

Mesmerised by the Midlands

THE KWAZULU-NATAL MIDLANDS MEANDER, IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE DRakensBERG MOUNTAINS, HAS SEVERAL SELF-DRIVE ROUTES. I TOOK TO THE R103 TO EXPLORE NOTTINGHAM ROAD VILLAGE.

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The GPS indicates it only takes a few minutes to drive from the R103 across the train tracks, along the dirt road, up and around the hill, through a tunnel of pine trees to reach Swissland Cheese. In reality, it'll probably take you a good 15 minutes, even more if you have a soft spot for landscapes and photography, as I do. Each bend in the road presents a new perspective – farmsteads plonked on the hillside, a valley carpeted in forests, cows grazing here, logs stacked there.

Our car is enthusiastically chased up the final stretch of verdant hill by two tail-wagging dogs. The goats welcome us with their bleats. Bells jingle as the cows are herded from one meadow to the next. We've arrived in a scene from Johanna Spyri's Heidi. It's no exaggeration. The landscapes before us resemble the northern European countryside, especially due to the many species of European trees and bushes that were planted here by English and Dutch farmers in the late 19th century.

Inside Swissland Cheese, Beauty Zuma answers a question she's probably been asked a hundred times with a chuckle. "I wish I was related to the president," she says as she lays out cheeses for a free tasting. The charcoal-coated chèvre (a soft, cream-like goat's cheese) melts in my mouth. Neither the Isinyani (which tastes somewhere between a Gouda and Cheddar) nor the Pecorino, or even the goat's milk Brie or their signature St. Maure Camembert, beats the flavour in my books. "And it's good for digestion too," Beauty adds as she hands me another helping.

Their impromptu picnic menu awakens one's sense of spontaneity. They provide blankets, bread boards, cutlery and multi-coloured plastic cups for free, and sell a selection of cheeses, crackers, preserves, jams and sauces, as well as home-made cheesecake and ice cream. Beauty is on hand to advise which South African wines to pair with the cheeses you've bought.

As we taste the selection of preserves, Beauty draws our attention to their most popular Thunderbum chilli sauce. "Despite the name it's not too bad." She smiles. "It's probably not called Thunderbum for nothing," winks my friend Tessa. I buy their cheese platter instead.



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Back on the road we visit the most popular attraction this side of KwaZulu-Natal: The Nelson Mandela capture site. On 5 August 1962, Mandela's car was flagged down by police five kilometres outside of Howick, after his visit to Albert Luthuli's Groutville home.

The sculpture was unveiled on the 50th anniversary of his arrest. Fifty laser-cut steel columns, between 6 and 9.5 metres high, stretch along a 20-metre length. Thirty metres from the sculpture, along the pathway symbolic of Mandela's long walk to freedom, the columns align to create Madiba's portrait. We walk through this forest of columns, which is said to be South Africa's largest artwork.

Close by, the Patchwood Elephant Centre is set in an English-style garden, where we find the Scottish owner Lyn Hansen tending to the garden. We browse the bric-a-brac sourced from the local community: there are crocheted items, vases, figurines, handmade jewellery and antiques. The adjoining Granny Doris cafe and restaurant recently received The Sunday Tribune Cafe Society 2017 award for the top 100 coffee places in the Midlands.

After hours of exploring, the best thing about coming home to our Brahman Hills' self-catering cottage is our private Jacuzzi. That, and the flavoursome gourmet food prepared by head chef Stacy White. And since this is beginning to sound very much like a list, I might as well add the luscious landscapes of the 1 000ha Blue Crane Nature Reserve, in which our cottage is found.



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"April to May in the Midlands is beautiful and the best time to visit," says Wayne Chislett, Brahman Hills' general manager, as we make our way down a precipitous green slope during our 11km hike through the reserve. "You don't have the summer mist and thunderstorms that come through the area every two days out of three."

On any other occasion, I'd agree with him because I don't like being barricaded indoors by the weather. Yet, this time it's different. The Jacuzzi (and our preponderance for sparkling wine) make the slight temperature change unnoticeable. The mountainscape becomes even more alluring when it's blanketed in mist. The zebras grazing by our wooden deck blend into the background. Everything disappears.

The homely atmosphere at Brahman Hills makes me want to stay indoors. We trade the chance of sitting next to the log-burning fireplace at Copper Bar for the experience of having Stacy as our private chef for the evening. We cosy up on the couches with wine and play 30 Seconds while she prepares dinner. Stacy knows exactly what we're after during our girls' weekend away. She braais fresh Yellowtail, stuffed with fennel and lemons, alongside a branch of Rosa tomatoes from her organic vegetable garden. She complements it with a baby-marrow ribbon salad marinated in lime, herbs and Dijon mustard. Dessert is braaied pineapple slices topped off with Rooibos granita. The following evening we're treated to a scrumptious three-course, wine-paired dinner at 89 on Copper Restaurant in the wine cellar of the barn.

It's easy to look for any excuse to relax in the hot tub, yet the great outdoors beckons. While it's really worth meandering through the Midlands, there's so much to do at Brahman Hills – whether it's exploring on foot, enjoying a celebratory picnic, or going fishing.

We take a detour for a cup of Terbodore Coffee, which is rated the best in the region. Their Great Dane, Sultan, welcomes us at the entrance. We drink this responsibly-sourced, locally-roasted coffee in the old shed that's been