

Sutherland to Calvinia

If you want to travel with the stars, drive on dusty back roads, visit an old-time country trading store, walk through a semi-desert with the waking sun, and go on a belly safari for a close-up of nature, then the upper Karoo in the Northern Cape is calling your name.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Southern African Large Telescope is powerful enough to detect a candle flame on the moon.



Sutherland

You're about to travel through a barren, ancient land where you can practically touch the stars at night, where the horizon stretches forever, and where you are welcome at many a farmer's dinner table.

This journey of starry skies begins in the small Northern Cape town of Sutherland, right outside the Art Deco farmers' co-op, where we meet Sutherland's primary champion, one Jurg Wagenaar. He tells us all about the upper Karoo region while he settles us into our rooms at the Kambrokind Guest House.

We've made an appointment for a night tour of the Southern African Large Telescope, which is on a hill outside Sutherland. It's a fascinating 90-minute tour, during which we get to look at fascinating objects up in space through special telescopes dedicated for use by visitors. We don't bother the busy astronomers, but our guide answers all our questions.

Some time spent with the stars up on that hill is definitely one of the highlights of any trip to the Northern Cape, and a great way for us to start this journey. (Just a note, if you're planning to do this tour, book well in advance, as they don't run every day).

The next morning we take a winding dirt road through the Roggeveld mountains to the small settlement of Middelpoort. At the Middelpoort Trading Store, where the interior could be a movie set depicting the 1950s, we buy old-style boiled sweets wrapped in paper cones and walk around the kennels full of boerbul dogs – one of the main Karoo breeds.

There's a bit of a commotion down near the shop, and we wander past it, right into a sheep auction. We stay for a few minutes, drinking in the country atmosphere and having a look at the livestock on display.

We're booked into the nearby Tankwa Karoo National Park for the night, one of South Africa's driest reserves. This is not a game park like, say, the Kruger National Park, which is all about the Big 5 and game drives. The Tankwa is where you use your 'desert eyes' and learn to spot the small things in life – and then look up and gasp at the wide-angle space around you.

At sunrise the next morning, after a great evening spent at our lodge, sitting on the porch outside and drinking in the heavens, we catch the early light.

The succulents open first, and we record this with our cameras. Then the spiders finish their morning webs and trap

breakfast for themselves, while a beetle leaves a drunken track in the sand.

We go for a walk after coffee and rusks, and suddenly, amid all this solitude, we understand why the Tankwa is such a beloved place. You're about as wonderfully far from home as you'll ever be.

At mid-morning, we check out and head north on the R355 to Calvinia, a true Karoo town and one of its most hospitable. We meet up with Alta Coetsee of the Hantam Huis guest houses, where we check in, and she shows us her herd of fluffy lambs. At suppertime we are well wined and dined, with our memory banks full of the wide spaces and night skies of the starry Karoo.