



## *The hullabaloo of* *Camdeboo*

SOUTH AFRICA'S SMALLEST NATIONAL PARK IS NO WILDERNESS. INSTEAD, HISTORICAL BUILDINGS LIE WITHIN SIGHT OF HERDS OF BUFFALO AND SPRINGBOK, HARKING BACK TO A TIME WHEN THE KAROO'S WILD ANIMALS WOULD WALK THROUGH TOWN. THESE DAYS, THEY SOMETIMES STILL DO. BY SCOTT RAMSAY.

One clear Saturday morning in Graaff-Reinet, as the town was going about its weekend business, a kudu ambled down the main road. The debonair antelope with impressive horns trotted up a flight of stairs to the first floor of an office building, slip-sliding across the parquet floor. A startled local, whose weekend chores didn't include giving street directions to large African herbivores, called Peter Burdett, Camdeboo National Park manager.

'We often have kudus wandering into town, especially during winter when the lush gardens prove too tempting. But this was one call I hadn't expected.'

After a few well-aimed kicks from the kudu, Peter and his team managed to grab hold of it and drag it back down the stairs and onto a Land Cruiser, eventually releasing the undoubtedly relieved animal into the nearby park.

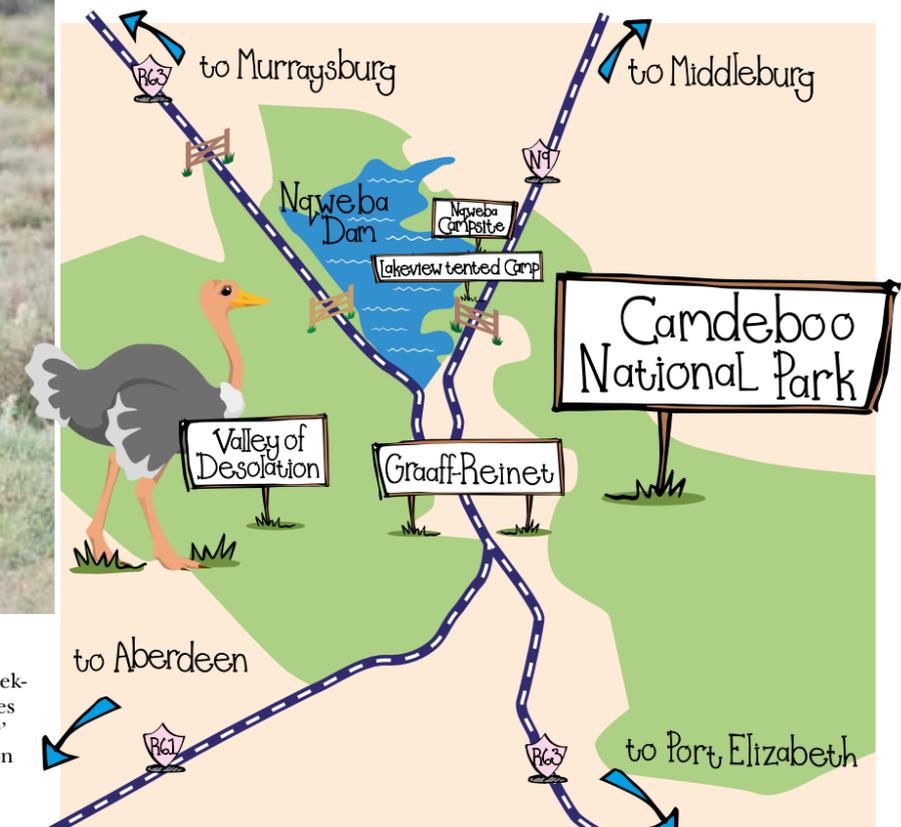
As bizarre as the kudu's urban foray may have been, Graaff-Reinet locals have long been used to bumping into wild animals. At the centre of the Great Karoo, residents in the town during the 19th century saw huge herds of springbok, wildebeest and hartebeest pass through town. Lion and leopard were common, and in 1869 James Murray woke up to find a black rhino munching on the cabbages in his back garden in the centre of town. In those days, the pachyderms were so common that Murray promptly shot it and went back to bed.

In this part of the Karoo, volcanic magma burst through cracks and fissures, solidifying over time to form dolerite. The Afrikaans name for this type of rock, *ysterklip* or iron rock, is a more apt description of its hardness and texture. After many millions of years, the surrounding sediments were eroded and today the dolerite towers remain.

## GO TO GRAAFF-REINET

You can't visit Camdeboo without stopping in Graaff-Reinet to see some of its beautiful historical buildings. Don't miss Reinet House (at the end of Parsonage Street; look for the replica of the horn from the black rhino that James Murray shot), the nearby Military History Museum (profiling the Anglo-Boer War) and the Hester Rupert Art Museum on Church Street. Call Graaff-Reinet Tourism on 049-892-4248.

Tem faciat vero que qui sequissi aut odi demquiam ipsam volendella nus ex etur? Hente corpori di velibus nihilitisqui sequia cullisque sit pa cumquatqui corepelest, et lit id eliquam nobis-sim fuga. Ut volor sant as est, unt minulparum qui nullatum, quos aute aut ea net vendis exceper iaspicto qui quis di cores adipsunt od et odist fugiOlor re elent verro quiHariscium et volor maximagni solenie nduntur arupiendus exeruptat. Ebis alite nonsequae sum dolorecab idebis et et eveni rerem et evelecepel il ideliquatiis aut latem eos aut fugia nusam, volupta tectem que volor aut vel molor aut mo omniendae. Nam lamene si que con nus pa volumquias int.



Although hunters and farmers exterminated most wild animals, and merino sheep subsequently overgrazed much of the land, Camdeboo National Park – declared a protected area in the 1970s – now covers 190 square kilometres of plains, koppies and valleys. Wildlife has been reintroduced, including Cape buffalo, Cape mountain zebra, gemsbok, red hartebeest, springbok, blesbok, black wildebeest and, of course, kudu.

It could also lay claim to being the most accessible wildlife destination in the region. The main game-viewing area to the north of Graaff-Reinet is partly fenced but animals can otherwise move freely across the veld – and into town if they feel like it, where Cape Dutch buildings line the streets, their bright white walls and thatch roofs contrasting spectacularly with the semi-arid landscape.

It's this striking combination of architecture and landscape, human history and natural history, people and wildlife that makes a visit to Camdeboo appealing. The best place to appreciate this juxtaposition is the Valley of Desolation. A winding tarred road meanders west from town to the top of a koppie, where you can see one of South Africa's finest panoramas. Look east towards the little town in the middle of a massive, seemingly empty place, its grid

pattern of streets built alongside the Sundays River, which ensures a constant supply of fresh water and today is supported by new Ngweba Dam.

Looking south are the Plains of Camdeboo – immortalised by author Eve Palmer, whose family still live on the nearby Cranemere Farm (and where lucky guests can enjoy juicy lamb chops that will make your tongue do flick-flacks).

To the north is the imposing Sneeuwberg range, from where the Sundays River flows. And to the west is the most famous view of all, where towers of rock stand like sentinels watching over the 200-million-year-old landscape.

The viewpoint is kept open to visitors until after sunset on weekends and I stayed a bit later to photograph the impressive dolerite cliffs and the explosion of stars. As the town below turned on its sparkling lights, it looked like a little ship navigating its way through the darkness of the ocean. A cold wind was blowing, carrying with it the sweet smell of the veld, itself an atavistic reminder of the timelessness that pervades the Karoo.

But the name, Valley of Desolation, is a misnomer; as part of the Nama Karoo biome, Camdeboo is blessed with diversity that would embarrass other semi-arid regions on the planet. More than 300 plant

species belie the apparent emptiness, including spekboom, that carbon-sequester wonder which gives the park its name (Camdeboo means 'green valley' in Khoekhoe, because of the spekboom growing on the slopes of the koppies).

There are no lions, leopards are rare, and caracal and jackal are only occasionally seen. But the park is a focus point for the conservation of birds, including the three threatened bustard species: Denham's, Kori and Ludwig's. Unfortunately, the park on its own isn't big enough to sustain viable populations, so it relies on surrounding farms to augment their conservation.

On my last morning at the tented camp, I fed some muesli scraps to a southern boubou and field mouse, then drove some of the gravel roads in the game-viewing section. After almost bumping into a secretary bird that hopped over my vehicle, I came across a herd of 50-odd eland. I hadn't realised that Africa's largest antelope called Camdeboo home and the sight of them surprised me.

Yes, it's unlikely we'll ever see thousands of antelope migrating across the Karoo – Camdeboo is too small a park to make a wholesale difference to conservation. But it is a symbol of restitution and revival. These eland were proving that, given half a chance, they will thrive. **G**



## STAY HERE

There are two accommodation options within Camdeboo National Park. Don't come expecting a true wilderness experience – you can hear distant traffic on the nearby national road from both camps. Lakeview Tented Camp (from R570 a night for two people) consists of four rustic, furnished tents. Each two-sleeper has a braai unit, fridge, table and chairs; bedding and towels are also provided. There are communal showers and toilets, and a shared kitchen is equipped with stove plates, cooking and eating utensils, and a microwave. Ngweba Campsite (R205 a night for two people) has 15 caravan or tent sites shaded by thorn trees. Each site has a braai unit and electrical point. A communal kitchen provides a deep freeze, stove top and microwave facilities, and communal ablutions have showers, toilets and a universally accessible unit. 049-892-3453 (park office), 012-428-9111 (central reservations), [www.sanparks.org](http://www.sanparks.org).

Cranemere Farm is near Pearstons, 60 kilometres southeast of Graaff-Reinet. The owners are often away, so visitors need to call before arriving. DB&B from R800 a person a night, including afternoon tea. 042-246-1492, [palmer@xsinet.co.za](mailto:palmer@xsinet.co.za).

There's a good selection of guest houses, B&B and self-catering options in Graaff-Reinet. Contact the tourism office on 049-892-4248 or visit [www.graaffreinet.co.za](http://www.graaffreinet.co.za) for more information.



## FRACKING AND THE KAROO

The threat of fracking for natural gas, and the resulting pollution of groundwater supplies, looms large over this semi-arid region. The Wilderness Foundation ([www.wildernessfoundation.org](http://www.wildernessfoundation.org)) is working with local landowners to ensure they're prepared for imminent changes. Located in an area where annual rainfall averages about 350 millimetres and is highly variable, the farms, national parks and private reserves can't afford to let water supplies be contaminated. Fracking would likely destroy a sustainable economy based on livestock, wildlife and tourism, and several farmers have committed to managing their land according to conservation principles. So far more than 200 000 hectares of private land between the Mountain Zebra and Camdeboo national parks has been submitted for protected environment status.

