

Vaalwater

From being a rather muscular town of stuffed animals and two-tone safari shirts, Vaalwater is developing a 'bush chic' identity. At the Bush Stop Café there's an Englishwoman called Jean Stout who makes great milkshakes and wondrous waffles. Next-door is the Black Mamba gallery, where quality objects from all over Africa are sold. Co-owner Shelly Zeederberg married into a family of transport riders who experimented with running a team of zebra in harness in the 1890s. The scheme failed. "Those fat cheeky zebra had no stamina for the long haul," she smiled. Vaalwater has become cosmopolitan, and at the ground breaking Waterberg academy school you'll see scholarship kids from the local township play with their English, French, Italian and Spanish classmates. Just off the Melkriver road is the Church of St John the Baptist, at twenty-four Rivers. It's just a little chapel, but it was built by the prime colonial architect of his time, Sir Herbert Baker, who also designed the Union Buildings in Pretoria. It's a popular place to get married, and young couples come from all over the world to make their vows here. This is Baber Country, and if you meet the patriarch Charles, be ready to speak about Bonsmara cattle. His charming wife Nina will tell you how they met and fell in Love. Their son Rupert, who holds an oxford degree in economics, will fill you in on the enormous vision of the Waterberg biosphere. And his English wife Tanya, who has a doctorate in reproductive biology from Cambridge, will take you through her community craft project where 16 local people produce exquisite leather and beadwork. Nearby in Ant's Hill, another Baber property. Named after Ant Baber, Rupert's Brother, it was conceptualised by his Kenyan born wife Tessa. The suites are built in the style of the classic East African rock lodge, where geology determines the design. The bathroom has the feel of a rocky grotto and the bedroom is pure four-poster love nest. While Ant's Hill is romantic, it's also one of the many lodges in the Waterberg where you can enjoy horseback safaris. Take a two-hour ride through giraffe, kudu, and sable on your Boerperd mounts to Ant's view, a hilltop sundowner spot where they'll unsaddle your horse and pour you a divine gin and tonic. If you prefer a loftier ride, head to Shambala Lodge near Vaalwater for an elephant back safari. Lead trainer Shadrack Ndlovu will introduce you to the elephants and their handlers, among them the lead Jumbo called Mickey. The 28-year-old elephant bull from Zimbabwe salutes you by lifting trunk and one leg at the same time. At the handlers command, Mickey lies down on his side and permits you to run your hands over the sand papery skin of his forehead and the soft rubbery side of his massive grey ears. The feisty youngsters Shambala and Madiba arrive for their delicious Lucerne pellets and their trunks frisk the visitors, probing for every crumb. Climb up behind the handler and suddenly you're about one storey off the ground. While your handler sprouts interesting facts about the worlds biggest land mammal, you'll be amazed to feel your pachyderm's great ribcage heaving and subsiding like a giant bellows. When the convoy enters a forest glade, the elephants pluck branches and leaves from surrounding trees, sometimes knocking over a sapling for fun. You'll suddenly realise how this species can transform a landscape. Much like humans, they are great agents of change.