

A road trip from the Garden Route to the Klein Karoo

By [Mareike Pietzsch](#)

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As we hit the N12, we leave the Garden Route's cool breeze behind us. The last time I see the ocean is in George and I give it a wistful wave. I'm not sure what to expect from the Klein Karoo. A friend told me, 'You'll love it if you can handle the heat'. It's the end of September so I think we'll be okay. Yet the closer we get to Oudtshoorn, the redder my arm gets resting on the window, and the more often James and I play the 'switch the aircon on and off' game.

The N12 narrows as we get closer to the 'ostrich capital', Oudtshoorn. Trucks and Geländewagen whizz past us. I swop seats with James and am now driving. I try to overtake a big truck three times on the narrow one-lane road, sand and scrub on either side and fail as it dips up and down. Around me the Klein Karoo is a wide-open expanse, baking hot in the midday sun, allowing my thoughts to flutter free.



What's most noticeable in the Klein Karoo is the absence of bright colours – and except for the bold blue sky, everything is muted. I find myself suddenly daydreaming about dusty porches and midday naps. "Do you think we could live here?" I find myself asking James, but he's fallen asleep.



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We drive into Oudtshoorn and stop at a large farmstall shop with a restaurant attached. The shelves are dusty and meagrely stocked. The wine section, however, is full. I buy a Coke and some Calitzdorp red wine. "How do you get Coke to Oudtshoorn," I wonder. I'm aware suddenly of the distances it takes to truck products into this remote region.



My Coke is flat and James takes the wheel. We turn left onto the R62 and drive towards the Groot Swartberg Nature Reserve. Somewhere on the highway, we turn right onto a dirt road towards Buffelskloof. The [Groenfontein Valley Circle Route](#) snakes in a C-shape towards, and then away from, the impressive Swartberg Mountains. We are now in what feels like nowhere, on a dirt road surrounded by veld, succulents and dry trees.

People and cows

Our car starts climbing higher as we get closer to the mountains and, suddenly, there's a group of Nguni cows; speckled black and brown, stoically staring at us with large horns. We later learn that grazing is a hotly debated topic around here between farmers and conservationists! James stops so that I can take photos. My camera jams. The big bull disappears into the bush. On every holiday, there's always that one photo that gets away. This moment, this bull, was just that.



We skid to a halt outside a white-grey gallery with a decadent, heady garden: Kruisrivier Gallery & Roger Young Studio. The photos are monochrome and colour, film and digital, and speak of the people who live in the Klein Karoo. My favourite is a bride and groom standing next to their broken-down car surrounded by the stark Swartberg mountains.

“These calves are too thin. I don’t know how he keeps them alive in this drought,” says Young waving to his neighbour who is herding cows past the house. He joined us in the gallery earlier, gave us a tour, and I’m so excited that we are standing next to him, and then also, deeply touched by his love for this community (evident in his photos). We stand on the porch in silence. I come to discover that this is a Karoo silence, common among those who live here. It’s as if someone inserted commas between words. Slowly this quiet descends on us like soft snow. It speaks of the acceptance of nature’s hushed moments, the unsaid things in the silence between when the kettle boils and the tea is made. Everything in the Klein Karoo is calmer, slower and more at ease.



“Moenie bang wees nie, dit is baie stadig hier,” says a farmworker we gave a lift to, as we arrive at The Retreat at Groenfontein. Our small Fiat is now covered with a fine layer of Karoo dust. It smells like rainwater as I step out of the car and everything around us is green. There’s a reason they’ve named the valley ‘green spring’ in Afrikaans. Marie, the owner of The Retreat, welcomes us and shows us to our room. The main house is a former Victorian farmhouse, decorated with succulents, paintings and curiosities like baboon skulls. We step into another era and only days later, emerge from its haze.

At night, we eat together around a big wooden table with other guests. We meet a French couple who are visiting all of the

Karoo wine farms; a Calitzdorp artist and his son and American wife, who are having a sort of reunion; a retired crazy pair from LA who pronounce South African words as if they have cotton wool in their mouths; and a delightful family from Knysna. We see our country through their eyes – and reflected in our own – chattering and battling about politics, art, sustainability and how the French get too many holidays.

Succulents and art

The 800-hectare plot sits on the Groenfontein conservancy and borders the 129,000 hectares of the Swartberg World Heritage Site. There are several hikes on the farm and we try one; it's steep and spectacular, and I can't believe how stark everything is. How do animals survive? And plants, even? How do people live in this isolation with their own thoughts? There's no traffic noise, no crowds; only a lonely aeroplane circling overhead. The nearest town is 40 minutes away on a dirt road and sometimes there's no cellphone reception. It's magical.



Even though the Swartberg Pass is closed on one side due to the erosion following a recent fire, we go. It's a weird contrast visiting the quiet pass after stopping off at the famous, busy Cango Caves. We grab a quick lunch at Kobus Se Gat with a bunch of bikers who've come to make use of the smooth, winding tar roads. They're eating burgers and playing funny YouTube videos – and we make a quick getaway.

The wind is icy as we drive up the black crust-covered mountains. The views are great though and we hop around in the cold to take photos. We meet a group of mellow baboons (clearly, they're not from Cape Point!) who are ripping out roots and eating *vetplante*. The next day, I think – I lose count as the days melt into each other – we stop off at the Oude Postkantoor to eat the best cake ever. It's a great spot for a lazy afternoon of coffee and affordable food (or is Cape Town just seriously overpriced?).

We drive (although we could've walked) with full tummies to Peter Bayly Winery where we taste too much port and chat to Peter and his wife about the snow on the mountains, depressing art and how there's a Cobra in their geyser. Formerly managing a high-end hotel in Cape Town, they packed up and bought a house in the Karoo.



We visit the town of Calitzdorp, which has a reputation as an artists' town, for the succulent festival that's happening over the weekend. Calitzdorp is filled with colourful houses, art galleries, wine farms and some coffee shops. As in all small towns in South Africa, it's always a good idea to research the best spots to visit before you go or ask the locals for the best places to see. As we've arrived on the last day of the succulent festival, most of the plants have been sold. We catch the last 10 minutes of a fascinating talk about how cacti are spreading dangerously in the Karoo, and buy a protea painting.

Then we sit outside, waiting for our guide who will take us on a veld walk to Jakkalskop. We learn that this little town has its very own Succulent Society. Kevin Koen, a young, hip South African guide takes us to a nearby koppie where we stoop and walk and learn, and stoop some more. The Klein Karoo succulents have adapted in amazing ways to the harsh environment – with snow in winter and over 50°C in summer. We learn about the massive *spekbome* and tiny *perdetande* (*haworthia truncate*).

Kevin Koen knows them all by name, in Afrikaans and English, and is quite literally plant obsessed, which rubs off on the rest of us. The next day we stop off at his nursery and buy some plants (as many as fit in our little packed-to-the-brim car). He's a gentle, soft-spoken man – which seems typical of this region – so connected to his land and the natural things around him.



I read the slogan 'come as tourists, leave as friends' somewhere and I find it perfectly summarises the Klein Karoo. Even though I didn't anticipate it, the region has really snuck its way into my heart. I found that the Garden Route was about the scenery and places. The Klein Karoo, as much as it's about the vastness (giving me that same feeling as stargazing) is about the people we met along the way. The Klein Karoo is for the hermits, art lovers, those escaping loud cities – and you'll fall for its charm like a fly for syrup.

ABOUT MAREIKE PIETZSCH

I am part of the fantastic marketing team at Giltedge Africa - a brand that is defining luxury travel for Africa, continuously on the lookout to improve its product offering for international travellers. I write content about the tourism offerings in Southern Africa, East Africa and the Indian Ocean islands, new travel trends, sustainable tourism and multi-generational travel.

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