

Travel

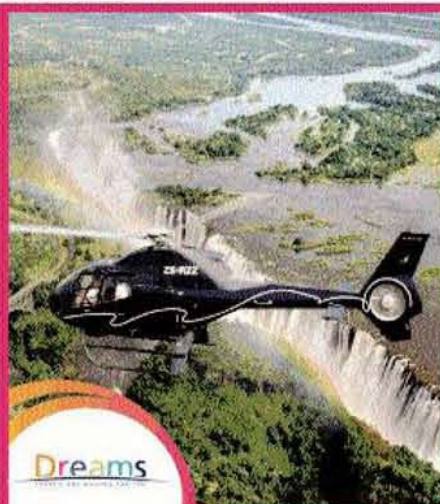


The other Twitterverse...

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March 2 2013

Edited by Brendan Seery



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Birds of a feather...

Twitchers need twitch no more – there are classy B&Bs for them, writes Jim Freeman

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 team with an abundance of bird species.

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

Two of these – Verlorenvlei at Elandsbaai and the Wilderness Lakes – cover about 2 800ha and attract bird-lovers from around the world.

If you're going to attract bird-watching visitors, 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 even that which travellers to this part of the Southern Cape expect as the norm.

Their differences are embodied in the appearances and natures of their owners: Albert Robertson of Vensterklip is as gnarly as *Weskus*



Wilderness Manor is rated as one of the top establishments in its category in the country.

driftwood while his counterparts in Wilderness are sleek, polished yellow-wood.

Gerald Hoch and "JD" Jans van Rensburg are retired senior aircrew 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 phenom-

enonal 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 recount-

ing how the manor came into being.

The next time my colleague visited, there was a jug of fresh milk in the room fridge. Room preferences are also noted for possible future visits.

Gerald and JD also have a sharp and subtle eye for marketing: the most photographed aspect of the manor is the bird-table adjacent to the breakfast room. They put a fresh half-apple on it every morning and down comes one of the resident



A Malachite kingfisher perches.

Knysna turacoos (*Ioeries*) and, perhaps, some of the olive thrushes to squabble over the fruit.

Cameras invariably click furiously away and, cannily knowing their guests will share these pictures with their friends, 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 Southern Cape town and the 12th best B&B in South Africa – as rated by the people who have stayed there.

Wilderness and the four-star manor is a year-round destination.

The facility is small – there are currently only four rooms, three of which overlook the Wilderness Lagoon – and the couple have no plans to expand it to any considerable extent.

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What makes Wilderness Manor one of the finest B&Bs I have ever stayed at is the couple's phenomenal attention to detail



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On the battlefields of Gallipoli
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Verlorenvlei, near Elands Bay on the West Coast, is a twitcher's paradise and one of the best spots for water birds in the province.



Linda Koli has been in the restaurant business for years.

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They're constantly fully booked and feel that excessive expansion will detract from the level of service they offer to visitors.

The only specials they offer 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. Single rates on request.

Across the road from the manor is a boardwalk that follows the shoreline of the lagoon through reeds and milkwood into the "town" of Wilderness, about a kilometre away.

Because Gerald and JD don't offer lunch and dinner, it's an ideal appetite-sharpening stroll to ultra-friendly Pomodoro restaurant or The Girls art-bistro. Hop into your car if you want to experience Salinas with its gorgeous views over Wilderness' blue-flag beach.

You'll also need the car to get to the Malachite Bird Hide, which is



Not often you see a Knysna Loerie (left) this up close and personal.

located on the northern shore of the upper Langvlei on the back-road to Sedgefield. It's about seven minutes' drive from the manor and is situated in the Wilderness

section of the Garden Route National Park.

Langvlei, together with Eiland and Rondevlei are connected by the Touw River. Collectively known as

the Wilderness Lakes, it was proclaimed a Ramsar site in June 1991 and encompasses 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. This means you won't have to share it with the masses.

Get there at the right time and you can reasonably expect a close-up look at pied and malachite kingfisher, 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.

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Birds of a feather... coast to coast

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Verlorenvlei is one of the few coastal fresh water lakes in South Africa and, according to Birdlife International, "supports over 189 bird species, of which 75 are waterbirds. The wetland regularly supports over 5 000 birds and occasionally it holds over 20 000, including more than 1 000 waders of at least 11 different species".

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.

While there is serious birding to be done, 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... in keeping



An egret looks for dinner.



Vensterklip is an eerily magnetic formation on the West Coast.

with the fact that the kitchen is owned and run by Linda Koli, whose relationship with Vensterklip owner and former restaurateur/entrepreneur Albert Robertson goes back to 1991 when they ran a Mike's Kitchen franchise in Cape Town's northern suburbs.

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 Redelinghuys. It's on a different section of Robertson's farm to the guesthouse and pub-restaurant, and you can only visit the site 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 10 centimetres.

Vensterklip's accommodation comprises a number of lakeside camping sites, cottages and the beautifully restored 220-year-old three-bedroomed Scott House farmhouse which has a large verandah overlooking Verlorenvlei. There is a large, well-stocked kitchen and a self-catering accommodation option is available at R350 per person per night. The dinner (main course only), 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



Gerald and JD love their work.



A dabchick (above left) dabs, while Venterklip's Tin Kitchen (right) lures the hungry.



night.

"We want this to become an eco-friendly hamlet," says Robertson.

"All our meats are free range and locally sourced and we grow all the vegetables organically right here

on the farm. My next project is to establish a micro-brewery so we can brew our own beer."



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