

Grinning IN THE RAIN

Three 4x4 trails in Tankwa Karoo are part of the park's agricultural heritage. Chances are you'll have the otherworldly landscapes all to yourself. **By Morgan Trimble**



ROADS THAT ROCK
Spectacular views of the Tankwa Valley from the Watervlei 4x4 Trail, one of three such routes in the park.

As we pull in to enquire about conditions on the Watervlei 4x4 trail, Johann Visagie, owner of Gannaga Lodge, arrives on a motorbike amid a cloud of dust, back from checking the borehole. He points out the easy-to-miss track, a pair of red scars snaking over the plateau amid millions of rocks and tufts of wiry grass. Despite bumpy conditions, we should manage the 20-kilometre trail in half a day. "See you for a beer this afternoon!"

We take Johann's recommended detour "at the bicycle frame hanging on a pole" for a fantastic view of Ou-Langkloof, where arid, iron-rich hillsides tumble into an equally dry riverbed under a cloudless sky. We pass a fat snake track, likely a puffadder's. Molehills carpet the plateau, as if these Roggeveld Mountains are made of them. If this snake is any sort of hunter, it should be enormous.

Back on the rock-strewn main trail, our suspension and grab handles work overtime as herds of mountain zebra and gemsbok shimmer like desert mirages. Grey-winged francolin and Ludwig's bustard poke around brittle scrub and dozens of kestrels soar overhead.

I'm testing a preview of Peter Slingsby's new Tankwa map, following along as we jolt and jostle past Ystervarkkloof, Trekhoek, Vensterpunt, Potkop and so on. The trail is fairly level, but we pass within metres of epic drops and forever views to the valley below. In a few places, I get out to scout our line between boulders. The trickiest section ▶

Tankwa Karoo National Park lies 325 km northwest of Cape Town.





Large-billed lark, one of several LBJs that will test you.

veers downslope over a steep rock slab where we strategically set a few stones to ensure adequate clearance. From the bottom of the obstacle, I tentatively gesture where the wheels should roll as my partner, Ashley, drives.

Later he says, "I follow your hands for direction and your face for speed." Apparently, I pull some worrying expressions.

In a little over three hours we're back at Gannaga. Our throats burn from the oven-dry air and ache for a beer with Johann but, instead, we make the 60-kilometre roundtrip to Middelpoort for petrol. Mercifully, the gravel road now feels as luxurious as silk pyjamas.

On the way back, a few stray raindrops splatter the windscreen, becoming more voluptuous as we descend Gannaga Pass. Rain in this long-parched land smells intensely sweet and earthy.

Ahead, a ball of fur scuttles across the road. We pull up next to the fluffball, now perched on a rock and recognisable as a black-backed jackal pup, no bigger than a rugby ball. The pup, oblivious to us, looks around in bewilderment as the spitting escalates to full-blown shower, undoubtedly the first to wet this youngster's pelt. Roaring thunder breaks the powerful quiet of the Karoo and, instinctively, the pup stands up, shakes off and heads for its den.

At headquarters, we check in to confirm our safe return from Watervlei. I ask the staffer on duty, "When was the last time it rained here?"

"I don't remember!" she says with a grin. Section ranger Hennie Delpoort elaborates, "It hasn't rained like this since September last year." The rain is now a downpour, hammering the roof. I tell Hennie we're tackling Leeueberg 4x4 Trail in the morning. He says, "Good luck! The roads get chaotic when it rains!"

Tankwa's 4x4 routes are part of the park's agricultural heritage. "The trails are mostly farmers' tracks that we took over and kept open," Hennie says, a theme that echoes through the park. For millennia, Tankwa was the haunt of San hunter-gatherers followed by early nomadic pastoralists. In the 1700s, Tankwa became a grazing ground for Trekboers' sheep on annual migrations between the Cederberg and Karoo Escarpment. Some farmers settled permanently, but overgrazing took a harsh toll. Today, mud-brick skeletons of homesteads, decomposing more each year, dot the lunar-like landscape. Even from the comfy stoep of De Zyfer, a century-old, restored farmhouse, it's hard to imagine choosing to settle here.

But as a national park, Tankwa succeeds beautifully. From its declaration in 1986 at ▶

1 Tackling the hills on the Leeueberg 4x4 Trail. 2 Take a compressor as the gravel road leading to the park is notorious for chewing tyres. 3 Black-backed jackal pup experiencing its first rain. 4 After a downpour, the park's gravel roads turn into rivers. 5 The rugged track that leads down the Elandsberg 4x4 Trail. 6 Karoo girdled lizard on the Leeueberg 4x4 Trail.





Explore further

Mountain biking is allowed in the immediate vicinity of booked overnight accommodation. Guests can also explore roads on foot.

Rain in this long-parched land smells intensely sweet and earthy.

a humble 270 square kilometres, the park has expanded, adding former farms to cover 1 460 square kilometres that protect a vital slice of a unique, arid biodiversity hot spot, the Succulent Karoo, packed with endemic plants.

It's still overcast in the morning as we set off for Leeuberg in the park's northwest corner. We pass an incongruous-looking porcupine, ambling across an empty expanse of burnished gravel. When we reach the trailhead, we're delighted to find smoother driving conditions than Water-vlei's relentless boulder fields. As the cloud burns off, we soon discover Leeuberg's challenge is the incline.

The 11-kilometre trail cuts unapologetically up and over a series of impressive hills. It feels scarier than it really is, but I'm thankful to have an automatic transmission. The most nerve-rattling part comes when the 4x4 crawls over a hill's crest, nothing but blue sky visible over the long bonnet. Luckily, I decide to get out to check which way the road descends. Sharp left!

The landscape transforms along the one-way, eastward route. From a barely vegetated gravel field, we transition to a shrubland daubed with tangled bushes of pastel purples, golds and dusty greens, dotted with springbok, gemsbok and mountain zebra. We emerge at Rooivlei, an impassable clayey mess after yesterday's rain.

A detour through Blinkvleivlakte gets us to the stylish Elandsberg Wilderness Camp. As we arrive, so does a second thunderstorm. Lightning performs a mesmerising dance ▶

How wild is that!

This panoramic sunset view makes the drive up the Elandsberg 4x4 Trail more than worth the bumps.

Colourful succulents dot the Tankwa's otherworldly landscapes.



across the amphitheatre formed by the distant Roggeveld Mountains.

The weather clears before sunset, so we decide to tackle Tankwa's remaining 4x4 route, Elandsberg, thinking the 4,1-kilometre shot to the top of the mountain will be easy compared to Watervlei and Leeueberg. Despite a smooth start, the trail proves both steep and rocky. It's

slow going, climbing what looks and feels like a decaying marble staircase paved in iron cannon balls. We arrive at the peak minutes before sunset, our extra effort rewarded with the most spectacular view of the park yet.

Tankwa Karoo may be off the beaten track, the 4x4 trails even less travelled, but it's well worth going the extra distance. 🐾

Elandsberg Wilderness Cottages offer stunning views, interesting architecture and plunge pools.



TRIP PLANNER

CONSERVATION FEES R40 an adult, R20 a child, valid *Wild Card* members free.

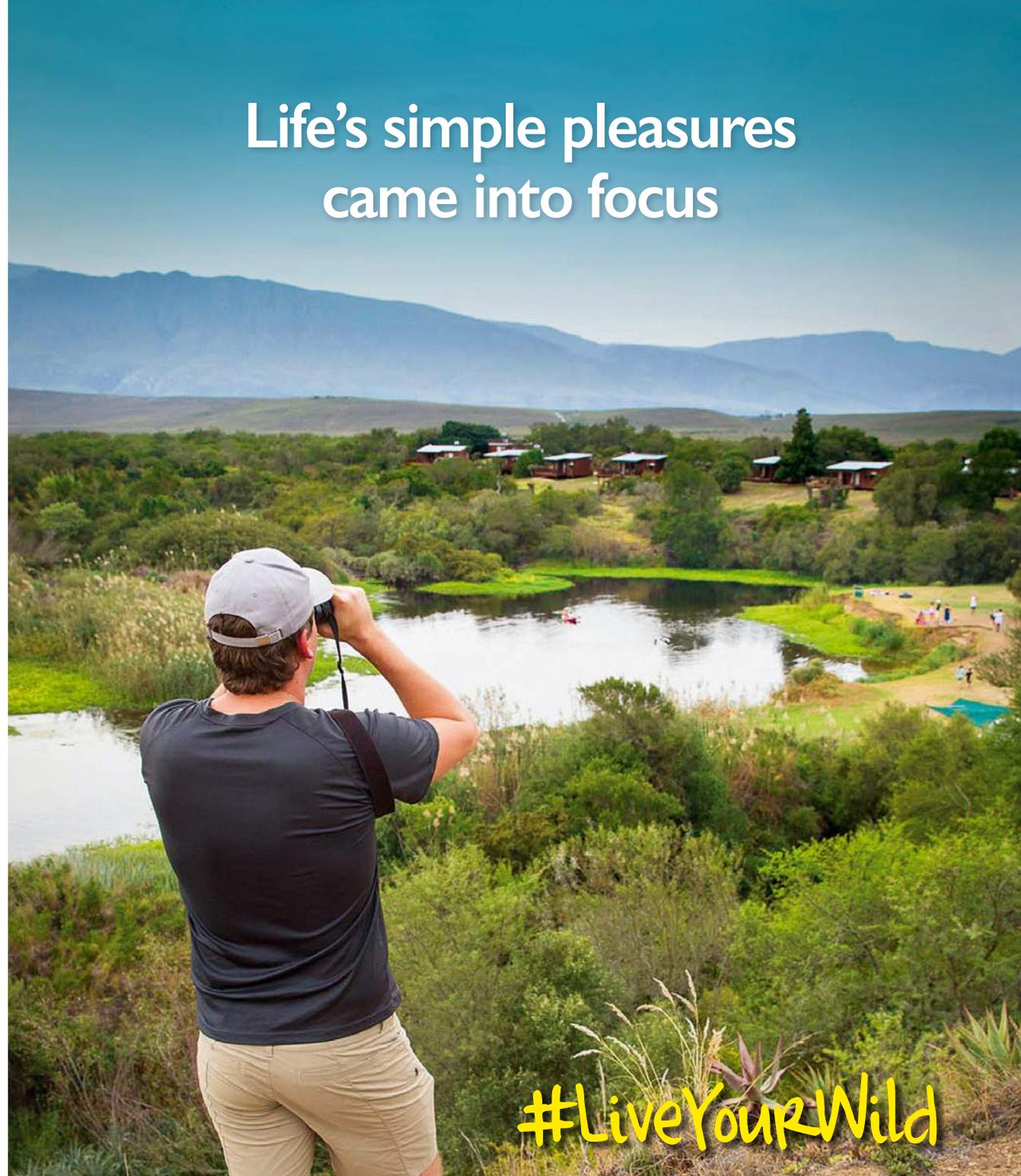
ACCOMMODATION Elandsberg Wilderness Camp cottages cost from R1270 a night for four people. Tanqua Guesthouse near Oudebaaskraal Dam is from R730 a night for two while restored farmhouses are from R730 a night for two plus R260 for an additional adult. Campsites with private bathrooms and kitchenettes from R315 a night for two, and sites catering to self-sufficient, leave-no-trace campers R125 a night for two.

GOOD TO KNOW Electricity and mobile reception are scarce. Bring water and food. The borehole water tastes brackish and there is no shop. The privately owned Gannaga Lodge serves food by prior arrangement. Plan carefully for fuel. Diesel is available in the park, but the nearest petrol is in Middelpoos, 50 km from park headquarters.

VEHICLE GEAR Spare tyre, puncture repair kit and compressor are mandatory. In preparing for the trip, I repeatedly read to "watch out for sharp gravel". Despite "watching out", we ruined two tyres on the R355. Later, I learnt the key to preventing punctures is reducing tyre pressure.

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