

# Fine fare for birders

Two Western Cape Ramsar sites attract visitors from around the world to view their feathered treasures

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AS THE crow flies, the distance between Elands Bay and Wilderness is less than 550km. In terms of topography, they are poles apart.

Both are in the Western Cape and on the coast: Elands Bay on the semi-arid West Coast and Wilderness on the lush Garden Route. What links them, however, is that both are home to Ramsar sites – ecologically sensitive wetland areas that teem with bird species.

There are 20 Ramsar sites in South Africa, with six in the Western Cape.

Verlorenvlei at Elandsbaai and the Wilderness Lakes attract bird-lovers from around the world so it makes sense to build places that cater for them after a hard day's "twitching".

Both Vensterklip and Wilderness Manor perfectly capture their spirit of place, which means they are about as different from one another as can be.

Vensterklip is virtually on the banks of Verlorenvlei and is as rough-and-ready yet welcoming as the people of the West Coast. Wilderness Manor, on the other hand, is lavish and refined – offering a level of sophistication that exceeds the expectation travellers have of this part of the Southern Cape.

Their differences are embodied in the appearances and natures of their owners: Albert Robertson of Vensterklip is as gnarly as *Weskus* driftwood while his counterparts in Wilderness are sleek, polished yellowwood.

Gerald Hoch and "JD" Janse van Rensburg are retired senior air-crew who, during years of international travel, collected the expensive furnishings and décor that make Wilderness Manor a wonderland for inquisitive browsers.

What makes Wilderness Manor one of the finest B&Bs I have ever stayed at is the couple's phenomenal attention to detail. The colleague with whom I visited there the first time loathes the ubiquitous ever-fresh milk *pikkies* that traditionally get plonked on your room tea-set and asked for a jug of fresh milk instead.

She conveyed this request on arrival when JD welcomed us with (for himself included) a welcoming drink. He then sat with us for the best part of half an hour learning about our preferences and recounting how the manor came into being.

The next time my colleague visited, there was a jug of fresh milk in the room fridge.

Gerald and JD also have a sharp eye for marketing: the most photographed aspect of the manor is the bird-table adjacent to the breakfast room. They put a half-apple on it every morning and down comes a Knysna Turaco (*loerie*) and, perhaps, some Olive Thrushes to squabble over the fruit.

Cameras invariably click furiously away and, cannily knowing



REGAL FEATHERS: The Malachite Kingfisher, above, and the egret, below, are among the Wilderness birdlife.



their guests will share these pictures with their friends, the owners have affixed a Wilderness Manor sign to the structure.

The class of the place has not gone unnoticed: TripAdvisor consistently rates Wilderness Manor as the top accommodation facility in the Wilderness and the 12th best B&B in South Africa – as rated by people who have stayed there.

The facility is small – there are only four rooms, three of which overlook the Wilderness lagoon.

They're constantly fully booked. The owners feel that excessive

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expansion would detract from their level of service.

Their only specials are an off-season "stay for four nights, pay for three" or "stay for seven nights, pay for five" at R500 per person sharing per night, including breakfast.

Across the road from the manor is a boardwalk that follows the shoreline of the lagoon through reeds and milkwoods into the "town" of Wilderness, about a kilometre away. It's an ideal appetite-sharpening stroll to ultra-friendly Pomodoro restaurant or The Girls



TOP-NOTCH: Wilderness Manor is rated as one of the top establishments in its category in the country.



VETERAN: Chef Linda Koli has been in the restaurant business for years.

art-bistro. Hop into your car if you want to experience Salinas with its gorgeous views over the beach.

You'll also need the car to get to the Malachite Bird Hide on the northern shore of the upper Langvlei on the back-road to Sedgfield. It's about seven minutes' drive from the manor.

Langvlei, Eilandvlei and Rondvlei are connected by the Touw River. Collectively known as the Wilderness Lakes, they were proclaimed a Ramsar site in 1991 and encompass 1 300ha.

There is no charge for entering the hide and, because it's off the beaten track, it's only really known to birders.

Get there at the right time and you can reasonably expect a close-up look at Pied and Malachite kingfishers, at least two types of swallow (in season), dabchicks, geese, cranes, darters and cormorants, herons, moorhens and any number of LBJs – little brown jobs – in the reeds. You'll probably see and hear fish eagles but it's unlikely that they'll come close.

The hide at Verlorenvlei couldn't be more different: it's far more convivial, for one thing, and it's more of a spot to take a bottle of wine and watch the sun going down over the vlei, painting it in pretty pink and purple pastels. It isn't so much a hide as a viewing deck.

Verlorenvlei is one of the few coastal freshwater lakes in South Africa and, according to Birdlife International, supports more than 189 bird species, of which 75 are waterbirds. The wetland regularly supports more than 5 000 birds and occasionally holds more than



RUSTIC CHARM: Vensterklip's Tin Kitchen, in a converted barn, has many delights to lure the hungry.



MAGICAL STONE: Vensterklip is an eerily magnetic formation on the West Coast.

20 000, including more than 1 000 waders of at least 11 different species, it says.

You'll see pretty much the same as you would at Wilderness, with the exception of a lot more pelican and flamingo, as well as the odd Spurwing Goose. The LBJs are different, though.

Vensterklip is also about enjoying breath-taking sunsets over the water and reedlands before hurrying back to the "International" pub for some not-too-subtle West Coast banter or straight into the Tin Kitchen restaurant. It's a converted barn (built in 1788), so the rustic furnishings are appropriate.

The fare is hearty, as might be expected from a kitchen owned and run by Linda Koli.

The property takes its name from a rocky arch that serves as a window westwards to Elands Bay and the Atlantic Ocean and east over potato plantations to Redelingshuys. It's on a different section

of Robertson's farm to the guest-house and pub-restaurant, and you can visit the site only if accompanied and by prior arrangement.

Look carefully and you might see the southern speckled padloper *Homopus signatus*, the world's smallest tortoise, which grows to between six and 10cm.

Vensterklip's accommodation comprises several lakeside camping sites, cottages and the beautifully restored 220-year-old three-bedroomed Scott House farmhouse, which has a large veranda overlooking Verlorenvlei. There is a large, well-stocked kitchen. Self-catering accommodation is R350 per person per night. The dinner, B&B rate is R450.

Scott House is rented as a unit with a minimum of four adult guests per night. The rate during peak season and over long weekends is R2 000 a night for the house, with a minimum stay of three nights.