

CAUTION: HIPPOS CROSSING

Living the Lowveld high life

Set between jagged peaks on the one side and a low crocodile of hills beyond which lies Mozambique on the other, the Panorama route and the Lowveld is a beguiling land of big game, enchanting forests and tall tales.

Words by Marc le Chat Pix © Brannon Phillips

I recently had the opportunity to visit, what is to me, one of the most scenic and beautifully sculpted stretches of the South African landscape. Called the Panorama route for reasons most obvious when traveling along it, the landscape offers an eclectic mix of scenery that varies from natural bushveld to commercial farmland, all posed against a mountainous backdrop.

Summerfields River Lodge & Spa over-looks the Sabie River and offers the ideal base from where one can explore the region. Located near the town of Hazyview, it is a venue

with a real difference.

Hazyview is a one-time pioneer settlement which has become a tourism nexus, 10 km from the Kruger National Park, its name derived from the shimmering vapor thrown up by the heat unfolding on the plains to the east. This is the Lowveld and the air down here has a spicy warmth which caresses a rural largesse of tropical fruit plantations, stands of indigenous bush and the wonder of a great African river, the Sabie, which flows through it.

En route to the Lodge, we work our way through fields of litchi and macadamia trees. The sun had

already begun its descent to the west, embalming the entire valley with a soft, golden glow that typifies the African twilight. It's a time of day when the dreamlike ventures into the real and an aura of myth turns darkening trees into arboreal giants as shadows unravel on riverine rocks. Passing a sign which cautions on hippos crossing, we turn up a secluded valley that shelters Summerfields River Lodge & Spa.

When Andre and Ilse Van Heerden bought Summerfields farm, it was known largely for a bar called Stuck in the Mud, attracting wayfarers and khaki jungle-jockeys who escorted day visitors into the Kruger.





The village of White River's Casterbridge Farm is a former mango farm turned into a smart little country centre where you can purchase anything from furniture to hand-made chocolates. Summerfields sells roses at the adjacent Bagdad Shopping Centre. Or you can purchase beautiful traditional items and tropical fruit from vendors on the roads in an out of Hazyview. For more detailed tourist information on everything from white water rafting to game drives and balloon trips, visit www.mpumalanga.com



Within months, the Van Heerdens had demolished the bar, set up a rose farm, bought two other surrounding farms and began planting macadamia nuts along with litchis before deciding to establish what must be one of South Africa's most romantic new retreats.

Put your feet up in one of the luxuriously appointed air-conditioned tents set beneath jackalberry and tambotie trees. These facilities boast bathrooms that are open to the cascading sounds of the river, bedside ipods and percale cotton sheets that lend contemporary comfort.

Slightly downstream, the Spa Pavillions have been created in the style of Asian spa resorts, where treatments have an air of outdoor sensibility, surrounded by forest fever trees and aromatic shrubs.

I decide to take the opportunity to unwind and enjoy a soothing neck massage before dinner. The skilled therapist starts by washing my feet with rose water, before proceeding to the massage using locally produced macadamia oils.

As I prepare for dinner, I contemplate that word has spread like wild fire on the Lowveld gourmet circuit: Summerfields' Kitchen is where chef Lienkie Erasmus fashions her country-chic culinary style.

With outdoor pillars clad in iron-stone purchased from a local clan, Summerfields' Kitchen menu is influenced by seasonal fresh produce supplied by local farmers and from the restaurant's own garden, with everything from chutneys to mayonnaise and bread being homemade.

Starters include an LM prawn, mango and sunflower seed salad and deli platters of homemade tapenades, while the main courses range from lamb cutlets with rosemary potatoes, to a rump with parmesan mash and green peppercorn sauce. All of this is complemented by desserts such as home-grown litchis in ginger, and pavlova with Chantilly cream and confetti of fruit.

The next morning dawns opaque, the skies pregnant with the possibilities of afternoon downpours, which is a good time to head for the escarpment. Taking the switch-back turns of Kolwyn's Pass, beneath Afro-montane forest dense with monkey ropes, we head up for the heights over-looking the Lowveld.

With its numerous scenic stars, the trip is aptly named the Panorama Route and outside the town of Graskop lies one of the area's gems, God's Window.

Literally on the very edge of the escarpment, at God's Window you pad through deep green rain forest studded with exotic-looking clivia shrubs, and are afforded secret glimpses down to the valley hundreds of metres beneath. On a clear day you can see over the plains of the Kruger and to the Lebombo Mountains 100 km east.

Near enough to drive on to, Bourke's Luck Potholes are a curious meeting place of two rivers whose millennia of churning cascades have fashioned deep holes into a rocky gorge at the head of the Blyde River Canyon.

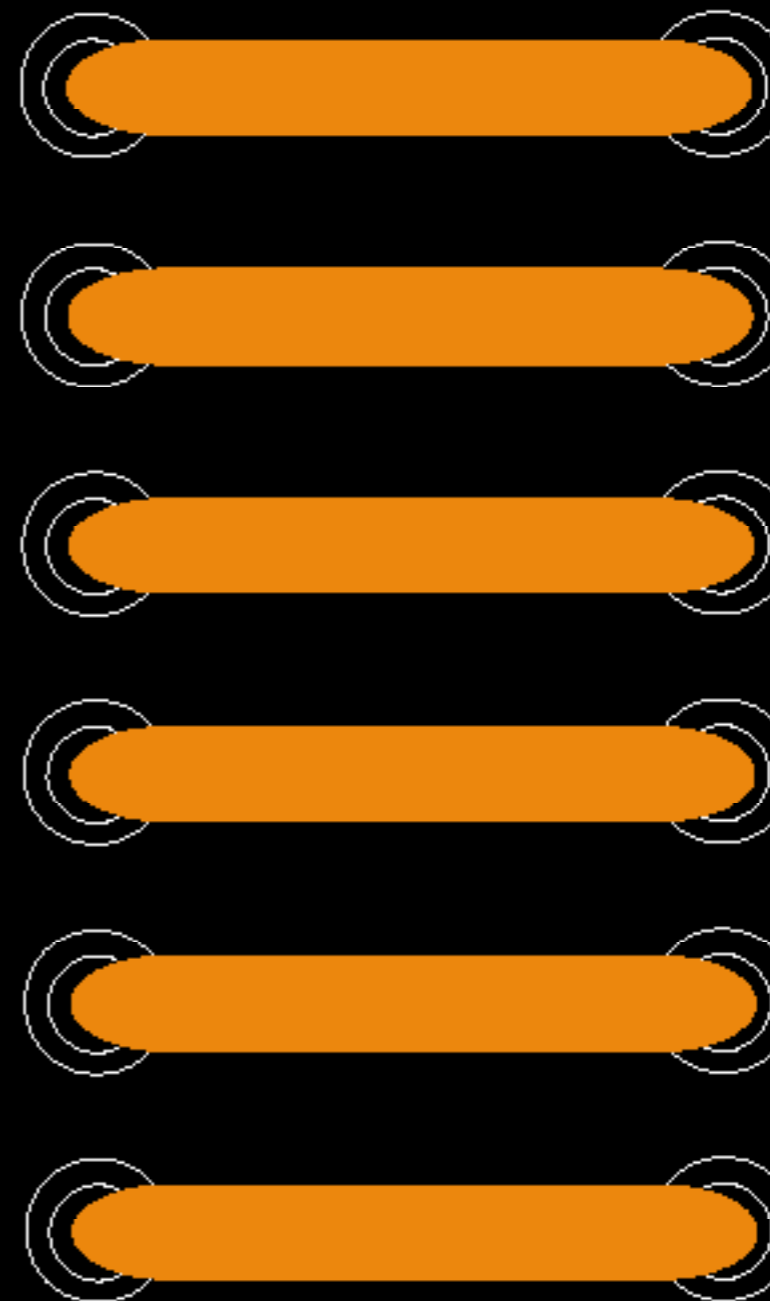
The escarpment is where the Drakensberg Mountain range - now 300 km from its southerly birth - begins to break up into jagged kloofs, creating waterfalls such as the Mac Mac Falls which plummet 100m over a lip festooned with ferns and aloes.

Back at Summerfields, we're in time to laze indolently in a steam bath (a large rose quartz crystal inside creates an aura of pink serenity) before turning in and allowing ourselves to tune into that which beats within.

Summerfields River Lodge & Spa and Summerfields Kitchen can be visited online at www.summerfields.co.za.

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