

MOORDENAARS

Karoo Fun



Words & Pics by Nick Yell

With our coastal trip to Cape Infanta in tatters — no availability due to lack of planning — Annette and I decide to cast about for a farmstay in the Moordenaars Karoo, hoping there are only a few crazy folk like us planning a trip to this hot and dusty region in early October.

As luck would have it, we happen across a brand new venue just 10 km north of Laingsburg on the Moordenaars Karoo dirt track. A new income-generating project by the farmer's son, 24 year-old Izak van der Vyver, it had literally just been listed on Lekkeslaap when I called him. "Yes, I have space for you and am very excited to meet you both," he gushed.

With serendipity working wonders for us just two days ahead of our departure, we quickly round off our work and family projects, get the two old warhorses prepped and start assembling the long list of tools, provisions, food and booze that accompany any self-sufficient, self-catering and self-respecting biker's trip into the boondocks.

Due to the lack of planning brought on by the sudden window of opportunity that presented itself, both the KLR and the DR were not in top-notch condition for the 700km round trip ahead. While checking the DR's oil level I noticed the clutch cable has lost three strands of the roughly nine it had to start with. But with no time to fit a replacement I simply

snip off the loose ends of the broken ones and then cable tie them tight to the remaining cable, ensuring there's enough cable travel so the tie doesn't impede the cable's movement. And with some Q-20 applied to both ends to ensure less friction in the cable housing, I'm done.

Okay, so I do have some old lengths of cable in my tool bag should Plan A fail, but I'm fairly confident it won't. Apart from the normal chain servicing, tyre pressure checking and the general once over I always perform before a long bike ride, I also need to charge the KLR's flat battery, a result of me hitting the kill switch and leaving the ignition on and the light burning for a few hours when I last rode it.

So I apply the car battery charger I recently inherited from my late stepfather's garage and head back inside to pack. When I go to check how it's doing a few hours later, I hear a disquieting, yet soft bubbling sound coming from the battery. It's not hissing and boiling — something my quick internet search tells me would not be a good sign — but I decide to rather disconnect it overnight and charge it for another hour before leaving in the morning.

After a short charge the next day and hearing more bubbling, I disconnect the terminals and the bike starts at the first turn. But as those of you who are less distracted, smarter and more mechanically savvy than me have realised by now (I only discovered this after a proper internet search when we arrived at

our destination later) I'm subjecting you to this long anecdote and exposing my ignorance to save you from making the same mistake.

Motorbike batteries only require between 0.8 and 1.2 amps to charge effectively, whereas my car battery charger I found out when I got home was putting out about three times that amount of current. My only saving grace in this saga was I thought to check on the battery charging progress before going to sleep and not leave it on overnight charge as I'd originally intended. If I hadn't done this I might've been woken by a fairly catastrophic explosion, or at the very least, a completely fried battery. You have been warned!



Last dirt stretch — the uber-scenic Swellendam to Drew dirt track.

Oblivious of the crisis averted, we set off on our 360km back roads trip to Laingsburg the next morning. It's a beautiful late spring day and the twisted dirt track that is the Van der Stel Pass issues us through this mixed farming area of vineyards, citrus, cattle and even a rescued lion (and other assorted orphans) who resides at Cornell's Kop and who daily lets Bot River residents know he's still king of the valley with his magnificent nightly roaring.

There are only so many ways one can enthrall one's self into the Karoo on an adventure bike; and having done most of them numerous times,

it took a lot of map staring last night to eventually trump up a network of dirt and tar less travelled. But there's really only one route for me to Montagu — from where we'll mix things up a bit more — and that's the Koppies-Doringrivier-Scherpenheuvel dirt track and tar mix though Robertson.

With no mud and other sense-of-humour-robbing rock and sand sections to speak of, Annette gives me a smiling thumbs-up when I ask her how she's settling into the saddle, some two thirds of the way to Villiersdorp. But her smile and good humour is short-lived.

Koek en tee – Kloof padstal in Montagu.



Just a kilometre down the road a massive grader is busy reshaping the wetted surface and it's become an obstacle course of note. Large piles of crumbling sand and stone have to be crossed before we can access the 'graded' section, but this too is a loamy minefield as it's yet to be compressed by a steamroller. The look in Annette's eyes tells me I should have known the municipality were going to rain on our parade of unicorns and butterflies today.

Instead of risking any more of her chagrin, I graciously wrest the KLR away from her, do the obstacles and get the bike into a more favourable position 100-metres down the road. With only a few hundred metres to the tar, I'm praying she will manage through the loose stuff; nobody wants to fall so early in the ride, especially someone in her work-jaded state.

Thankfully all goes swimmingly and after taking the Koppies turn-off on the other side of Villiersdorp we're

back into the land of Narnia, twisting through rolling hills, past sparkling dams and budding green vineyards. In an effort to mix things up a bit, I stop outside the Doringrivier Handelshuis, hoping to snag a cup of moer koffie to go with our egg sarmies. As it turns out, this plaas café doesn't serve coffee, but washing down breakfast with a Red Bull is not the end of the world either. We spend a pleasant half-an-hour languishing on a bench on the shaded stoep, revelling in the quiet country atmosphere and thoughts of the meditative ride ahead.

My first time riding through the Moordenaars Karoo was on my Circling the Great Karoo journey in

November 2005. For the book of the same name I delved into the origins of its title and came up with all sort of explanations — there was even one about a sadistic prison warden near Anysrivier who used to chase his prisoners up and down a hill in the searing heat while firing live rounds among them — but the most plausible explanation remains that it is the inhospitable environment, with its mid-forties summer temperatures and less than 100mm of rain per annum, which gave the region its murderous moniker.

Some, however, like Leon Nell (The Great Karoo; Struik, 2008) intimate the name arose after an incident "... in the 1770s where a white overseer

was killed near the Sak River in the north" after which the "...San rose as one, and from Kamieskroon in the west to the Stormberg in the east, farms were ravaged, farmers and their families were murdered..." causing more commandos to be dispatched and "...more San were killed..." as "...the brutal cycle repeated itself."

But this theory is not backed up with hard facts and it's further hard to believe the "San rose as one" because the San were not a cohesive nation that would rise up under one leader; they were a collection of independent clans that did their own thing. And this fact is borne out by the frustrations the harried Boers experienced in having to keep negotiating with different clans as there was no cohesive regional, let alone national, leadership.

I'm thinking these thoughts as we coast up the sublime tar ribbon that spools through the verdure that is the Koo Valley between Montagu and Touws River. Even though I clearly prefer dirt tracks to tar, this was the only way for us to bypass the truck-laden N1 and reach the magical Leeuwenbosch dirt track that connects the R318 to the Touws River gravel road.

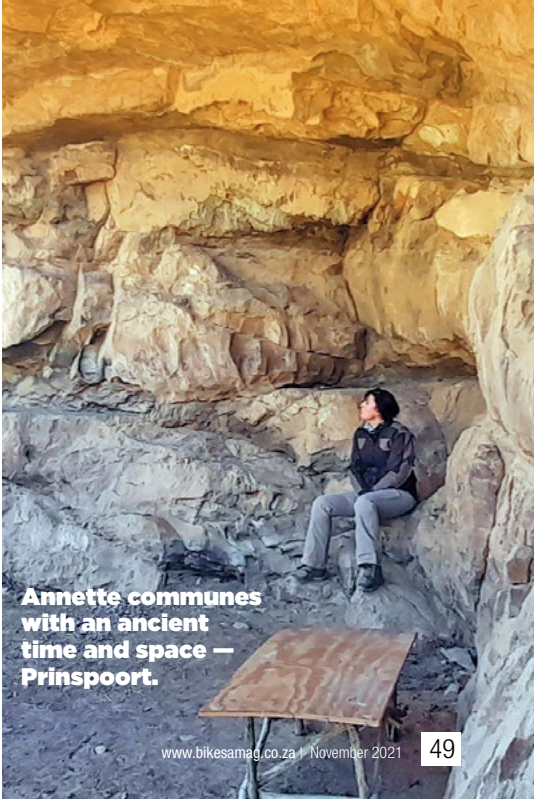
Annette and Ollie en route to the Buffels River on Opzoek Farm.



The old warhorses parked-up in the shaded werf — Opzoek Farm.



Annette communes with an ancient time and space — Prinspoort.



But with epic views over the Koo Valley from the Rooihoogte Pass, riding this blacktop is no big hardship. Soon we are thrumming along the 20km of Leeuwenbosch adventure riding heaven, its range of surfaces and topography accompanied by boundless Karoo space. The last stretch, from the T-Junction along the busier dirt track into Touws River, however, is a bump and grind gravel highway that underlines the need to always seek out secondary dirt tracks, even if you have to wipe the odd sheep off your windscreen every so often.

After topping up with fuel in Touws River — the KLR averaging around 21 km/l and the DR 18.7) we scarper up the unavoidable N1 at great speed (Blouperd tops out at about 160 km/h) towards one of my all-time

favourite Karoo detours, the 62km Witteberge pad.

After 5km of southing, we enter the defiles of this hidden adventure biking nirvana and cruise west on the good gravel surface. One of the things that make this valley special is the lack of fences, making you feel like an early explorer in virgin territory. Another highlight is the range of gnarled and twisted rock formations and pillars about a third of the way in. These evocative sculptures are soon followed by some absorbing riding through a narrow poort after which a lone farmhouse is nestled in what appears to be bucolic bliss.

But the relative fertility of this valley halts abruptly about halfway through. It's as though a giant

guillotine fell from the heavens one day, demarcating where the rains should fall and where not. Yet this dryness adds a little sand and spice to the ride and soon we are climbing out of the valley before descending again to the R323, 5km south of Laingsburg.

After topping up the bikes with fuel and securing a few cold beers, we make our way out of town and hook a right just after the Buffels River bridge into the Moordenaars Karoo. 6.5 km later, after crossing another bridge over the Buffels River, I wait up for Annette at the turn-off to Opzoek farm. While waiting I reflect on how quickly things went pear-shaped back in 1981 when the Buffels River became a raging torrent that all but wiped out Laingsburg in the terrible floods that followed. It's an event well summed up by the venerable and credible internet portal, www.sahistory.org.za :



Johanna and Christiaan van der Vyver met die 'kerk bakkie.'

"425mm of rain fell on 24 and 25 January 1981 causing the Buffalo River that flows North-south through the town to burst its banks. The force of the water was so immense that victims' bodies were found as far away as Mossel Bay. Ten of the survivors were rescued 21km away at the Floriskraal Dam. Outside relief teams only reached

Laingsburg 24 hours later as all the bridges leading to the town were blocked."

It's pretty much guaranteed that the last few kilometres of an adventure bike ride; when you're tired, thirsty and the light is fading, will be the most challenging. And the 3km ride into Opzoek's werf proves no different as we cross a number of rocky drifts and power our way along the twee-spoor through sand and scree towards boots-off time and a cold beer.

The Leeuwenbosch dirt track combines great riding and scenery.



First roadside pit-stop — Doringrivier Handelshuis.

TRAVEL NOTES

Day 1:
Bot River to Opzoek Farm (in the Moordenaars Karoo, 10 km north of Laingsburg): via Van der Stel Pass; Koppies; Doringrivier; Robertson; Montagu; the Koo Valley, the Leeuwenbosch dirt track; Touws River; the Witteberge detour and Laingsburg. Distance Day 1: 361km; around 206km (57%) on dirt tracks.

Day 3:
Opzoek Farm to Bot River : via Laingsburg, Rooinek Pass; Anyenberg; Outol Pass; Prinspoort; Plathuis; R62 to Barrydale; Tradouw's Pass; Swellendam; Drew; Klipdrift; Stormsvlei and Caledon. Distance Day 3: 342 km, about 123km (36%) on dirt tracks.

Total Distance Travelled:
703 kilometres over 2 day's riding — 329 km (47%) on dirt.

Experience required:
Beginner

Best time of year to go:
April to September

Route highlights:
Leeuwenbosch dirt track; the Witteberge pad; the short farm track; the farm-stay; Plathuis dirt track through Prinspoort and the Swellendam to Klipdrift back road.

What I'd do differently next time:
Ride up to the old Klipstoor on Opzoek Farm.

What it cost me:
Accom: R1200 - 2 pax. Petrol, food, drinks etc.: R 1,550. Total: R 2,750 *(This doesn't take into account maintenance/running expenses of R0.80/km for each bike.)

Accommodation
Opzoek Farm — call/Whats App Izak on 082 929 3091.



Even in a long drought, the perennial spring keeps flowing.



Prinspoort is a highlight on the Plathuis dirt track.

Our cottage is adjoined to Izak's house, but it's totally private, shielded as it is from him and his parents, Johanna and Christiaan (they live in the original old farmhouse 50-metres away) by an innovative screen of old wooden shutters. But it's probably the banksia rose-covered archway entrance that awes us most as it conducts us into our peaceful enclave.

Isak is away irrigating onion seed lands on the other side of the farm, so it's father Christiaan who welcomes us to the werf. He tells us heart-breaking stories of the drought they've been experiencing for years and how he's had to reduce his sheep flocks from 2800 to less than two hundred. It's the reason why they've put their hopes of survival on onion seed production and also why Izak is supplementing his income with farm-stay accommodation.

Annette and I kick the boots off and slowly numb out on the stoep while sipping a couple of our favourite cold beverages. Leaving the monster braai-pack of Karoo lamb and a metre of plaaswors for tomorrow's braai night, it's not long after eating our ready meal that we bid adieu



Nick negotiates a rocky river drift — Opzoek Farm.

to the crescent moon and Venus bringing depth and scale to the darkening-blue sky.

The next morning we are taken on an impromptu tour of Johanna's up-cycled artworks —many backed by thought-provoking, hand-painted philosophical axioms and scriptures— succulent gardens and her paintings hanging in the old farmhouse. Among the endeavours of her handiwork, we uncover three adorable Siamese cats, which, along with the farm's three busy sheepdogs, her aviary full of finches and miniature doves, a few neighing horses and the brood of magnificent strutting cocks and 'krap hoenders', make up her menagerie.

In the afternoon we take a walk across the mostly dry Buffels River towards the old Klipstoor (6km distant, soon to be done up as a rustic overnight spot). We're accompanied by Ollie, brother to Rooies, the other unusually brown and white coloured Border collie I first mistook as an Australian kelpie. Wearing only sandals, we don't venture more than a couple

of kilometres, but it's enough to appreciate the swathe of greenery along the river bank brought on by effects of shallow groundwater and a perennial spring a little way up river.

Our 340km route home the next day entails heading back to Laingsburg and then taking the Rooinek Pass road to the Ladismith dirt track. Once through the Klein Swartberg and Outol passes, we'll hang a right onto the Montagu road and then left onto the Plathuis dirt track towards the R62 and Barrydale. From there we'll take the Tradouw's Pass to Swellendam, then the back road via Klipdift to Stormsvlei from where we'll klap it home on the N2.

It turns out to be a magic carpet ride on a cool and windless day, the highlights of which were eating braai leftovers at the top of the Outol Pass; soaking up San spirits in a monster cave overlooking Prinspoort and blatting it at full tilt down the wide gravel tracks towards Drew, flanked by the many clefts and pointy peaks of the spectacular Langeberg range.

The only things sully the ride home are the impatient and inconsiderate drivers on the section of N2 back to Bot River; but hey, I guess it can't always be unicorns and butterflies.

Epic views into the Koo Valley from atop Rooihoogte Pass.



Johanna van der Vyver's artwork and philosophies will spirit you away.