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African Storybook Media
Postnet Suite # 140
Private Bag X9199
Cape Town
South Africa
MOBILE
+27 (0)82 451 3828

Travelling through the Karoo with Baba.

“ Wrapped against the cold and strapped into the seat for four hours, he'd had enough...”

The practice of fitting a baby into your life – or rather parents adapting to fit its world – is an overwhelming 'event'. My own learning curve reached a certain peak on our recent road-trip north from Cape Town, destination Joburg and the bush beyond.

For starters, we had little idea of how long baby Fynn would last in the car baby-seat.

Plans revolved around his moods and waking moments, and by the time we were approaching Beaufort West his objections to continuing the journey had been firmly made.

For the first time, the soothing late afternoon light of the Karoo was lost to me, drowned out by a baby's howling; wrapped against the cold and strapped into the seat for four hours, he'd had enough. Luckily we'd made our choice of accommodation from a guidebook in the car earlier, and the voice at the end of the line said they had a room for us - with a cot. My first cot. It felt like a bonus. I felt I'd arrived as an adult.

With the night-sky swallowing up the landscape beyond our headlights, we found the four-star rated Olive Grove Farm, 15km down the turning to Oudtshoorn. We weren't looking for star-grading, but as it happened it was both perfectly timed and positioned. It turned out to be a good choice. On a working sheep and olive farm, the room was clean and perfectly adequate, the cot was in the corner as promised (a *clean* cot, something we would come to appreciate), and dinner - preceded by sherry, blue cheese and figs at the fireplace - was waiting. As was Rona - a grandmother from the neighbouring property - at reception.



Typical Karoo scene. On the N1, from Leeu-Gamka to Prince Albert Road.



Fynn's first hike, strapped to Dad's chest, with Skipper the collie for company.

“...the cot was waiting, as was sherry, blue cheese and figs at the fireplace...”



Noo-Noo the Meerkat. Star attraction.



Top cuisine from a Zimbabwean couple...in the Karoo? Leonard and Stella Taipei.



Olive Grove reception.

Seduced by his *gurgles* and *goos*, Rona insisted on holding him throughout what turned out to be a remarkable dinner, prepared and served by a Zimbabwean couple who have served the British High Commission and the Queen (and fled the local economy). Throw in Noo-Noo - the 'pet' meerkat - the border collies we walked with through the olive groves and the activities we had no time for the next morning, and this stopover was suddenly rich in experience - especially for those 'encumbered' with children.

Beyond the Karoo National Park, I have never considered Beaufort West and surrounds as a potential stopover. All I knew before this last visit was that this once attractive, now scruffy little town was the biggest railway junction in the country. Such is the way of perceptions.

What this overnight stop did was to highlight the importance to a region of positive experience, of well-trained, genuinely obliging staff.

These are globally dismal economic times, and whether six star hotel or guesthouse, there are significantly fewer visitors to this country - the luxury offerings doubtless feeling the pinch a little more. Which suddenly propels the local tourist into the somewhat cynical position of being a desirable commodity.

If I was a tourism player I would want to keep the local travellers 'onside' (yes, the football metaphors are coming) during the

good times too, with fair pricing demonstrating their value.

Beyond the 'good deal' though, one of the best ways to encourage locals (and foreigners) to visit your home town or establishment is by introducing people to and sharing your stories, telling the real story of your region - not just your own product.

Stories about people and compelling tales that catch one's attention; maybe about those who work for you, those who visit or that odd but inspiring character next-door. We all know of 'wow' stories about



The offending car-seat.

significant feats and people.

It is stories after all that weave the history that creates the fabric of a society. And beyond the beaches, mountains and obvious attractions, it is these stories that do their bit in attracting the traveller. Which brings us back to our first journey up the N1 with baba Fynn.

Back on the highway, we stopped at the Bun Cloudy guesthouse in Hanover for tea. We were welcomed like family, the owner, Ouma Bessie, serving a sublime apple pie - after which she posed for photographs with Fynn in the kitchen.

This drive was an intensely positive experience, a trip that highlighted the generosity, warmth and tolerance to be found just off South Africa's busiest highway. Throughout we found rich narratives, a wealth of material with which to market this country. Yes, despite the internal political bollocks that consume us, there's also loads of positive stuff.

Coming up soon we'll be talking Western Cape spring flowers, kids at game reserves, the Baviaanskloof as possibly South Africa's last true wilderness, and what it is that makes a standout hotel - even if you haven't got the cash to fly international media to your establishment.

In the meantime please visit us at www.africanstorybook.com. And email us too, we'd love feedback, to hear and share your stories...especially those about that BIG soccer tournament in 2010.

