

ROAD *tripping*

Even if you can't jet off to a far-flung tropical island for your honeymoon, you can plot an equally incredible adventure on our shores. Editor Heather Ingarfield grabs her other half and hits the road to find SA's most romantic spots

WORDS HEATHER INGARFIELD

It started when night fell. The trees came to life, with their sounds echoing through the leaves, vibrating through the balmy air. We'd been told to listen out for the cries from the treetops, but what we ended up hearing was a bushbaby symphony like I had never heard before.

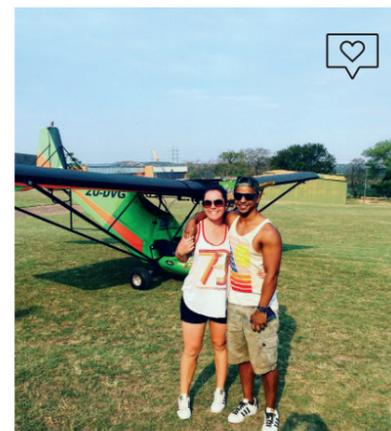
We were listening to the sounds from the loungers on the patio of our villa with G&Ts in hand. The emerald valley stretched out before us, the Sabie River roaring through its depths, adding to the dusky soundtrack with a deep grumble. Birds settled in for the night; bushbabies noisily shook off the sleep from the day; colourful lizards traversed the rocks; the ice crackled and popped around the gin.

We had arrived at Timamoon Lodge just in time for the evening show. After dropping our bags off and exploring the villa – and the personally curated collection of fascinating artefacts that adorn it – we jumped into the icy waters of the private plunge pool and then sunk into the loungers, taking a breather before dinner.

Sitting atop one of the peaks of the Drakensberg mountain range, Timamoon is an exclusive, privately owned lodge comprising six luxurious, incredibly spacious, insanely private villas. Owners Gaylyn and Maurice Hammond, inspired by their travels around the world, created and built Timamoon to feel like an exotic hideaway tucked away in the forest. Named after Timimoun, an enchanting oasis in the Sahara, Algeria, known for its red mud-styled architecture, Timamoon borders organic banana and avocado plantations. The villas all have their own slice of the valley, which can be enjoyed from the pool, daybed, outside shower or large, raised mosaicked bathtub flanked by a pair of big windows.

'Knock, knock.' A voice drifted down from the villa's gate. It was Patrick, sent with flashlight in hand to escort us to dinner. Designed with privacy in mind, everything at Timamoon is far apart. After a good 10-minute walk through tropical-plant-lined paths, Patrick dropped us off at Over the Moon restaurant.

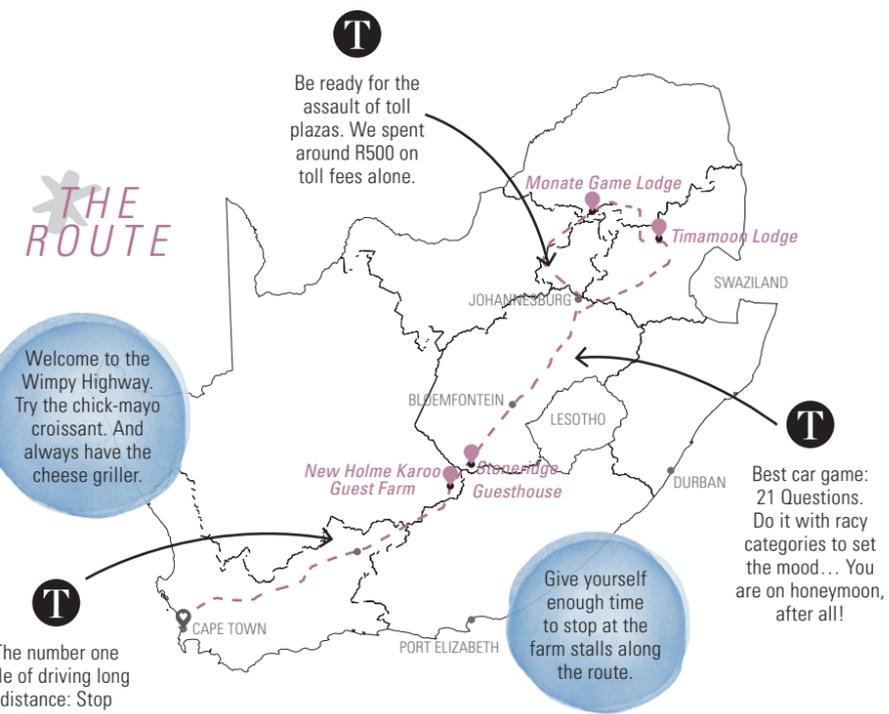
Intimate, open and perched in the treetops, eclectic African music softly playing in the background, Over the Moon's kitchen is led by



Chef Estelle van Niekerk, a young local chef who takes inspiration from culinary trends, seasonality and whatever's growing in the lodge's veggie garden to create a different four-course dinner every day. After an amuse-bouche of baked halloumi and berries, we devoured the Mediterranean vegetable stack and broccoli soup.

'I like to keep things current and always incorporate food trends,' Chef Estelle tells us. 'Like the Mexican feast, where the pulled pork tacos, fillet enchiladas, stuffed jalapeños and frozen margarita shots are all served in petite, canapé-sized portions.'

Mexican feast? Music to my ears. We ordered that, as well as the kingklip fillet served with potato wedges and sugar snaps, finished off with king prawns and a caper-fennel sauce. The sweet finale was a super smooth vanilla panna cotta (paired with a fresh granadilla pulp) and a white-chocolate mousse topped with a ginger-biscuit crumble. Not only exceptionally constructed and cooked, but also plated on unique hand-picked crockery.



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It's this attention to detail that is evident throughout the lodge. The minibar in the villa is not only stocked up with the usual beer, cider, spirits, wine and bubbly, but also with a granite cutting board, knife and lemons. Incense burners are set up all over the place; romantic albums are stacked up on top of the CD player; the bath is furnished with a huge bowl of fragrant salts and tall glass bottles of shampoo and conditioner; the four-poster bed is dressed in soft pink or purple satin linen and enveloped by a mosquito net; candles and matches lie waiting in every corner.

Romance is inevitable.

'Here's the picnic lunch menu. You can let me know in the morning what you want,' said Jessie Hammond, manager and

daughter of Gaylyn and Maurice. I wasn't that surprised to find out the lodge was a small, family-run business. The scale and sheer size of the lodge might point to it being a commercial operation, but the care taken with every aspect of the business shows that it's a labour of love.

The next few days were spent exploring the valley from the sky with local microlight pilot Wayne Morse and from the back of a quad bike, with our adventure-loving guide, Michael. On the last day, we walked down the hill to the Timamoon waterfall, where we basked on the rocks under the trees, swam lazily in the river, feasted on burgers, wraps, berry jars and fruit skewers, and sipped beers in the afternoon sun. The lure of the Soy Candle Massage and All Natural Facial that waited for us at the villa was enough to send us back up the hill.

Set up on the veranda, we settled onto the massage beds for two blissful hours, completely unaware of the world happening around us. The sun started lowering, the bushbabies started waking, and one of the resident peacocks strolled through the gardens. It was the perfect day to take in all the moments from our road trip – a trip that had started at the largest dam in South Africa, Gariep Dam.

Win

a 2-night stay at
Timamoon. More
on page 212.

TIMAMOON LODGE

Hazyview, timamoonlodge.co.za

Getting there Timamoon is located 18 km outside Hazyview in Mpumalanga. There's a pretty rough dirt road getting up to the lodge, so if you're still deciding between your Ferrari and Land Rover, you might want to take the latter. If you have a normal sedan or hatchback, you'll be fine – our VW Golf made it up and down a few times.

Good to know There's no shortage of activities in the area, from visiting the Blyde River Canyon and rafting down the river, to horse-riding, microlighting, quad-biking and elephant experiences. Activities are offered by companies located in Hazyview, but it's a short drive from Timamoon.

Barefoot, beers in hand, we headed to the sunbed outside our room. A large wedge of sun lingered on the horizon

STONERIDGE GUESTHOUSE

Gariep Dam, stoneridgesa.co.za

Getting there Find the signs for Gariep Dam right off the N1 – it couldn't be easier. Drive into the town and look for Kiewiet Street – that's where you'll find Stoneridge.

Good to know Head over to de Stijl Gariep Hotel for dinner or a drink. The hotel has a lovely view of the dam, great cocktails and decent burgers. There are also a few spots close to the entrance of the town that are favoured by the locals (Monday night is party night).

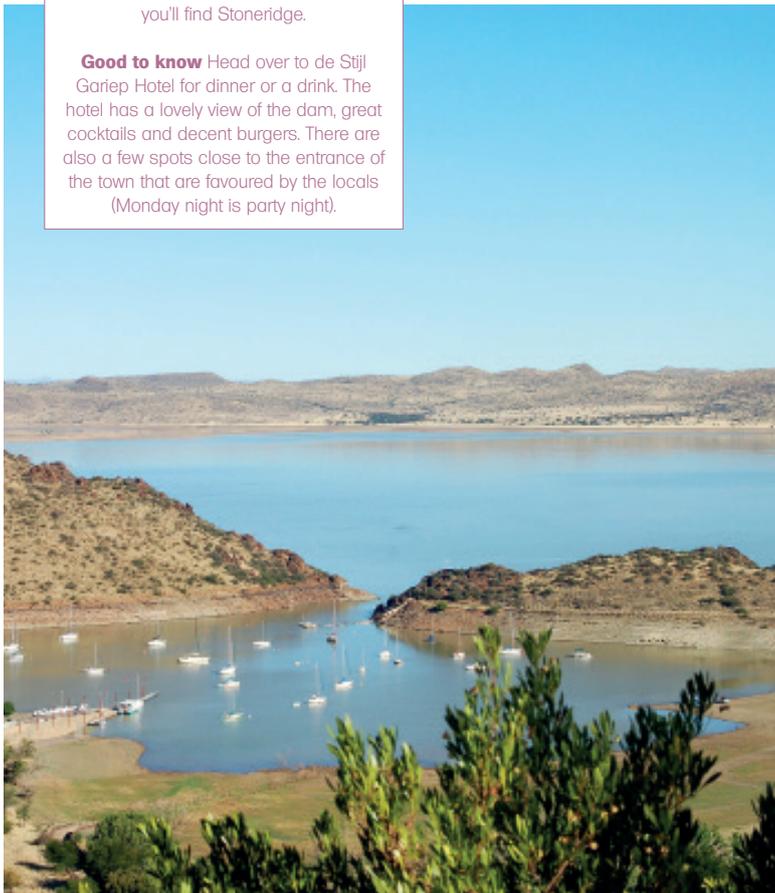
It's known as one of the best stopover points for those doing the long haul from Cape Town to Joburg, as it's pretty much smack in the middle, close to the towns of Venterstad and Colesberg. But once you're there, the little town reveals itself to be so much more.

We pulled up the driveway of Stoneridge at about 3:30 pm, after hitting the road before the sun had cast its glow on the Mother City. Owner Michelle Murgatroyd runs this quaint guest house, having sought the solitude of small-town life a year ago – she found it in Gariep Dam, which has an enchanting combination of inland, Karoo appeal, with vast, thorny lands and rocky koppies, and waterside charm, with its tiny harbour and boats.

This is the largest freshwater dam in SA, with an impressive 435 km shoreline and a total size of 360 km². It was built by a French construction company in 1965 – a project that took them six years to complete. As a result of the construction, the town popped up around it.

'Make yourself at home,' Michelle said as she gave us a quick tour. It's a small guest house, with only four rooms. The rooms are elegantly decorated, with four-poster beds, dark oak furniture and claw-foot bathtubs; with sliding doors opening on to the sweeping Karoo heartland. In the centre of the property is a neat turquoise pool, surrounded by lush trees. Michelle serves a hearty, generous Karoo-style breakfast in the quirky dining room overlooking the pool – that's also where she has a fully stocked bar.

'You guys have to try this mango liqueur,' she said, pouring shots of the chilled pastel-orange liquid. It went down a treat in the inland heat – it was only October, but the day was clinging on to a scorching summer kind of warmth. Barefoot, beers in hand, we headed back to the sunbed outside our room. A large wedge of sun lingered on the horizon and then disappeared; the sky was brilliant and clear, a blank canvas for the splatters of twinkling stars.



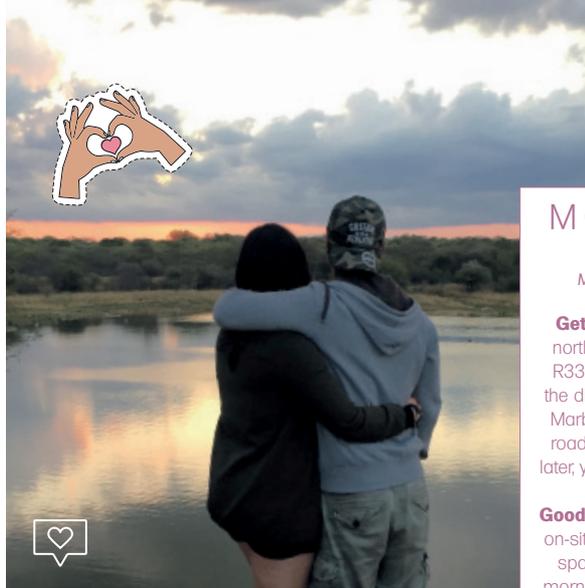
HONEYMOON

The next day we were back on the N1 at first light: We were heading to Monate Game Lodge in Limpopo, where the promise of a game drive and sunset drinks in the bush was waiting. Some nine hours, a Wimpy breakfast, Steers lunch, a few Red Bulls and an impressive thunderstorm later, we were waiting for a herd of bewildered blue wildebeest to zig-zag through the golden scrub and across the dirt road leading to the lodge. The clouds were building in the distance, threatening to burst open at the next crack of thunder.

'Can anyone tell me which animal made this?' Bryan asked, pointing to a deep hole in the sand. We'd checked in and jumped into the back of the open Land Rover with our guide, Bryan, who's been driving the dusty roads of Monate for more than 10 years. 'It's what makes nature so beautiful. It was originally made by an anteater, to find ants, but has become a house for lots of little creatures, like warthogs and jackals.'



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MONATE GAME LODGE

Modimolle, monatelodge.com

Getting there From the N1 heading north to Pretoria, you need to take the R33 (Kranskop off-ramp), and drive in the direction of a farming hamlet called Marblehall (you'll turn off on to a dusty road before Marblehall). A slow 15 km later, you won't miss the gate for Monate.

Good to know Monate has tons to offer on-site. Unwind with a massage at their spa, enjoy the peace in the bush on morning and evening game drives, play some putt-putt, have breakfast under the rock fig tree or while away the hours in the jacuzzi (cocktails are mandatory).

Set on 1 839 ha of private reserve, Monate boasts an impressive list of wildlife, such as lion, buffalo, giraffe, hippo, zebra and many antelope. Managed by the Ardmore Hospitality and owned by Tanja and Ellis Lourens since 2014 (it's been around since 2002, but has moved into 4-star status with the Lourens at the helm), Monate has become a popular venue for couples dreaming of the bush.

Concealed in the heart of the reserve is the lodge, a collection of luxurious rooms dotted among the koppies and bushveld. Behind the tall sable-antelope water feature lies the dining room, tastefully decorated and ready to serve local delights. Beyond that, two jacuzzis are tucked into the rock, only the lazy pillows of steam revealing their location. A stone staircase winds up the koppie behind the jacuzzis and disappears into the mountain.

'That's where you'll be having dinner – in the cave,' Bryan told us. We'd stopped at a dam for sundowners. In front of the table

of drinks and snacks Bryan had set up, hippos snorted in the water and broke the calm gloss of water with noisy rolls. Frogs chirped and whistled behind us as lightning cut through the cerulean sky.

We bundled back into the Land Rover as the rain tapped our shoulders, seeking the shelter of the cave, the setting for our private dinner. Formed 300 000 years ago, the sandstone cave overlooks a waterhole and boundless views. Surrounded by only the amber glow of candlelight and paraffin lanterns, we indulged in the three-course dinner of barbecued chops, creamy potato bake and crispy vegetables.

We strolled back under the starry sky to our suite, Shingwedzi. Half-tent, half-building, Shingwedzi is the ultimate in glamping. It is one of two exclusive lodges at Monate, designed to achieve the ultimate in seclusion. Tucked away in the furthest corner of the lodge, when you're at Shingwedzi, no one else exists. The large wooden deck, private aqua pool and firepit overlook nothing but the green-grey Limpopo bushveld.

It's on this deck where we had dinner the next night. Greeted with a crisp white tablecloth and candles, we settled into the colonial-style canvas chairs.

Our dinner arrived in little potjie pots of chicken, oxtail and veggie stew. We sipped on our Champagne and tried to identify the stars. Leaves rustled softly and lions sighed in the distance, as though they too were mesmerised by the serenity in the air.

'I hope the drive tomorrow doesn't undo all this relaxing,' I said over a slice of cheesecake.



NEW HOLME KAROO GUEST FARM

Hanover, karoogariep.co.za

Getting there About 20 km north of Hanover, look for the sign 'New Holme'. About 15 km down a dirt road, you'll find the guest house. If you come across closed farm gates, just open them and carry on (closing them behind you) – the farmers close them to keep the lambs in.

Good to know The new wedding venue provides an idyllic backdrop. It holds anything from 50 to 200 guests (50 indoors, or up to 200 in the garden or marquee). Decor and catering are seen to, while the guest farm has comfortable accommodation for guests.



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Thirty minutes into the drive out of Monate and to Timamoon the next day, we came to a grinding halt and watched as a 300-strong herd of cows was ushered along the main road to a neighbouring farm in Marblehall. They sauntered cavalierly along the tarmac, ignoring the herdsman and building a queue of traffic behind them. They shot us unfazed glances, as if to remind us to slow down and appreciate the essence of life (and the truly memorable aroma of fresh cow dung).

This feeling stuck with us while we disappeared into the Mpumalanga mountains at Timamoon, while we started our journey back down to the Cape, and while we rattled deep into the Klein Karoo for our final stop at New Holme Karoo Guest Farm.

Located within the newly proclaimed Karoo Gariep Nature Reserve, this charming spot is a family-run property offering a real home away from home. Surrounded by trees that are home to an impressive array of birdlife, the guest farm is run by PC and Marisca Ferreira and their charismatic daughters. A conservationist at heart, PC is gradually reducing the number of livestock and reintroducing game species to the reserve. To help guests fully enjoy the heart-stirring vistas of the Karoo, PC offers morning and evening drives, where you're likely to spot the local wildlife, including hare, aardwolf and aardvark.

After dinner, we walked out on to the patio to marvel at the night sky. The air was so quiet, blanketing the scrubland, not letting so much as a bird's cry through. It wasn't like the lion grumbles at Monate, or the bushbaby choir at Timamoon.

It was a beautifully silent note to end a whirlwind road trip on – although I'll be searching for a bushbaby ringtone... ♥

