

# Colours of the rainbow nation

**From millennia old rock art and safaris to rooibos and vineyards, Cederberg has all the essentials that make up a South African identity.**

Text **Lucy Corne-Duthie**

**O**range and red rock formations jut out from the horizon, framed against an implausibly blue sky. The rutted dirt road winds around curve after vertiginous curve, each new stretch offering ever-more impressive vistas, with colours so bright they almost hurt the eye. The Cederberg Mountains are vivid with colour, like a picture painted by an artist incapable of using muted tones or pastel shades. I can't help humming tunes from Western films as I scan the craggy landscape seemingly devoid of civilisation, and I almost expect a group of cowboys to appear on the horizon as we drive.



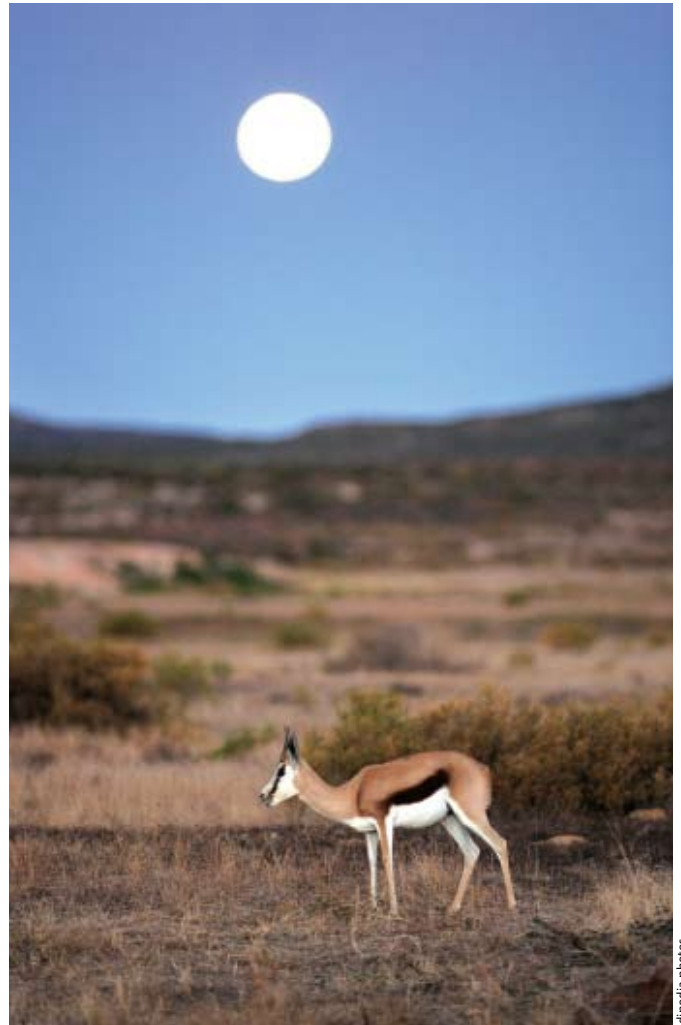
▲ Bright blue skies, orange rocks and vivid greens—the Cederberg Mountains offer a colourful welcome to South Africa.

### High on wine

As we leave the last curve of the Uitkyk Pass behind us, civilisation comes into view in the form of a verdant vision breaking up the ochre-tinged terrain. In one way, the blanket of deep green before us seems out of place in this largely arid landscape, yet somehow it also seems to belong—another blast of colour from that daring artist and his flamboyant palette. This ocean of green is not naturally a part of the Cederberg. Sitting 1,000m above sea level and planted in the 1970s, it is one of South Africa’s highest vineyards. This spot has been farmed since 1893, with tobacco, apples, pears and table grapes preceding the now multi-award-winning vineyards. Winemaker David Nieuwoudt is our guide through the vines—vines that few thought would work when the idea was first conceived. David’s family have farmed this land for over a century, a tranquil oasis 40 km from the nearest tarred road—and the nearest cell phone signal. His vineyards sit on a range of soils, which, combined with the cool nights and lack of vine diseases at this altitude, make for exquisite, crisp Sauvignon Blancs and full-bodied reds whose bottles are so generously adorned with awards, there is barely room left for a label.

### Starry night

After an in-depth tasting, we buy a couple of bottles and retreat to our chalet to sip sundowners on the terrace as the sun’s dying rays light up sandstone mountains with glowing shades of orange. Once darkness falls, we head out for our second course of South Africa. Across the country, hoteliers, tour guides and space enthusiasts are realising the merits of their astonishingly clear night skies and the Cederberg is one of the top spots for uninterrupted celestial views. Locals from nearby towns man the amateur observatory close to David’s vineyards, passionately hosting ‘sky safaris’ on Saturday nights to groups of visitors huddled in blankets. We are introduced to constellations and nebular clouds, as also to African myth and legend, folklore originating from the stars. Eventually, the cold gets too much and we retreat to our chalet, glad that we’ve left South Africa’s favourite sleeping option, camping, for a night at a lower altitude.



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▲ Above: A springbok gazes at the vast expanse of the Cederberg Mountains. Below: The Cederberg Mountains’ cool air, rich soil and disease-free environment has helped David Nieuwoudt’s wines win a number of awards.



Cederberg Private Cellar



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Cederberg Private Cellar

▲ Clockwise from above: With an impressive height of 30m, the Maltese Cross is a natural rock formation that draws many tourists to the Cederbergs; San rock art, depicting seven dancing San women; As the sun sets, the sand-coloured rocks seem to catch on fire, glowing with an intensity hard to match.

### Happy trails

At night, temperatures plummet, but by day—even in the winter months—the mercury regularly inches over 30 degrees and often nudges 40 in summer. We arise early to begin a hike deeper into the mountains before the sun is too strong. David strongly recommended the eight-hour Wolfberg Arch hike, but we feel a gentler walk better suits lazy legs more used to strolling to the shops. Both hikes cover some of the area's more emblematic rock formations, and while David had joked that our chosen route was better suited to elderly walkers, we find the undulating path and ever-increasing heat enough of a challenge and are happy to reach the 'Maltese Cross', a four-storey monolith that looks like it was planted amid the mountains.

### Art rocks

With leftover meat from last night's *braai* (barbeque) eaten and the 7-km roundtrip walk complete, there is time to spare before heading to the Stadsaal Caves for dusk. Wine and stars might represent South Africa but there are few things as typically South African as San rock art. The San were the country's original inhabitants and clear examples of their millennia-old paintings are now in short supply. The Stadsaal paintings actually lie just before the main caves and record an era when elephants still roamed the area. Their russet shades mimic the landscape around them and we remember David's recommendation to be at the labyrinthine main caves before sunset. Regretting not heeding his other suggestion

—to bring a bottle of his complex and dangerously drinkable MCC (Methode Cap Classique, the local name for Champagne-style wine) to sip—we enjoy a tepid bottle of mineral water as the sun lights up the caves with a warmth that electric lighting never could.

Our bed for the night lies deep in the valley, back along the snaking dirt road, yet far from the sound of cars or cell phones. Jamaka is a working organic fruit farm and we find a spot for our tent close to the river, with not one other camper within sight or shouting distance. The night is warmer here, but we keep our *braai* fire burning long after the ostrich *boerewors* (sausage) has been eaten. When the characteristic blue sky greets us the next morning, we explore Jamaka's hiking trails and even brave a chilly dip in the river before setting off for a tour to round off this smorgasbord of all things South African.

### The Rooibos route

The African Dawn Rooibos Estate sits 15 km west of the region's largest town, Clanwilliam, and is one of the only places that this uniquely South African plant is grown, picked, processed and packaged—all in one place. Our guide Chris du Plessis, of Elandsberg Eco Tourism, is passionate about Rooibos, a plant that grows in a small pocket of the Cederberg and nowhere else in the world. Once dried and fermented, Rooibos is used as a healthy herbal tea and has been drunk in the area since the times of the San people. We follow the Rooibos route, witnessing the harvest in progress and the needle-like leaves drying in the sun before we end up sampling a cup of the final product. As we sip the slightly sweet tea, we realise there is one area of unmissable South Africa that we've overlooked.



Rooibos Ltd., South Africa

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#### Lodge luxury

We extend our trip and head east, into the northern reaches of the Cederberg. This region boasts no big game reserves, but that doesn't mean we can't experience a little lodge luxury. Our weekend ends at Bushmans Kloof, an upmarket lodge that seamlessly blends opulence with the outdoors. The best of South Africa comes together here—world class cuisine enjoyed under the stars, excellent wines, game drives to spot antelope and zebra and sky safaris to spot Saturn and the Milky Way.

South Africa, often labelled the Rainbow Nation, is renowned for its variety—the cornucopia of cultures, the ever-changing landscape, the big city vibe juxtaposed against rural towns and the melange of cuisines. Truly exploring all that is quintessentially South African would take many months of research and travel—but I think I'm up to the challenge...

◀ Left: The broom-like leaves of the rooibos bushes are oxidised, giving the tea its distinctive flavour and colour.

Below: The lodge at Bushmans Kloof in the Cederberg Mountains brings the outside indoors.



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## Fact file

### Getting there

Jet Airways has regular flights to Johannesburg from Mumbai. Onward connecting flights and trains to Cape Town are available. The easiest way to access this section of the Cederberg is from the N7, a national road heading north from Cape Town. The turnoff for Algeria, which leads to Jamaka, Sanddrif and the main hikes is between Citrusdal and Clanwilliam, 200 km north of Cape Town. Bushmans Kloof and Elandsberg are accessible from Clanwilliam.

### Accommodation

Sanddrif (tel: +27 027 482 2825), home to Cederberg Wines, offers well-equipped cottages and campsites under the trees. It's a great base, close to the observatory, Stadsaal Caves and some of Cederberg's most famous hikes. Jamaka Organic Farm (tel: +27 027 482 2801) also has cottages and campsites as well as a range of moderate hiking trails. For a luxury sleepover, Bushmans Kloof (tel +27 021 481 1860) is unrivalled. Their full-board packages cover a wide range of activities, from canoeing and mountain biking to yoga, archery and painting.

### Where to eat

Restaurants and shops are few and far between in this wilderness area, but most accommodation comes with self-catering facilities and *braai* areas. Stock up in the towns of Citrusdal or Clanwilliam, both sitting on the N7 from Cape Town. The restaurants at Bushmans Kloof cater strictly to overnight guests.

**For more information:** [www.southafrica.net](http://www.southafrica.net)