elizabeth, about the sustainability of such a project, and how much land they would need for the animals they proposed to introduce, including cheetah, an endangered species in South Africa. In the end, the couple bought 11 farms, a total of 28,000 hectares, creating the biggest private game reserve in the Eastern Cape.

Then they took Kerley’s advice, and did nothing: the overgrazed land was left to heal for three years before the first animal was introduced.

Samara Private Game Reserve will never compete with the intensive game-viewing on offer at the ‘Big Five’ reserves adjoining the Kruger National Park, but it provides the luxury of seemingly unlimited space (there will never be more than 20 guests at a time) in

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a varied landscape none of the others could hope to provide, encompassing four of South Africa’s seven biomes, from dense thicket to sweeping vistas of high-plateau grassland. With the restocking schedule well under way, it is also home to a growing number of springbok, oryx, eland and blesbok, as well as buffalo and black wildebeest, giraffe and white rhino, rare Cape Mountain and Burchell’s zebra. But it will never have elephant (the owners want to keep their 500-year-old Shepherd’s trees) or lion, which would interfere with the Tompkinses’ successful cheetah programme.

Six years ago they acquired Sibella, a female cheetah rescued from captivity by the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust, as well as two males. A year later, Sibella gave birth to five cubs; in 2006 she had a litter of six, and a year after that another seven cubs were born, six of which survived. Most of the cubs have been relocated throughout South Africa by the De Wildt project, and a further two males and one female have been brought in, widening the cheetah gene pool while keeping the numbers down (there are 12 cheetah on the property). It is a balancing act Graham Kerley keeps a watchful eye on.

To help finance the project, the Tompkinses have built a first-class lodge and grand private villa on Samara. Although many of their guests fly in from Port Elizabeth, I drove from Graaff-Reinet in less than an hour; it takes four times that to cross the property from north to south, and I spent three days tracking cheetah. The cats are fitted with radio collars, and the ‘telemetries’ used to track them (deceptively low-tech-looking devices, like television aerials) beep with increasing volume and frequency as the cheetah, each recognisable by individual radio frequencies, come into range.

On my first afternoon we left our vehicle and approached two young cheetah males, brothers Mozart and Beethoven, panting in the shade of an ancient Shepherd’s tree. As we walked closer, my guide spoke softly to ‘his boys’ in reassuring, measured tones until we were standing metres from two prime examples of the fastest land animal on earth. By spending so much time with the cheetahs, the rangers have built up a surprising level of trust, and for half an hour we were able to watch them doze, one eye open, their bellies rising and falling like bellows, until we backed off quietly and drove on.

Early the following day, we tracked the brothers along a dry river bed. Alerted by a guttural roar and panicked cries, we ran in the direction of the uproar to find Mozart already crunching through the skull of a kudu calf. As we drew closer, he rose and hissed and arched his back, snarling at us through bloodied teeth before settling on his haunches to feed noisily. He was soon joined by Beethoven; and 15 minutes later, they finished feeding and licked the dark, warm blood from each other’s faces before walking off. All that remained of the calf was a still-wet nose and four tawny lower limbs with tiny hooves like little black toe-socks.

There are magnificent red-grass plateaus on the top of Kondoa Mountain, known as the Samara Marra after East Africa’s famous open savannah grasslands. This is where you will find herds of eland, blesbok, zebra and wildebeest. We were up there on my last day looking for Sibella, who had thus far remained elusive. My guide picked up a strong signal on his radio tracker and within minutes we were scrambling down a steep precipice to find the fresh carcass of a full-grown kudu and, a few metres above it, lying on a rocky outcrop, Sibella, alone and deeply content.

Sarah Tompkins’s vision has already extended beyond Camdeboo to the creation of a million-hectare national park, linking the Mountain Zebra National Park near Cradock with Samara and the Camdeboo National Park, and ultimately the Addo Elephant Park, stretching all the way from the Great Karoo to the Indian Ocean. It would, she says, help recreate migratory routes for elephants and springbok, as well as vastly increase employment opportunities in the Eastern Cape. This ‘Serengti of the South’ would, with his permission, be called the Nelson Mandela National Park; and Tompkins, with typical passion and enthusiasm, has pledged to devote the rest of her life to its implementation.

From Samara, I drove back towards the Indian Ocean, through miles and miles of undulating farmland, past new-looking signs for game reserves and bush camps and hunting lodges. When I had met up with the Port Elizabeth conservationist Graham Kerley on Samara, he had spoken of wildlife auctions (a big business in South Africa) where rhino are bought for exorbitant sums only to be shot in prearranged deals with trophy hunters the next day, and of a cheetah park not far from Samara where these magnificent cats are bred in cramped conditions. ‘There are many atrocities committed in the name of conservation,’ he said, urging me to stop at the cheetah park to see for myself. In the end, I couldn’t. I drove right past it, choosing instead to leave the Great Karoo with one abiding memory: Sibella, lying free and proud atop Kondoa Mountain, with all of Camdeboo before her.