

EXPECT THE *unexpected*

IN THIS NEW SERIES, ANGUS BEGG EXPLORES
THE DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH THAT IS SOUTH
AFRICA'S NORTHERN CAPE PROVINCE

The Last Frontier. While that phrase may evoke images of European settlers moving west across America—leaving destruction, displacement, a peculiar form of civilisation and eventually Starbucks in their wake—in the world of travel it rings true for the Northern Cape.

Aptly enough, as the original home to De Beers and of Kimberley's Big Hole, this is South Africa's unpolished diamond. This is where things are rough, where Wi-Fi is as rare as a rhino, and most locals will consider a 'flat white' rather to be a white person run over by a lonely lorry on the N7. As the word 'intrepid' is by definition mostly used for humorous (or rhetorical) effect, in this piece we look beyond Mike Horn-type adventures to challenges many regard as equally tough. Like doing without your daily cappuccino, having no talking-head radio in the car—apart from Namakwa 93.4 FM occasionally bursting its way through the static—and possibly the toughest test of all for contemporary travellers: being without Internet connection.

This province has a habit of throwing up more happy surprises than most parts of the country. It is home to the unexpected.

Like the coffee stop, Miershoop, I discovered at Bitterfontein rail siding. Hardly a hamlet let alone a village, it's the proverbial (caffeine) oasis in a parched, gravel landscape from which most of the country's granite gets shipped north to Johannesburg for use in upmarket kitchen counters. Built by the municipality, the coffee brewed in an industrial, Italian espresso machine by the occasional trained hand at Miershoop was a relative lifesaver. But the Afrikaans Vredendal woman, who last year elevated the coffee and lunches to city status in an effort to forget the husband who left her after 30 years, has abandoned the shop. Today, a local named Francina runs it for the municipality. She told me over the phone that the machine has broken; that she's using a plunger until they fix it.

It's easy to feel alone out there. Because you usually are. And therein lies its magic.

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In compiling a chapter on the province for an international travel guide, I had driven most of its roads and asked a lot of questions—where to get ‘that’ coffee among them. It was a typical case of wanting what you can't have, until I eventually unearthed a quality cup in the provincial hub of Springbok. Caffe Bella is the name. Opened only last year, it is the best or only real, full-bodied coffee you will find until you reach Upington, some seven hours east on the N7. I even tried at the Italian restaurant some 90 minutes northwest on the coast in Port Nolloth—a late 19th-century diamond-diving settlement established by the English in crayfish country.

Conrad Mouton, a former South African soldier and now a specialist guide based in

emerges a character who's the closest (in appearance) to a ‘frontierman’ I have ever seen: This is George Moyses. After starting his career in the 1970s as a diver for the navy in Port Nolloth, with a nose for opportunity and a little wealth he hung around when he left the state's employ and started diving for diamonds. “We'd get 50% of the diamonds we dived for, and De Beers got the other 50—it was a rip-off!” he says.

He speaks of the danger of being sucked up by the massive worm-like industrial suction pipe, the centrifugal slurry pump, used to suction the treasures from deep on the ocean floor. You needed “guts or stupidity” to do it, says George, while relating the tale of his mate Ernie Foster who was trapped under a rock



was using the trust monies for himself, his mates and family.

A little like your typical police procedural show, a car follows me and my colleague wherever we go. While that wasn't hard to notice on a long and straight isolated dirt road, more concerning to us at the time was what could happen when we put our heads to our respective pillows in our lonely (but wonderful, run by a mother and daughter) guest house some 10 kilometres outside Alexander Bay. It's easy to let one's mind wander in a deserted land where it is notoriously easy to ‘buy off’ the police and even easier to hide a body.

In the reassuring light of day, I tell Conrad I will one day return here with him, to take in a shipwreck tour and a spot of diving with his crayfish dinners.

for sheep) to relative regional oblivion. “You know what farmers are like, always quick to shoot,” says Willem.

This apparent massacre took place in Oorlogskloof (now a nature reserve), itself an unexpected and quite dramatic, deep gorge situated around a high waterfall up on the Bokkeveld plateau, adjacent to what is today Mariette and Willem's sheep and guest farm, Papkuilsfontein. Happily, Willem is more comfortable with conserving jackals, Bushmen paintings and delicate bulbs—with names such as romulan and sparaxis—than with a rifle.

Beyond hiking and bike riding, the obvious adventures in the Papkuilsfontein area tend toward the culinary. While being mildly famed for the ginger beer made by more Van Wyks (related to Willem) and



the little settlement, smirks when I raise the subject of real coffee. “It's the limestone,” he says, enthusiastic eyes sparkling. “The lime blocks up the pipes.” And so the story is repeated in the other two or three eating establishments in town.

While enticing me to join him on one of his private tours of the Richtersveld—South Africa's last remaining true, remote wilderness—Conrad takes me to what looks like a 1970s holiday beach shack at the edge of the water on the edge of town.

After probably five minutes of Conrad's repeated knocking on the door, there

for 25 minutes with no air. Apparently, Ernie survived.

Today, living in that little asbestos beach shack for which he doesn't pay rent—and which, he claims, was licked by the waters of the 2005 Asian tsunami, before being pummelled by “the worst storm in living memory” in 2008—he runs the museum in Port Nolloth. It houses a compelling collection of everything that could interest most people, especially inhabitants of this country. Standing next to the 1980s *Scope* and *Sunday Times* magazine articles on the former town

mayor arrested for illicit diamond dealing (he owned 22 houses and businesses), George tells of the crooks who called this tiny town home, and of the morning he woke to find his girlfriend had fled with one of his prize diamonds.

I think back to an investigative television story I produced on the scam surrounding the biggest land claim yet in South Africa, deep in the arid and rugged mountains of the Richtersveld, maybe an hour's drive to the north. It was all about diamonds and how the chairperson of the community trust, set up to oversee it,

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Far to the southeast, in the northern extremes of the Cederberg, outside Nieuwoudtville, Mariette van Wyk clucks when her farming husband Willem says matter-of-factly that his ancestors were “probably responsible” for shooting out the last Bushmen in the Northern Cape. Two Van Wyk brothers had been among the first Dutch settlers to settle this area—apparently in the late 18th century—and Willem says it was at the battle of Oorlogskloof that his early farming forefathers and their comrades perpetrated that dark deed, committing those early rock artists (who also had a taste

served at a nearby padstal, Papkuilsfontein is also home to Mariette's contemporary take on farm-style cooking, and her daughter Alri's quite remarkable cakes. The coffee isn't bad, either.

This is beautiful, rugged country, and we haven't yet touched upon one of South Africa's most appealing and ‘improved’ drives: along the Orange River, between Upington and the Augrabies Falls National Park. That's the contradiction of this province of such magnificent appeal, this last frontier. Get here before the others do; before the likes of George and his ilk are swallowed up. ☉