

Searching for
flowers in the
Hantam National
Botanical Garden,
Nieuwoudtville.





Blooming BLUES

Every spring, travellers from around the world descend on South Africa's normally barren Namakwa region to witness the impressive wildflower display.

But what is there to do if the flowers aren't blooming? Lucy Corne found out the hard way

With its craggy outcrops and scrubby vegetation, the Northern Cape is not what you'd call classically beautiful. But there is something magical about its vastness: long, straight, traffic-free roads that disappear into a shimmering horizon several kilometres away; the immense sky with its 180° cloudless horizons by day and its implausibly bright blanket of stars by night.

The province has always managed to wow me, and that's without having witnessed the annual spectacle of the Namakwa wildflowers. Although I've seen photographs, I could never quite picture the province with a Technicolor facelift. And thanks to a bit of bad travel luck, I still can't.

Like any travel adventure that's linked to nature – turtle spotting, whale watching, wildlife drives or a journey to see the Northern Lights – the Namakwa flowers cannot be guaranteed. After years of failing to make the trip, we finally took a springtime drive to Springbok last year. But thanks to a lengthy drought, instead of the famed flower carpet, we found a familiar barren landscape with just a peppering of petals. Plus a steady stream of forlorn-looking flower-seekers wondering what on earth to do in Namaqualand when the blooms don't play along. ➤



diamond deals. Its rustic charm is undeniable, and the town is well worth a visit. Even if the flowers are blooming, drag yourself away from the petals for a seaside lunch and a wander along the pretty promenade, allowing half an hour for the delightfully jumble sale-like museum.

Small-town charm

Pretty towns abound in Namaqualand and it's tough to pick the prettiest. There's

Nieuwoudtville with its gravel streets and undulating botanical garden, ideal for gentle hikes even when there are no flowers. There's Calvinia with its whitewashed buildings, junkyard art emporium and oft-photographed giant postbox (formerly a water tower). For me, though, there is no quainter town in the province, or perhaps the country, than Sutherland.

The town is known for cold nights, freezing winters (the mercury has been known to dip as low as -15°C) and gloriously clear, star-filled skies. The wide main road is lined with guesthouses, family-run stores and the odd restaurant specialising in Karoo



Red meat country

If you're on the flower trail, there's a good chance you'll find yourself in Springbok. As a popular stopover on the Cape-to-Namibia route, the unofficial flower capital has the greatest collection of accommodation in the region and is only an hour's drive from perhaps the best place of all to view the spring flowers: the Namaqua National Park. When the park isn't blooming, you could head for a hike in the nearby Goegap Nature Reserve, or you could just stay in town and fill your belly. If you do nothing else while you're in Springbok, be sure you book a table at the Tauren Steak Ranch. Since 1986, the steakhouse-in-a-cellar has been serving meaty meals to locals and travellers. In fact, dining at Tauren is a little like stepping back in time to the '80s with its dark, leather-and-wood décor, the cheery, unpretentious atmosphere and the vast portions of food. Flavour takes precedence over pretty presentation.

Hearty fare tends to dominate in Namaqualand, with several towns sporting signs reading: "Welcome to Red Meat Country." But it's not all about steaks and lamb chops. The ocean-front restaurants of Port Nolloth serve up portions of unfussy seafood – perfect for the unfussy coastal town. It's a glorious 160km drive from Springbok to Port Nolloth and, once you leave the N7 behind, the road winds and dips dramatically, giving a panoramic view of the coastal plain. The sense of space is overwhelming as you descend towards the Atlantic Ocean and the darling little town.

Port Nolloth was established in the 1850s to ship out the copper found in the hills of Namaqualand, with diamonds later discovered off its coast. These days, it has a Wild West-meets-seaside feel, with its 19th-century corrugated iron buildings, near-empty streets and tales of dodgy

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Clockwise from top left:

Port Nolloth beach. Port Nolloth Museum. The Giant postbox in Calvinia. A corbelled guesthouse near Carnarvon

Opposite:

Republic of Rustica, a junkyard art gallery and guesthouse.

lamb. Sutherland sees a constant stream of astronomers from around the world who come here to work at the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT), 19km east of town. A daytime trip to learn about the largest optical telescope in the southern hemisphere is an excellent way to spend a morning, but it doesn't compare to bundling yourself up for a night-time sky safari on one of the considerably smaller telescopes. All you have to do is hope that clouds don't thwart your star-gazing plans the way that drought might just scupper your petal-gazing ones.

MUSEUMS OF NAMAKWA

■ **Calvinia Museum:** Based in a beautiful old synagogue, the well-curated exhibits take you through the town's origins and the surprisingly interesting history of sheep farming in the area.

■ **Fred Turner Museum:** They're an iconic feature of the Northern Cape landscape and you've probably stopped to photograph dozens of wind pumps as you drive through



the province's empty roads. Learn more about the wind pump at this quirky museum in Loeriesfontein.

■ **Nababeep Mining Museum:** At the heart of the old copper-mining town is a little-known museum charting the region's 19th-century copper boom.

■ **Port Nolloth Museum:** As with many small-town museums, it's the curator who brings this haphazard collection to life and you'd be hard pressed to find a more passionate and fascinating guide than former diamond diver, George Moyses.

WHERE TO STAY

■ **Naries Namakwa Retreat:** One of the most upmarket places to stay in the region, with a range of sleeping options scattered about the property. There are family cottages, elegant rooms in the main house or, best of all, luxury suites inspired by traditional Nama architecture. It's 30km west of Springbok. Tel: 021 872 0398; web: naries.co.za. Cottages R2 380, double, including dinner and breakfast from R3 150.

■ **Bedrock Lodge:** With a seafront location and quaint corrugated buildings dating back to the mid-19th century, Bedrock is Port Nolloth's most charming place to stay. As well as rooms in the main house, there are self-catering cottages dotted about the town. Tel: 027 851 8865; web: bedrocklodge.co.za. Single/double including breakfast from R640.

■ **Sterland Skrywershuis:** This charming cottage perched on the edge of Sutherland is owned by

DON'T MISS: MEATFEST!

Held in Calvinia on the last weekend in August, the Hantam Vleisfees is an homage to meat, particularly lamb. Fill up on braaied chops, *sosaties* (skewered meat) and *wors* (sausage) while listening to Afrikaans rock and folk music. hantamvleisfees.com

astronomy enthusiast and local tourism guru Jurg Wagener. Book ahead for one of Jurg's stargazing evenings and bring plenty of warm clothing. Jurg also runs a guesthouse and caravan park in the town. Tel: 023 571 1481; web: sutherlandinfo.co.za From R495 per person.

■ **Corbelled houses:** In the southeastern corner of Namaqualand, around Williston, Fraserberg and Carnarvon (which falls just outside Namaqualand) you'll find fascinating corbelled houses. Built by the trekboers in the early 1800s, the striking feature is the roof: truss-free and made entirely from stones. Some are preserved as guesthouses – check out carnarvon.co.za for further info. From R1 000 per night.

FINDING THE FLOWERS

■ **When?** No one quite knows when the flowers will bloom, it all depends on the winter rains, but August and September are the best months. Petal viewing can only be done in full sun, so plan on being out between 11am and 4pm.

■ **Where?** One of the best places to view the flowers is the Namaqua National Park. Book several months ahead if you plan to stay over in the park. Other reserves include Hantam National Botanical Garden in Nieuwoudtville and Akkerendam Nature Reserve in Calvinia.

More info: Photos of recent sightings are posted on [facebook.com/namaqualandflowers](https://www.facebook.com/namaqualandflowers) or you can call the flower hotline on 072 760 6019. 🌸