

# To the manor born

*Janet Couryer finds a perfect escape in the magnificent Sneeuweberg mountains*



As we drive inland, from Port Elizabeth, the view changes from lush vegetation to low-lying scrub with dry river beds and patches of sandy earth. It's an arid landscape heavy with silence; a vast wilderness of endless plains rolling away to the distant expanse and stretching to the wide-arching sky. This is the heart of the Great Karoo.

My fiancé and I are on our way to Mount Camdeboo Private Game Reserve, a 14 000 ha farm located some 280 km from PE and which opened to visitors just a year ago. We turn off the R75 and on to the R63 Pearston/Somerset-East road and there, in front of us, lie the soft curves of the beautiful Sneeuweberg, South Africa's second-highest mountain range. As we head left on to the Petersburg dirt road, the region immortalised by Eve Palmer's classic *The Plains of Camdeboo* rolls into a valley enveloped on either side by the range's indigo-tinged bulk. I'm amazed; I had no idea the flat Karoo hid these magnificent mountains.

There to welcome us to the Cape Dutch manor house are the reserve's owners, Cathy and Anthony Cordle. They are visiting too, and invite us to join them for one of chef Ignatius Khoel's sumptuous dinners. By the time we are sipping coffee in front of a toasty fire, we feel as though we're with old friends.

Later, along a path lit by lanterns and starry skies, we take a short stroll to our cosy little stone cottage. Originally a gatehouse, it's nearly 300 years old. Inside, the lamps and underfloor heating have been switched on, and on top of the turned-down covers of the four-poster bed is a copy of a Karoo tale – our bedtime story.

The following morning we decide to take in some of the area's sights. From the reserve it's about a 45-minute drive to South Africa's fourth-oldest town, Graaff-Reinet, with its 220 national monuments. We park next to the impressive Dutch Reformed Church at the top of Church Street and stroll down to the publicity association for a map



**PREVIOUS PAGE**

The Sneeuberg mountains, Mount Camdeboo Private Game Reserve and the Valley of Desolation.

**ABOVE LEFT**

Thank you to Hertz Rent a Car – partner of the AA – for the use of a Toyota Yaris on the trip. For deals exclusive to AA members, call the AA on ☎ 083 843 22 or visit [www.aa.co.za](http://www.aa.co.za).

**ABOVE CENTRE**

The Dutch Reformed Church in Graaff-Reinet.

**ABOVE RIGHT**

Helen Martins' cement statues in the backyard of the Owl House, Nieu-Bethesda.

of the town and loads of brochures. We amble past numerous pretty white cottages as well as some larger, handsome buildings all with green roofs and shutters, most of them sporting the national monument plaque. We also visit the Hester Rupert Art Museum housing an excellent collection of contemporary South African art, a gift from one of the town's most famous sons – entrepreneur and philanthropist Anton Rupert.

We trundle about 30 km out of town up the N9 till we see the sign to Nieu-Bethesda. A dusty, winding pass leads us down to where the tin-roofed, wide-porched Owl House gazes across the valley.

The eccentric Helen Martins had a vision for incorporating light and colour into her home, and the walls, ceilings and doors remain covered in crushed glass today. As she became increasingly obsessive and reclusive, she filled the grounds of her property with hundreds of cement and glass sculptures (including owls and camels) inspired by Biblical texts and the works of William Blake and Omar Khayyam. Sadly, she started to go blind, and when she was no longer able to create, she took her own life one winter's morning in 1976.

Next door to the Owl House is the tiny Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre which has local fossils from some 253 million years ago – the region is a palaeontologist's paradise. Barend Minnies guides us to the nearby dry river bed to point out fossils still entombed in the rock. As a farm boy he saw his first specimen at age nine, and quickly developed a passion for these treasures.

Daylight is beginning to fade, so after a quick glass of home-brewed ale at The Brewery, we head back to Camdeboo National Park that virtually surrounds Graaff-Reinet and is home to the spectacular Valley of Desolation, a 100-million-year-old geological phenomenon where towers of dolerite rock rise up from the valley floor. From one of the trail's outlook points we watch the magnificent Sneeuberg and plains of Camdeboo turn purple and charcoal in the dying light.

Back at Mount Camdeboo, we're out on the Landy by 7:30 am the next morning. Despite rugs and ponchos it's freezing, so when lodge hostess Tinette van Niekerk arrives with steaming hot-water bottles my gratitude is boundless.

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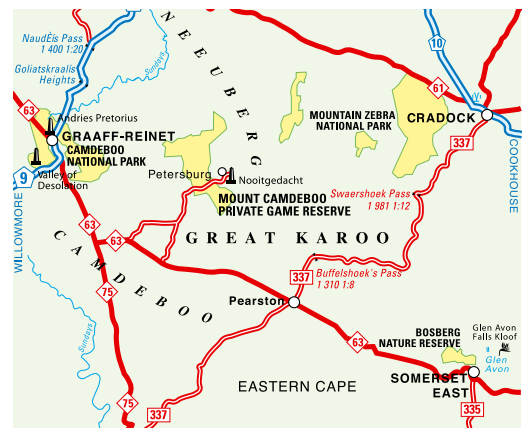
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On the game drive the nearly two-metre-tall head ranger, Erhardt Brümmer, points out an aloe ferox plant that, at almost four metres, dwarfs him. 'Judging by the rate at which they grow, this one's probably between 250 and 300 years old,' he explains. 'And the farm is littered with aloes this size.' With a law degree from Tukkies and a stint managing radio stations for Primedia, he's not your typical ranger. 'I grew tired of the city,' he shrugs simply.

Up on the grassy mountain plateau we spot Cape mountain zebra. Previously hunted almost to extinction, these pretty grazers remain highly endangered. We also see sparring giraffe bulls, skittish red hartebeest, tsessebe (a kind of antelope), kudu and eland. But my day is made by the sightings of a pale chanting goshawk and an orange-throated longclaw.

Erhardt recounts the story of the Battle of Paardefontein during the Anglo-Boer War, and shows us the sheep kraal where Boer soldiers took cover from the British. Soon after, we crest a rise to see a white sun umbrella standing conspicuously in the middle of the plain, and beside it is a beautifully laid table. As we savour the Champagne brunch, I survey the incredible views and sigh gently. It doesn't get much better than this.

Later that afternoon, after an agreeable snooze, we're out tracking white rhino. My heart is pounding as we tiptoe through the bush and crouch down not far from a hulking grey pair. They are beautifully unaware of us. Erhardt reminds us afterwards what a privilege it is to share their environment but to leave them totally undisturbed. We are silent with awe.

On our last day, as we drive away from Mount Camdeboo, I ponder over something Cathy shared with me. During the 1800s, invalids with lung complaints were sent to the area to recuperate in the curative dry air. But perhaps they had another secret. Perhaps they knew this place is healing for the soul, too. 🍷



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