

LOCAL GETAWAY

# OUTTSHOORN: THE FEATHER IN SA'S CAP

From ostrich safaris to meerkat adventures to lazing at a luxury guest farm, the Klein Karoo's main hub is a rare treat. By Sanet Oberholzer



The breathtaking Outeniqua Pass. Pictures: Sanet Oberholzer

As you drive over the velvety green Outeniqua Pass and make your way to Oudtshoorn, the landscape starts to drastically change. The sound of the ocean and sights of coastal foliage give way to the arid semi-desert climate of the Klein Karoo. Here, the world still has that old-timey feel.

Oudtshoorn was built on the ostrich feather industry. Between 1875 and 1880, ostrich feathers cost up to £1,000 a pair. The boom peaked in 1913 and is believed to have collapsed in 1914 because hats decorated with ostrich feathers could not fit into modern cars with roofs.

As fashion trends change, so, too, do acceptable tourism practices. Today, a stop at an ostrich farm no longer means a chance to ride one of these giant birds.

A tour of Safari Ostrich Farm will lead you straight to the stars of the show. Enjoy a neck massage from Suzy the Stripper – so named for her penchant for ripping off buttons. For a handful of food, she willingly offers neck massages as she pecks at your hands from behind your back. She's cheap, if nothing else. Flanked by Jack the Ripper, the two make a formidable pair, but it is the lovely Lady Gaga that caught my eye with her snow-white feathers. We're told she's an albino ostrich and while her feathers are lovely, they apparently do not make for good feather dusters.

Safari is a working ostrich farm. It offers the only "ostrich tractor safari" in South Africa, on which the knowledgeable guides explain all the aspects of ostrich farming, from incubation to adulthood, and hand out food for you to feed to the birds.

Stand on an ostrich egg, learn to tell the difference between real leather and imitation leather, pose for a photo op with ostrich-feather accessories and marvel at the wonders that have been found inside an ostrich's stomach: what they swallow stays inside. It's best to hide your jewels on this tractor trip.

## A MOB OF MEERKATS

For a different kind of animal encounter, a pre-sunrise drive onto the plains outside Oudtshoorn holds a special kind of surprise. The early morning Karoo air has a sharp bite

## Go, Go, Go!

### DE ZEEKOE GUEST FARM

● Accommodation options range from rooms at the main house to secluded cottages with private pool, 2.5km from the main house.

● Rates, including breakfast, are from R680 per person sharing per night in a standard room to R1,850 in a honeymoon room. Private cottages for two cost R1,950 pps. See [capecountryroutes.com](http://capecountryroutes.com).

### MEERKAT ADVENTURES

Meerkat tours last between two to three hours. R660 per person, including coffee, tea, rusks, and informative snippets from an animated guide. No children under 10. Bookings are essential. See [fiveshymeerkats.activitar.com](http://fiveshymeerkats.activitar.com).

### OSTRICH SAFARI

Tours last an hour and are offered daily, departing every hour between 8am and 4pm. Tickets are R146 for adults and R73 for children aged 4 to 14. Tours can be booked online at a cheaper rate.

The experience will take you inside the ostrich breeding and chick-rearing camps on the farm and allows you to interact with the ostriches. If you work up an appetite, end the tour with a hearty meal at the restaurant. See [safariostrich.co.za](http://safariostrich.co.za).



Lady Gaga.

as the sun sleepily emerges on the horizon. We line our chairs up in a semi-circle, take a seat and start the patient wait as my toes freeze.

Soon, a head pops out from a burrow and disappears as quickly as it emerged. Seconds later, a small body blithely slips out. Another face pops up and a few more join until all 11 members of the meerkat family have assembled to bask in the sun.

The responsible members of the meerkat mob stand, poised with hands resting on their tummies, heads urgently moving from side to side to scout for any possible danger. The somewhat sleepy ones stretch in lapsed downward-dog positions and every now and then one falls over, having fallen asleep. It's a case of cuteness overload.

Meerkats are part of the "Shy Five". The other members of the group are the armadillo, armadillo, porcupine and bat-eared fox – all are hard to spot.

Meerkats live in families and mate for life but they're not as adorable as they make themselves out to be: they guard their territory jealously, aren't afraid to attack and can cunningly outwit predators.

Our morning of observing the meerkats was booked through Five Shy Meerkats, a tour company that has been arranging such adventures since 2004.

While the meerkats are not touched or fed by humans, they have become accustomed to having people sit and quietly observe them as they wake from their deep slumber and prepare to take on the day.

After they have warmed their stomachs to get their digestive systems going, they start to quietly slip away, one after another, to begin their day of foraging. Soon they're small sticks in the distance, leaving us to pack up and head back to our cars as we embark on our own hunt for food.

## A SOULFUL ESCAPE

The meerkat adventures are run on a meerkat-conservation site 9km outside Oudtshoorn on the property of De Zeekoe

Guest Farm. Part of the Cape Country Routes portfolio of accommodation and activities (which includes the Safari Ostrich Farm and Five Shy Meerkats), De Zeekoe is a soulful escape.

Between the Outeniqua and Swartberg mountains on the banks of the Olifants River, its rooms are spacious and charming. On a warm summer evening, enjoy a glass of wine on the porch swing. During the winter months, soothe your soul in a large bath (water levels permitting) and melt away in a canopy bed before a wood fire.

Its De Windpomp Restaurant serves up hearty comfort food. Ostrich features abundantly – try ostrich bobotie, a roosterkoek ostrich burger or a succulent ostrich fillet with farm-style vegetables.

A range of treatments can be booked at De Zeekoe's Tranquillity Spa, while

adventurers can get their fill with bike rides, a 5km hiking trail around the farm, canoe escapades and leisurely swims. At night the clear, unspoilt skies welcome eager star gazers.

Unwind from the thrills with a picnic on the river bank or enjoy a local gin or glass of wine from the bar – a selection I found surprisingly pleasing.

If you prefer to go straight to the source, take a drive through the Klein Karoo Wine Route. Arguably the most diverse of South Africa's wine regions, it stretches from Montagu in the west to Outeniqua in the east.

It might sound clichéd but local is lekker. In this sense, it's truly fascinating. You wouldn't expect a host of wine farms around the region, especially not in the midst of a drought.

The experience is very different from the prestigious, more expensive estates in the Cape winelands – here in the Klein Karoo things are more down to earth. Much like the rest of your stay, you might find it makes for pure, unpretentious comfort. In this fast-paced, often superficial world, I can certainly drink to that.

Oberholzer was a guest of Cape Country Routes

## Did You Know?

Ostrich feathers were once SA's fourth-largest export after gold, diamonds and wool.

Source: [oudtshoorn.com](http://oudtshoorn.com)