

KLOOF OF LIFE

Close to Pietermaritzburg, sitting atop a hill, you'll find Karkloof Safari Villas. **GILLIAN MCLAREN** spent a few days savouring this five-star lodge's scenery and attractions

I hear the rushing water before I see it. We alight from the game vehicle, grab our cameras and set off on the path that winds into the indigenous mist-belt forest. A thick canopy of trees protects us from the heat of the day as we hike upwards, surrounded by ancient cycads, ferns with circinate fronds and moss-covered boulders. A medley of butterflies sip from tiny orange flowers. The flight of stairs – made of a non-slip composite – has terraced platforms where I stop to gaze at the Karkloof River. The water rages over massive dolerite boulders, forming pools before cascading to the next level. The area has had abundant rainfall, and we are privileged to see the river at its most powerful.

The higher I climb, the more mist fills up the air, until I reach the top platform in a euphoric state and see the grandeur of the Karkloof Falls as they plunge 88 metres down to the river valley below. Although I'm sopping wet from the spray, I'm warm, so I can linger to gaze at the rainbow that arches across the gorge – a glorious sight. Wending our way down the stairs, we are all smiling and agree that it is a cleansing, almost spiritual experience being in such overwhelming beauty. As this area is privately owned by Karkloof Safari Villas – where we are staying – we are privileged to be the only visitors to this part of the Karkloof Nature Reserve.

THE KARKLOOF REGION OF THE KWAZULU-NATAL MIDLANDS IS KNOWN FOR ITS LUSH VEGETATION AND FAST-FLOWING WATERFALLS

LEFT THE 3 000 HA RESERVE BOASTS PROFUSE NUMBERS OF BIRDS AND ANIMALS

BOTTOM LEFT THE LANDSCAPE WITHIN THE RESERVE IS DIVERSE

BOTTOM RIGHT DURING THE RAINY SEASON, THE RIVERS IN THE AREA FLOW STRONGLY, PROVIDING LIFE-GIVING WATER TO THE ANIMALS



Back in the game vehicle, we are almost dry thanks to the dappled sunshine on our way down the path. Driving back to our villas, we spot a zebra with a baby. The little one – with a reddish glow to the top of its mane – sticks close to its mother's side. Warthogs, too, are plentiful here. We watch a mother with three babies as they dash off with their antenna-like tails in the air. Further on, a herd of buffalo crosses the road. All have glossy coats, as the grassland is lush and nutritious at this time.

A highlight is finding some of the rhino that are carefully monitored and guarded in this reserve. In the heat and humidity, they are snoozing beneath a stand of splendid *Vachellia sieberiana* trees, formerly known as paperbark acacia, which grow in loose, widespread groups. I'm distracted from this splendid sighting when three grey crowned cranes land on one of these flat-topped trees. This 3 000-hectare

game reserve is rich with birdlife and my favourite is the gregarious trumpeter hornbill, with its large grey casque and plaintive, wailing call. Groups of up to seven of

them congregate outside my villa each afternoon, drawing me out of the soothing cool of the air conditioning and on to my viewing deck, with its panoramic vista down the Umgeni River valley, over grassland to the hills beyond.

Driving back, we spot a zebra with a baby – the little one sticks close to its mother's side



RIGHT THE VILLAS ARE HIDDEN BY THE VERDANT VEGETATION
BELOW GUESTS CAN EXPECT FIRST CLASS CUISINE DURING THEIR STAY

Drinks and canapés on the verandah precede our evening meal, served in the formal lodge dining room

After a refreshing shower – or an indulgent bath, for the water-deprived Capetonians among us – we tuck into a three-course lunch, served on the wooden deck of the communal area of the lodge. Meals at Karkloof Safari Villas are a feast, and come with choices from a wine cellar to please the most discerning of oenophiles. The Sauvignon Blanc bottles available are, among others, Waterford 2017, Neil Ellis 2015 and Life from Stone 2016. Each course has a raw option for those who prefer an alternative, or who are perhaps visiting the Safari Spa for a detox. A popular dessert – which we find ourselves ordering repeatedly – is the home-made ice cream. Flavours include hazelnut, rich vanilla, coconut and banana, but voted our top favourite is the delectable cinnamon. After lunch, I head over to the well-stocked library to select some coffee-table books before strolling to my private villa on wooden walkways shaded by the tree canopy. Shy nyala watch me as they browse on the greenery.

Drinks and canapés on the verandah precede our evening meal, which is served in the more formal space of the lodge dining room, with the luxury of white linen tablecloths and napkins. The meal is memorable, with succulent lamb as one of the main-course



selections. Colleen Glaeser, the owner of Karkloof Safari Villas, is a generous hostess. She insists that we sample the Beluga vodka, plies us with fabulous five-star wines and entertains us with anecdotes into the small hours of the night. Apparently, over the last few years, several celebrities have visited this idyllic valley, including Gary Bailey. Some have hired the whole lodge, for enhanced exclusivity. Karkloof Safari Villas has welcomed royalty such as Princess Charlene of Monaco and Russia's Princess Olga Romanoff.

We have a special guest with us, Peter Meyer, whose father pioneered safaris in the Karkloof Valley when Peter was a young boy. He recently launched a book, titled *The Boy from the Wild*, a memoir of his blissful childhood in this awe-inspiring region. A tribute to his handsome, entrepreneurial father, the book relates exciting and even life-threatening incidents that happened at various sites on the Karkloof Safari Villas property. A natural raconteur,

GOOD TO KNOW

GETTING THERE An easy, comfortable and hassle-free flight with Airlink will get you from OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, or from Cape Town International Airport, direct to the charming Oribi Airport in Pietermaritzburg, which serves the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands region. Airlink is a member of the Voyager South African Airways Loyalty programme. For bookings, call SAA Central Reservations on +27 11 978 1111 or visit www.flyairlink.com.

Pietermaritzburg Airport to Karkloof Safari Villas is a 45-minute transfer through picturesque scenery.

BOOKINGS For reservations at Karkloof Safari Villas, and more details on activities and the spa, visit www.karkloofsafarivillas.com.

WHAT TO TAKE The Karkloof Nature Reserve is malaria free, but take insect repellent for game drives, cycling and your walks in the wilderness. Remember a sun hat, sunscreen, a good pair of binoculars and your birding guidebook. A camera is a must, as you get very close to the game in an open Land Rover, and the scenery is superb.

Peter shares his passion for the wilderness with us, as well as how it has influenced his life choices. The book is an easy-to-read, romping tale of an energetic and talented young man.

Liberal decorated with ribbons of streams, and the Karkloof and Umgeni rivers, this idyllic valley – so close to the city of Pietermaritzburg – is quiet, peaceful and achingly beautiful. 🍷



Win one of two copies of Peter's book, *The Boy from the Wild*.

SMS the keyword 'Karkloof' and your full name to 45546. (See competition details on page 13.)