

# The best of Berg and country life

Willem van de Putte heads the ‘other’ way from Gauteng and finds much to do in the shadow of the Drakensberg



The entrance to the resort spa. Time well spent to be sure.

**M**ORE often than not when you live in Gauteng and you want to slip away for a few days, albeit just a weekend, your first thought is to head north along the N1 and park under a thorn tree in the bush. However, only an hour or two further in the other direction on the N3 and you find yourself at the foot of the Drakensberg, in one of the most beautiful areas South Africa has to offer and which also happens to be a World Heritage Site. There’s something special about a majestic range like the Berg. I’ve driven past it many times on my way to the coast without giving it another thought, even though as youngsters we went hiking there many times. It took me the blink of an eye to agree to spend a weekend with my wife at The Cavern Drakensberg Resort and Spa. As it happened, it was also the period in which I was test-driving the Ford Ranger Wildtrak. A few mails later and I was given an alternative route that included dirt roads for the Ranger that would lead us to Oliviershoek Pass – although it must be said that after years of “Stop” and “Go” signs that rendered normal driving all but impossible, the R74 past the Sterkfontein Dam has been completed and is a joy to drive. The Cavern has been in the Carte family for more than 70 years and has become a must-visit institution in the Drakensberg. It was my first, but my brother, a regular visitor, commented that we would not be disappointed. And how right he was. It’s about four hours from the big smoke, so take Friday afternoon off and ease the car towards Harrismith before the rest of Joburg clutters the highways. It’s about the same distance from Durban as well, and occupation seems to be about 50-50. As far as I could gather, none of the staff were aware we were there for Independent Traveller. The friendly reception and information we received on arrival set the tone for the rest of the weekend. We were accommodated in one of



The resort is nestled at the foot of the Drakensberg. Pictures: Solette van de Putte



The wine cellar has an impressive array to choose from.



Chilling beside the pool is only one of many activities at The Cavern.

the superior suites with its own patio, television and bar fridge. It also has underfloor heating, so I know where we’ll be in mid-winter when temperatures plummet. There’s a host of different accommodation types to suit all visitors, but what struck us – apart from the friendly staff – was how family-friendly the place was. The one word that came up repeatedly was “wholesome”. “Bored” isn’t on the menu and if you find yourself at a loose end you have only yourself to blame. The Cavern is named after the “Cannibal Cavern”, a 200m-wide and 60m-deep overhang, situated above the hotel, and which was home to ancestors of the Amazizi tribe. One of the guided tours will take you there, as well as to view Bushman paintings. There are guided tours every morning and afternoon, on a short or a longer walk, and on arrival you get tea and biscuits. I must confess, it sounded tempting, but we were in rather a mellow mood, so we opted for a

short walk to the fern forest and waterfall just above our suite, followed by an afternoon at the spa overlooking the forest. Mountain bikers of all ages were out on the trails from sunrise, exploring and working up a sweat, and I swear some of the guys had less hair on their legs than I did on my face.

Throw in horse riding, bowls, tennis, a swimming pool, natural rock pools, flyfishing, trekking and an adventure centre close by and you have so much to do that not even a long weekend could do justice to everything. And for kids (and the kid in us), details of activities are posted on the noticeboard every day to keep

them occupied. There is also a baby-sitting service if mom and dad want a bit of respite. And spending so much time outdoors works up a real appetite, which The Cavern caters for brilliantly. It’s “proper” food – nothing nouvelle cuisine – wholesome (again that word) plates of home-cooked food for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It’s a *table d’hôte* menu or set menu, and includes freshly baked bread and salads, and you can order as much as you like. A nice touch on the menu is a question that guests are asked to answer and the first one who gets it right wins a small prize or treat the next day. The hotel has a decent wine list as well as an impressive cellar, with a wide variety to suit every palate. Oh, yes, in case you find you are peckish, tea and biscuits are served at 11am and 4pm every day. Social responsibility is also high on the agenda. The Cavern is involved with the Khanyisela Project, supporting children and crèches as well as the Royal Drakensberg Primary School just before the entrance to the resort. Having spent only a weekend there, I can well understand why people keep coming back. Apart from the natural beauty and activities, you’re treated like one of the family, get decent value for money, and head back into the city feeling a whole lot better than when you arrived. [www.cavern.co.za](http://www.cavern.co.za)



Bowls and tennis in the shadow of the Drakensberg are popular with visitors.