

# Mytravel

SATURDAY: FEBRUARY 23, 2008 MY WEEKEND

## NEXT WEEK

OUR INTREPID EXPLORER TEAM IS BACK ON THE ROAD AND THIS TIME HEADED OFF TO THE TARKASTAD AREA TO DISCOVER ITS RICH HISTORY. HAVE YOU BEEN TO THIS CORNER OF THE EASTERN CAPE? EMAIL

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PHOTOGRAPHS NICHOLAS YELL



**WET AND DRY:** Traveller Lerié Yell takes in the view of the Karoo landscape after the rains.

# A not so funny thing on way to Karoo cabaret

Be prepared off the beaten track to Steytlerville, warns **Nicholas Yell**, but what awaits is well worth the drive

**P**ROBABLY the last thing you need on your way to a cabaret is a flat tyre. But choosing a scenic back roads route from Aberdeen to the Karoo Theatrical Hotel near Steytlerville can cause this to happen. When it comes to being prepared, I'm well known as a bit of a paranoid boy scout but I certainly hadn't expected the spare wheel to cling to the bakkie like a rock-addicted limpet.

"Surrender to the situation," I

said to myself – and the large roadside tortoise staring at me with a bemused expression.

After much persuasive language, I eventually separated the spare wheel from its rusted umbilical cord.

Yet it was only when I was cranking up the jack that I realised it was going to be a little too short for the job. In fact, it was my wife who expertly pointed this out as I grunted face down in the dirt. I was really pleased I'd asked her along otherwise I probably wouldn't have realised this on my own. After building a small flat rock foundation, we helped the pint-sized jack to step up to the task and were on our way again before you

could say, "Why the hell didn't we just stay at home and watch TV" 300 times. Yet small, sweaty, marriage-altering challenges like these are part of any back roads journey.

From a distance, the Mexican hacienda-styled hotel looked more like a French Foreign Legion fort.

"Welcome to the Karoo Theatrical Hotel," said a husky voice off-stage. The voice appeared from behind a

gilded pillar and Mark guided us to reception.

"Did you have a good drive?" he asked, opening the visitors' book with a flourish.

"Mostly yes, thank you," I stuttered, deciding to keep our trials and tribulations to myself. On the way to our room, I noticed generous splashings of organza and velvet everywhere. The room furnishings were modern and the golds, blacks and browns of the curtains and linen lent an elegant, yet somewhat masculine tone.

But the Karoo Hotel with its public bars has not always been well received in Steytlerville. Mark told us that when the hotel, built in 1943, was first proposed, the local dominee insisted it be located some way out of



**PARTY PAIR: Hotel owners and hosts Mark and Jacques outside Grimaldi's Theatre Hall Restaurant.**



**RURAL RECEPTION:** The classic old façade of the Karoo Theatrical Hotel with its gilt trimmings.

# Karoo cabaret hotel deserves an encore

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town so as not to expose his flock to temptation. Yet the thought of a bitterly cold beer, after a short walk or drive out of town, has been motivation enough for locals over the years – and miraculously, the church still thrives.

It wasn't only Mark's poise or sequin-encrusted cream jacket that spoke of his decades of performing piano recitals; it was his passion and perfect timing. The small yet enthusiastic audience comprised a few tables of hotel guests and a large table of vocal locals. When Jacques' voice arrived, followed moments later by his generously proportioned figure in a Chinese silk dress and feather boa, the small theatre hall erupted. And what better way to lose your inhibitions in a dress than to imitate Shirley Bassey and her version of *I Am What I Am*. The crowd was unanimous in appreciation of the duo's talent.

By the time we got to Jacques' Bistro the next morning, it was only ourselves and a collection of hotel cats that hadn't had breakfast yet. Gazing sleepily through the window at the town, beyond the Karoo veld in the distance, I was saddened that we'd only booked one night.

We hadn't even managed to fit in a walk to the dam or made it to the sauna and we realised that even the Putt-Putt would have to wait until next time. But we knew we'd be back, because one thing's for sure – this unique hotel certainly deserves an

encore.  
**FACT FILE**

**Where:** Four kilometres north-east of Steytleville, two hours out of Port Elizabeth and 2½ hours from George.

The hotel has comfortable rooms, oodles of pizzazz, a supper-theatre venue with evening cabaret, a gym with sauna and hydro-spa, a short Putt-Putt course, a full-size billiard table, walks across the Karoo veld, magnificent stargazing and two very friendly hosts.

Dinner is pre-ordered from a reasonably varied à la carte menu and served before the show. Breakfast included fruit juice, cereals, scrambled egg and sausage, toast and coffee.

**Costs:** R280 per person sharing, which includes breakfast and the show.

**How to get there:** Some of the most scenic routes are the dirt road following the Groot River from Willowmore in the west and the Elands River road (4x4 only) on the Baviaanskloof side of Patensie. On tar, Steytleville can be approached from Graaff-Reinet and Port Elizabeth via the R75 and R329 (the turn-off is just after or before

Wolwefontein, depending on where you're coming from) which also continues on to Willowmore. Besides pleasing Karoo scenery and interesting farm stalls along the way, the Baviaanskloof Wilderness Area is certainly worth a detour as is the restaurant and eclectically stocked shop Sophie's Choice in Willowmore.

Contact Mark or Jacques on 049 835 0010, visit [www.karoohotel.co.za](http://www.karoohotel.co.za) or e-mail [info@karroohotel.co.za](mailto:info@karroohotel.co.za)

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