

Rooibos on Route 62



South Africa's Cederberg region entices visitors with Bushman rock art, colonial lodgings,... and its famous Redbush. Cindy-Lou Dale hits the road in search of the perfect tea time.

Cup of Redbush tea, sir, madam? The cabin attendant repeats the query as she pushes her trolley down the aisle of the South African Airways flight from JFK. I hold my cup out for a final refill as the plane descends to Cape Town.

After whisking through baggage and customs, I am handed the keys to my 4x4 – a crisp, white, chunky-looking Toyota Fortuner 3.0-liter D-4D. After my camera assistant Heather finds a gear she likes, makes a couple of bronco lurches, and a lively but unintended salutation of the windshield wipers, we take to the open road.

The Fortuner is rather fabulous, with all the whistles and bells required by any petrol head.

The only thing we need though, it does not have: a GPS. Fortunately, Heather's husband had carefully noted down the exact route we needed to follow, which we dutifully ignore and get ourselves lost.

Trying to find someone to direct us, we approach a village that overflows with hawkers selling rough-hewn stools and chairs and women grilling maize cobs on smoky braziers. The sharp-sweet smell of the maize instantly brings back childhood memories, as it speaks much of life on the African roadside. I approach a vendor for directions and

lunch. Following an exchange of coins and a few words, she looks over my shoulder at the shiny Fortuner and its blued-out windows.

"I am very sad today," she announces. "My van, she is an old one. She has been my friend for many years – right from the time we first came to the Cape. And now she is like an old cow standing under a tree waiting for the end to come." Her eyes moisten around the edges, as those of one who has looked too long into the smoke of a wood fire. Her husband appears brightly from somewhere, cutting her off. He raises a finger and points at the Fortuner, as if pointing to the source of his inspiration.

"This car is what we will buy Beauty."

he says, turning to his distraught wife. "This car, she is good. I have read what the newspapers they say of her."

While the engine ticks itself cool, he tells me of Toyota's history in South Africa, explaining that it is as much part of the country's culture as rugby, BBQs, and sunny skies.

The Fortuner is Toyota's cheapest SUV. Its frame is based on that of a pickup, but the styling is soft, with no 4x4 toughness showing through. It has true off-road ability, thanks to four-wheel drive with low-range gearing. It has loads of legroom and space for five adults and two kids. As such, its value-packed price has attracted families rather than off-road junkies.

This unit produces 163 b.h.p., but more importantly 35 k.g.m. of torque, since it has to shift the Fortuner's



Getting There, Getting Around

Celebrating its 76th birthday, award-winning South African Airways is one of the oldest airlines in the world. It operates one of the most technologically advanced fleets on the globe and delivers American travelers from JFK to Cape Town on a direct flight.

The Cederberg region is a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Cape Town, depending on which route you take. The direct route is on the N7 highway north, heading towards Namibia. Look for signs to the towns of Citrusdal and Clanwilliam. The scenic route, which would add an hour to your journey, is along the R27, past Bloubergstrand, the West Coast National Park, Langebaan, and onto Veldrif, where you'll take the R399 to Piketberg to join the N7.

The main roads of the Cederberg are tarred, but many of the attractions are on gravel roads. You don't need a 4x4, however; these roads are easily negotiated in a standard sedan car.



considerable 1.8-ton bulk. This engine is mated to a five-speed manual gearbox, with the option of four-wheel drive. Steering is precise and does not make the Fortuner feel like a truck. In fact, every time I turn the steering wheel, I feel certain I am drawing a line through physics. Even with its girth and height, there are no maneuvering issues. There's no denying it, the Fortuner is a bully car. It's imposing and sits high off the ground on 17-inch wheels, so it's a bit of a climb – but worth the view.

Happy with his introduction to the SUV (which included a short drive),

the deal is sealed: Toyota is to receive another excited customer, and I have directions to my destination.

A short 80-minute drive on Route 62 west of Cape Town (in other words, the opposite direction we had been traveling) delivers us to the elegant Rijk's Country House in Tulbagh, the heart of South Africa's wine lands. A graceful five-star establishment encased in Iceberg roses, Rijk's offers an incomparable experience with remarkable attention to detail and service levels to match.

Surrounded by some of the world's best wine estates, Rijk's looks the

part. Snow-white Cape Dutch architecture in what look like rows of converted farm buildings are, in fact, 15 individual suites with sumptuous interiors in muted shades of cream and white and African accents. Each has a private terrace overlooking a river and vineyard. There are also three family villas on the opposite bank (rates are ZAR1,400, or about \$172, per person, including breakfast).

Hunched over by the Witzenberg Mountains and lined with gnarled old oaks and a wealth of Cape Dutch-style buildings, the rustic and rural

village of Tulbagh is home to eccentric artists and historians who spend their lives observing village life from beneath their wide eaves. With craft and art browsing, a world-renowned wine-tour, wine estate "night harvest" dinners, and a privately owned Big Five game reserve, Tulbagh offers something for everyone.

I push at the protesting door of an interesting-looking antique shop. It is stuffed with owls – their eyes gold-tinged and their wings forever spread. The only light emanates from an old-fashioned green-enamel coolie hat cowering in the corner. Its glow of

despair matches the mood of the elderly couple sitting beneath it. They are squabbling quietly. The argument seems to focus on lunch.

"But you didn't even ask if I wanted any," he says, gazing critically at a graveyard of chicken bones. The complaint is immediately contradicted by his wife, who speaks in the unmistakable tones of a veteran contradictor. Perhaps they remained married out of sheer spite, Heather notes.

Chicken bones get me thinking of dinner possibilities. I ask the owner of a neighboring junk shop for a recommendation. She is witchlike, bedecked in armloads of clacking, heavy jewelry – copper, tortoise shell, adamantite. It pleases her, she claims in a voice that grows suitably dramatic, to see visitors come to her country.

"They all seem to fall head over heels in love with my country. And why should they not? The world is a sad enough place and it needs a few points of light, a few places in which people could find comfort." And if South Africa is one of these places, then she is proud of that. "If only more people knew that there is more to Africa than all the problems they see on television."

An evening meal at the picturesque Paddagang Restaurant in Tulbagh's town center is an experience of

traditional Boland cuisine. The interior is intimate and atmospheric with yellowwood tables and immense fireplaces. We choose to dine under the full moon and trestled vines.

We are guided to our table by a large woman of an institutional kind now obsolete, yet once found in every hospital wearing a white uniform, starched veil, and sensible shoes with a watch pinned to her rigidly starched breast. Her attentive service assures us a feast of Bobotie and Waterblommetjie Bredie, berry pie dessert – all tastes of the Cape served with generous portions of Afrikaans hospitality (dinner for two was ZAR275, or about \$37, including a bottle of wine).

A few miles beyond Tulbagh is Ceres, another picture-postcard fruit-growing town in a peaceful valley shadowed by the Schurweberg Mountains. I am to meet a chap from Ceres Zipline Adventures, who promises me "an awesome eco-adventure," the longest ziplide tour in Africa, one that would take me across amazing rock formations and rivers.

The mere notion of me, an African lady in a traditional generous mould, suspended hundreds of feet off the ground from a thin rope trestle scares me – and why I accepted the offer still evades me. My mind rationalizes the

prospect: It would be useful, I tell Heather. I am not quite sure in what way, but I am sure to learn something from it. While I am being harnessed, I conclude that this is going to be the way I die. I spend a few moments thinking about my will, then, in an air of finality, I step off the cliff to my death.

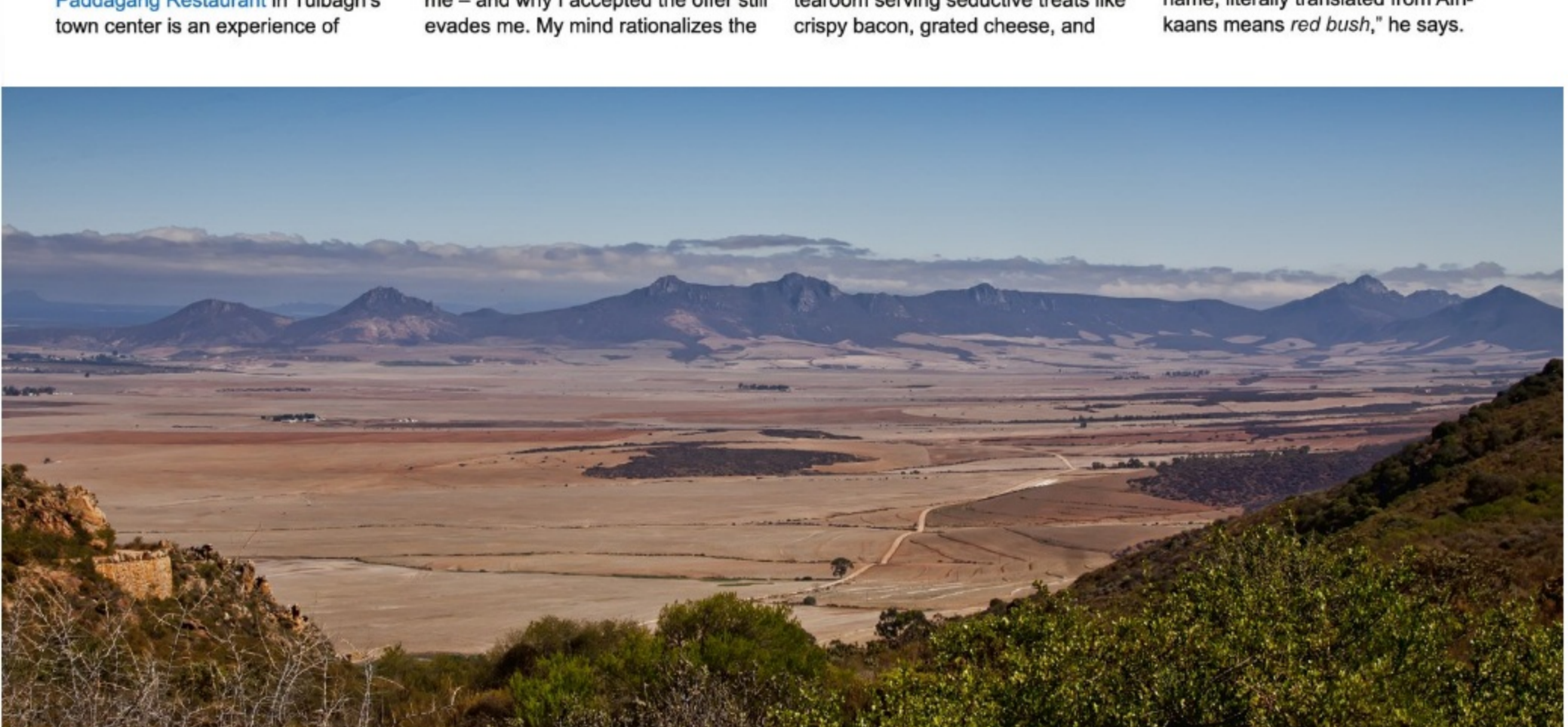
Instead, I fly across the dense forest, flailing wildly. I'm definitely no adrenalin junkie, as one 12-year-old zipliner helpfully points out to his dad before strutting off speaking of further fearsome things done in the great outdoors.

Afterwards, a local suggests a visit to the Tolhuis, which, as the name suggests, historically extracted a "fee of passage" from pioneering farmers driving their ox wagons over the mountains.

Today, instead of a tollbooth, the winding Mitchell's Pass offers an enticing diversion in the flavor of spectacular views from a quaint tearoom serving seductive treats like crispy bacon, grated cheese, and

onion marmalade breakfast rolls, washed down with a cup of Redbush tea (ZAR25/\$3.30). Be sure you leave with a keeapsake tin mug embellished with a Cape Baboon to remind you of great South African hospitality.

The idea of tea made from a bush fascinates me. Reint Grobler, co-proprietor of Tolhuis, tells me of its history. "Rooibos, to use its South African name, literally translated from Afrikaans means red bush," he says.



"Historically, it was used by the Khoisan Bushmen as herbal medicine and later by the Malay slaves, brought to the Cape by the Dutch settlers. It was later commercialized by Wupperthal's missionaries, who saw that the Malays were making a tasty and aromatic drink by fermenting the leaves of the bush. Since then, Redbush has played a large part in everyday South African life, with many scientific

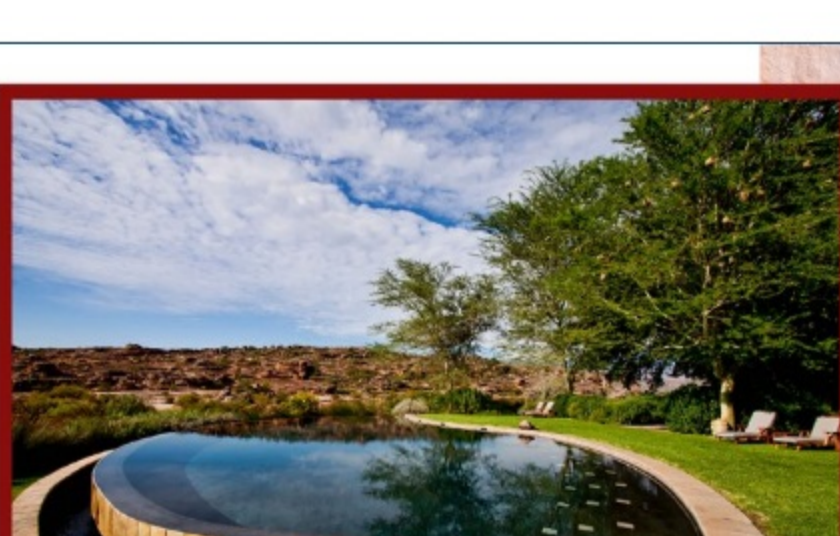
studies being made of its health-giving properties."

I consider my cup. The red drink has a distinctive aroma and clean, refreshing taste. It is a sweet, slightly nutty tea, hugely popular in Western countries, particularly among health-conscious consumers, who appreciate its high level of antioxidants, its lack of caffeine, and its extremely low tannin levels.

Redbush tea is only grown in the raw, rugged beauty of the immense Cederberg mountain range, which is tacked onto the hem of South Africa's west coast. It's a 100-kilometer-long floral kingdom (and living art gallery of Khoisan Bushman rock paintings) that, from July to September, erupts into colorful swathes of Namaqualand daisies and other wildflowers. With their orange peaks and crisp air, the

Cederberg Mountains provide the perfect environment for the unique health-enhancing Redbush tea plant – the only place on earth it is found.

"Take a drive out to Wupperthal," says Reint, his eyes burning bright and sharp, like the eyes of an old rooster and a secret untold. "It's a historical village established on the outskirts of the Cederberg region. Only first-grade Redbush is grown there."



I scribble down directions and head towards Clanwilliam. There, I spend the night at the exclusive Bushmans Kloof Wilderness Reserve, an internationally acclaimed, 16-room, five-star haven to wellness and indulgence. Rates start at ZAR3,050, or about \$375, per person.

At dawn, I fire up the Fortuner and edge along a paprika-colored mountain road to Wupperthal, found 27 kilometers beyond Clanwilliam in the remote Tra-Tra Valley. The town dates back to 1830 and was established by German Rhenish missionaries Baron Theobald von Wurm and Johann Gottlieb Leipoldt, a

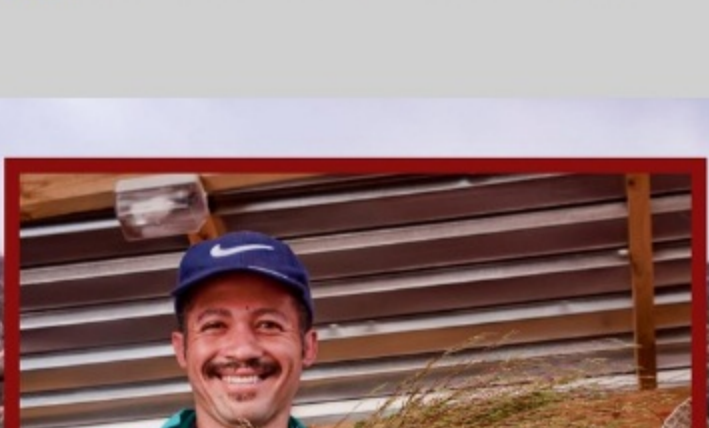
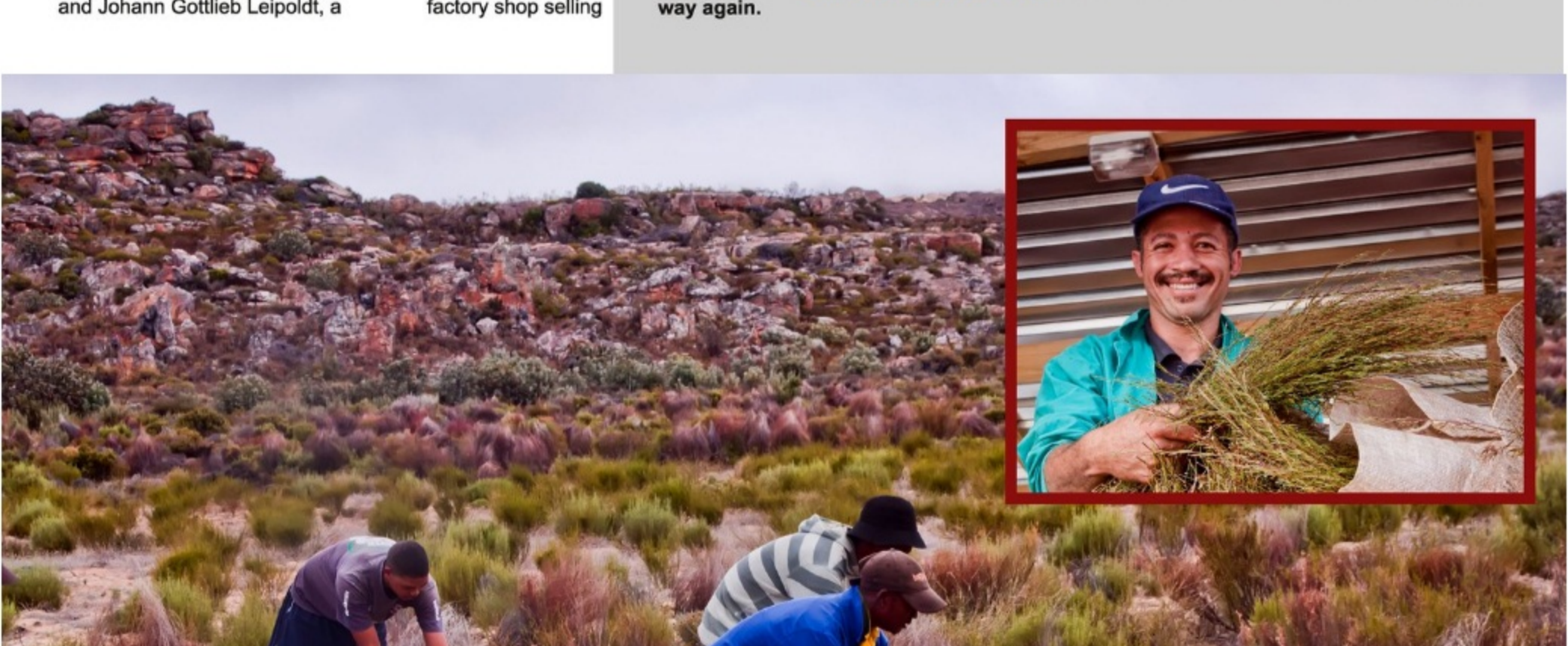
shoemaker by trade and grandfather of famous South African poet Louis Leipoldt.

In fact, the shoe factory is still in operation. In the heat, the Bougainvillea appear to wobble bright blossoms over the white-washed houses. Other than a few historical buildings, a bakery, grocer, and a Redbush Tea factory shop selling



Exploring the Cederberg

A self-drive tour of the Cederberg must include a visit to the Algeria Forest Station, a popular for hiking, picnicking, and camping, a swim at the Maalgat rock pools, and a trip over the scenic Pakhuis Pass to the Sevilia Rock Art Trail, and, in season, the Bleudouw Valley for the flower displays. Continue via the Englishman's grave to Wupperthal mission village. On the way back, visit Heuningvlei mission village, poet Louis Leipoldt's grave, and the Soldier's Head. Also consider the Redbush tea farm safaris at Elandsberg Eco-Reserve. You'll never look at a Rooibos latte the same way again.



tea lotions and soaps, I find a fabulous little tearoom. The Lekkerbekkie Tee-kamer serves the best chicken pie you are ever likely to find. But it is the Redbush Tea factory that draws me.

"It's still made in exactly the same way as it was by the Malays," explains Brian Salomo of Wupperthal's Original Small Farms Co-operative. "And it's still the only herbal tea produced using a simple fermentation process."

"Rooibos soil is not fertilized," he

continues. "Our tea bushes grow here in the Cederberg Wilderness Area without interference from man. Within a year of planting, the bush is ready for its first harvest. The leaves, harvested by hand, are cut, put through the bruising machine to ferment, spread out in long heaps in our drying yards, sprayed with water, and left overnight. In the morning, the tea is spread out to dry under the hot sun before being bagged and taken to

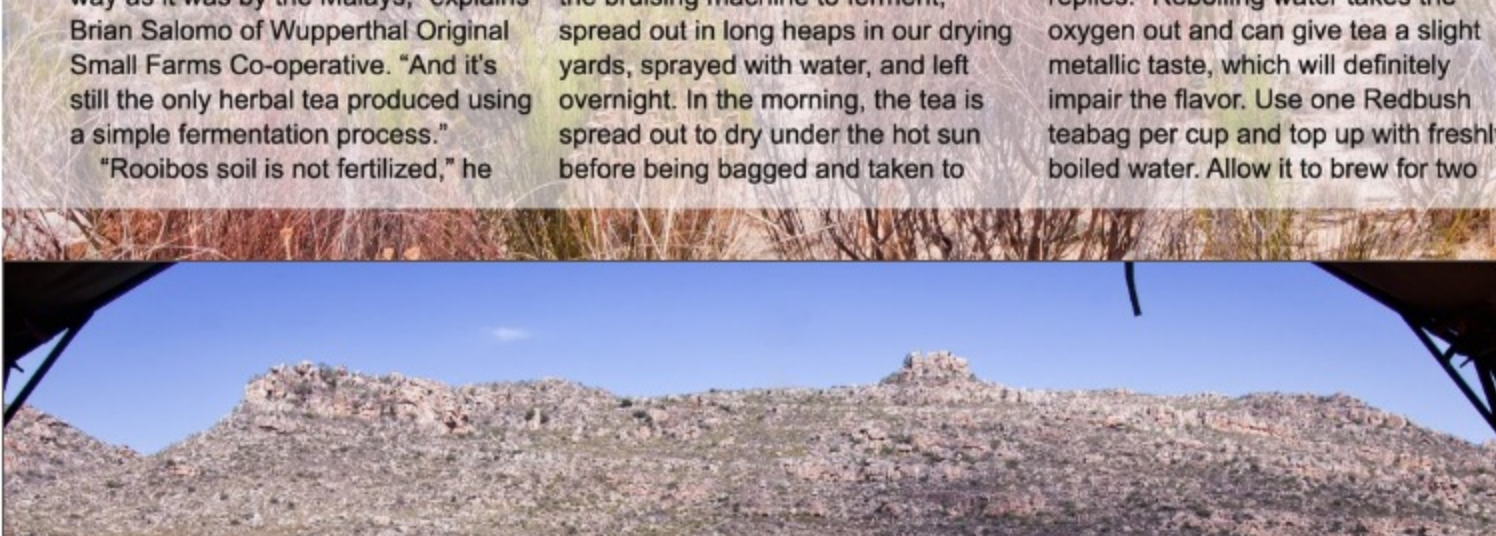
be graded, pasteurized, packaged, and exported."

I contemplate this, then ask Brian how he would suggest I make the perfect cup of Redbush tea.

"Always boil fresh water," he replies. "Reboiling water takes the oxygen out and can give tea a slight metallic taste, which will definitely impair the flavor. Use one Redbush teabag per cup and top up with freshly boiled water. Allow it to brew for two

to five minutes, then serve on its own or sweeten it with honey or sugar. Add a slice of lemon if you like. If you take your Redbush with milk, put the milk into your cup after the tea. If you're making a pot of tea, put milk into the cup first as this will avoid scalding the fats in the milk."

I am tempted by the offer of humble Wupperthal accommodations but opt instead to return to Citrusdal to experience "glamping" – luxury safari-tent



lodgings at Karukareb, a four-star colonial lodge set in an organic orange orchard I'd driven past. Other than the remote rock-pool picnic lunch, a superb dinner under thatch created by Chef Shaun Taljaard, and rock-star service, I am made to feel welcome and at home. Rates start at ZAR1,270, or about \$156, per person.

With a three-hour drive back to Cape Town, we leave before sunrise. After consuming all the sandwiches and snacks packed by Chef Taljaard, we lapse into a comfortable silence as the road uncurls before us.

We stop in a village in search of additional sustenance and fuel. Tractors coughing to life and people in the act of creating food and chickens crowing and stretching, tumbling out of their roosts.

We listen to the sweet sound of a choir – children's voices rising through the branches of tall birch trees. They are singing an old African hymn, one everyone knows, a song that has inspired and comforted so many. *Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika – God bless Africa, give her life, watch over her children.*

It is then, while sipping my Styrofoam cupped Redbush Latte, I come to the realization that no matter where I live, my heart would always belong to Africa. **AT**

