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One couple's vision: huge skies and horizons are on offer at Samara, the South African game reserve returned to its former glory over eight years by Mark and Sarah Tompkins

David Rogers

## Their own private game reserve

After restoring the land and reintroducing its original wildlife, the owners of 28,000 hectares in the Eastern Cape now offer a minibus-free taste of Africa, says **Lucia van der Post**

Anybody who delves into the writings of the early European explorers in Africa is confronted with extraordinary tales of the wildlife. Those first explorers saw elephants foraging in herds of hundreds, savannah sometimes so densely covered by antelope that it seemed like a moving carpet. Lions were so prevalent they were regarded as pests and hunters might see 150 rhinoceros in a day.

The writer Peter Matthiessen, in *African Silences*, recounts how vast tracts of forest and savannah have become silenced. "Where teeming animal abundance existed, ghosts scrape out an existence. Whole species have been wiped out and the fragile balance of nature tossed aside." The difference between Africa as it was then – in terms of its wilderness and wildlife – and Africa as it is today hardly bears contemplating.

It's enough to make those who love Africa despair . . . except all is not yet lost.

Apart from the long established game parks and wilderness areas, there are now increasing numbers of people reclaiming degraded farmland and restoring it to its former glory.

Some of this is done out of a pure, disinterested desire to save precious land and endangered species. Some of it is bought and kept entirely for private pleasure but other owners are beginning to open up wild areas to people like you and me, giving us fresh ways to experience wilderness, enabling us to enjoy landscapes that feed the soul and aren't spoiled by crowds and minibuses.

In South Africa, for instance, where wildlife and open country are part of its romance and history, almost everyone who is lucky enough to make or inherit a fortune spends some of it buying a little bit of wilderness. In England, they'd buy an old rectory or Georgian manor. In South Africa they buy a game farm.

These days they are thinking bigger and bigger, buying farmland that no longer

provides much of a living, pulling down the fences, allowing the land to come back to life and restocking it with wildlife.

Particularly interesting things are happening in the Eastern Cape where government institutions and private enterprise are joining hands in using conservation projects to regenerate the whole area. Apart from the garden route with its tourist traffic, it used to be largely an economically depressed area. Then, a few years ago, Adrian Gardiner, a successful businessman, bought up about 19,000 hectares along the Bushmans river and turned it into Shamwari, a malaria-free game reserve. He'd read "about the animals that used to swarm over the land" and became inflamed with a sense of loss and a passion to "put back what had once been there".

Against all the odds (nobody thought a game park in the Eastern Cape could ever tempt the punters away from the swanky lodges on the borders of the Kruger National Park) he's

created a hugely successful business. He's shown that conservation can bring more prosperity than goat-farming ever provided, as well as more jobs (Shamwari employs 350 people, whereas when the land was farmed only 18 people were employed).

But just last month a new and very different enterprise opened its doors and its vast panoramas to the paying guest. Samara, as the 28,000-hectare reserve is called, is a huge wilderness area in the heart of the Karoo. It is heart-stoppingly beautiful. It has extraordinarily varied terrain with mountains and plains that encompass four of South Africa's seven biomes (compared with the vast Kruger National Park which has only one – savannah).

There is Nama Karoo (Karoo bushland), thicket or valley bushveld, savannah and plateau grassland. What this means in practice is that there are low plains, riverine vegetation along the rivers, high plateaux where the animals of the plains thrive and vast vistas reaching towards

purple mountains in the distance. Almost whichever way you turn you see nothing but huge skies and horizons, all of which seem to fall within the domain of Samara.

It was its beauty that made its owners, Mark and Sarah Tompkins, fall for it. They lived in Paris at the time and buying it made no kind of practical sense. But, as Mark Tompkins puts it: "It was a 'heart' thing. We knew it was lunacy but we just fell in love with the place." It's what others who suffer from the same weakness call a "virus", and many of them catch it from the same man - the great South African conservationist Ian Player.

It's about eight years now since the Tompkins first caught the bug and started buying up the 11 farms, pulling down the fences, and "giving the land time to recover". From the beginning they thought big. They knew that they would want to restore the land to how it used to be and bring back the wildlife that once roamed the plains and, for that, size was critical.

They decided to do it properly. From day one they consulted the experts, most particularly Graham Kerley at Port Elizabeth University, about the land carrying capacity of their 28,000 hectares. They looked back into history to see what animals used to be there. Gradually they have restocked it.

Now they have white rhino (although they're not sure they were ever there, down on the plains is perfect rhino

country), cheetah, kudu, eland, giraffe, mountain reedbeek, steenbok, monkeys, baboons, Cape Mountain zebra, Burchell's zebra and many more. There are several species - red har-tebeest, springbok, gemsbok, black wildebeest, mountain reedbeek and mountain zebra to name a few - that cannot be seen in the Kruger

"share this paradise with others". There are three suites within the main lodge, Karoo Valley Lodge, and three private Karoo suites - in effect, recreations of typical small Karoo houses - that are a little distance from the main lodge. All have just been finished with the help of one of South Africa's new starry designers, John

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National Park.

It's evolving all the time with new births (cheetah cubs brought great excitement) and new arrivals (the most recent being giraffe). They may bring in brown hyena and possibly wild dog but lion and elephant, which used to roam the area, aren't on the agenda for the moment. "We're aiming," says Sarah Tompkins, "to make it a reserve for endangered species, such as the Cape Mountain zebra but primarily for cheetah. There are under 1,000 cheetah left in South Africa and bringing in lion would have a very bad impact on the cheetah population, while elephant would probably do too much damage to the 500-year-old shepherd trees that we have."

For eight years they've been restoring the land and putting back the wildlife - now the time has come, as Mark Tompkins puts it, to

Zwiegelaar. The suites have all mod cons, there is a swimming pool, library and tennis court, and the food is fantastic. But the really special treat that Samara offers is the chance to experience such a vast and beautiful place and to be sharing it with just a very few other people.

Though Samara offers all the usual safari excursions (picnics, game drives, guided walks, cheetah tracking on foot) there are other reasons why Samara is special. It is in the centre of the Karoo, one of the most fascinating parts of South Africa.

The Karoo is psychologically at the heart of South Africa and until you've experienced it, it's almost impossible to understand South Africa's history and psychology. Until now there hasn't been a good way of experiencing its wild areas. There are plenty of charming

B&Bs, particularly in the town of Graaff-Reinet which is about 55km away, but they're mostly in small towns. Until Samara opened its doors there had been nowhere where the ordinary holidaymaker could explore its vastness and see wildlife on this scale.

Samara is right on the plains of Camdeboo. This is land where the bushman roamed, where you can walk up to bushman rock paintings, where the wildlife was so rich that it would take two weeks for the famous springbok migration (last seen in 1896) to pass a given point and two weeks for the dust to settle in Graaff-Reinet. This is land where there are very ancient archaeological remains and fossils so old they make dinosaur fossils seem *parvenus*.

You can fly by private aircraft into Samara's own airstrip, you can pick up a car at Port Elizabeth airport (it takes about three hours) but it's also brilliantly placed for those who travel round the country by car, being just two-and-a-half hours from the end of the garden route.

And for what it offers, its prices seem amazingly reasonable. They start at R1,000 (£92) per person per night in low season in the lodge (R1,800 in high season) and at R1,350 per person per night for the Karoo suites in the low season (R2,400 in high season).

*www.samara.co.za or e-mail reservations@samara.co.za*