

NORMANDIEN/KRANSKOP SCENIC ROUTE

LAID BACK AT MEMEL

Memel is not just for the birds (although that usually is the main attraction). With a range of 4x4 routes to enjoy, the emphasis is on luxury and easy living, not a gruelling offroad challenge. While staying at the cosy Mahem Guest House we explored the area and discovered country hospitality at its best.

Situated 240kms from Johannesburg and 400kms from Durban, the name Memel comes from the Prussian and means, "surrounded by water." This is certainly true as the area is rich in unique wetlands situated in the Drakensberg area of the north-eastern corner of the Free State. If you are a birder then this area is for you. Seekoivlei Wetland is one of the last remaining natural wetlands in South Africa and comprises 220 oxbow lakes formed by the Klip River and is also one of the few marshes left in the Vaal River catchment. The 12 000 hectare floodplain provides unique habitat for wattled, blue and crowned cranes and was declared a Ramsar Site in 1999. Over 350 bird species have been listed here and the hippos that were once shot out over a hundred years ago have been reintroduced to the vlei. The habitat around Memel is composed of grassy plains, mountains and the ubiquitous wetlands. Rich in history, various battlefields and memorials are also to be found in the area including Majuba Mountain, which is 45kms from Memel and has two museums displaying items from the battle of Majuba.

Your best location from which to explore the region is Mahem Guest House, run by the affable Jimmy and Sylvia Saunders. The rooms have all the mod-cons including DSTV, heaters and en-suite bathrooms, and while most rooms sleep two, they can be adjusted to sleep four. There is a useful guide to the region in your room with all the relevant contact numbers for activities in the area, and the chef is a registered Birdlife SA Tour Guide. Although there is a self-catering farmhouse across the road that is part of Mahem Guest House and sleeps eight, most visitors opt for the delicious dinner, bed and breakfast option (be sure to try the mouth watering nastegal jam which is unique to the area). Packed lunches are also available should you be spending the whole day on the road. Most of the rooms overlook the lush gardens with its flock of friendly geese, while there is a wonderfully decadent honeymoon suite in the farmhouse with its own spa bath and enormous double bed swathed in mosquito netting. The setting at Mahem is definitely upmarket and only caters for children from the age of 13 upwards. There is an honesty bar and cosy lounge situated around a blazing log fire. Another self-catering farmhouse around the corner is currently being renovated which will cater for children of all ages and even pets!

Jimmy will give you directions for all the self-drive 4x4 routes in the area including GPS co-ordinates for the Kranskop Route. The Normandien Route, which had just been graded and resurfaced before my visit, so can no longer qualify as a 4x4 trail, is worth the time to explore. It is high altitude plateau grassland and boasts small numbers of blesbok, vaal rhebok and mountain reedbuck. Scout the rocky cliffs for bald ibis while keeping an eagle eye out for Botha's and Rudd's larks in the grasslands besides the road. When you get to the top of Normandien Pass you will be rewarded by sweeping views of KwaZulu-Natal as the escarpment drops away sharply to the south. Mist belt forest clogs the valleys below and black eagles and jackal buzzards spiral above. After completing the Normandien Route drop in at Garth Brent's Wonderdraai farm. He also runs a 4x4 route along river frontage with a camping ground and the opportunities for wingshooting and trout fishing. Nearby is Ann Muirhead's, Moorfield farm, which has a mountainous 4x4 route that will definitely get the adrenalin rushing. Her accommodation is stylishly rustic in an Oregon pine lined farmhouse, a rondavel that sleeps 2-4 and 10 camping sites. Although most of the accommodation is self-catering, breakfast and group catering is available on request. The route on her farm is more suited to corporate groups and both farms have stunning waterfalls to enjoy after all the fun.

Next on the agenda was the Kranskop route, an easy Grade 2-3 depending on how much rain has fallen. It takes you through rolling farmland, so make sure you close all the farm gates behind you. This route has some scenically stunning spots to picnic, such as Oupa se Gat, a waterfall and swimming hole. Then there

is also the bizarre house built across a river – how long that will last is anyone’s guess. The highlight of this trail is Kranskop Mountain itself. A tumble of weathered sandstone boulders, it has a hole clean through the mountain at its western end. The trail has one or two rough parts but a soft roader should cope easily with the dongas and cattle tracks. We met some quirky locals along the way who shared their bottle of Jagermeister, which was most welcome as the wind had come up and the temperature was hovering just above freezing. They had a holiday home in Memel and instructed me to put in my article that Memel was “The Best!” Well, I couldn’t have said it any better myself! Go see for yourself!

TRAVEL PLANNER

WHAT IT COSTS

Mahem Guest House: R195,00 per person per night sharing, R220,00 single. Breakfast – R50,00, Dinner – R50,00 – R75,00. Packed lunches – R50,00 Three to four people sharing in a 4-bedded room R175,00 per person per night. Self-catering – R200,00 for the farmhouse per night and R50,00 for each person per night (accommodates 6 people).

WHERE TO BOOK

Mahem Guest House: Jimmy or Sylvia Saunders Tel: (058) 924 0034, Fax: (058) 924 0536, Cell: 082 565 8939, E-mail: mahem@xsinet.co.za, Website: www.wheretostay.co.za/mahem or www.memelgetaways.co.za

Moorfield Farm: Ann Muirhead: (058) 924 0794

Wonderdraai Fram: Garth Brent: Tel/Fax: (034) 3121210, Cell: 082 8549 471, E-mail: gfbrent@worldonline.co.za

GPS WAYPOINTS

Just follow the signs to Mahem Guest House from the R34 from Vrede to Newcastle. Jimmy will provide GPS co-ordinates for Kranskop Trail

LIST OF CAPTIONS

1. One of the cosy suites
2. One of the cosy suites
3. The entrance to the guest house is guarded by a flock of friendly geese
4. Sweeping views into KZN from the Normandien Pass
5. One of the cosy suites
6. The units at Mahem Guest House
7. The comfortable lounge
8. The honesty bar
9. The dining room at Mahem
10. The self-catering farmhouse across the road from Mahem Guest House
11. One of the cosy suites
12. The upmarket honeymoon suite
13. Sweeping views into KZN from the Normandien Pass
14. Sweeping views into KZN from the Normandien Pass
15. Normandien Pass has been concreted over and no longer poses a challenge, but is still very scenic
16. A river crossing on the Kranskop Trail
17. The Kranskop Trail takes you through rolling farmland
18. The top of Kranskop Pass
19. The tracks are easy, with Kranskop in the background
20. The tracks are easy, with Kranskop in the background
21. The tracks are easy, with Kranskop in the background
22. The tracks are easy, with Kranskop in the background
23. The tracks are easy, with Kranskop in the background