



White rhinos roam in the 14,000-hectare Mount Camdeboo Private Game Reserve

Savour the unseen side of South Africa

Isabel Conway takes an intoxicating tour of the lesser-spotted South African Cape

The jeep skids over the deeply rutted narrow track, some of it partly washed away by flash floods, before grinding to a halt in the middle of nowhere. We've rounded hairpin bends, almost reached mountain-tops and bumped down switchbacks in some of South Africa's steepest and remotest terrain.

On the way, we've admired troops of noisy, bickering baboons in an Eden of luxuriant foliage below. The baboons politely give up a drop toilet they've been guarding at the camping terrain where we stop for our picnic lunch. Splashing through flooded river crossings, there are fleeting glimpses of Bush backs, duiker and kudu among the antelope species roaming the bush. This is also leopard country, but they are rarely seen.

The World Heritage wilderness of Baviaan Kloof (Valley of Baboons), seven hours east of Cape Town, was created when the land cracked open millions of years ago. The landscape is dominated by the stark 1,759-metre Cockscomb mountain (a perfectly shaped cockerel comb) called T'Muniqua, or "covered in clouds", by earlier tribes. The Eland and Groot Winterhoek ranges beyond stretch out panoramically on a spectacular canvas.

As the afternoon wears on, our driver-guide jumps out, bends down and examines a large heap of dung with noticeable excitement. To the untrained eye, it looks like something you might accidentally step in at an Irish livestock mart.

"Pretty recent," announces experienced wildlife spotter Alan Fogarty, "a black rhino bull. Look at the bush, see how he's eaten it at a 45-degree angle; rhinos always do that. He also urinates and scrapes his feet regularly to mark his territory. Rhinos leave tracks, makes them easy to hunt."

In my haste to capture a rhino dung photo opportunity, I edge over to the driver's side, clumsily leaning on to the horn, to a chorus of curses and a stifled scream from a nervous passenger. So much for safari know-how.

Yet the shrill blast may prevent any imminent rhino charge from the undergrowth. Black rhinos are unpredictable and dangerous, according to those in the know, whereas white rhinos are generally said to be non-aggressive.

Our driver Alan says he has been in the safari guiding business for over 35 years (alantours.co.za) and knows this "valley of a thousand and one hills", crisscrossed by numerous identikit tracks, like the back of his hand. On our long day's journey into dark night, he only reluctantly cuts short further exploration of an adjoining wilderness as darkness falls, returning us safely to Port Elizabeth.

On the way, I try to visualise the hardship endured by early settlers centuries ago, trundling up here by ox cart to obstinately tame a wild, inhospitable terrain into arable farmland and fight with their lives to hold on to it. Driving through black night under a million stars, we play at being survivors, scavenging



The Eastern Cape of South Africa has a variety of breathtaking mountainous and coastal scenery

our leftover supplies – packets of 'Eet-Sum-Mor' biscuits washed down with the remains of the red and white wine cartons in place of dinner.

We meet a South Africa far removed from queues of tourists, zebra-striped safari buses and jeeps that roam famous Kruger National Park or refined wine tasting/culinary tours of Stellenbosch and Franschoek.

Agrittier outback experience awaits in the Karoo, where they say you can stop and hear the silence. This enormous semi-arid region, the size of Germany, was once home to huge herds of elephant, hippo, rhino and the now extinct cape lion. Rampant hunting by the colonists eradicated most of the wildlife, while farmland fences stopped the vital springbok migration. Today, the tide has turned somewhat and private reserves are doing much to return the big five to their natural habitat.

Our first stop at Mount Camdeboo Private Game Reserve brings us to a large estate of nostalgic retro bungalows and several swimming pools, nestled in the foothills of the Sneeuberg mountains. The luxury accommodation (I am billeted in the romantic Pepper Tree lodge, complete with four-poster bed, gorgeous antiques and mysterious night-time wild



Cheetah spotting in the Karoo outback

FACT FILE

What to see: Eastern Cape and the Karoo is a vast, rarely visited ancient outback, encompassing centuries of history, from tribal conflicts to the vicious bloody Boer Wars, stupendous views, towns steeped in tradition when the local agricultural show and cake sale were central to the white community's life and times.

Don't miss: the Valley of Desolation in Camdeboo

National Park and visits to Graaff-Reinet, Cradock and Nieu Bethesda, which form a triangle. In Port Elizabeth take a cruise into Algoa bay with Raggy Charters (raggycharters.co.za) for whale watching and to visit the St Croix Island marine reserve's endangered African penguins.

A city tour of Port Elizabeth with Lungton tours (Facebook: Lungton tours) is a powerful introduction to the brutal history of apartheid

by way of township visits, a lively braai (barbecue) in New Brighton township and Route 67, a pictorial tribute to the 67 years of Nelson Mandela's journey, ending at a voting line sculpture on the Bayfront overlooking the bay named after the great man.

Isabel Conway was a guest of South Africa Tourism. She travelled from Ireland via London Heathrow to Johannesburg (ten and a half hours) with Aer Lingus and British Airways,



noises outside) is like Country Life magazine meets Condé Nast luxury safari hideaway.

Beautiful as these Out of Africa-esque surroundings are (not to mention the delicious farm-to-table food and genial hospitality of the Reserve's owner Ian Buchanan, who looks like a character from Braveheart), it's primarily the wild animals we've come to admire.

A chilly early morning mist turns to a steady highlands drizzle as we don rain capes and head off by jeep up the mountain in search of a "heart-thumping" (according to a visitor review) cheetah experience.

A ghostly dilapidated sheep kraal (shed) on a windswept plateau was the scene of one of the last and most ferocious battles of the Second Boer War in 1901. The original corrugated roof, full of bullet holes, still stands as testimony to the carnage. We shiver, and our group falls silent hearing how Dutch Boer guerrilla fighter Johannes Lotter and his men were greatly outnumbered by the British Army's 9th Lancers and a bloodbath ensued. Wounded Boer survivors, some still in their teens, were stripped, chained and forced on a 50km march down the mountain.

Then, from behind the shed, the fog lifts slightly, enough to show a stealthy outline moving through the mist. "Cheetah," confirms wildlife ranger Hewart Mumba. "We will try to follow him." Hewart unravels a telemetry antenna, the modern communication link between man and wild beast. The cheetah wears a collar and is conveniently tracked with radio signals.

We are encouraged to hike over the wet, spongy,

russet-coloured lichen to meet the big cat. Minutes later, we are within ten feet of a handsome male cheetah who crouches in the long grass.

Well used to an audience, he rolls over on his back so we can better admire him. After some big cat preening and claw inspection, he turns his head, scanning the horizon for lunch. Then he opens his mouth wide, showing off sharp fangs. The cheetah has fathered four cubs born a few days earlier. No wonder he's showing off.

Cheetahs are seemingly among the least dangerous big cats, unlikely to attack an adult human provided they aren't threatened. But our guide Hewart warns us not to bend down for that enhanced photo angle, turn our backs, or panic and take to our heels. Our cheetah may then follow his natural instinct and give chase.

Returning to the manor, surrounded by its 14,000-hectare reserve, we stop to admire a group of white rhinos moving around under the trees. Ian tells how they were reluctantly forced to dehorn their adult rhinos to deter poachers. Stompy, a much-loved white rhino, was killed in 2014 and his horn was brutally hacked off. Four more rhinos would be killed at the reserve over the next year and a half, despite increased anti-poaching efforts. The poachers were caught and, a few days after my visit, came the welcome news that the trio responsible for at least 50 poaching crimes had each been sentenced to 25 years in jail.

From Mount Camdeboo we moved on down the valley to Graaff-Reinet, the fourth oldest town in South Africa and a place of dolls-house Dutch Cape whitewashed gabled houses. From clashes between the trek Boers (itinerant farmers from the Netherlands) and local tribes to a boom when the railway arrived and Graaff-Reinet became the centre of South Africa's wool industry, this town, a past hotbed of rebellion between Afrikaners and British, has seen it all.

Graaff-Reinet is surrounded by Karoo's magnificent Camdeboo National Park and the Valley of Desolation, a geological wonder every bit as awesome as parts of the Grand Canyon. We explore with local guide Les Slabbert of Karoo Connections tours (karoconnections.co.za), whose family has lived in the area for generations. Les can pick out wildlife with an eagle's eye such as a statue-still kudu blending seamlessly into the hillside. Sundowner gin and tonics are laid out on picnic tables whilst we watch the sunset sky turn from pink tinged with gold to deep blazing red.

The Karoo is also a place of valleys, secrets and hidden towns, inhabited these days by artists and writers in search of solitude and open spaces, as well as craft breweries, organic food stores and small tourism ventures. We briefly visit two of them: Nieu Bethesda and Cradock. The former only got electricity in 1994, and is best known for the Owl House, home and artistic enclave of eccentric Helen Martins. An opponent of the racial prejudice and conservatism of the strict reformed community who ostracised her, Helen scandalised her neighbours by enlisting a local black artist she had befriended to help with the creation of a fantasy world of more than 300



Cradock, a settler town reminiscent of mid-America in the 1950s and 1960s



Karoo's Camdeboo National Park in South Africa's Eastern Cape

concrete sculptures. The troubled artist took her own life in 1976, when failing eyesight was preventing her from carrying on. Today, her collection is a curious popular tourist attraction.

I feel I am in South Africa's version of The Last Picture Show on arrival in Cradock, a town of one long street, straight out of mid America of the 1940s or 1950s. Here we stop off at Die Tuishuise and Victoria Manor (tuishuise.co.za), today still the centre of this old settler town's universe. A century ago, horses and carriages brought farmers into Cradock for a brief escape from the isolation of far-flung homesteads.

The hotel is a retro gem, packed with atmosphere, its elegant lunch buffet a combination of dishes drawing on Xhosa, Afrikaner, British and Cape Malay cuisine, presided over by a whirlwind of a lady named Lisa Ker. She tells how the space and the isolation of the Karoo provides the perfect escape for all who seek authenticity as well as a digital detox. "We do have wifi, believe it or not," she laughs, "but it comes and goes a lot out here." ■



Stay in style at the luxurious Mount Camdeboo Private Game Reserve

then took the one hour and 40 minute onward flight to Port Elizabeth. Return flights from €500. See ba.com.

Where to stay: in Port Elizabeth, try oceanfront colonial style at the Boardwalk Hotel, prices from €178 for a double (suninternation.com/boardwalk/rooms), or the luxurious Mount Camdeboo Private Game Reserve from €543 pp for a three-night all-inclusive safari package (mountcamdeboo.com). In Graaff-Rein-

et the 5* Drostdy boutique hotel has doubles from €117 (newmarkhotels.com/places/hostels/drostdy-hotel).

For further information, see southafrica.net/meetyoursouthafrica.

When to go: winter - from June through August - is dry season, when grass and bush cover is minimal and animals are easier to spot. Spring is from September to November. In December to March, temperatures reach

the mid-to-late 30s.

Need to know: South Africa's main roads and highways are well maintained and they also drive on the left. Accommodation and restaurant prices are fantastic value - up to half of Irish prices because of the rand's slide. South Africa is one hour ahead in summer, with a two-hour time difference in winter, so you can forget about jet lag.