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WANDERLUST
The Karoo Calls
The Wild Wild West

PEOPLE
Caleb Swanepoel:
survivor to protector

DESIGN
Ebony Singita +
Kyle Jardine

High on Namaqua

people | style | travel | design | food





This page top to bottom: Samara's fly camping experience is an immersive adventure encompassing a guided bush walk and a sleep-out in one of Africa's most exquisite wildernesses. Game drives across the plains. Bush walk and tracking cheetah.

A LAND OF BIG SKIES

Famous Last Words

"I don't know why we are going to see this patch of land in the middle of the Karoo," said Sarah Tompkins to her husband 27 years ago. Muse's Carrie Hampton discovers how these 'famous last words' created the Samara Karoo Reserve safari destination near Graaf Reinet.

Words Carrie Hampton



Having lived in London, Paris, New York, and Johannesburg, Sarah Tompkins, co-owner of Samara, and her husband, said they had no intention of dropping off the map to live in the Great Karoo. Yet, having been persuaded by a man they'd met at a function – who turned out to be an estate agent – he entranced them with descriptions of an amphitheatre of mountains in a land of big skies. Of black-maned Cape lions, which once majestically reigned over the plains of Camdeboo and rhino and cheetah

and now-extinct quagga. He spoke of the haunting beauty of the semi-arid Karoo, once teaming with vast herds of springboks and of explorers and characters of yesteryear. Enamoured with the depictions of this place, the Tompkins agreed to make a detour.

"All my determination not to buy this piece of land went by the wayside as soon as we stepped onto this farm," said Sarah. The clear air, giant vistas and fragrant Karoobossies releasing their aromatic scent with each step are indescribably mesmerising and

can take away all reason, leaving the simple desire to be nowhere else. That's what happened to Sarah and her husband.

They did buy the land, then adjoining parcels and more, with the vision of rewilding the Samara Karoo Reserve with all the game that used to live here; cheetah, lion, rhino, elephant, eland, mountain zebra, oryx and those big herds of springbok, once pronging around the fenceless Karoo in their millions. By collaborating with scientific advisors and



Manor House.



conservationists, Sarah and her family entered a world they never knew existed. Though not living at Samara full time until recently, the whole family are devoted to it, with daughter Isabelle proving to be a champion of the planet and eco-warrior that will lead Samara forward with their tenet to 'think globally, but act locally'. To this end, as members of The Long Run – a membership community of nature-based tourism businesses committed to driving holistic sustainability – Samara has adopted the 4Cs' sustainability framework; Conservation, Community, Culture and Commerce.

The conservation front speaks for itself, first rewilding farmland across five vegetation biomes that had barely a blade of grass in 1997 and now supporting over 60 mammal species, including the Big Five, cheetah, aardvark, black wildebeest, and herds of antelope, plus 225 bird species.

Rewilding milestones have included the first elephant on the Plains of Camdeboo in 150 years, the first lion in 180 years and the first cheetah in 130 years. The story of the poorly treated and injured rescued cheetah Sibella became known

worldwide. Anthropomorphising the story, she seemed to be thanking her rescuers by allowing them, and many Samara guests, to get close-up viewings of her offspring. She raised an astonishing 19 cubs in four litters and has contributed 2.4% to the endangered wild cheetah population in South Africa. Walking groups tracking cheetah via a radio collar can often get close to them on foot, a highlight of guest activities at Samara. The effort of walking across sun-baked veld for over half an hour was all worth it the moment we saw Naledi and her three cavorting cubs, ignoring our presence just 20 metres away.

Another guest experience distinctive to Samara is the ritual planting of spekboom cuttings to rehabilitate heavily denuded areas. Instead of a decorative pot plant in each suite, there's a *Portulacaria Afra* succulent growing in a rooting bag. This wonder plant is indigenous to the Thicket Biome and can root even in terrain that receives no rain for months on end. It can quench your thirst, relieve sore throats and soothe skin ailments, but more importantly, spekboom helps to remove carbon

dioxide from the atmosphere by acting like a carbon sponge. It's full of Vitamin C, and if you nibble on a juicy little leaf, it releases a sweet-sour citrus bomb into your mouth. Elephants love it, which is why the newly planted shrub is given a sporting chance by covering it with thorn branches. However, digging a hole in the rock-hard surface of the red soil seemed impossible. How does an aardvark manage it? They have incredibly long, strong front claws, and we had a pick-axe-wielding guide and tracker. Once the crust is broken, guests dig a small hole and plant the succulent. Not merely a token of conservation, the spekboom initiative is responsible for thousands of new plantings across Samara every year.

Addressing the community element of Samara's commitment, Anneley Swemmer is a role model for the younger staff, mainly from the local area. She started as a scullery maid and rose to become Lodge Manager and Community Manager at Samara. Not just the smiling face most guests see when they arrive at Karoo Lodge, she also facilitates community involvement, education and upliftment



This page clockwise: Plains Camp tented camp, Karoo Lodge bedroom, Karoo Lodge suite exterior, venison on the menu, and dinner in a dry riverbed.





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projects, like sports tournaments and support for Vuyani Safe Haven orphanage. The '4Cs' act as the default guide to holistic decision-making in Samara's journey of improvement towards regenerative business practice with meaningful impact. Anneley ensures that nearby impoverished communities are positively affected by having Samara as a neighbour.

The vision for Samara is far from complete, with bigger-picture ambitions to link animal migration corridors with Mountain Zebra National Park to the northeast and Addo to the southeast. With a sweep of her hand, Sarah Tompkins states, "This is bigger than us." Yet, with all her passion and vision, she can still focus on small details within the 27,000 hectares of born-again wilderness of the Samara Karoo Reserve.

A recently fulfilled project is the redesign and redecoration of the now off-grid Karoo Lodge, the farmhouse where the Samara story began. Sarah casts her eye over a room filled with amply-stuffed sofas and chairs, riempi stools, botanical-inspired hand-embroidered cushions, coffee tables

scattered with heavy picture-books, vintage animal art prints and a large copper pot sprouting unruly thorn tree branches, an antithesis to formal flower arrangements, and says, "The interiors reflect my personal taste." Sarah is as understated as the décor and as layered with clever facets that come to light the longer you stay. The redesign pays homage to this special region, resulting in an authentic aesthetic that reflects the soulfulness of the Karoo. Amy Kidger of Hinterland Studio was responsible for driving the interior look and feel, and says, "I was strongly influenced by the surrounding nature and culturally historic location, as well as Karoo style. We did a lot of antique hunting to source traditional South African artefacts and furnishings to add to the layered and collected-over-time feel."

Glowing in the darkness, Karoo Lodge certainly gives off that 'welcome home' feeling as you pull up along the lantern-lit driveway after an evening game drive in search of an elusive aardvark. There's an aardvark skeleton in the Story Room, looking like a miniature dinosaur, and its distinctive

shape appears on caps and bags sold in the shop, but seeing one remains a rare privilege.

I'm sure co-founder Sarah Tompkins has seen many, especially now that she and her husband live at Samara full-time. If it wasn't for her famous last words, she wouldn't even be here as the matriarch, keeping a watchful eye on the progress of the grand plan for rewilding this most beautiful, precious corner of South Africa.

Samara has three accommodation options and a slackpacking trail; The Manor – a contemporary take on Karoo living, Karoo Lodge – a stylish homestead with suites dotted around the veld, and Plains Camp – an off-grid, no WiFi, tented camp on the Camdeboo plains. The Cheetah Trail at Samara is a 3-night slackpacking hike through incredible landscapes. SA Residents Rates start at R4,995 per person per night sharing, fully inclusive of guided game drives with expert trackers, meals, bush walks, and wildlife tracking. [m](#)

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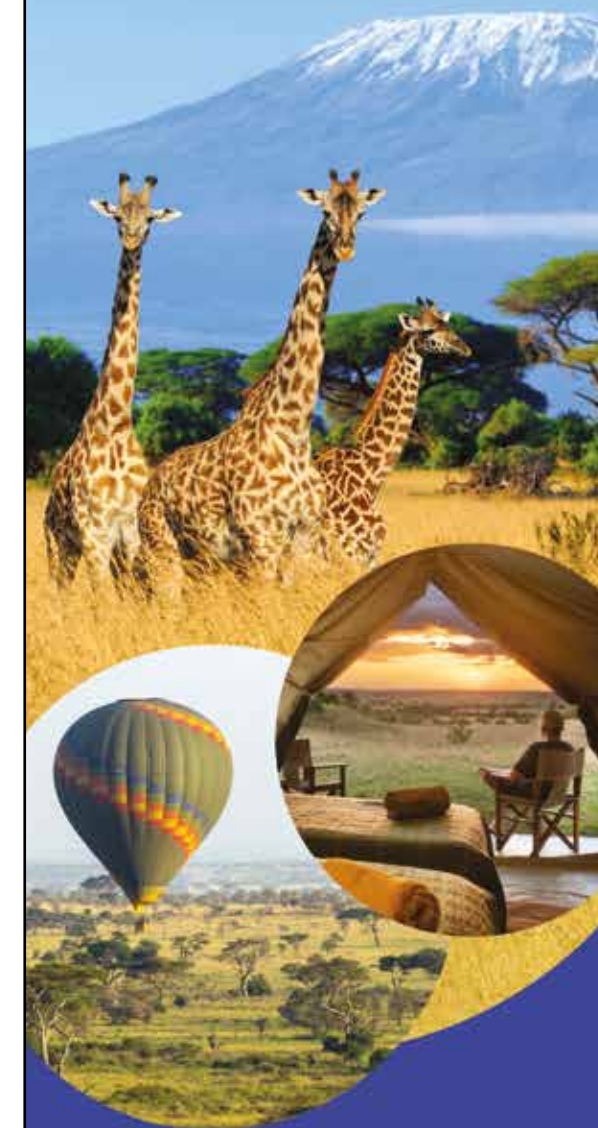
The Star Bed boasts a four-poster bed with a draped mosquito net.



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