

BITTER-SWEET DECEMBER HOLIDAY

Or is it the "Not to remember December holiday?"

Mid October we started to think about a holiday – the question was just where? We wanted to be close to water – sea, river, dam...

On the banks of the Vaal River, 12 kms before Parys, Free State, we found a nice spot – "Greystoke Adventures". The name never, ever to be mentioned again. Target shooting, archery, kayaking – lots of activities to take part in. A lodge was booked, but because it's only an hour's drive from home, we decided to check it out.

The chalets seemed very small, so we opted for a caravan stand. Preferably one right on the banks, so that we can have coffee while watching the water.

We hired a family caravan and left Jo'burg around 10am, Sat. 23 Dec. We took the drive very slowly, since we're not used to towing a caravan. Rissiepit, our faithful and lovely Pajero, didn't even hiccup.

The sun was in full blast around lunchtime, arriving at our spot. We had 2 young scholars helping us with the tent and then it was time for me to settle in. It took me till 3pm and the desire to braai flamed up high. Only for a while...

Deciding on a caravan spot was a very quick decision, so we didn't check out the ablution facilities, the braai, the electricity and water. There are no distinction between the stands – there goes my privacy. But worse – the braai is situated in the middle of 2 stands – meaning you're actually in the company of your neighbours. It was a quick adjustment to not lift your eyes when checking the rawness of the meat – although our ears could still catch everything said.

There were only 1 water tap amongst 10 stands and 1 electricity box serving 3 stands – but there were only 2 plugs, the other 1 just missing. So 2 stands had to share an extension cable, plus then the braai. Needless to say, things just got worse from then on.

The swimming pool was so slimy green, you could feel soft "things" with your toes. There were 2 ablution blocks – 1 quite a distance away, especially if Mother Nature's in a hurry!?! Each gender side only had 2 toilets, 1 bath and 2 showers. After the 1st day, the borehole dried up. So – no water. The caravan fridge, despite numerous attempts, didn't work – neither on gas, neither on electricity. Chicken and cheeses were dumped in the dustbin (only cleaned out every 3rd day – sometimes left with raw fish guts in it – can you imagine the stench, not to mention the flies?) Our meat we stored in the camp's freezer, having to ask them for the key when we need supplies. But the view was so gorgeous and the birds were chirping away ... who cares about rain and mud between your toes?

Our stay was paid for 10 days, we only stayed for 6. Having to boil water to wash the dishes, wear "plakkies" when you shower (when there's water), negotiating with Mother Nature to reach the ablution facilities in time, no electricity – rain filtered into the electricity box, sleeping on a too-small bed, no privacy, packing & unpacking the caravan – blah, blah, blah.

If you enjoy camping, then good for you. My compromise? Hubby can braai 3 times a day, every single day – BUT I NEED TO STAY IN A SELF-CATERING CHALET WITH THE BASICS PROVIDED!

During our bitter-sweet caravan stay, we ventured quite a few times into Parys for breakfast/lunch.

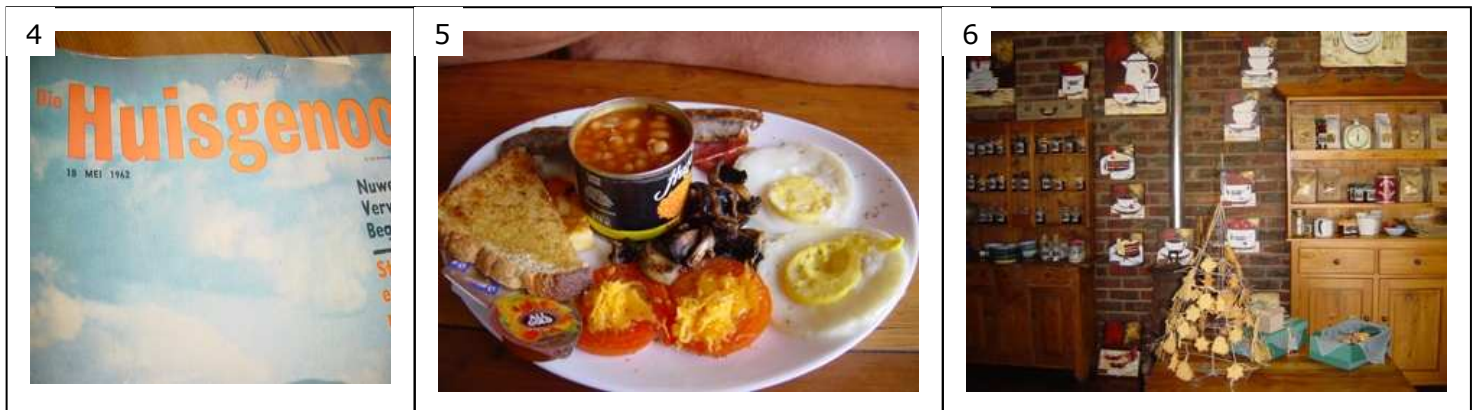
PLUM TREE COFFEE AND ART GALLERY

(<http://www.pamgolding.co.za/areas/parys/parys.asp>)



A little coffee shop *cum* art gallery. There's a relaxing patio with sturdy wooden tables and chairs on the stoepie or you can relax under the verandah (pic 2).

Inside, comfortable ox-red sofas and chairs beg you to relax (pic 3) in front of a fireplace when it's cold.



Can you read the date on the magazine in (pic 4)? 1962!!!! We had such a lovely time paging through this old Die Huisgenoot. There were some ads still in use, although my brain's drawing a blank now. Lyceum College featured big on almost every alternative page.

"Baked beans" with your breakfast comes in this little tin (pic 5). I just thought that such a novel idea.

Their xmas tree (photo 6) was made from wire, hung with homemade cookies. They also have divine cakes and desserts to linger over.

The art is extremely affordable and quite unique.

A coffee shop to visit for sure – remember, Parys is only an hour's drive from Randburg. And when you visit the website, you'll notice all the antique and décor shops – just begging to be seen.

ART LOVERS GALLERY & COUNTRY RESTAURANT, PARYS

www.artlovers.co.za



Tuesday night the campsite had an enormous storm. Thunder and rain for hours on end. Waking up on Wednesday morning, discovering there's no electricity for the coffee machine – that was the last straw. I have had enough! If we were in a chalet, I would have been packed in a flash. But thinking about packing up a wet tent, towing the caravan and unpacking everything again – that made me just a little bit hesitant. Too much trouble. So I had to wash in the tent (no shower water) and then we went to Parys for lunch.

Besides the Plum Tree Coffee Shop, for a more upmarket (meaning shake that wallet a bit more) restaurant, the Art Lovers Gallery is "balm for a wound". Everything is just so arty and creatively done. This was an old church that burned down ages ago – to be turned into an art gallery *cum* restaurant *cum* wedding venue.

The floors are screed (cement), the walls are hung with paintings (much, much more than in this picture). In the bathroom (yes, me and my bathrooms) the towel hangs from a gilded picture frame, attached to the wall.

The chairs and tables are wrought iron and the patio a smokers' delight.



The serviette rings are little "tomato concentrate" tins, lids and bottoms cut off. So ingenious.

Our starter was chicken and pistachio liver pate. To clean our palate, some smooth lemon sorbet.

They have a very limited variety of dishes – mainly pastas. The plates of "Pasta Mariana – seafood" and "Pasta Alfredo" were HUGE!

I had to finish with something sweet and chose baked a cheesecake with mixed berries. AND I STILL ENDED UP HAVING TO PAY THE BILL!

My spirits were lifted – for the time being. So slowly, very slowly we drove back to "the camp".

But on Saturday morning, we packed up. Heck no – enough is enough. Halfway home though, Hein and I had similar thoughts ...

"Why don't we unpack, store the caravan and book into a bed and breakfast ... - I seriously need some pampering now!"

DULLSTROOM INN – THE SWEET END OF OUR HOLIDAY

<http://www.dullstroom.co.za/accommodation/hvenue.php?id=137>

When we booked the room, we were warned to bring jackets and such ... and when we arrived in Dullstroom, we understood why. Although no rain, the chilly air made you a smoker without a cigarette in your mouth – real Scottish weather, I would imagine.

Dullstroom Inn is very old – no modern furnishings and décor – Biggie Best still reigns here.



The fireplace in the pub (rumour has it) has not been extinguished for the last 23 years!!! If you look closely, you'll notice the big wooden trunks burning slowly away.

The Inn is in a little side street, off the highway. To stay in a double room, will cost you R675 (for the room) bed and breakfast – peak season. Although we did have to wait a bit for the water to heat up (the geyser is way down the other side), everything was neat and clean.

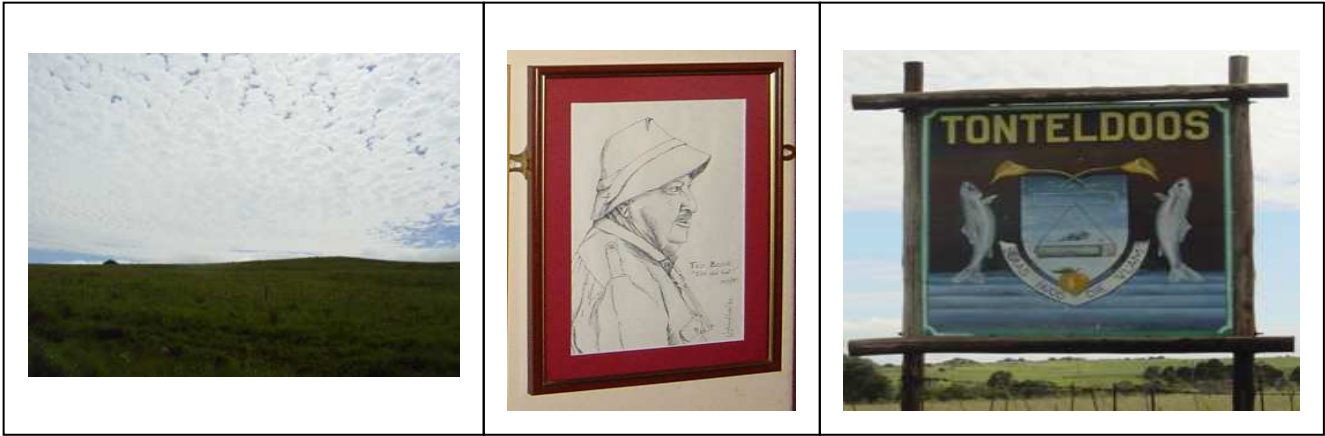
Breakfast wasn't elaborate, but everything was nice and fresh. They also serve breakfast in the Pub area and you should have heard the roar coming from that area, the morning of the 1st Jan. And that was only the beginning for that day – the tables rotated all the time, dishes were brought out one after the other – drinks were flowing. By that evening, the poor waiters had black circles underneath their eyes and were pumped full of Red Bull and Tequila – just to keep them going. The atmosphere is so amazing. The food, hearty oxtail, steak & kidney pie and loads of it!



There's a gorgeous garden at the back of the Inn, also 4 rooms out there, but in cold, rainy weather the slate steps can be quite treacherous.

Solly the barman, (one of 4 barmen) has been at the Inn for 22 years. Lovely, friendly chap, full of jingles and jives.

By early evening on our 1st day in Dullstroom, a heavy mist rolled into the streets and covered everything and everyone with a wet blanket. It was so divine – we sat in front of the fire in the lounge, read a book, drank some wine and had a little nap ...



We met an old war veteran, Ted Brown (centre pic), nearly 85yrs old and we had a lovely time with him. We also met Gerrie Steenkamp at the pub counter. Started to talk and found out that he was actually involved with the building regulations of our Randburg street. In-between short draughts of Castle Lager, Gerrie told us about this cheese factory out on the "Tonteldoos" Road.



Tonteldoos – English version – Tinder Box - Definition—small tin box with materials to make a quills fire: steel and flint for sparks, pieces of charred linen cloth to catch fire.

The Tonteldoos Road was a muddy slip of a road. We even had to tow out a car. It's definitely preferable to have a high vehicle (bakkie or 4x4) when driving there, but we've seen Uno's and other small cars attempting the mud.

The cheese place is called Bergen and you pass through the town, Tonteldoos, to their gate. What an absolute surprise. Firstly, the young man speaks Afrikaans. (At this point I have to mention – 3 of the barmen in the Dullstroom Inn, are white, young, Afrikaans men.)

We sampled the Feta (not as salty as the usual ones). Then a "soft curd cheese" with delightful aromas, then the Blue Cheese.

Now, hubby only recently acquired a taste for Blue Cheese and then only if paired with a barbequed steak – but he happily munched away on the testers. And I must say – not the "dirty sock" version – no, no – soft, buttery and the flavour ...

All three cheeses were sampled over and over again – we bought enough! Our further delight to learn that Bergen Cheese Factory supplies a little shop in Linden, Johannesburg, called The Cheese Gourmet. Although driving to Dullstroom could just be the very excuse to nip into the Dullstroom Inn's pub for a quick draft and chat.

Most of our meals were enjoyed in the Inn's pub – trout pate, oxtail, steak & kidney pie, pan-fried trout with rice, ploughman's platter (cheeses, breads and pickles), blueberry pie, sticky toffee pudding with ice cream and a fabulous coleslaw.

Oh, not to forget my tippie – Stroh Rum Dom Pedro. It tastes like melted Rum and Raisin Ice Cream – with a huge kick.

We stayed in Dullstroom for 3 days and hardly ventured into the Main Road. The Shops are ridiculously expensive (they admit it's for tourists) and crowded.

Wednesday morning we had our last breakfast under the verandah, fetched our cheese from the kitchen's cold room and headed back home.



Our December 2006 holiday – started as a Free State nightmare, ended in a Scottish dream...