

A JOURNEY **WORTH TAKING**

The Splendour of Samara Karoo Reserve

"I dream of our vast deserts, our forests, and all our great wildernesses. We must never forget that it is our duty to protect this environment." – Nelson Mandela

With eagerness and excitement, I arrived at Chief Dawid Stuurman International Airport in Gqeberha earlier this year, in the heart of summer. Armed with a rental car and plenty of enthusiasm, my husband, our two dear friends from Pretoria, Gauteng, and I set off for our destination for the next three nights – Samara Karoo Reserve. That familiar blend of anticipation and excitement, which builds from the moment a reservation is made until the adventure finally begins, was impossible to ignore.

Our journey through the Eastern Cape *platteland* unfolded beneath rolling clouds and the occasional late-afternoon shower. A sudden hailstorm trapped us inside a small roadside shop in Jansenville, where we happily devoured homemade pies while waiting for the skies to clear. As we continued towards Graaff-Reinet, we were greeted by the most magnificent rainbow. It felt like nature's gentle reassurance, sensing the uncertainty in my heart and mind. The skies seemed to whisper, "All is well. Sit back, embrace the beauty of the Karoo, and simply be present."

*by **karin jenkins** / photography by **samara karoo reserve***



On arrival at Samara, we were welcomed with refreshing ginger iced tea and the warm smiles of the staff, who would soon become familiar faces. A cool towel, a friendly handshake and the exchange of names immediately made us feel at home. We were shown to our luxurious rooms, complete with en-suite bathrooms and spacious verandas overlooking the surrounding wilderness – although we were gently warned to keep an eye out for the resident monkeys.

Having left the bustle of city life behind, I was determined not to miss a single game drive. The Great Karoo, once little more than a place on a map to me, revealed an entirely different character. The majestic Sneeuberge framed a landscape transformed by abundant summer rains. Lush vegetation, tiny wildflowers, thorn and shepherd's trees, and shimmering pools of water stretched across the plains in every direction.

Within the first hour of our first game drive, we encountered an extraordinary variety of wildlife. Giraffe, gemsbok, kudu, eland and red hartebeest were just some of the species we spotted. Elephant families, imposing at close range, appeared remarkably relaxed, almost as though they were posing for photographs. Keeping count of the animals we see on every game drive has become a treasured family tradition, and it quickly became clear that Samara would challenge our previous record. Seeing a rhino and her calf grazing peacefully, blissfully unaware of their endangered status, was especially moving. Our young guide and tracker displayed exceptional knowledge of the landscape, its wildlife, vegetation, history and people, making every outing as educational as it was memorable.

A VISION BEYOND THE SAFARI

Yet it was not the luxurious accommodation, exceptional game viewing or outstanding cuisine that made Samara truly unforgettable. For me, its greatest achievement lies in its inspiring vision and unwavering commitment to conservation, community and culture.



Samara's ambition is nothing short of remarkable: to help create the third-largest protected area in South Africa by restoring the Great Karoo to its former glory – a vast semi-arid wilderness of mountains, grasslands and thriving wildlife. Centuries ago, the Karoo would have been quieter in human presence, yet infinitely richer in biodiversity. The movement of animals, the fragrance of flowering shrubs after rain and the calls of birds would have travelled for kilometres across the open plains.

Wildlife here was once spectacular. Vast herds of springbok, known as trekbokken, migrated across the landscape in numbers reaching tens, even hundreds, of thousands. Quagga grazed alongside black wildebeest and red hartebeest, while eland, greater kudu and gemsbok flourished throughout the shrublands. Black rhinoceros browsed among the woody vegetation, while lion, leopard, cheetah, African wild dog, and both brown and spotted hyena roamed freely. Above them, blue cranes, secretary





birds, bustards, korhaans, vultures and countless raptors filled the skies.

What makes Samara so extraordinary is that this vision is steadily becoming reality. The reserve is working towards creating a conservation landscape spanning hundreds of thousands of hectares. Already, 300 kilometres of fencing have been removed across 11 integrated farms, with plans to establish even larger wildlife corridors linking public and private reserves. Such collaboration promises not only stronger conservation outcomes, but also meaningful employment through ecotourism while safeguarding this remarkable landscape for future generations.

The reserve's philosophy is built around four pillars – Conservation, Community, Culture and Commerce – ensuring that its vision remains both practical and sustainable. Initiatives already underway include a fully off-grid solar energy system, soil and water restoration projects, self-sustaining food production, the creation of 100 permanent jobs, and meaningful community upliftment programmes, all while maintaining long-term commercial viability.

I left Samara inspired, humbled and profoundly proud to call South Africa home. Ours is a country with many challenges, but if we occasionally pause to appreciate the remarkable work being done around us, we will also discover stories of hope, resilience and vision.

My journey back from Samara Karoo Reserve to Pretoria, Gauteng, was one of quiet reflection, fulfilment and gratitude. Sometimes the most memorable destinations do more than provide an escape; they remind us why the places we call home are worth protecting in the first place.

For more information, please visit www.samara.co.za.

