A Karoo tapestry

With its remarkable floral diversity after a season of rain, the Karoo is the type of place that will calibrate your soul. We drove 1 000 kilometres to four Karoo towns; one reached by a road well travelled, the others by three spectacular mountain passes.

Text *Lien Botha*

Tales of miracle and wonder await the traveller who embarks on a trip through the Karoo – a vast, enigmatic landscape, pin-holed with villages, people and stories of extraordinary diversity and depth.

Since the busy N1 is the portal to many of these wanderings, the trick lies in escaping the 18-wheeler dinosaurs with their roaring engines. Be brave and gather your playlist of wayfarer's hymns, because what lies beyond this highway is a panacea for the soul.

Day 1: The road to Matjiesfontein

"On The Road Again" – Willie Nelson

Just before the Hex River Valley on the N1, you crack through the code; turn up the volume and sing to your heart's delight. Past De Doorns you will see Veldskoen Padstal with its quirky garden. Pop in for one of the juicy burgers and stock up on Miss JL Hall's Worcester Sauce.

About 35 kilometres after Touws River, opposite the forsaken train station, look out for Tweedside with its eucalyptus lanes framed by ornate Victorian gates. It has always fascinated me. This time I stop to reminisce briefly about the farm's first owner, James Logan, the founder of Matjiesfontein.

Ten kilometres before Matjiesfontein lies the Monument Cemetery – burial place of the Logans amid numerous other historic graves. The two obelisks on the koppie are in memory of George Maxwell Grant, who was killed in a rail accident, and British Army major-general Andrew Wauchope, who was killed at Magersfontein during the Anglo-Boer War. Don't be surprised if you encounter a lone historian rummaging through the graveyard, and don't be nervous – the rustling sound belongs to statice flowers protecting the dead.

Flagged by the distinct red roof that signposts The Lord Milner Hotel, you turn down to Matjiesfontein, a village of 300 people, with many of them employed by the hotel and its various amenities. Listen to their stories and you will understand why their children leave, only to return to the "fountain of little reeds".

Remedy vents the dry Karoo air, the air that cured the fragile chest of James Logan who, in 1877 when shipwrecked at the Cape, found work as a station master, acquired Matjiesfontein in 1884 and built the hotel during the early stages of the Anglo-Boer War. No wonder it was used as a military hospital, whose turret was utilised as a lookout post, with some 10 000 troops camped around the village during this time.

In 1968, David Rawdon, hotelier par excellence, purchased Matjiesfontein. After extensive renovations, the entire village was preserved as a National Heritage Site in 1975. When Rawdon died in 2010, his family took over the reins.

You may feel that time is out of joint in this late-Victorian tableau, so give way to the layers of nostalgia; be it an imaginary spin in one of the vintage cars in the Transport Museum, or following Alice through Marie Rawdon's Wonderland. Take a leisurely stroll past the Pink Church and the historic cricket pitch, meditate in |the Traveller's Chapel or read erstwhile guest and writer Olive Schreiner's *The Buddhist Priest's Wife*, written while she stayed in one of the cottages. Start or end your day with a couple of laps in one of the greatest swimming pools on Earth.

Sundowners equate showtime with Johnny Theunissen's famous double-decker bus tour of the village (it takes all of 10 minutes), followed by a ghostly introduction in the royal lounge of the hotel, and the grand finale at The Laird's Arms for the crooners' melancholic melodies, ranging from Nat King Cole to Sonja Herholdt.

After a gracious dinner of herb-crusted hake and double-decker mousse, it's time to settle in on the wide verandah with its view of the Anysberg. Before lights out, think about Jimmy Logan – the first person in South Africa to introduce electricity, a flushing toilet *and* a landline telephone linked to his neighbouring farm.

Matjiesfontein: Good to know

- **Lord Milner Hotel** 023 561 3011
- **The Snake Eagle Thinking Path**, the first permanent geoglyph created as part of the Karoo Geoglyph Project.
- **Rovos Rail** does three or four grand steam-train trips from Pretoria to Cape Town via Matjiesfontein. rovos.com

1. The suites at The Lord Milner Hotel open onto the pool
2. The famous red double-decker London bus in Matjiesfontein
3. The Lord Milner's façade echoes its Victorian heritage
4. Karoo stargazing is legendary

Day 2: Matjiesfontein to Calitzdorp

"Ride" – Lana del Rey

By the time the Rovos Rail steam train whistles into the station, it's goodbye Matjiesfontein and hello Laingsburg. Before heading to Calitzdorp via the R323, stop at the Flood Museum for a tour by enthusiastic tourism official Madré Walters. The museum remembers those who lost their lives and those who provided assistance during the catastrophic flood of 25 January 1981. Also on view is the Wolfaardt Collection of Africana and memorabilia, as well as age-old items used by the Khoi-San.

Pause for a light meal at Hakkiesdraad, next to the museum, to ponder the tides of the Buffels River (which rises in one season and runs dry in another); stock up on some Karoo delicacies from House of Garlic, browse through Nostalgia, buy *roosterkoek* (griddle cakes) from Tannie Poppie in Voortrekker Street and, if you're a carnivore, get your protein fix from Karoo Biltong before heading out of town.

The R323 is a spectacular road with very little traffic. Allow the dramatic vistas to stir your soul as you imagine the rummaging Bradysaurus who roamed here 250 million years ago. Continue to Seweweekspoort, an unforgettable 10-kilometre stretch of gravel road following the course of the Huis River through the mountains. Afrikaans poet C Louis Leipoldt, after travelling through Seweweekspoort, proclaimed it to be one of the "Seven Wonders of the Cape". Today it is under the control of Cape Nature Conservation and is also a certified Unesco World Heritage Site, with Seweweekspoort Peak marked as the highest point in the Western Cape.

After connecting with the R62, it's a slight turn into Amalienstein to say a peace prayer inside the Missionary Church, established in 1853. Near Opsoek, pop in at Frikkie se Gat and Blikkantien farmstall for *moerlekker koffie* (damn fine coffee) and a pair of *meelsak* (flour sack) trousers.

The trip resumes with a deviation at the Matjiesvlei turn-off: a seven-kilometre meander that leads to a hamlet of historical Karoo-style cottages situated in a pristine and tranquil vale at the foothills of the Swartberg Mountains. With no TV, wi-fi or cellphone reception, I add Matjiesvlei Guest Farm to my bucket list, and return to the R62 in the direction of Calitzdorp, a mere five kilometres further down the track.

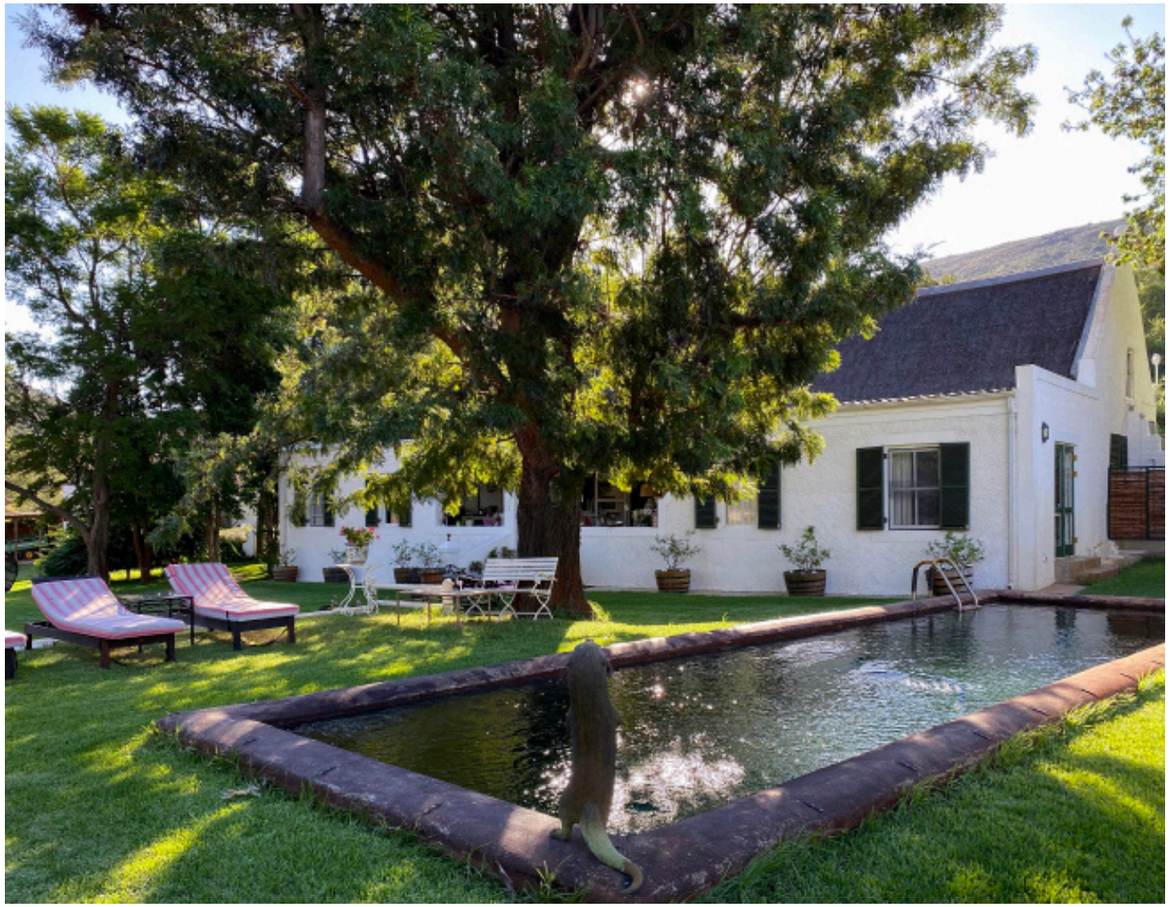
My first stop is De Krans wine estate for a bottle of Premium Cape Ruby and then to nearby Boplaas for some of their fine Portuguese wine blends.

Late-afternoon light leads the short drive to the distinguished 1836 farmhouse of Daniëlskraal, situated in a lush spekboom kloof and owned by the high-spirited Rosheen Kriegler. Follow her on Instagram and you'll see why the "Contessa of Calitzdorp" delivers an unparalleled experience of Karoo pizzazz – complete with a menagerie of delightful beings such as maintenance manager Sandra Galbraith, Bella the dog, Juno and Jambo the goats, a bull called Jack and a gaggle of geese.

Calitzdorp: Good to know

• **Anysberg Nature Reserve** 087 087 8250
At the exit of Seweweekspoort, a chance encounter with a family of eccentric world travellers, happy as larks in their little mobile home. Check out their journey on Instagram: @lesmollalpagasencavale
• **The Accidental Baker** at Lenieshof 079 868 7478
• **Daniëlskraal** 082 887 1055 (Rosheen Kriegler)
• **Die Bosvarkie Bush Pub**, also a restaurant and campsite 081 473 3232 (Cheryl)
• **Calitzdorp Camino** 073 500 8182 (Charl Ewerts)
• **Calitzdorp Uncorked Festival** 17–19 June 2022, 082 469 8143 (Kevin)
• **Calitzdorp Museum** 044 213 3414 (Paul Boshoff)
Look out for Lizel von Wielligh's textile botanicals and Trevor Rizzato's ceramics.
• **Gamka River Safari Co.** 078 987 9852
• **Veld Fliek** open-air movies 082 338 8782 (Marcia Vermaak)
• For something completely different, **Sunny Baek**'s Korean cuisine pop-up paired with golf simulation by **Ed Holding** 072 241 4952

This spread, clockwise from opposite: The R323 takes in spectacular scenery; Daniëlskraal outside Calitzdorp offers welcome respite from the Karoo's arid landscape; owner Rosheen Kriegler with farm manager Sandra Galbraith and Juno and Jambo.



Day 3: Calitzdorp to Prince Albert

"The Wayfarer" – Bruce Springsteen

Early the next morning, before leaving Calitzdorp, amble through the town so gracefully cradled by the Gamka and Nels Rivers; follow the squiggle at the start of Queen Street, wonder about a street named St Helena and marvel at the time-honoured Karoo gardens. It's no surprise that Hans Fransen, an expert on Cape vernacular architecture, regarded Calitzdorp as one of his favourite Karoo *dorpies* (villages). After the lovely Sunny Baek's kimchi-fusion breakfast, I pop in at the Handelshuis exhibition, followed by a forage through the museum, and then it's time to leave the "village with a heart".

Eventually, all roads lead to Oudtshoorn, regional centre of agricultural trade and ostrich capital of the world. Along the way, I notice signs for Karooboom Braai, Bella de Karoo and Meerkat Experience. But the 27-kilometre Swartberg Pass lies ahead, and I would prefer not to encounter any of the ghostly drifters who may appear along its crooked bends and treacherous escarpments on moonless nights.

From Oudtshoorn, take the R328 and just keep going. At Kobus se Gat, a traditional veld restaurant, the coals are still warm from the lunch served to a group of adventurers who have dispersed into the Cape Fold Mountains, with its remarkable floral diversity featuring Karoo veld, renosterveld, mountain fynbos, spekboom veld and numerous geophyte species. A few kilometres further, cold mist creeps in and makes me speculate about the bullet holes in the Skelmdraai sign.

And then, of course, there is the 57-kilometre drop down to Gamkaskloof (Die Hel). First inhabited by farmers in 1830, it was only accessible on foot until 1963 when a road was finally built. Who can tell how it came to be known as Die Hel, but one story recounts a livestock inspector who visited in 1940 describing his experience of clambering down the Kleinberg route as "hell".

Descend valiantly – or continue to Prince Albert, the pristine Karoo town that has largely retained its charming mid-19th century character under a layer of discreet contemporary fabric. At the genteel Dennehof Karoo Guesthouse, I am welcomed by Albert, Inga and Ferdinand the ridgeback (super-organised hosts with a link to everything worthwhile), and then it's off to the Fransie Pienaar Museum and the recently added Outa Lappies exhibition (detailing the artistic travels of a Karoo gypsy) – a vital addition to this renowned collection. After a hearty supper at African Relish, I take a stroll along Church Street, counting the homes with *holbol* (convex-concave) gables.

Prince Albert: Good to know

- **Gamkaskloof (Die Hel)** 087 808 5730
- **Dennehof Karoo Guest House** 082 854 9301; ghost walk with Ailsa Tudhope 084 673 1710
- **Gay's Guernsey Dairy** 072 133 0450 (Claudia)
- **Fransie Pienaar Museum** 023 541 1172
- **Cycling** 083 395 9038 (Arno Botha)
- **Prince Albert Olives** 023 541 1687
- **African Relish** restaurant and cooking classes 023 541 1381
- **Biodiversity walks** 082 770 0206 (Sue)

1. Weekend cooking classes at African Relish
2. The rooms at Dennehof in Prince Albert
3. After the Swartberg Pass, Prince Albert is a welcome sight
4. Meiringspoort is known for its waterfalls
5. Dine in a garden conservatory at Dennehof

Day 4: Prince Albert to De Rust

"Wide Open Spaces" – The Chicks

At the crack of dawn, I follow a group of cyclists as they set off to Weltevrede Fig and Guest Farm outside town. Somewhere between Oukloofberge and Treintjies, I slow down and watch as they become dust clouds.

After a stop at the Saturday market, I head for Klaarstroom via the R40. A billboard echoing *High Noon* lures me into the town: a single street with some charming Karoo dwellings surrounding a modest Anglican church. Inside the pub of the Klaarstroom Hotel, a wedding dress in a glass case meets the weary traveller, and I settle for a cold cider near the pool, only to hear I'm a day late for pizza – served strictly on Friday nights only.

From Klaarstroom, the N12 takes one through Meiringspoort, the first major project of young engineer Thomas Bain (built between 1854 and 1858). Count the 25 drifts that lead you through this gorge and speculate about their fascinating names and the stories surrounding them. Take a plunge in one of the deep pools below Waterfall Drift and, at Herrie's Drift, note Afrikaans author CJ Langenhoven's ode to the well-known elephant from *Sonde Met Die Bure*, memorialised in stone in 1929. Frequent stops with basic amenities and excellent information boards are located between the drifts.

You exit the final drift to arrive at De Rust, considered one of the best-preserved Victorian villages in the Western Cape. Its appropriate name (meaning "The Rest") was that of the farm on which it was established in 1900, which in turn belonged to Petrus Johannes Meiring after whom Meiringspoort was named.

With much of its original tissue intact, it follows a slight dog-leg grid alongthe Huis River. There is an intimacy to the streetscape, lined with modest but charming Victorian houses. It offers a vibrant art community, a variety of eateries, and a curious saunter to discover some of the town's eccentricities.

Time slows down at Rus in De Rust – the perfect sleepover to conclude the trip. Located at 16 Burger Street, the old rectory with its lofty ceilings and a verandah for daydreaming has been thoughtfully restored by the present owner, Deon Theron.

On Sunday morning, before heading home, it's breakfast hour at Ray's Coffee Shop. There's a twitter of malachite sunbirds around bird feeders in the garden, and a nearby table fills up with farmers, chatting about recent harvests and good rains. As one of them gently touches the head of a sheepdog, I realise that this pattern of the world makes perfect sense.

De Rust: Good to know

- **Weltevrede Fig Farm** 087 095 6229
- **Klaarstroom Hotel** 084 576 7633
- **Meiringspoort Half-Marathon** 8 October 2022, 083 309 8732
- **Rus in De Rust** 072 188 7270 (Karin Theron)
- **Café Rust** 079 432 7606
- **Domein Doornkraal** wines and farmstall 082 763 5296
- **Alles en Nog Wat** curio shop 082 324 8766
- **Pluim Eatery and Coffee** 082 655 7085