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*"On a road to nowhere really, we suddenly found paradise..."*

## Donkeys and Dust: Exclusive Baviaanskloof

In a place quite far away from anywhere really, through red-rock gorges trapped in fold mountains that speak of the earth's violent physical history, lies a surprising find. It's a valley of sorts, home to a many-roomed house of close on Victorian vintage, wrapped in a verandah. Just to the left a few crops are grown in subsistence fashion, tended to by a local family, and horses and sheep are paddocked.

A short walk from the house, past a grove of poplar trees and around a rocky hillside, sits a thatched and rustic Karoo cottage, of polished dung floor and a tiny, cosy kitchen with fireplace. Outside the bedroom is an alfresco bathroom; a basin for shaving and bath and shower, used as a cooling device during the day and for romance by night. Up above and around, baboons bark and leopards undoubtedly watch. Depending what you're into, this is one version of paradise.

I'd been wanting to visit the Baviaanskloof (baboon gorge) for a long time, a part-time quest really, to find *real* wilderness in a fairly cultivated South Africa. Thus it was that, en route back to Cape Town from the Eastern Cape with my Alison seven months pregnant, we put two nights aside for a first dash into 'the Kloof'. It was Alison, myself and Julian, my 11 year-old stepson.

We had two days, in which time our goal was beauty, privacy and romance. An odd choice with an 11 yr-old in tow, so we also wanted a place that would keep a city-boy occupied. With the obliging help of Jane, the information officer in the arid Karoo town of Willowmore - the western gateway into what is now known as the Baviaanskloof Mega Reserve - we found a place to stay. It was called Cedar Guest House.

Soon after leaving Willowmore, we were twisting through dramatic kloofs and negotiating tight bends on a passable dirt road (seven months down the road to birth, Alison found the road a bit rough). We didn't see another vehicle - apart from a muddy, red 1980 VW Golf rattling past at speed en route to the turn-off. At *Makkedaats* cave (weird and wonderful holiday accommodation) we branched off the 'main' dirt road. Alison spotted a *klipspringer*, one of my favourite antelope, on the rocks to our left, but as we slowed to a stop it sped off, darting from boulder to boulder on its dainty and pointed hooves.

I tell you this. No matter how much of South Africa you have seen, this Baviaanskloof is magnificent country. Quiet, unspoilt and wild, with just a handful of places to stay, scattered miles and mountains apart, it's the sort of place where the night beyond your accommodation is black, where seeing another light is unlikely. And that's exactly as it was at Cedar Guest House,



comprising Victorian period house, the gorgeous little Karoo cottage in which we stayed, and an adobe cottage set against cliffs next to the river.

The first person we saw was a young local boy on his donkey cart at the old gate to the farm. For R2 (less than 20p) he said he'd give us a ride to the Just For Two cottage. Julian hopped in and they disappeared down the dirt road, around the *koppie* (hill) and up to the cottage, where we met them. Julian had found a friend for the next two days.

The lavender in the tiny pots on the bedroom windowsill framing the hills outside, the kitchen and the outside loo..all cried out to be photographed. So too the almond shells pressed into the floor – and shaped like a heart - at the foot of the bed. The cottage, we agreed, was one of the most magical places we'd ever stayed at.

An empowerment initiative by owner Linden Booth, the Cedar Guest House operation reflects an unusual attitude in this thoroughly isolated part of the country. I haven't met 30-something Linden, but he seems to be on a mission. A trustee of the 'Another Way Trust', he seems determined to change the way things have been done ever since the 'Kloof was settled; among them putting a stop to the farmers' persecution of leopards, and encouraging the better treatment of farmworkers (a living wage for starters, and providing opportunities to better themselves).

I'm told he isn't a popular guy with the established, largely conservative farmers of the region.



Cedar Guesthouse is self-catering, but - staying true to his empowerment initiative - Linden allows Willem Maganie, the farm caretaker, and his wife, Marta Jumat, to run the show (Linden lives with his family in Knysna). From a little dining room in the rustic designer barn-cum-lounge, adjacent to the pasture where the sheep feed, Marta serves up good food for those who need a break from self-catering; we still use her kudu pie recipe (perfect pastry). She keeps the



*Willem introduces a pregnant Alison to the Just for Two cottage.*

proceeds. Family members help with other activities, like hiking to the waterfall (beautiful birdlife) and up to the camera-traps that monitor the secretive leopards.

And then there is the bread. Marta made us *roosterkoek* (bread roasted on an open fire), and had Willem walk them over to us at the cottage - on a plate and covered in a tea-towel. They were still warm when he knocked on the door. The fact that I somewhat preciously prefer my scones 30 minutes after baking was utterly irrelevant. This was real hospitality from real people.

Outside the 'Kloof a few days later, on sitting down to coffee and something sweet at Sophie's Choice coffee shop in the one-donkey town of Willowmore, we picked up on gossip, locals' thoughts on Linden among them. Most of it actually involved the relationship between the owner of the guesthouse we were staying in and Sophie. But it's complicated, and someone in the town library tried explaining it to us, without success. So for now I'll stick to looking for leopards, klipspringers and stories of changing mindsets as landowners look to the needs of their staff.

