

# MATJIESFONTEIN, O MATJIESFONTEIN

Matjiesfontein is richly spiced with tales of murder, mayhem and magic, all woven in a rich tapestry of gallantry, ghosts, fact and fiction. Ellen Raubenheimer was invited to spend a weekend there and found it enchanting.

**T**he tiny Victorian village of Matjiesfontein is one of the most pleasant weekend getaways, only two and a half hours' drive from Cape Town and nestled in the beautiful Klein Karoo. A popular wedding and birthday venue, there is plenty to do and see, even as a regular weekend getaway.

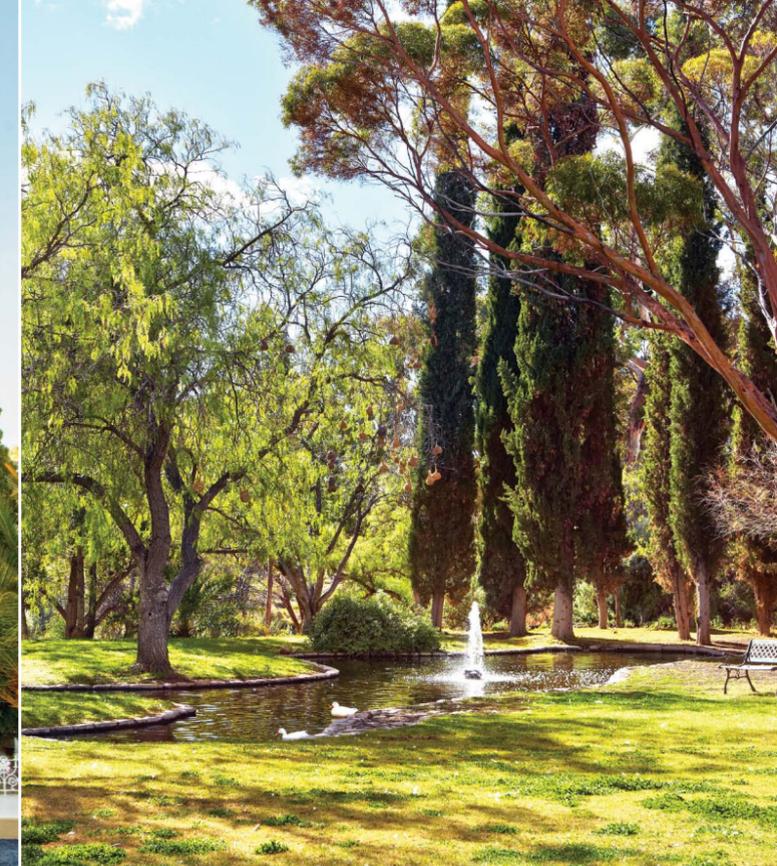
We planned to leave the City on a Friday afternoon at 2pm but only got away at 4 big mistake as anyone who travels on the N1 Durbanville way will know – and it being winter, it got dark quite soon. We were in weekend-mode and chilled until hitting the fruit-carrying trucks from De Doorns and heavy roadworks. This was a nightmare, at some places travelling 30km an hour behind a big truck, but eventually about 56km after Touwsrivier we spotted the Matjiesfontein lights and turnoff.

What a warm welcome! Crackling fire places and friendly staff invited us inside

'The village was also a fashionable health spa that attracted visitors from all over the world'

the much-photographed Lord Milner Hotel. We did not even unpack before joining other diners in the antique-filled candle-lit dining room. Needless to say we had delicious Karoo lamb chops, roast potatoes and veggies – and of course malva puds and a bottle of red vino. By 9.30pm we were passed out in the luxurious bedroom with its old-world charm and twin baths and a shower!

The next morning after waking up to clear skies and a traditional English breakfast, we could explore Matjiesfontein, founded in 1884 by legendary Scottish-born railwayman James Douglas Logan. He was a dynamic and unorthodox man and even his arrival in South Africa was unusual. Shipwrecked near Simon's Town and with only a few pounds in his pocket, he walked



to Cape Town. He got a job on the railways – and rocketed from penniless porter to one of South Africa's wealthiest men. He owned lots of businesses and hotels, one being to sell travellers clean, fresh, health-giving air – that of the Karoo in Matjiesfontein. His fascinating biography can be read in Dr Dean Allen's book *Empire, War & Cricket in South Africa* (R290 by rondonstruik.co.za). By chance we were in Matjiesfontein the same weekend of the book launch and gate-crashed the party. Dean has a special relationship with the town, its people and the history of cricket (one of the first international cricket matches took place here between South Africa and England).

History lovers will lap up all the colourful facts: it was a fortification during the Anglo-Boer War as headquarters of the Cape Command, military hospital, refuge for Jamieson Raid reformers, and the venue of controversial war crimes hearings. The village was also a fashionable health spa that attracted visitors from all over the world, including Lord Randolph Churchill (father of Winston), Cecil John Rhodes, Rudyard Kipling and writer Olive Schreiner, who lived there for two years.

What we found interesting was the "firsts". Logan built a large wind-powered mill to crush wheat and generate electricity for Tweedside Lodge (this was the first private dwelling in South Africa to have electric lighting and flush toilets), and he laid a 20km telephone line, then the longest in SA, from Tweedside to Matjiesfontein. After the 'Laird of Matjiesfontein's' marriage to Emma Haylett, he bought a farm





between present-day Matjiesfontein and Touwsrivier which he named Tweedside.

After strolling around the village built with imported materials by Scottish and Irish stonemasons, stopping for cake and coffee and some champers at the Coffee House, we had a snack at the pub full of cricket memorabilia and the bugle-playing porter, Johnny Theunissen, rounding up volunteers for a sing-along. In the meantime the media crowd for Dean Allen's book launch arrived by bus and the party got merrier until it was time for the launch. Dean told many anecdotes about Logan and one was that guests at his station restaurant normally

ordered and paid for a full meal. But the soup was served so hot that the train's whistle sounded long before it was sufficiently cool to finish, and the rest of the food was never served, if even ever prepared!

After dinner the media crowd went off to visit the museums (we wished them good luck as it was quite spooky in the daytime, never mind at night!) and we looked forward to getting back to our room to soak in those two big twin tubs! The soaking happened only to me as running my bath must have emptied the geyser. My man did his best to join – he boiled the kettle many times but that



References: heritage.org.za, karoo-southafrica.co.za, randomstruik.co.za and matjiesfontein.com

bit of water barely covered the bottom of his tub – so much for twin-soaks! At least I had candlelight to keep me company and perhaps one or two fleeting shadows hovering around. Talking about shadows, there are many rumours about friendly ghosts, but we did not actually encounter any rattling of door handles, or sensing a nurse in the passage or even old man Logan waiting at the top of the stairs in the hotel.

After Sunday morning breakfast the journalists and bloggers were excited at the thought of travelling back to Cape Town on Rovos Rail. We were slightly envious but then again, travelling back in daytime through the beautiful Hex River Valley made up for it.

When next planning a celebration or relaxing getaway, keep Matjiesfontein, O Matjiesfontein in mind.

• The hotelier David Rawdon (now deceased)

found Matjiesfontein in a disintegrated state in the late 1960s and managed to restore and renovate it, adding antiques gathered during his world travels, and the village was declared a national monument in 1975.

• Two years ago the Rawdon family as custodians of Matjiesfontein clinched a five-year partnership deal with The Collection by Liz McGrath which includes the renovation and management of the Lord Milner Hotel and the hospitality experiences at Matjiesfontein. The Collection's touch is very much evident and it is a well-run operation with excellent service, food and attention to detail.

• Rates from R800 a person bed and breakfast in the hotel, but check their website for other accommodation in the various cottages and the motel. Matjiesfontein Village, ☎ 023-561-3011, matjiesfontein.com



**The Coffee House**

Tuck into freshly baked scones and pastries and light lunches in its courtyard.

**The Old English bus**

Take a trip on the Old London Bus, the shortest tour on earth around the village to see its sights.

• Also pop into the courthouse and jail, the quaint Travellers' Chapel, the Old Post Office, the Old Bank Building, Pink Church, Flourmill and Mineral Waterworks, Railway Station (Rovos Rail stops once or twice a week depending on the season) and the Transport museum (featuring a remarkable collection of vintage cars, bicycles in all styles and a steam train). **The Marie Rawdon Museum** houses an eclectic collection of Victoriana providing insight into life at this Colonial outpost at the turn of the 19th Century. Also go walking in the veld, hike or do mountain biking, play



tennis and petanque or get some Vitamin D by the pool. The sprawling, well-established garden is an oasis of green and a diversity of birdlife in an otherwise dry and sparse Karoo.

**Matjiesfontein is named** after a reed or rush called *matjiesgoed* from which early mats were made.



**What to see and do:**

**Historic cricket pitch**

The first official game was played at the opening of the waterworks in November 1889. Many famous English cricketers played this unforgiving Karoo pitch.

**The Lord Milner Hotel**

The gracious grand dame was completed in 1899.



**The Laird's Arms**

Enjoy a drink and a pub lunch and stay for the regular impromptu honky-tonk sing-alongs.



Photos by Ellen Raubenheimer, Ado Wessels and supplied by The Collection by Liz McGrath.

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