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 40mph — and “leave the speeding to the cheetahs”. It’s a wry reminder that to this 20,000-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 semidesert that covers a third of South Africa, teeming 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 cheetahs 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 tourist 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 mostly florescent of hurricane lamps and a night sky like a shower head of stars.

The reserve accommodates a maximum of 88 guests, spread over three locations. There’s the luxurious Manor House, with terracing jacaranda trees and a 21 metre swimming pool. Karoo Lodge is a colonial-style home with antique teak furniture and leopard tortoiseshell wood. A man-made ravine hides the main road. The Marny House, with its own swimming pool, is in the British style. All are within the Karoo National Park. Here the chief attraction is the Valley of Desolation, where sunsets views are terrific.

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

When I got cheetah chasing, I spot Silvella providing 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 making me, I really love your coat... but luckily I’m no juicy yellow 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 3888, africatravel.co.uk) has five nights’ full-board at Samara private game reserve from £2,795, including return flights and Budget car hire.