

Terrestrial time travel

Four hours and a couple of centuries from Cape Town there's a sprinkling of villages offering grass-roots tourism, traditional food and surprisingly speedy donkeys. By Lucy Corne-Duthie.



As we careened around a corner and hit a particularly deep rut in the road, I lost my grip on the miniscule wooden handle, flew into the air and landed neatly on my driver's lap. He barely flinched as he adjusted the reins and I fumbled for my perpetually escaping cushion – the only thing protecting my bum from the hard wooden seat. It wasn't quite as relaxing as I had envisaged, but travelling by donkey cart was certainly a more exciting ride than I'd ever imagined.

On arriving in Heuningvlei, my driver and guide, Abraham Viljoen, grinned as he looked at his watch and gave me a knowing nod. Earlier he'd told me our cart was the turbo-charged version – substituting two of the usual quartet of donkeys with a pair of ponies to ensure a faster, but not necessarily smoother, ride. I disembarked 20 minutes earlier than planned, met my hostess for the night and tucked into my third gargantuan meal of the day as the sun dipped behind the northern peaks of the Cederberg.

The trip had started early the day before with a 4x4 transfer from Clanwilliam in the Western Cape to the hidden hamlet of Wupperthal. Just more than 45 kilometres of tar road took us through Thomas Bain's Pakhuis Pass and on to a winding gravel track deep into the valley. The whitewashed cottages of Wupperthal, population 500, suddenly came into view, cottages cut off from the rest of the Cape by rough gravel roads, rippling mountains and a complete absence of cellphone reception.

It was in 1830 that Rhenish missionary Johann Gottlieb

Leipoldt first clapped eyes on the valley, then adorned with just a solitary farmhouse. He named the spot after Germany's Wupper Valley, the landscape of which this remote corner of the Cape brought to mind, and set about starting a mission station in the mountains. While many Rhenish churches merged with the Dutch Reformed Church in the 20th century, Wupperthal aligned with the Moravian church and, as with other mission villages in South Africa, it remains the property of this church. The atmosphere remains tranquil and traditional – a hamlet so remote that in a mere 60 minutes you feel you've travelled a couple of centuries back in time.

Take the local shoe factory, for instance. Set up in 1836 by Leipoldt, himself a trained shoemaker, this is believed to be the oldest footwear manufacturer in the country, but you won't find any machinery or manic production lines here. The veldskoens are handmade by the four well-practised partners who, judging by the lunchtime laughter I hear as I approach, are also firm friends. They're suddenly all business as I step inside and I feel guilty for interrupting, but a smiling Gerhard Farao, one of the partners, puts me instantly at ease. He drops the leather he's working on and explains the surprisingly speedy process (the four can put together a pair of made-to-measure shoes in 90 minutes) before showing me the hap-hazard showroom next door. If not for the broken windows and lack of Victorian bonnets, the factory would look like something you'd find in a mock historical village, but Wupper-

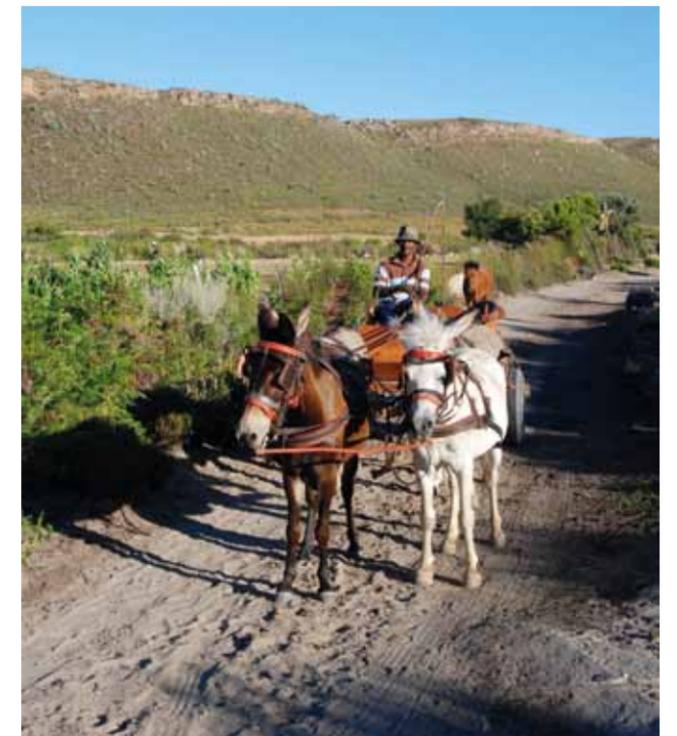
South Africa's mission villages

Also known as mission stations, these settlements were established across South Africa throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, with the first being Genadendal in the Cape Overberg. European missionaries arrived intent on converting the local populations to various branches of Christianity and set up communities generally built around an enormous church. Today, many of these villages – or at least the land they're on – remain the property of the church and often membership of the church is a prerequisite for living there. Largely, the villages have stood frozen in time and offer a picture-perfect slice of the past. As well as numerous villages scattered around the Western Cape – particularly along the West Coast – try visiting:

Botshabelo, Middelburg, Mpumalanga: Now a museum, this 19th-century mission station also has an Ndebele Cultural Village attached to it.

Moffat Mission, Kuruman, Northern Cape: Founded in 1816 by the London Missionary Society, this shaded spot has a theology school and a museum marking where the first Setswana Bible was printed.

Pella, Northern Cape: Worth a visit simply for the outsized church sitting in the desert, built over seven years with construction knowledge gained from an encyclopaedia. Like Elim, Genadendal and Wupperthal, it's still a functioning village.



ABOVE: Abraham Viljoen with his turbo-charged donkey cart en route from Kleinvlei to Heuningvlei. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Looking back at Wupperthal from the donkey trail to Kleinvlei.

MISSION VILLAGE WUPPERTHAL

thal's shoe factory is an authentic piece of the past. 'The kudu leather is shipped in from Namibia, but the skills are all home-grown,' says Gerhard proudly. After learning the trade from his father, he's been creating footwear for more than two decades. When asked if his son will carry on the trade he looks wistful as he picks up his tools. 'We dearly hope so,' he says. 'It would be a shame to lose such a long-established tradition.'

The shoe factory may be a time-honoured Wupperthal trade, but today the residents are looking for new ways to make ends meet. A cosmetic company selling soaps and shampoos scented to resemble the region's endangered cedar tree was set up by local ladies in 2004, while another local product provides a solid income for many Wupperthal dwellers. Barend Salomo is the CEO of Wupperthal Original Rooibos and sees the plant



Genadendal

The first sign you see as you leave the R406 for Genadendal advertises the internet centre in the local library, making you wonder about the truth of the second sign inviting you to 'step back in time'. But once you pass the outlying houses that have spread out from the original Moravian mission station and reach the church square, you realise Genadendal can still bill itself as a time-travel destination – and one that's far easier to reach than Wupperthal, lying just 27 kilometres from the N2.

The square is worlds apart from the nearby highway. People are few and far between and cows and horses roam around, giving the sandy square an almost frontier feel. Genadendal is an open-air museum, which allows you to wander past South Africa's first teacher-training college, its first infants' school and, of course, the oldest mission church in the country. As I sit down for a glass of iced honeybush tea with museum curator Dr Isaac Balie, his passion for restoring Genadendal to the glory of its early years is evident. His life's work faces you at every turn, from the restored watermill to the handmade information panels in the main museum, which give an in-depth look at the history of South Africa's first mission station. After an insightful chat, Dr Balie excuses himself to attend to the mammoth project of digitally documenting every exhibit in the overflowing museum – an ongoing project that ensures people will be able to step back in time long into the future. Search for Genadendal Mission on Facebook for more information.

playing an important role in the region's future. 'Rooibos is part of our history,' he says. 'When the missionaries came, there were seven Khoisan families living here, using rooibos for medicinal purposes. Rooibos runs in our veins; it's a rope that connects us to our past and leads us to a proud future.'

It's refreshing to see traditions embraced in a bid to save the struggling economy and nowhere has the region's culture been honoured more than in Wupperthal's newest initiative, tourism. Community tourism projects are popping up throughout the valley – not just in Wupperthal itself but also in the surrounding outstations, 13 hamlets sprinkled around the hills, some so tiny they make Wupperthal seem like a metropolis.

It's to one of these outstations that I'm headed, following a silent night in Wupperthal. After an enormous breakfast in the Lekkerbekkie Tearoom – the village's only restaurant housed in Wupperthal's oldest building – I'm ready for a little exercise. This turns out to be convenient since straight after breakfast, brothers Nico and Clement Zimri arrive from neighbouring Kleinvlei, with their donkeys Riebeeck and Venter. Nico and Clement are locals who, while not accredited guides, know the terrain so well you're sure you couldn't be in better hands.

Having failed to read my itinerary properly, I was expecting the donkeys to be attached to a cart, but the first leg of my three-part donkey adventure sees the animals carrying just my bags, not myself. The road to Kleinvlei winds laboriously through the mountains and is seldom used, the narrow walking path offering a far faster option. Once my luggage is securely strapped to an increasingly sweaty Riebeeck, we walk through the valley alongside the very enticing Tra-Tra River. As the temperature inches towards the 40s, I think of Kleinvlei's residents who have to take this four-kilometre hike whenever they fancy a cold Coke or need a loaf of bread. There are no shops in Kleinvlei and only two bakkies among 24 families to take the rough and rutted road that leads to Heuningvlei and eventually joins Pakhuis Pass.

It's this road that I will later travel on, using the form of transport people here have used since the mission villages

BELOW: Gerhard Farao at work at the Wupperthal Shoe Factory, the oldest of its kind in South Africa.



ABOVE: Shopping at Wupperthal's Moravian Mission Stores is like stepping back in time, right down to the 1950s music blaring from the radio.

were founded, but before boarding the donkey cart I take lunch in Kleinvlei with Abraham Viljoen, a local guide passionate about the new prospects tourism is bringing to town. The village women, whose home cooking I'm lucky enough to sample, seem to have been expecting a larger party and as we work our way through mountains of fried chicken, buttery mashed potatoes and five types of veg, Abraham enthuses about tourists visiting the valley. 'As well as donkey-cart rides and a guesthouse in each outstation, we have a three-day hiking trail with a backpacker hostel in Heuningvlei and a new campsite here.' The camping ground has been lovingly designed, with each site marked out with whitewashed stones. Tents are available to hire and, judging by my experience, a visitor to the area will never go hungry. 'Everything is ready,' says Abraham as he saddles up donkeys and ponies for our bumpy ride to Heuningvlei. 'Now we're just waiting for people to come.'

I see some of those people the following day – two hikers who scramble for their cameras as we zip past on our donkey cart. They seemed similarly surprised at the speed these apparently docile creatures can reach and fail to snap a shot in time. This is my second donkey-cart ride of the weekend, this time manned by local farmer Dawid Swartz, who picked me up where Abraham dropped me off the day before – Heuningvlei. Despite an absence of ponies, the journey keeps some serious momentum as we bounce along 12 kilometres of narrow track. When Dawid's grandson leaps out to stop the errant donkeys from wandering into the bushes I seize the chance to take a few photos – the only ones not snapped at whatever a laden donkey's top speed might be.

I get my fill of the landscape – rocky outcrops reminiscent of America's Arizona or Utah, their hues of orange and red jutting into the unfeasibly blue sky – and as I savour the last few moments of a form of transport that's as invigorating as it is uncomfortable I realise it's not just the scenery that makes me think of the Wild West. Buildings are absent, people are few and the only other vehicle we see is another donkey cart. I'm sure tourism here will one day take off – after all, it's the closest thing to time travel that we have.

➔ Travel planner overleaf

Elim

If Wupperthal is too remote and Genadendal too accessible, Elim is the answer. The thatched, whitewashed cottages that line the main – and only – road are endlessly photogenic and lead you to the centre of Elim. Behind the cavernous, un-adorned church sits the old watermill, housing a restaurant, small museum and the mill itself. 'It was built by Germans,' says passionate tour guide Emile Richter. 'So it still works.'

Like Genadendal, Elim boasts a few firsts – the oldest working clock in South Africa sits in the church tower and not far away is the country's only monument to freed slaves. Elim is home to 2500 residents, but none could be as enthused and welcoming as Emile, who has to leave our conversation on several occasions to attend to visitors wanting information on the town. 'This is a living museum,' he says. 'So right now you're chatting to one of the exhibits.' Emile has big plans for Elim. He talks about building a pool, converting the house currently used to represent a typical early home into a honeymoon suite and is hoping to start up home stays so people can interact with the village's most fascinating museum exhibits – its smiling people. Find out more at www.viewoverberg.com/Elim.asp.



BELOW: A rutted gravel road heads from Wupperthal, deep into the Cederberg.

