



Culinary heaven in the Tsitsikamma forest

Peace is right next to the road

BUT HIDE YOUR FOOD AWAY FROM CRAGS COUNTRY LODGE'S DOG



JIM FREEMAN



My girlfriend and I came upon the gate to Crags Country Lodge surprisingly quickly after turning off the N2 about a quarter of an hour beyond Plettenberg Bay on the way to Gqeberha. It was dark, we were surrounded by tall trees and I expected something of a drive through the forest till we reached reception but, no, it was right there.



All in all, it was about 400m from the freeway and I worried that our sleep would be disturbed by trucks hurtling by through the night. I couldn't have been more wrong: if anything the muted sound of traffic was rather calming... much like the surruration of surf when your hotel's right on the beach.

annual Knysna Oyster Festival (21-30 June, www.knysnaoysterfestival.co.za) and one prospective accommodation host had just cancelled.

No problem, said Tracy, and would you like to have dinner with us? Boy, are we glad I said "Yes"! Here's my first piece of advice about Crags Country Lodge: stay for at least two nights and make NO plans to eat out. When you finally leave the property, you'll rue every missed meal; the place is foodie nirvana.

Our two-night stay, a joy in every regard, came about by happy chance.

That shouldn't be surprising since executive chef Alice Burnam-King (as well as her lodge manager/sommelier husband James) worked for years at Singita's ultra-exclusive lodges in the Kruger National Park, Tanzania and Rwanda before repatriating at the end of 2021.

Hailing from Willowvale in the erstwhile Transkei, her smile spread even further when I told her I'd spent a year at Centane, just down the road from her grandparents' home when I was *khwedini* (a very young boy).

It was about an hour before closing time at the WTM Africa travel trade show in Cape Town in April that a friend from Sedgfield introduced me to Tracy Degumois on the Garden Route & Klein Karoo stand. She was representing a new country house in The Crags, she said, and would I like to visit?

The menu offered a choice of two starters, three mains and a pair of desserts. Rose-marié and I decided to eat from each other's plates. It nearly scuttled our relationship.

It happened I was planning a midweek roadtrip to the area with Rose-marié as prelude to the

Had we known the feast that



PIECE OF HEAVEN. A part of the beautiful rain forests of Nature's Valley. Pictures: Jim Freeman

mouthful, was she particularly keen to share her twice-baked and blue cheese soufflé. I can honestly say I have rarely tasted something so exquisite.

Mains were a Cape Malay seafood curry and slow-braised springbok shanks and here, at least, the sharing was more equitable.

All the while, James hovered attentively with a winelist but we deferred to his expertise.

James began sommelier training a decade ago, first completing

the international Wine and Spirits Educational Trust's level two and three courses before going on to tackle Michael Fridjohn's judging course and the University of Cape Town's Business of Wine programme.

"I want to do the WSET level 4 diploma next but don't tell my wife... she says I'm done with studying!"

Wine, he adds, ended up as a passion; "a hobby that started paying the bills".

chakalaka, and smoked trout.

We were joined at breakfast by James and Alice.

"We were living in Somerset West after returning from Rwanda when we got a call from a recruiting company saying there was a new property opening on the Garden Route... and would we be interested?" recalls James as we sip more mimosas.

"We said we'd be interested only if we could bring our dog, Luke.

"Five minutes later, we received a phone message with thumbs-up and puppy emojis."

During their interview, the owner said she "knew nothing about running a hotel but she knew this place was special. She gave us *carte blanche* to do with it whatever we liked".

The Burnam-Kings arrived at Crags Country Lodge last January and opened the property six weeks later.

The first weeks were hectic.

"There were no structural alterations that needed to be made but we stripped the walls down to

the brick, redid the electrics, put in new roofs and ceilings, re-plastered and painted."

One of the members of the municipal team installing the electrical meters was Nomzamo Dyubele, who was studying electrical engineering and was engaged on a practical.

"She applied for a job for the season in December. She was so good and keen that we asked her to stay on," says James.

"She's a rock-star and my front-of-house right hand."

The eight-suite lodge is situated in a large manicured garden atop a hill with 360-degree views. The entire property encompasses 28ha and features a brisk walk down to the delightfully named Whisky Creek.

"It's a magical place regardless of the weather," maintains Alice. "Whether it's misty and rainy, or a perfect day like today, the views of the Tsitsikamma forest, Formosa Peak and the Outeniqua Mountains are amazing.

"We've had sundowner ses-

wandering through the incomparable Birds of Eden and Monkeyland wildlife sanctuaries, both of which are run under the auspices of the South African Animal Sanctuary by Lara Mostert and Tony Blignaut.

On our return, we found an extensive cheese and charcuterie platter (with enough food to feed an army); we did it justice but couldn't finish it all. When we got to the room after breakfast, we found the platter had been licked as clean as Baby Bear's plate in Goldilocks.

Muddy paw-prints all over the white cotton duvet cover gave us our first clue to the culprit.

Our fault for leaving the door open but, then again, the Crags Country Lodge is that kind of place.

There are very few properties around us; we see the odd light at night but it really feels as if we are back in the bush."

At this time in the interview, we were joined by a very smug-looking Luke the Dog. We soon found the cause for his self-satisfaction.

The previous day, Rose-marié and I had gone out to do some exploring of The Crags and nearby Nature's Valley before meeting an old friend for lunch in Plett at the Ski Boat Club.

We wouldn't be eating in that night, we said.

We arrived back after a long day