RANGING FAR AND WIDE

Bush camping in the southern Cape

Story and photos by Richard van Ryneveld
I was suffering from writer’s block. Then my wife sorted it out for me. Listening to me trying to explain my misery, my scowl and my stomping around the garden, Dominique cut to the chase. ‘Maybe you’re talking too much.’ She was right, of course: I had too much to say.

This is a simple tale that seemed quite ordinary at first. Collect a Ford Ranger from our office in Cape Town, drive to the Bushwakka factory in Worcester, collect a Bhoma off-road caravan and then head for the hills of the Groot and Klein Karoo. But, as I was to learn over and over on this trip, local turned out to be very lekker. You see, I had forgotten that my backyard - I live in Greyton - could be just as exciting as a trip to a far fancier destination.

I began my trip proper at Kopbeenskloof, the farm of Wouter and Elsabe Stemmet, some 70 kilometres outside of Montagu. It’s set high up on the sandstone slopes of the Waboom Mountains; from my campsite I looked westward over the rolling plains to the snow-capped Witteberg Mountains. I was on my own; Dominique was going to join me later, so I had the chance to work out the Bushwakka Bhoma set-up at my own pace. I usually find that you get to know your caravan or camper only after a good couple of set-ups, but the Bhoma proved itself the exception, being fast and simple to set up.

I’m over six foot tall in old-timer talk, and I like headroom; the Bushwakka Bhoma has plenty. And there was no sukkeling with bits of canvas which won’t pack away properly, or zips that won’t zip. No, it soon became clear that this trailer had been designed by an engineer, and an experienced camper to boot. As the trip progressed, Dominique and I found the Bhoma more like a caravan than a trailer; and yet, it’s built to be like a Sherman tank - wherever you go, it’ll follow.

I did regret, though, that Dom hadn’t been on hand to meet the Stemmets of Kopbeenskloof. Wouter, a retired headmaster, has gone back to teaching at Touws River and Elsabe teaches at the...
same school. Wouter is a big guy, with one of his ears testimony to many years in the boiler-room front row of rugby. The Stemmetts have been running kids’ Land Service camps for years, so they’re well set up for them. There’s a massive kuier area with a large screen TV and indoor braai, with an adjoining kitchen which could feed an army. With a 4x4 trail, two self-catering cottages and the many showers and toilets on the farm for the Land Service kids, the Stemmetts started attracting people with off-road trailers who wanted to camp. This is one of those finds - starring warm-hearted, hospitable country folk - that one actually would like to keep secret!

After setting up the Bushwakka, I sat watching the sun set over the Ceres mountains in the distance. It was absolutely freezing that first night out in the Klein Karoo, so I was glad to get into bed. Wrapped up in the down duvet, my beanie pulled way below my ears, I started to thaw. After the city, the silence of the Karoo was deafening, but then it was broken by the far-away call of a jackal. Followed by the honking of ducks and geese at the nearby dam - was it the jackal that had set them off?

Then I heard a dull ‘boom, boom, boom’, which sounded like a drum, the bass note hanging on the cold night air. ‘What the hell is that?’ I wondered. I was so snug that I soon fell asleep again, but I had the answer early the next morning: it was the sound of an emu; in fact, a whole lot of the critters. I had seen them from the dam wall, grazing with the sheep as I approached the farmhouse, but I’d forgotten about them. Believe it or not, that’s the noise that they make.

I had two more superb camping spots to visit nearby: Leeuwenboschfontein and Drie Kuilen, both a couple of kilometres down the Nougaspoort road from Kopbeenskloof when heading towards Touws River. Over the years, Leeuwenboschfontein Guest Farm has become one of my favourite camping places in the Klein Karoo. There are new owners, but the previous managers - Johnny and Joan Viljoen - are still there, so (if anything) the standard has gone up. I know the 20-kilometre 4x4 trail up to God’s Window quite well, and it’s well worth the effort if you’re driving a suitable vehicle.

Drie Kuilen Nature Reserve is five short kilometres down the road from Leeuwenboschfontein. This venue is completely fenced and the 4 300 hectare property is home to buck, zebra, leopard, jackal, caracal and the African wildcat. Shortly before our arrival, a couple had photographed an aardvark in the middle of the day - an animal I’ve never seen in the wild. The Nature Reserve, with its network of game viewing, is also a place that has my plant-loving wife...
hopping with excitement. On a previous visit, Dom and I had sat on the stoep of the small, appropriately-named Zebra cottage, watching the animals drinking at the dam 200 metres away.

I sometimes feel a bit like a missionary, converting souls for the camping fraternity - we managed to persuade Drie Kuilen to allow camping. Campers will have to use the ablution facilities at Campers Den, which itself can sleep 52 people. Kevin and San-Marie, the husband-and-wife team who manage Drie Kuilen Nature Reserve, are both qualified conservationists with extensive experience in the wildlife and conservation realm. I spent a fascinating couple of hours chatting to them about their work for Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife in Ndumo Game Reserve; they had also worked with seabirds on an island of the Seychelles before heading out for a stint with illusionist David Copperfield on his private island in the Bahamas.

Then we were on our way to Anysberg Nature Reserve, located to the east of us, between the towns of Ladismith, Laingsburg, Touwsrivier and Montagu. On our previous trip, we took the wrong road and drove right around the reserve, coming in at the eastern gate; a magnificent drive.

But, this time, we wanted to enter at the western or bottom end and drive the full length of the reserve. Anysberg, founded in 1998, is huge, covering some 64 565 hectares. It consists of Karoo plains and, further east, the reddish, ochre-tinged Cape Fold Mountains. Looking at these mountains with their deep gullies and steep gorges, one can only imagine what subterranean force was needed to form these waves of red sandstone rock.

Two years before, we’d camped at the area set aside for campers near the office complex at Vrede. At the time they were busy building a 5-star ablution block. Well, the ablution block is complete:

Dominique and I stayed at Zebra House, one of the most peaceful places in the Klein Karoo, on a previous trip.

San-Marie and Kevin Joliffe are the lekker young couple who run Drie Kuilen Nature Reserve. Both have qualifications in Nature Conservation and have worked all over the world.
Leaving Anysberg Nature Reserve through the eastern gate on our way to Vleiland and Seweekspoort; Anysberg Nature Reserve was once a farming area. I wonder what stories this old farmhouse can tell; A fantastic way to explore the remoter regions of the reserve is by horse. Anysberg offers guided excursions, ranging from two hours to two days. Book in advance; There are five well set-out campsites and a brand new ablution block. There’s a super modern communal kitchen too, along with braai facilities and picnic tables, but no electricity. It sports toilets, showers and a fully-equipped kitchen. There are solar heaters on the roof, all that’s missing are gas bottles for the showers and kitchen. The campsite consists of five superb stands, each separated by a wooden screen. We were kindly allowed to camp, as we were fully self-contained. I just wonder why this first class campsite hasn’t yet been opened.

By this stage, it took us barely 10 minutes to break camp with the Bhoma, so we were soon headed for Anysberg’s eastern gate, where we turned right onto the R323 gravel road which connects Ladismith and Laingsburg. It’s a magnificent drive that sees you winding your way around the base of the Klein Swartberg. We drove on to the T-junction, turning right toward the tiny hamlet of Vleiland - left would take one to Laingsburg.

Roughly eleven kilometres from the T-junction, after you’ve descended the Witnekke Pass and crossed the Buffels River, you’ll see a turn-off to the right for Rouxpos. This road skirts the Swartberg Mountains and has to be one of the most beautiful drives in SA - the road comes out at Vleiland. However, it was getting late, so we took the direct route: passing the small settlement, carrying on the narrow gravel road, and passing the farmsteads of Hartland, Modderivier and Nietvoorby before heading up the steep Horlosiekrans. We were heading for the steep descent of Bosluiskloofpas and on to my mate Fox Lederboer’s accommodation at Gamkaspoort Dam, but it was late, and I knew it was quite a trek down to Fox’s place.

Then I spotted a sign: ‘Sandrivier Camping.’ At the farmhouse, we met Fritz Hunlun, who led us down to the Op-Die-Plaas campsite overlooking a reed-fringed dam. I remember a brilliant Afrikaans short story where the old shepherd, after the long winter sheep-trek down into the Karoo, sighs deeply and says, ‘Dis party keur nie onaardig om ‘n mens te wees.’ The translation is bum, but is, ‘Sometimes it’s not too bad being human.’ It’s a helluva lot better in Afrikaans, but with a Scotch in hand, that’s how I felt that night - if you get my drift.
Established in 1998, Anysberg is some 64 000 hectares in size. Here we cross one of the three rivers which feed the reserve.
By this stage of the journey I was back in gypsy mode. My American Express Gold Card, which is what I’d named the bullion-coloured Ranger, was like my second skin. That 5-cylinder motor is so smooth, and the power comes on so sweetly, that I was hardly aware that there’s was more than a ton in tow. I also had the Bushwakka Bhoma, our home, so well organised, that when Dom disappeared on succulent hunts, I had the kitchen swung out and the green kettle on the stove whistling in minutes.

Our next stop was also famous for its reds: we were on our way to Calitzdorp, home of the best port wine in the country. However, first we had to get from the Groot Karoo through to the Klein Karoo. The route from our overnight camp at Sandrivier took us through Seweweekspoort; in my view, the most beautiful pass around. The narrow dirt road crosses the small river no fewer than 23 times, as you wind your way for some 17 kilometres through the ravine where the folded, vertiginous, red sandstone cliffs tower above you.

We popped in at a small farm called Aristata, named after a rare protea only found in Seweweekspoort. This is the only place in the poort that offers accommodation; it has three cottages and there’s an excellent grassed area one could use for camping. It was during school holidays, so all the cottages were fully booked; however, the guy managing the camp said we could camp and use the bathroom in the nearest cottage. This is definitely a place we would like to explore in the future. We pushed on, reaching the R62 near Amalienstein and Zoar; then it was left, tackling the Huisings Rivier Pass to Calitzdorp.

The character of Calitzdorp is hidden, in a manner of speaking. The broad, and somewhat dull, main road prompts many to push on to Oudtshoorn, but that’s a big mistake - you have to stop and explore this fascinating town. Derek McKenzie, a friend and fellow-photographer who works out of the Old Post Office, joined us for lunch at the Handelshuis. We told him that Dom and I had decided to look at other potential camping sites in the..
Say what you like, looks count. I liked the Wildtrack from the moment I saw it at Caravan & Outdoor Life HQ. And your first impressions are only improved on as your backside gets comfortable in the heated leather seats, and you start to get the feel of the silky-smooth 5-cylinder 3.2-litre turbodiesel engine. (It's good for 147 kW and 470 Nm, and, in our vehicle, ran through a 6-speed auto box).

Perhaps it's my age, but I don't usually bother with all the gizmos and gadgets that come in the latest models I get to drive. However, I enjoyed this bakkie so much that I went the whole hog. I had the Bluetooth with voice control set up, I tapped the steering to set the cruise mode, and felt very cool blipping the volume on the steering-wheel-mounted audio controls. The Wildtrack has individual climate control and electric windows all round; what's more, if it rains - as it did numerous times on this trip - the windscreen wipers come on automatically!

And, when Dominique said, 'Darling, you're parking the Bhoma trailer so easily...' I didn't let on that there is a reversing camera that displays through the rearview mirror. Certain things should be on a need-to-know basis only.

Safety hasn't been compromised on the Ranger. It has seven airbags, ABS braking, and stability control. I also liked its three 12-volt sockets - if you include the one in the passenger compartment; it's incredible how many sockets a photographer needs with all the techno junk that we now carry. Lastly, this vehicle is really spacious; a big plus in my estimation.

All I can say is that it's going to be hellish hard to get back to reality and my 30-year-old Bantam bakkie back home. But... thems the breaks. For more information, visit the website (http://www.ford.co.za/commercials/ranger/models/wild-trak).
area; we had camped a number of times at Bennie and Selma Nel's Dam River Camp at Matjiesvlei, a great campsite with magic people; but Derek said, 'Why don't you have a look at the Old Railway Station? They are literally around the corner, next to De Krans cellars. Michael and Cheryl, a great couple, own it, and I know they have campsites, too.'

Actually the Railway Station ended up finding us. We popped in at De Krans to buy a bottle of Cape Tawny Port for the cold. As we were driving towards the nearby Railway Station, a lady in a blue Fiat Palio waved at us, smiling broadly. The car followed us into the old station. ‘I saw you driving out from the Dorpskui… I saw your off-road trailer. I thought you might be looking for the Railway Station?’ It was Cheryl de Villiers, the owner. We had already heard in the dorp that it was darts night at the Stations pub, so we had arrived on the right evening.

That night was a riot. The darts team gathered in the cavernous part of the shed adjoining the pub. There was an indoor braai going, with chops and wors. The world cup was on, and some were watching the game while a noisy game of pool was under way. A short guy in a faux leather hat, who called himself the Karoo Cowboy, strutted to the front of the bar with a microphone clutched in his hand, but a young sound engineering student couldn't get the ancient tape deck with his backing tape to work. ‘Do you do any Johnny Cash numbers?’ I asked. ‘Ag man, I am a lot better than Johnny Cash,’ he replied.

As we’d missed out on the Karoo Cowboy, someone put on some good boeremusiek. ‘Just grip my thumb,’ a guy called Kevin said to my wife. He then proceeded to swirl her around the floor at a cracking pace. He was a rooinek, actually, but he could really dance and Dominique loves dancing. With the party still in full swing, we crossed the railway line to our Bushwakka home, with nary a celestial locomotive in sight on the old railway line.

The Railway Station was our idea of a good campsite; it had a clean, newly-painted ablution block with tons of hot water. Every stand had power points; the tented accommodation they offered was top class. Cheryl had turned the old station and ticket office into a two-bedroomed self-catering cottage. There was a black Mustang parked on the platform outside the ticket office, belonging to a young honeymoon couple. They hadn’t joined us at the Grand Ole Opry the night...
Bushwakka Bhoma

Bushwakka has built up an enviable reputation for building tough, go-anywhere trailers. Jasper Hewitt, the owner (an engineer by profession) saw the gap in the market for a trailer that was easy to set up, and more like a caravan than a trailer - especially in the comfort department - but one that retained the company ethos of building trailers that could tackle Africa's roughest terrain with ease. With the Bhoma, I think Bushwakka has achieved its aim.

You can have your home set up in less than ten minutes. Set-up was so simple that I swung out the double beds on either side, although it was only the pair of us. The interior of the trailer is spacious and well-designed, with plenty of packing space. There's a bedside cupboard which lifts to give you a washbasin with hot and cold water. We stored our bedding in the big space below the cupboard. I also liked the big swing-out kitchen that gives you access to the trailer. I am a coffee addict, so the Bhoma's galley saved me from withdrawal symptoms and having to accompany my wife on succulent hunting expeditions. That said, here's her take on the Bhoma:

‘There are some really special features on the Bhoma Bushwakka. The ease and simplicity of ‘popping’ out the sleeping areas and tent is great – arriving late at a campsite is no cause for panic any longer. As long as comfortable sleeping quarters are up, the rest of the camp can be sorted the next day. Cupboard space is a big plus, and the clever use of ‘empty space’ for storage, such as the space under the sink, is great. The mirror and strip LED lighting is practical and neat. The kitchen gets full marks for being compact, practical and functional. A quick stop for lunch en-route, or even for only making a cup of coffee, is an easy process — and everything packs away neatly and quickly to have you back on the road in minutes. The only drawback is that being short, I found getting to the top shelves a little challenging but the clever step-ladder solved all that.

I prefer to spend some time at one camp to really enjoy the benefits of the trailer. We were on a tight schedule and moving from camp to camp on a daily basis, which can be quite difficult when dealing with tents and guy ropes, but not with this baby in tow; what a pleasure to be sorted really fast and getting supper on the go in minutes. My kind of trailer for sure!

From a bloke’s perspective, the Bushwakka Bhoma is an extremely strong, well-engineered piece of equipment. But, over the days, it became more than a piece of engineering; it became a really comfortable and spacious home. It also became a bit of a dream-machine. If I could spend months out in the Kgalagadi with my cameras, I would like to do it in a Bushwakka Bhoma. For more information, contact them on 023 342 3438, 023 342 8469 (fax), 082 773 7544, sales@bushwakka.co.za, or visit their website (www.bushwakka.co.za).
before, but as hubby fired up the Mustang’s V8 the next morning, the bride confided, ‘It’s the most boooootiful cottage.’ I have to agree.

The Calitzdorp Railway Station was to be our last stop on this trip; the Ford Ranger had to be back in Cape Town a day earlier than I’d thought. But the Station did provide one last surprise - Ludwig Johannes Fritz Leibach, aka Fred Leibach. Fred is short of stature, and wiry, with a full grey beard. He has piercing blue eyes that meet yours reluctantly from under his worn old cricket hat; he is introverted and shy. But someone had told me something about him the night before at the pub, and, when I asked, he seemed to look through me as he confirmed what I had heard.

‘I had walked over 100 000 kilometres by 2006… I stopped counting after that,’ he said. Fred Leibach, 69 years old, intends to keep walking until his seventieth birthday next year. ‘Then I want to get a camper, a 4x4 camper, and keep travelling,’ he says.

He’d been a Telkom technician for 37 years when he was hijacked in Port Shepstone in 1991. He survived a gunshot to the head. Then he started walking… and walking… and walking. He was caught in really bad storms on his way to Calitzdorp and took a bad fall. After limping into the Railway Station for a rest, he was persuaded by Cheryl to stay a while to recover his strength.
When talking to Fred, I found that I envied how he lived totally according to his own song. He is also financially independent and pays his way wherever he goes. He lives life simply, but on his own terms. It’s meeting people like Fred that makes the gypsy life and travelling such fun.

We had to get home, but we took the long way around - from Calitzdorp, through the narrow winding Rooiberg Pass, on down to red blooming aloes to Van Wyksdorp. From here, it was a left turn on to the R327, heading for Riversdale and home.

So, what had we learnt and loved on this trip? Firstly, you don’t have to drive miles and miles to some exotic location to have a great trip. There are hidden treasures right on your doorstep. Secondly, you need to have a good vehicle and camping trailer like those we had.

There’s something reassuring about exploring in a good vehicle with a comfortable, well-designed trailer or caravan in tow. On this trip, we stopped often, swinging out the kitchen for a cuppa, or lunch, wherever we fancied. The camper was so comfortable and easy to set up that it put me in mind of Fred Leibach’s philosophy, ‘I know where I’m heading, but I just take each day as it comes.’ Right said Fred.
WHERE WE STAYED

LEEUWENBOSCHFONTEIN
S33.566667 E19.985556
Boasting additions to the campsites and new ablution blocks, this venue offers brilliant accommodation and camping facilities. Set in a valley in the Klein Karoo, the 29 campsites are neatly set out under willow trees surrounding a dam; each site has a large wooden worktable/space, an electric box, and a light and water point.

The ablutions are quite luxurious – the large bathroom boasts a really big bath and generous shower. Next to the new campsites, there’s an ablution block with three showers and three toilets. The really lovely sheltered lapa, with its enormous fireplace, is a great place to socialise and even enjoy a communal braai. The farm has a number of additional accommodation options, cottages from small to large so there’s something for every party.

The 4x4 trail up to God’s Window is an absolute highlight. As one slowly grinds up the trail, vista after vista unfolds. At the top of the plateau, a large enclosed shelter with a fireplace makes for a fabulous lunch spot.

For more information contact Joan and Johnny Viljoen on 023 358 1722, lbf@cornergate.com or visit their website (www.leeuwenboschfontein.co.za).

OP-DIE-PLAAS KAMP
The road that leads into the Seweweekspoort is absolutely beautiful and one of the most majestic, with spurs and folds of towering rock lining it. We came across an ideal stopover and delightful little campsite for anyone wishing to explore the area: Sandrivier is a working farm and is owned by Fritz and Junel Hunlun.

The casually-placed campsites are either under towering eucalyptus trees or on a grassed lawn on the banks of a tranquil farm dam. There are approximately 56 camping or caravan sites and the area lends itself to special-interest or school groups. The ablutions are basic but quite adequate with showers, basins and toilets; the donkey has to be fired up to get hot water. There is no electricity, but there are taps at strategic points around the camp. A large lapa/communal lounge is currently being built.

For more information, contact Fritz & Jonel Hunlun on 023 581 5009, 076 276 2864, info@seweweekspoort.co.za or visit their website (www.seweweekspoort.co.za).

ANYSBERG NATURE RESERVE
The campsite is still very small and underdeveloped, but the pluses are that the six sites are situated on grassed lawns under mature eucalyptus trees, and have beautiful vistas over the plains of Anysberg. Provided that you are pretty much self-sufficient and well equipped, it will be a comfortable visit.

There is a water point at each site but no electricity. The ablation blocks are quite basic but adequate, with two showers and toilets – no hot water yet. There is a communal kitchen with a washing up sink, gas hobs for cooking and a fridge/freezer. (Cape Nature does not currently advertise the camping facilities as there a few changes to be made on the ablation blocks.)

The large reservoir/swimming pool with a deck is delightful for summer months, but also has a lovely elevated viewing deck for winter relaxation on chaises longues. The horse trails are really popular and give a completely different perspective on interacting with the veld and surrounds. Bicycles and kayaks are available for hire.

Anysberg is situated between the towns of Montagu, Touwsrivier, Laingsburg and Ladismith. Once off the main tar roads, you’ll find that the reserve has only dirt roads. They are in reasonable condition, unless floods have damaged certain places. A high-clearance vehicle or 4x4 would give more peace of mind than a normal sedan.

Various accommodation options are available, five cottages of various sizes. For more information contact during office hours on 023 551 1922, 021 483 0190, or visit their website (www.capenature.co.za/reserves/anychberg-nature-reserve).
CALITZDORP RAILWAY STATION AND CAMPING SITE

Always on the scout for different and interesting places to stay, I found the Calitzdorp Railway Station and campsite a great choice for the night, and a real find. Campers and caravanners will find this intimate little site up against a steep cliff quite comfortable. Situated only a few minutes from the main centre of town, the site is quiet and almost off the beaten track. The owners have spent a lot of time restoring the old station buildings and shed alongside the now-disused tracks.

There are 10 grassed sites for tents, trailers or caravans. There are electricity points and central water points that service the site. Braai spots are also available for day visitors. In summer, there is a communal corrugated-iron reservoir/swimming hole and braai area. The ablution block is basic, with two showers and toilets, but hot water is plentiful and the showers roomy.

The historic ticket office has backpackers’ accommodation for four; bedding is supplied on request, and there is a fully equipped self-catering kitchen. There are also two well-supplied safari tents with comfortable beds and fresh cotton bedding.

For more information, contact Cheryl de Villiers or Michael Archer on 044 213 3 587, 081 473 3232, or calitzdorpstation@telkomsa.net.

KOPBEENSKLOOF

Kopbeenskloof is an organic farm set on three thousand hectares in the Koo Valley, with views to the snow-capped Ceres Mountains. Wouter and Elsabe are a lovely couple who run the different aspects of this working farm. They cater for groups ranging from small weddings, to educational or special groups of up to 200 people, and everything in between. The farm is used by Land Services, and mainly for environmental education or school groups from urban areas.

The farm has a range of different accommodation and facilities to support different groups. There is a huge hall for functions, with adjoining kitchen facilities and a boma with space for a large-scale braai or spit roast. A range of spacious wooden chalets with bunk beds accommodates groups of varying sizes. The three-bedroomed guest house/cottage, with indoor fireplace and fully-equipped kitchen, sleeps a group of nine people comfortably. Then there is the rustic Karoo huisie which sleeps four; no electricity here. The cottage has basic facilities and is supplied with oil lamps.

The farm has wonderful areas in remote parts of the farm where you can set up camp – there are no ablution facilities, so only a one-night stay in these parts is allowed. The camping area for tents, caravans or camping trailers has nearby ablution facilities with hot water. Kopbeenskloof is easily accessible from either Montagu on the R 318, or from the N1 from Touws River.

For more information, contact Wouter and Elsabe Stemmet on 023 614 1993, 082 829 6308, info@kopbeenskloof.co.za or visit their website (www.kopbeenskloof.co.za).