



Swing along the SWARTBERG

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The road through the Swartberg is one of the most spectacular self-drives in South Africa, taking visitors on a journey through the heart of the Karoo.

Oudtshoorn, the ostrich capital of the Cape, is the gateway to the Swartberg, and all roads in the region lead through the 'black mountain'.

Passing the Cango Caves - one of South Africa's top ten tourist destinations - the road climbs through Schoeman's Poort into the foothills of the Swartberg. Curious ostriches watch you over the fences of old ostrich farms. Leaving the tarred road behind, a good gravel one leads to the Swartberg Pass. Often called the most sensational pass in Africa, the 24-kilometre Swartberg Pass took eight years to build - and was the last of 24 passes built by Thomas Bain. Declared a national monument in 1988 on the centenary of its opening, the

Swartberg Pass 'is a stupendous piece of work ... It stands as the greatest tribute to his genius ... And marked the end of an era in road engineering' (*Bain: A Colossus of Roads*).

If you ask politely at Kobus se Gat, the rustic pub near the summit of the Swartberg Pass, the bartender might offer you a taste of witblits, the legendary moonshine distilled by farmers in the Karoo. The lookout spot at the summit reveals a spectacular vista of rugged mountain ridges, fynbos, olive scrub and red Karoo soil. Far below the precipice -1583 metres above sea-level - lie the shimmering plains of the Karoo. Look for the ruins of an old stone prison which sheltered the convict labourers who built the pass - a place haunted by ghosts, according to

early travellers who sought refuge here when the pass was blocked by heavy snowfalls.

A serpentine road zigzags down the steep slopes of the Swartberg via switchbacks supported by hand-packed stone walls - the trademark of road-builder Thomas Bain. The road fords crystal-clear streams, cuts through strata of rock and rounds dizzying bends with sheer drops.

A signpost ten kilometres from the top of the pass points west to the Gamkaskloof - a destination known as 'Die Hel' (meaning the Abyss). The rugged, 35km minor road into this remote valley is not for the faint-hearted, and best undertaken with a sturdy 4x4 vehicle. Tour operators in Prince Albert offer day tours and



overnight stays at restored farmhouses, a campsite and caravans in this remote conservancy.

The dramatic road to Die Hel passes through Eland's Pass and fords the 'Gamka' (Lion) River before descending steeply to the valley floor 1000 metres below. The secluded Gamkaskloof was once home to a small community of trekboers who lived here in isolation for over a century. Before the road to the Gamkaskloof was opened in 1962, access was only on foot or horseback - and the farmers carried out their harvests of dried fruit, nuts, tobacco, vegetables and honeybush tea by pack donkey.

According to legend, when a boer commando pursued by British soldiers fled into the Gamkaskloof during the Anglo-Boer War, they came across farming folk dressed in bonnets and goatskin clothing speaking old-fashioned Dutch. Deneys Reitz, one of the boer soldiers, wrote in his book, *Commando*: 'We spent the night and the next day with this curious Swiss Family Robinson and in the evening toiled up the cliffs again'.

The journey to Gamkaskloof ends in this primordial valley of abandoned farms which seems more like a Garden of Eden. Getting there might seem like hell on the hairpin bends - but the sense of peace and quiet is worth the trip. The original San and pioneers are long gone, leaving a sanctuary for horse-riding, walking trails, birdwatching, caving, and an overnight donkey trail.

Annetjie Joubert, the last remaining descendant of the original community, still welcomes visitors to Fonteinplaas, one of the old family farms. Her farm stall sells organically

grown fruit, farm preserves, traditional potbrood (bread), witblits and peach liqueurs distilled in the old copper potstill.

Visitors who overnight in the two historic farmhouses of Oupa Piet Mostert and Pietjie Swanepoel enjoy the traditional farm cuisine served at the Oude Klowers Farmkitchen.

After sunset, paraffin lamps are lit.

Beyond the Gamkaskloof, the Swartberg Pass leads to Prince Albert - an untouched Karoo hamlet with nineteen national monument homesteads, charming country guesthouses with cast-iron broekie-lace porches and oodles of Victorian charm. Prince Albert is a destination in the heart of the country that has been resettled by artists, artisans and writers.

The restaurants of the valley showcase the quality of local farm produce - from olive oil, figs and dried fruit to wines, venison and Karoo lamb. The art galleries display the work of local artists inspired by the Karoo landscape.

Andries Gouws, whose family has lived here since 1837, is the local distiller licensed to make witblits on the old potstill at the fascinating village museum in Prince Albert. Nearby, you'll find Soet Karoo, the only wine estate in the Great Karoo at 56 Church Street. Herman Perold, the great-nephew of Abraham Izak Perold, who invented Pinotage, planted vines in the garden of their guesthouse and now makes an award-winning red muscadel in a micro-cellar in the garage. At night, when the Milky Way in the clear night sky seems close enough to touch, the hurly-burly of the city seems like a mirage in this Karoo oasis. The road through the Swartberg ends here.

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