

GREEN IN AFRICA



MELISSA ANDREWS AND
PHOTOS CHRISTOPHER LIST

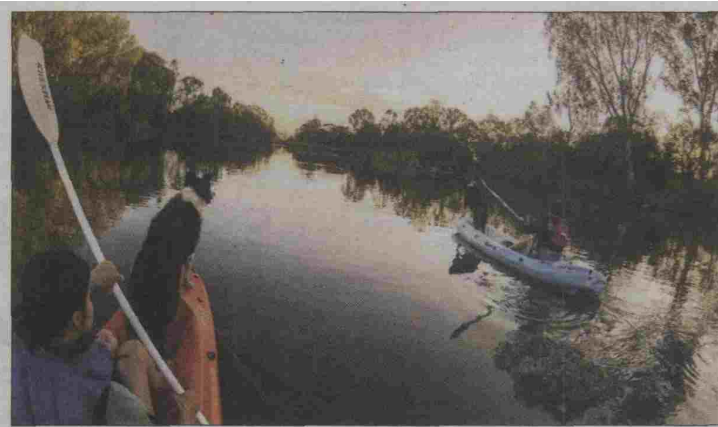
THE alternative party capital of the country, a spiritual Mecca, a place to experiment with herbal medicine, a permaculture education centre – I'd heard it all before ever setting foot in the infamous Rustler's Valley. Like a hologram, Rustlers was something different to everyone.

We went to find out for ourselves and perhaps even find ourselves. Leaving the majestic Golden Gate in our rear view mirrors, we headed deeper into the eastern Free State, passing the picturesque town of Clarens, flower-adorned trees as pink as a young girl's blush, and the wild craggy mountains just north of Lesotho, before entering the tiny border town of Fouriesburg to stock up on supplies.

Avoiding large potholes and other perils of the gravel road on the way to Rustlers, we were grateful for our two wheels, imagining the cars that didn't make it to all those long-ago festivals.

My confidence was overstated. Traversing monolithic rocks and a steep hill my bike cut out and I proceeded to do my not-so-graceful topple, accompanied by an indignant squawk as my foot became trapped. Chris came to the rescue and we proceeded to Sunmoon Lodge, where we'd be staying in one of the blue gum or wattle and daub rondavels.

Owned by former fashion photographer Robert Stirling (known as Nishiwaka, or the Fire Keeper), Sunmoon is set on the slope of a mountain facing a spectacular sandstone valley where there has been human life for 100 000 years. In the wake of a devastating fire in 1997 that consumed everything at Rustlers, Nishiwaka was one of the few community members to rebuild, and is now the farm's



VAAL RIVER: Melissa Andrews and Karen Addison kayak with two collies.



WAKE-UP: Morning light hits the campsite at Golden Gate.

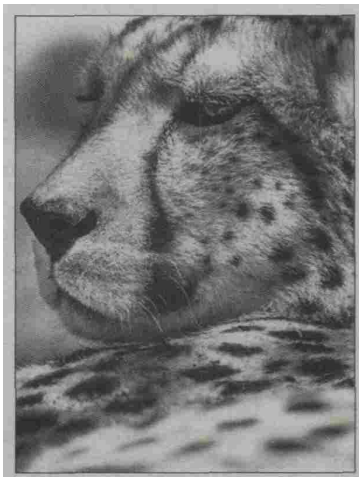
CHEETAH COUNTRY

On the slope of a spectacular sandstone valley

director. While little but ruins remain, Sunmoon has risen from the ashes to provide spiritual teachings under the watchful Sangoma's Eye, a 12-metre-high sandstone arch.

A bountiful vegetable and medicinal garden shows evidence of permaculture at play, while solar panels provide power, toilets are composting, and water comes from a spring that taps into an underground river.

Heading out to Parys, we had to cover 300 uninspiring, grain-swept kilometres in a day of blistering heat. Amusing myself hooting and waving at passers-by, I was thrilled when the sky began to blacken. Somehow managing to miss the worst of the storm, we arrived in the wet streets of Parys.



CONSERVATION: Nikita purrs in the shade.

Targeted as an adventure centre, Parys is home to the Vredefort Dome, the remains of an ancient meteorite impact crater dating back 2023 million years.

Staying at Otter's Haunt on the Vaal River, we were impressed by owners Graeme and Karen Addison's knowledge of the area.

Shaped by the underlying Dome geology, the Vaal is one of the oldest rivers in the world. Conservation is crucial to its continued existence. We went white water rafting with Dolf Jordaan of Ingwenya Tours to see what the impact of this popular activity is. After a debriefing, armed with our paddles and a life-jacket, we tackled the sinuous rapids. Dolf told us that through the tours, they try to get jaded city folk to reconnect with nature. Reg-

ular river cleanups and training of guides further contributes towards their environmental initiatives. Conservation seems part of the parcel at Parys.

Our next stop was the Dell Cheetah Conservation Centre, where we met Pieter and Estelle Kemp, who aim to address the male cheetah's low fertility and small gene pool through a breeding programme.

The first of its kind in the world, the centre plans to employ a three-pronged approach where cheetahs are allowed to breed, and cubs are raised without interference in a separate area populated with game and eventually released at between 18 and 24 months old. The centre has successfully bred and hand-raised 23 cheetahs, 12 of which have been sold for breeding programmes.

We then made a frantic dash to attend the *Green Expo* in the City of Gold. We also visited Food & Trees for Africa's new Farmer Eco-Enterprise Development Programme (Feed Africa). Managed by Quinton Naidoo, the project aims to provide emerging organic and sustainable farmers with support. We visited two farms one at Rethabiseng just outside Bronkhorstspruit (which won 2011 Gauteng Woman Farmer of the Year) and another in Cullinan. Inspired by the vast variety of organic crops produced, we left, keen to see what the rest of Gauteng had in store for us.

● For more, see www.eco-friendly-africa-travel.com