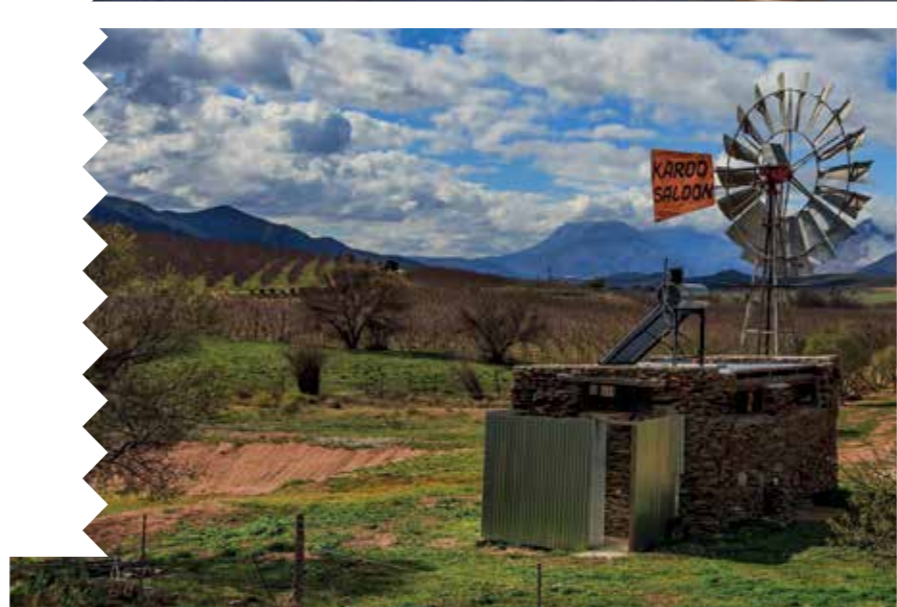




IN PRAISE OF PADSTALLE

Route 62 is South Africa's answer to Australia's Outback, to America's Arizona Desert. Set back from the renowned Garden Route, few visitors have heard of it, let alone driven it – making it one of the least travelled highways in the country. It is dotted with *padstalle* serving home-bakes like *koeksusters* (small plaited pastries, deep fried then marinated in syrup), buttermilk rusks and farm produce, whilst others host frontier bars serving moonshine, biltong, *dröewors* and Nik-Naks corn bites. It's a journey undertaken by the most adventurous of long-distance road-trippers... and one that gives a glimpse of life in the Karoo

WORDS AND PICTURES: **CINDY-LOU DALE**



Top right: Rusks and rooibos, a Karoo staple

Left: Karoo Services. A roadside loo with a view

Below (both): At Bella de Karoo, Estelle Sinclair has converted a farm labourer's cottage into a particularly delightful roadside shop and cafe



Back in the day a South African *padstal* (roadside store) was a sad affair: a rickety shed standing forlornly on the side of a deserted road; the wares displayed on a grubby laminate counter no more than three aged apples, perhaps a bunch of blackening bananas, and in the interior gloom the downcast face of customer service. Now, however, they're bespoke, filled with local produce and run by funky artisans.

There is a crazy mystique about visiting an isolated padstal as all reflect the people who live there, what they produce on their farm and, often, what makes them laugh. They each have their own eccentric flavour and style, mostly selling a bit of everything.

Head east out of Cape Town on a road that extends some 620-miles towards East London. One of the first frontier bars you'll encounter, about 10 miles before the darling little town of Barrydale, is the Karoo Saloon – a rock roadhouse to the core, popular with bikers. Here you start off by asking for some Stafrænn Hákon music, order up a kudu pot pie, a shot of moonshine, then kick back for the better part of the day.

On the other side of Barrydale is the legendary Ronnie's Sex Shop, billed the oddest pub in Africa. Frequented by stone-eyed bikers, progressive hippies and weekend warriors, who all settle in behind a cold adult milkshake (peanut butter and Jack Daniels is a crowd pleaser), discuss slow travel, and leave a bit cooler than when they first arrived. The 'stuck in the grill' menu options at their Roadkill Café is equally interesting.

Between Calitzdorp and Oudtshoorn there's Bella de Karoo, one of the most memorable frontier roadside stores you'll encounter. Sitting on the front stoep, surrounded by her adorable farm dogs, is Estelle Sinclair who's watching 'Airforce One', the farm cockerel demonstrating his flying prowess. Rooibos tea and *melktert* arrive and soon talk turns to the conservation of the land, the plants, and the animals on it. She points out a hut visible on a distant hill of Andrieskraal, her family farm, one of the most historic farms in the Karoo.

"It was once a hunting lodge," Estelle explains, "but now serves only as an opportunity to observe the beauty of →



And there it is, Zebra-licious, a shabby little padstal built in part of brick, reeds, concrete and corrugated iron, serving fresh scones with home-made jam, venison pies and warm, straight-out-the-oven, rusks



nature. When lying on the bed, splay your toes like this," she holds out her hand, stretching her fingers, "and you can see across the Lategan valley and watch the kudus, with their magnificent spiral horns, grazing peacefully."

The padstal itself, housed in an old labourer's cottage, is simply and exquisitely filled with a sumptuous variety of edible delights, hand-crafted clothes, jewellery, toys and household items of the Laura Ashley kind.

Driving towards Graaff-Reinet, through a crowd-lonely landscape so vast you can see the curvature of the earth, you'll come across a hand-drawn sign hanging askew off a wooden post announcing cake is to be had 500m ahead. And there it is, Zebra-licious, a shabby little padstal built in part of brick, reeds, concrete and corrugated iron, serving fresh scones with home-made jam, venison pies and warm, straight-out-the-oven, rusks.

Zebra-licious' owner, successful restaurateur Linda Coelho, delivers Portuguese-Karoo fusion cuisine to long trestle tables, whilst kids play outside in the on-site play park. Mozambique-born Linda describes the Karoo as a sacred space filled with authentic life experiences.

Beyond Graaff-Reinet, on the fringe of Nieu-Bethesda, a tiny mountain village where nothing much happens, is Tot Hier Toe Padstal, a quaint and colourful trading store filled with everything you didn't know you needed. Owners Chrissie Swarts and Riel Malan stock the place with gorgeous craft items and rustic staples like ginger beer, venison pies, traditional pastries, the best rusks you've ever tasted, and preserves infused with floral fragrance.

Chrissie pulls up a chair and dips a warm rusk into her mug of tea. "You don't just 'happen upon' Nieu-Bethesda. To reach us you need to traverse the forbidding Sneeuwberg mountains, perilous with tight bends and sheer drops from



Top main image: It's not what it says on the tin.

Above: Dolly, the Milkart Queen of Daggaboer

Far left: Zebra-licious, home of the freshest scones and rusks

Left: Diesel+Creme, just outside Barrydale



Above:
Driving country.
The expansive
farming lands of
the Karoo

Left and below:
Chrissie Swarts
offers a friendly
welcome at Tot
Hier Toe padstal
near Nieu-
Bethesda



unimaginable heights. This is an outback village like nothing you've seen before; populated with former city slickers who all abandoned the fast life for one of platteland seclusion. For decades nothing much has ever happened here, other than donkey-carts criss-crossing the gravel roads. Then playwright Athol Fugard wrote *The Road to Mecca* and overnight we're on everyone's travel bucket list."

Set off for the frontier town of Cradock, driving through authentic one-horse towns, along barrel-straight roads that border the desolate beauty of immense stretches of farmland.

Just 30 miles south of Cradock is Daggaboer farmstall, another firm favourite of Karoo travellers, and one of the best in the country. Here they're known for their fresh *roosterkoek* (grilled cake), strong farm coffee, homemade pies, kick-in-the-pants ginger beer, moist biltong, everything sheepskin and mohair related and Karoo lavender products.

Isobel Neethling explains the story behind the unique name which implies they grow 'weed'. She claims there to be several official reasons for the name, but the one she prefers harks back to the 1800s: "The first owners of the farm - the Trollips - were licenced to grow marijuana (*dagga*) as a crop. In those days the plant was completely legal and a sought-after supplement for horse feed as it gave the transport horses extra stamina needed to cover long distances."

Whilst she serves a thick wedge of what will become your favourite padstal tea accompaniment, ask Dolly, the Milkart Queen at Daggaboer, about her most memorable happening. She may relay the story of the butt-naked man who parked at the back of the farmstall and walked into her kitchen. He introduced himself as Adam, explaining that he was looking for Eve.

Seasoned travellers claim that combing through these quaint shops is the quickest way to truly understand the old-time platteland. If it's done right, a long-haul padstal-crawl is a thing of beauty, a veritable playground to burn money and become a biltong guru. 🐾