

THE GRASSLAND GANDER 4 X 4, MOUNTAIN BIKE AND QUAD TRAILS

WAKE UP TO WAKKERSTROOM!

Co-ordinated by Mark De Venney of Weaver's Nest Guest House, the Wakkerstroom area now boasts a series of scenic 4 x 4 trails suitable for soft roaders and quads.

Wakkerstroom has always been a birder's Mecca and now, thanks to the irrepressible Mark and several land-owners in the area, it is now set to become an offroad destination in its own right. The Grassland Gander is a series of trails that take one through farmland and property owned by the Mpumalanga Parks Board, to various scenic, historical and geological points of interest. Suitable for soft-roaders, these trails are set to take off in a big way as they are great for weekend trips for the whole family, without the kids getting bashed about in the back of the vehicle while dad tests his 4x4 skills. Graded as a 3-5 depending on the weather, the trails incorporate mostly grassland with several rocky inclines and declines and river crossings, but nothing too extreme to damage your vehicle. The pace is leisurely and Mark will tailor-make an itinerary to suit your interests and organise access to the various farms. He also leads all the historical trails in the area and is a mine of fascinating information.

The first trail I undertook was the Paardeplaas Waterfall Trail, a couple of clicks off the Piet Retief road from Wakkerstroom. The track takes you through farmland to a stunning waterfall overlooking a gorge clogged with indigenous moist montane forest and home to the endangered samango monkey. There are several blockhouses in the area dating back to the Boer War, said to stretch all the way to Swaziland, which are being uncovered and restored. This trail connects to the Groothoek crater, which is 18-20 million years old.

The second trail I explored was the Ossewa Kop Trail which takes one to the top of a mountain by the same name, to the site of several blockhouses built by the Staffordshire North Regiment from 1898-1901. The view from the top of Ossewa Kop is breathtaking and the wind was biting. It was awe inspiring to think of those hardy British soldiers keeping watch from their freezing eyrie.

As the area was a melting pot of Khoisan, Swazi, Zulu, Boer and British history, records of the various Zulu wars and settlers date back to 1660 and San rock art can also be found on many farms in the area.

The Moon Mountain Trail on the Luneberg road takes the visitor through some fascinating geological features. On the right hand side of the road, a few kilometres after the turn-off, a volcanic extrusion dating back some 200 million years thrusts upwards through the surrounding rock. Pure sea sand has been found in this cutting and the remains of seashells have been discovered here. It is hard to believe this area was once part of the seabed. The Moon Mountain trail is for hardier vehicles during the wet season as it becomes very muddy with several river crossings and rocky inclines and descents.

The Wandersheim Trail run by Horst Filter, also in the same area, boasts rustic self-catering cottages, which may be booked for those wishing to take in more of the scenery during the trail. Fishing can also be arranged.

Back at the cosy Weaver's Nest Guest House, my every need was catered for by the junior manager, Zwelethini "Sparks" Buthelezi, Mark's right hand man. He is responsible for the Silver Service In The Veld – where weddings and special events are catered for. A traditional meal in a nearby village may be arranged if the visitors wish to sample local cuisine, but who would want to tear themselves away from head cook Petunia's mouth watering cooking I cannot imagine. Just to titivate the appetite here is a sample of what's on offer for dinner; thick curried vegetable soup with crunchy Irish soda bread, prawn cocktail on a bed of fresh lettuce, followed by melt-in-the-mouth fillet of beef cooked in a red wine sauce and served

with crispy vegetables and creamy mashed potatoes, pudding was a mixed berry mousse followed by filter coffee! No weight loss here I'm afraid!

Weaver's Nest is a Victorian style country manor and boasts fully serviced self-catering and catered units. All the rooms have large fireplaces with charcoal supplied, heaters and massive down duvets to keep out the winter chills. Even a decanter of sweet muscadel is thoughtfully provided in each room. There are two trout fishing dams on the premises and four archery butts with all the professional equipment. There is even a small obstacle course for those who are not completely comfortable with driving a 4x4 and Mark will lend a helping hand with driving tips for the uninitiated before going out on the trails. The cosy well-stocked pub is the hub of social life at Weaver's Nest and Mark will keep you amused for hours with historical tales and anecdotes about the locals.

Bird guides can also be arranged for those wishing to sample the rich avian life of the region. Martin's Dam is nearby and the so is the vlei where most of the birding takes place. And then of course there is the town itself to explore. With turn of the century architecture and evocative names like the Mucky Duck Pub it's hard to resist the charm of Wakkerstroom.

TRAVEL PLANNER

WHAT IT COSTS

R375,00 D/B/B per person sharing (winter rates). R425,00 D/B/B per person sharing (summer rates). R600,00 for the self catering units which sleep six. R250,00 B&B per person sharing (winter rates). R300,00 B&B per person sharing (summer rates). Enquire about the Silver Service In The Veld if you are planning a wedding, conference or special event.

WHERE TO BOOK

Weaver's Nest: phone Mark De Venney or Sparks on (017) 730 0115 or Cell: 082 520 0136 or e-mail weavers@icon.co.za

Wandersheim Self Catering Trail Cottages: phone Horst Filter on Cell: 084 995 0017

GPS WAYPOINTS

S27° 19.86; E30° 10.01 turnoff from main road between Wakkerstroom and Piet Retief. Weaver's Nest is 4km outside Wakkerstroom.

LIST OF CAPTIONS

1. The Paardeplaas Waterfall
2. The Paardeplaas Waterfall
3. The Paardeplaas Waterfall
4. A local traffic jam
5. The exterior of the self-catering units
6. The entrance hall at Weaver's Nest
7. The dining room where Petunia serves up her gastronomic delights
8. One of the amusing signs in Wakkerstroom
9. The Mucky Duck Pub in Wakkerstroom
10. The blockhouse at the top of Ossewa Kop dates back to 1898
11. The cosy bar at Weaver's Nest
12. The dining room where Petunia serves up her gastronomic delights
13. A non self-catering cottage interior
14. The cosy duvets and fluffy pillows will keep out the chilly night air
15. The exterior of a non self-catering cottage
16. The exterior of a non self-catering cottage