

Tankwa Karoo And Cederberg trip 14-17 March 2014

By Johan Muller

On Friday the 14th, we left our Cape Town home early, picked up a couple of friends in Stellenberg, and set off up country.



Marita Muller and fellow travellers Johann and Sonya Lamprecht

Being in familiar territory, we took the N1, turned off to Rawsonville for the Slanghoek valley, heading for the Ou Tol restaurant in Mitchell's Pass where we had a substantial breakfast.



Inviting scene at Ou Tol Restaurant

Ceres saw us topping up on fuel before tackling the road to Calvinia, the R355, which is the longest road between 2 towns in RSA. It becomes gravel after about 40 kms at which point I switched over to 4x4 and lowered tyre pressures.

Our next stop was at the Tankwa Padstal in the middle of nowhere where we had very tasty ginger beer. The place is run by two farmer brothers and their wives. Customers are scarce during the week and we had virtually all their attention. The padstal becomes a social focal point over weekends and bikers form a large part of their clientele. The only other customers consisted of a group of 3 friendly wine-drinking locals whose donkey cart was parked nearby.



Tankwa Padstal welcome



Wall Ornaments a la Karoo



Happy Customers



Wall Ornaments a la Karoo



Ghost Rock

On the bar counter was a curious ornament fittingly called the 'ghost rock'. It had been picked up in the veldt in its present shape.



New Kitchen



Outdoor Entertainment Area

We then continued on the R355 until we hit our turnoff to Middelpos/Sutherland.



R355

We were constantly aware that these roads have a reputation as tyre rippers. To keep the wheels in the clean tracks whilst at the same time admiring the desolate countryside requires constant concentration. The shale shard ridden centre is to be avoided and quite often a

sharply pointed rock had been deposited in the middle of a track waiting eagerly to puncture a tyre.

Our next turnoff took us into the Tankwa-Karoo National Park proper, a very desolate area. A breakdown could prove disastrous since traffic volumes are low. We did not meet a single vehicle after turning off the R355.

Our progress was now slower on a relatively poor quality road but this took a turn for the worse just past the Park offices. It had rained heavily in January causing the road to become a river with disastrous results. Not much of the road surface remains. The road had dried up and no repairs had been made as yet. The going was extremely slow as we picked our way choosing a safe route through the dongas. Once through, we faced the awesome Gannaga Pass.



Ganaga Pass

But an approaching cloud of dust announced the advent of the first vehicle in hours. It was a Landcruiser 100 towing a bush caravan. We chatted briefly and were met with the good news that the road ahead was in good shape. We did not have such good news for them though.

The Gannaga Pass however, posed a problem for our vertigo suffering passenger, who did not utter a word during the stupendous trip to the summit. The view from the top back over the Tankwa Karoo was magnificent.



View over Tankwa

We then dropped in at the nearby Gannaga Lodge where liquid refreshments were in order to calm shot nerves. The poor driver had to make do with fruit juice.



Ganaga Lodge



Pool at Lodge

A Scotsman from Edinburgh, part owner and the only person in attendance was talkative, as can be expected when so few people drop in to lighten up your day. Our fellow travellers had stayed in Edinburgh years ago and after a short while, Scottish was spoken!

The last few kms to Middelpos was completed briskly and, with the town in sight, we had to brake to avoid a collision with a speeding local bakkie at a Y-junction. It being Friday afternoon, we thought that the driver was in a rush to the off-sales but he stopped a short distance further for no apparent reason.



Middelpos

Upon arrival at the hotel we were shown a selection of rooms to choose from since we were the only guests! We quickly settled in at the bar for proper refreshments.



Middelpos Hotel

The town is owned by the van der Westhuizen family. Hotel, Post Office, shop with a couple of fuel pumps, police station and some other odd buildings. They successfully breed Boerboels. The National Champion trophies are displayed in the bar.

While relaxing on the hotel stoep, there were 2 new arrivals. They were a husband and wife team who had just taken a fall on approaching the town on their motorcycle. They were not hurt but their BMW 1200GS was out of action. The fall had been caused by the rear brake caliper mounting that had broken causing the brakes to lock. Help had to be summoned from Cape Town.



Motorcycle Marais' at Middelpost



Broken Caliper Mount

Dinner was served. It was homely food with an excellent salad. The barman of earlier was now the waiter and every now and then Schatzi raucously whistled for attention. It was early to bed for the weary travellers but also early to rise to explore our new surroundings. A mother peacock and her 3 chicks foraged for food but the daddy did not want to pose for our cameras. The Boerboels are huge, friendly creatures and I am sure many visitors place orders for puppies on the spot.



Schatzi

Soon after a quite satisfying breakfast we departed for the town of Calvinia. The road was still gravel and a few wrecks lying in the veld warned us of the consequences of inattention.





On the road again.

It is impossible to resist the lure of the Karoo and stops were made just to appreciate the ancient landscape.

The tarred road just before Calvinia was a welcome sight as was the sudden silence from the tyres.

In town we visited old friends for a relaxing cup of tea and had to force ourselves to bid these hospitable people goodbye in order to take to the road again.

Of course we took this opportunity to stock up on essentials for our coming 2 day self catering stint in the Cederberg. The Calvinia Butchery especially, had us drooling and we left after decently boosting the town's economy. Their sosaties deserve special mention as well as the pork chops that were treated with their bespoke spices.

Our turnoff to the Cederberg was about 40 kms out of town at Soetwater and we headed south on the R364 in the direction of Clanwilliam. The road was straight and dusty with little other traffic.

After descending the Botterkloof Pass we shared the road with a family happily waving at us from their donkey cart as we passed them slowly in order to create as little dust as possible.

Our next encounter with traffic was a bakkie which, on its way after presumably buying the weekly groceries in Clanwilliam, had overheated and was blocking half the road. We stopped and since we carried no water (an oversight, I know) promised the very inebriated occupants that we would send help. Which we arranged when we reached our destination, Traveller's Rest, a short while later.



Traveller's Rest



Brandewyns River



Relax at riverside

By this time it was late afternoon and we were directed by the friendly staff, headed by Charité, to our little house called Hoeksonderkoffie against the mountainside. This turned out to be a comfortable spacious 2 bedroom en suite old farm house with a large outside braai area.



Hoeksonderkoffie



Dusk at Hoeksonderkoffie

Soon after lighting the fire for the evening braai, we realised that we were not alone. Against the kitchen wall squatted an enormous spotted gecko, a beautiful specimen. It was joined by first one, then two, bats flying in and out of the kitchen area resisting all my attempts to chase them away. These creatures later disappeared behind the hessian covered ceilings, as did the gecko, not to be seen again during our stay, much to the delight of the ladies.



Beautiful Gecko

During the early hours of the morning I heard dripping noises from the en suite and upon investigating at first light found a fat field mouse swimming in the loo. The poor wet creature was extricated with the aid of a plastic bag and set free outside the window only to disappear within seconds.



Intrepid mouse

Sunday was indeed a day of rest. We rid ourselves of the city stress each in his or her own way. In the heat of the day we remained inside the cool house reading and sleeping until it was again time for the evening braai presided over by a full moon. Afterwards we remained outside till late enjoying the clean Cederberg air and the stars.



Mountains at Dawn

Monday morning we reluctantly left Hoeksonderkoffie through the 2 farm gates, said goodbye to its horses and sheep as well as the friendly Travellers Rest people.



Some of the Traveller's Rest inhabitants

The Kouberg Pass led us down into the picturesque little town of Wupperthal where the Lekkerbekkie restaurant provided us with a delicious breakfast.



Kouberg Pass into Wupperthal



Sweet Potato Crop at Wupperthal



Leipoldt House

We then enjoyed a leisurely walk during which we visited several historic buildings such as the shoe factory. We chatted with the inhabitants who were all friendly and informative, obviously proud of their town. Freshly baked bread was bought at the bakery while the next batch was already in the oven.



Church



Delapidated Shoe Factory



Inside Shoe Factory



Post Office

The road south to Eselbank was indicated as 4x4 only on our map. The sign at the entrance to the pass said '4x4 recommended'. One of our maps said 'jeep track'. We thought this meant slippery in winter with possible high level water crossings. Little did we know...



Eselbank 4x4 Sign (Photo by DvdMerwe – Google Earth)

The road starts off looking like a standard Cedarberg road until it suddenly changes as it starts to climb up the Eselbank Pass. The road now consisted of rocks interspersed by infrequent concrete sections until the top of the pass is reached. The Frontier took to the 'road' with aplomb, much better than its occupants.



Bottom of Esselbank Pass

About 3/4 of the way up we came upon a black Mercedes ML crawling uphill at walking speed. With no possibility of passing we took this opportunity to stop at the first widening of the road, stretch our legs and admire the rock formations thus allowing him a 15min head start.

(Upon reaching home, I found several videos on youtube dated from mid 2013 and earlier indicating that there once was a proper road surface).



Cederberg Scenery

On the plateau rooibos has been planted and the scenery was breathtaking. We drove slowly through the tiny hamlet of Eselbank and eventually turned west at Matjiesrivier. The farming activity notably increased and we passed several wine cellars leaving them for another day.

Looking down the valley at the winding Uitkyk Pass we were about to descend, was exciting.

Algeria was a noisy hive of activity as a large crew was busy building the replacement Cape Nature offices as well as 6 new chalets. Deadline is end 2014. We shall miss the old Kliphuis where we had many enjoyable times.

Our route then took us over the Nieuwoudt Pass after which we decided to take the gravel road to Citrusdal. From this road we could see the queues building up at the stop/start signs at the road works on the N7. The road runs on the eastern bank of the Olifants River and passes many citrus farms with large packhouses.

We had a lovely late lunch at the Kardoesie restaurant on the Piekenierskloof Pass. Here I bought a bottle of curried fish which proved to be delicious.

Our last stop was at the Desert Rose Farm Stall. Money was exchanged for honey. All good things come to an end and so unfortunately did our 4 day excursion. It was great fun and we can't wait to start planning the next one.

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