

Limpopo's perfect peace

Kurisa Moya is an ecofriendly getaway that makes MARTIN BENADIE rethink his lifestyle

THE unique mud-packed entrance gate and narrow winding access road already signified I was in for an experience with a difference.

Tired of stressed Jozi life, I was intent on finding somewhere I had not been before and where nature rules. At Kurisa Moya, I was assured of peace, meandering forest trails, birdsong and a secluded hideaway spot — and with a name meaning “tranquil spirit” in Xitsonga, I thought this had to be the place.

Kurisa Moya lies in the northern Drakensberg escarpment of Limpopo, near the small settlement of Houtbosdorp, and is just an hour's drive from Polokwane. The last part of the drive took us through interesting countryside interspersed with local villages, impressive granite inselbergs and bizarre plants such as mountain aloes and tree euphorbias standing guardian-like over the picturesque landscape. On arrival we were warmly welcomed by Lisa Martus, who explained the ins and outs to us over a fresh cup of tea.

The 422ha conservancy is the doing of six family members who are passionate about the area.

It has beautiful indigenous forest, typical African bushveld and patches of remnant pine plantations. This variety of biomes is home to an interesting mix of flora, more than 300 bird species and animals such as bushbuck, bushpig and various primates.

The farm is owned by the De Boer family and hosted by Lisa and Ben de Boer.

The accommodation is varied and all tastefully done, yet retains simplicity through the use of solar power, candles and gas and applying the principles of recycle and reuse. A delightful, large farmhouse built in 1937 has been meticulously restored to its original splendour with high ceilings, spacious living areas, old pictures and a kitchen that took me back to my early childhood in Zimbabwe.

It's ideal for a family or group of friends. The spacious stoep has magnificent views back over Polokwane in the distance, and a hammock has been strategically placed in the garden for those who want to absorb this while “defragmenting”.

For a more secluded option, two log cabins raised on stilts have been built in indigenous forest, well hidden and far apart from each other. These lairs are the ultimate in seclusion and privacy, ideal for romantic weekend getaways. Enormous windows give you panoramic views of the forest, whether you are snuggled up by the fireplace or just lounging

in bed listening to the evocative calls of Samango monkeys.

Sitting on the deck, your only visitors may be the crimson flash of a Knysna Turaco, colourful butterflies and other forest creatures. The cabins can sleep four (ideal for those with younger children) and are fully kitted out.

Then there is Thora Boloka, a comfortable but rustic stone cottage with magnificent views of the Kudu's River Valley.

The well-equipped kitchens are great for the self-catering option, but I highly recommend spoiling yourself to dinners prepared by Lisa. Ours was a candle-lit affair of fresh vegetables, baked potatoes and tender ostrich fillet. After dinner we enjoyed coffee outside, where the silence and vast night sky offered welcome respite from our hectic lives.

The farm is steeped in history, and was once owned by Sir Lionel and Lady Phillips, who fell in love with the area. It was mainly used for the harvesting of indigenous hardwoods, and the sawpits in the forest bear testimony to this. The native forest and large granite dome on the farm has also been a spiritual stomping ground for the Sotho-Pedi people of the area for many generations.

A big draw card includes several well marked hiking trails crisscrossing varied habitats, all with graded difficulty and length. The forest is intriguing: impressive cabbage trees, yellowwoods, red stinkwoods and wild peach, not to mention the wealth of tree orchids and butterflies such as the Green-banded Swallowtail.

Small streams cascade over moss-covered rocks and the undergrowth is a myriad of ferns, greenery and flowers. Keep a look out for a giant forest cabbage tree which, with a diameter of 8.5m, is thought to be the largest in the world. For the more adventurous there are mountain bike trails, abseiling down granitic inselbergs, or a 4x4 drive to an altitude of 1 900m above sea level, the highest point in the area.

Fly-fishing for trout can be done on the farm and the nearby Haenertsburg area is a nationally renowned trout fishing area, where access to various dam and river venues can be organised.

If you are feeling weary, Ben can give chair massages and Lisa offers cranio-sacral therapy — but best you ask her yourself what this entails!

As the conservancy is located in one of the last remaining tracts of climax afro-montane forest, the birdlife is excellent and a local guide is on hand to escort you along well laid-out forest trails.

If the thought of adding Narina Trogon, Black-fronted Bush-Shrike and White-starred Robin to



LAZY DAYS: The hammock — all the better establishments have one — on Kurisa Moya's spacious stoep with views over Polokwane. Pictures: MARTIN BENADIE

your life list sounds appealing, then time with Birdlife SA-trained David Letsaolo will be unforgettable. He also has stakeouts for the rare Bat Hawk as well as the critically endangered Cape Parrot, two megaticks on any birder's list.

The nearby Woodbush State Forest is the largest indigenous forest in the province, and there is a wonderful drive through it.

The spectacular Debengeni Waterfalls, which locals claim are

“Two log cabins raised on stilts have been built in indigenous forest — well hidden and far apart from each other”



COMING CLEAN: The Blue Bathroom, in which the great outdoors has moved inside.

occupied by water spirits, provides a refreshing picnic stop.

Meal hampers can be arranged, and Lisa's brunch pack is excellent with enough palate diversity to keep you going for most of the day.

In the wake of increasing oil prices, general cost of living and a looming global energy crisis, perhaps it is time for us all to reconnect with nature and pursue more sustainable lifestyles.

Kurisa Moya's ecofriendly and

social commitments made me reassess my urban environmental carbon footprint, and how I could reduce it — the unspoilt wilderness, rural hospitality and remote location offered by this pocket of paradise, where the stresses of city life faded into insignificance, will turn my assessment into action.

■ *Kurisa Moya Nature Lodge, (015) 276-1131, www.krm.co.za*

BOOK ♦ TRAVEL

Going to hell for one heck of a read

DO TRAVEL WRITERS GO TO HELL?

Thomas Kohnstamm
Three Rivers Press

JUMP into bed with an Austrian flight attendant called Inga, take lots of drugs and party for days with other backpackers at a Rio guesthouse. That is how Thomas Kohnstamm begins his research to update the Lonely Planet guide to Brazil. Kohnstamm, a 30-something American, has written a number of guides for Lonely Planet. He is unlikely ever to write for them again, however, after explaining the shortcuts and tactics used to gather information for the books widely regarded as the bibles of independent travel.

“The waitress suggests that I come back after she closes down the restaurant, around midnight,” he writes about one Brazilian town. “We end up having sex in a chair and then on one of the tables in the back corner. I pen a note that I will later recount in the guidebook review, saying that the restaurant ‘is a pleasant surprise ... and the table service is friendly.’”

The intention of this book is not just to make notches on bedposts and slag off Lonely Planet. There is a lot of both, but some would argue these form the essence of any successful backpacking trip; Kohnstamm's argument, however, is that the way writers of most travel guides are paid prevents them being the well-researched and authoritative



texts they are held up to be. The very fact that writers are paid one lump sum to cover their costs as well as to make a profit is an incentive to conduct as little research as possible for the least possible cost, he says.

We have all sworn at travel guides. Far too often, they bear little relation to reality and Kohnstamm explains how such a state of affairs comes about. Of course, that is the serious side. What makes this book fun is the haphazard and chaotic way he goes about his first Lonely Planet guide.

Researching a travel book with his deadline fast approaching, running out of money, and having to deal with the fantastically mundane hurdle of the publisher's software that requires him to format this information on his laptop as he goes — Kohnstamm's tale thrills and horrifies.

It also, truth be told, leaves a wistful feeling of “Dammit — my trip was never that eventful!”

An “eventful” trip is not necessarily a blessing, as Kohnstamm found out the night a group of cowboy Brazilian policemen beat him senseless for smoking a joint and stubbed the lit joint out on his hand. He is no doubt thankful he wasn't busted in his attempt to boost funds en route by selling ecstasy tablets (supplied by one of the backpackers he met at the start of his trip in Rio).

For anyone who has ever considered writing for a living, penning Lonely

Planet guides has got to rank up there among dream jobs.

This debunks a lot of that mythical ideal by laying out all the ordinary and practical considerations of information gathering for such a book. That a travel guide will only ever be, at best, an approximation of what was on offer at one point in time becomes clear as he discusses gathering information about restaurants to mention in one particular town.

“It is hard to fathom how many places I will have to visit to determine what stands out here. How am I supposed to eat at all of these places? I have room to choose a dozen or so for the book and they pretty much all need to be positive reviews.... But shorter word counts mean that I can't just go to 12 places that I randomly choose and say ‘This one's good, this one's OK and this one sucks.’”

All backpackers have had miserable moments when they dream of being home in comfort with the price of a meal to their name. The thin mattress, the bedbugs, the uncertainty of it all and the temporary poverty all make for the best stories afterwards, however. And this is what Kohnstamm has done. He's taken the miseries of his voyage — as well as his eventual travel — and spun them into a great travel tale.

And what does it mean for those of us who buy these guides? Be sceptical. Be very sceptical.

MICHAEL BLEBY

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