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# Tranquil Tankwa

Tankwa - there's magic in the name. 'Place of the San', 'Place of Thirst', 'Place of Murky Waters' - no one is quite sure of its meaning. Information about the Tankwa Karoo National Park is scarce; people are scarce there, too. You must go there yourself to truly understand it - perhaps even by yourself. It's a place where solitude is encouraged and rewarded. Travelling there means also travelling inward.

By Melissa Siebert • Photographs by Karin Schermbrucker

**AH, SPACE!**  
The awe-inspiring view from the top of the Elandsberg, southwest towards the Cederberg.

IT LOOKS LIKE THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN, WHICH IT ONCE WAS. Silence enfolds you, the heat moves across the veld. Storms, dust and thunder, overtake you. Ancient dark and rusted koppies, serrated and tiered, shift under the shadows of clouds, frothy stairways to heaven.

God has his hand here.

“People come to the Tankwa for the sense of space. And the quiet,” says park manager Conrad Strauss. We’re talking in the *voorkamer* of a 100-year-old farmhouse, now park headquarters. Strauss has been park manager since 1998 when the family farm, Roodewerf, was sold to SANParks. “We’re never going to have the Big Five or a lot of animals. You may go around and see a few red hartebeest, gemsbok or springbok, but maybe you’ll see nothing. People mostly come here to chill, do nothing.”

Proclaimed in 1986 and now 131 000 hectares, mostly former farms, the park is known for its birding and plant diversity. Nearly 70 per cent of the park’s plants are found nowhere else and its Succulent Karoo Biome has been named one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots. But the landscape itself is the star attraction. An awesome stage where nature truly seems omnipotent and plays out in so many ways, infused with the past, both recent and distant.

“It’s spectacular,” says Strauss. “It turns into a paradise in August, with all the flowers. You get the desert in the west, something like Namibia or the Kgalagadi. Then you get the grasslands and the Elandsberg, and lots of euphorbia. And then the Rhenosterveld fynbos on top of the Roggeveld.”

Straddling the border between the Northern and Western Cape, the park is framed by the Cederberg to the west, the Roggeveld to the east and the Klein Roggeveld to the south. The names of its mountains and rivers tell a story, of the creatures that used to roam this veld: Elandsberg, Luipardskop, Rhenosterrivier, Gemsbokberge, Quaggasfontein. Millions of years ago, the Tankwa was under an inland sea. In the relentless heat of a summer’s day, you can easily imagine the water evaporating. Humans have occupied the area for at least 10 000 years, first hunter-gatherers and later pastoralists.

When trekboere moved in from the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Tankwa became something of a Wild West frontier. There were, inevitably, clashes with the Khoisan peoples. Fugitive slaves and farm labourers fled into the wilds of the Cederberg and the Tankwa. Stock theft was rife, as were other forms of crime and violence. Records are few, though Dirk Ligter, a scoundrel and stock thief from the early 1900s, is remembered. Aside from rock paintings primarily in the Cederberg, few traces of the Khoisan have been found. Though their presence, along with that of the farm families who battled this harsh land, lingers.

Strauss mentions the research being done by University of Cape Town history professor Nigel Penn to uncover more of the area’s human past. “Penn stumbled upon a few skeletons in the mountains. He was looking for a cave where breakaway Bushmen hid with stolen sheep.” Honorary rangers are also compiling a history of the Tankwa from oral histories. But, for now, most of the stories are silent, still to be told. ▶



A surprising strip of turquoise in a desert land – a small pan as you enter the park from the south.

Remnants of the *plaaslewe*: homesteads like DeZyfer now house visitors.

You can walk as far as you want, as far as the eye can see; here, walking in the veld outside DeZyfer, near the Roggeveld.



*Millions of years ago, the Tankwa was under an inland sea. In the relentless heat of a summer's day, you can easily imagine the water evaporating.*

**ROOM WITH A VIEW**  
Remnants of the *plaaslewe*: homesteads on the former farms now house visitors.



**If walls could talk**

Our first night in the Tankwa is spent in a nineteenth-century farm cottage some say is haunted – one guestbook entry mentions a ghost rattling around in the kitchen. DeZyfer (‘the spring’) nestles in a small hollow down a dirt road from the information office, minutes away literally but a time warp once there. The Augustyns once lived here; some lie buried in a tiny graveyard nearby.

We watch the weather moving across the land. Over the top of the Roggeveld, rising like a giant wall to the east, lightning plays as evening comes. Doves stare from the palm trees. An owl appears as the sun sets and turns the mountains pink. A fierce wind comes up from the south, slightly relieving the heat. It threatens to take our fire into the veld, tossing cinders about like the girl who threw them into the sky and created the Milky Way.

When night falls, millions and millions of stars appear against the deep blue. Shooting stars as well. It’s worth having a restless night, waking often to go outside, to see the stars perform.

The next morning we awake early to go up the Gannaga Pass, one of the park’s more renowned drives. It’s breathtaking. Maybe breath-stopping is more accurate. Pray you don’t meet another vehicle on the way up or down. Cliffs of sandstone drop off sharply. From the viewpoint near the top you could be in a helicopter or small plane.

“Look for black eagles [Verreaux’s], we’ve got nine mating pairs,” says Strauss as he tackles what to him is a familiar road. “We’ve had only one accident here,” he reassures as he sees our eyes widen at the next hairpin turn, “and he survived.”

That afternoon we’re joined by section ranger Letsie Coetzee, in charge of conservation, and head northwest towards the Elandsberg in search of game. Centuries ago, the area was full of game and the site of wildebeest and springbok migrations. Today, the park hosts just over 40 mammal species, among them, duiker, steenbok, caracal, grey rhebok, black-backed jackal, bat-eared fox, leopard and aardvark. Red hartebeest, springbok, gemsbok and Cape mountain zebra have all been restocked and there are plans to eventually

**Centuries ago, the area was full of game and the site of wildebeest and springbok migrations.**

restock eland, black wildebeest, black rhino and possibly brown hyena.

“We’re trying to see which areas of the park the animals utilise the most, and what influence it has on the veld,” Coetzee says, picking up signals from their radio collars on a tracking device. Animal grazing and trampling of the veld are critical to its good health and regrowth.

We see mother and baby hartebeest, a few springbok and gemsbok on a far ridge. That most intriguing of beasts, the aardvark, eludes us, though Strauss shares a story of one once coming right to him and sniffing his toe.

Our third day in the park and we’re again up with the sun. Strauss takes us to his favourite place, the top of the Elandsberg. On the summit, 700 metres above sea level, it’s immediately clear why he loves it. It’s otherworldly, prehistoric, a vast plain with ridges, koppies and mountains, shrouded in mist, awaiting the appearance of a pterodactyl or

herds of brontosaurus. “You’ve got a 360-degree view, overlooking the tops of all these mountains without seeing another human being,” says Strauss. “It’s amazing.” He points out the pinprick silhouettes of a few gemsbok down below. How did he see them? “It’s from sheep spotting.”

After our siesta to escape from the searing heat, he takes us on another expedition, up the Watervlei 4x4 trail to the top of the Roggeveld, 1 150 metres above sea level. Coetzee joins us. She’s never been in her four years working at the park. Strauss has obviously navigated the way before, expertly taking our Pajero Sport up and over countless rocks, down small drop-offs, forward on a track we can barely see. We crawl slowly over the stones, crushing aromatic kapokbos and passing fields of golden elephant grass, stopping several times to gasp at the views. You can’t absorb the views, really, they’re too grand. Humbling.

Back at park headquarters we meet Willem Jacobs, who worked for Strauss’ father for more than 40 years and now does maintenance for the park. Ironically, he is now taking down farm fences he put up years ago so that animals, and people, can move through the Tankwa more freely.

Going back, but not backwards. Untaming an untameable land.

1. A puff adder blends in with the desert landscape.
2. The roads can be hard going and a 4x4 is recommended.
3. An angulate tortoise crawls across one of the park’s dusty roads.
4. A *botterboom* (butter tree) in the Gannaga Pass. As a boy, park manager Conrad Strauss used their trunks as sleds.
5. Windpumps throughout the park testify to the former farms.

6. In winter the spiky leaves of the *kanniedood* (can’t die) offer up bright red flowers.
7. The harsh landscape surprises with examples of dainty beauty adapted to the conditions.
8. Park manager Conrad Strauss surveys his favourite vista from the top of the Elandsberg.
9. The brilliant red and yellow of the grasshopper warns predators to steer clear of this poisonous snack.



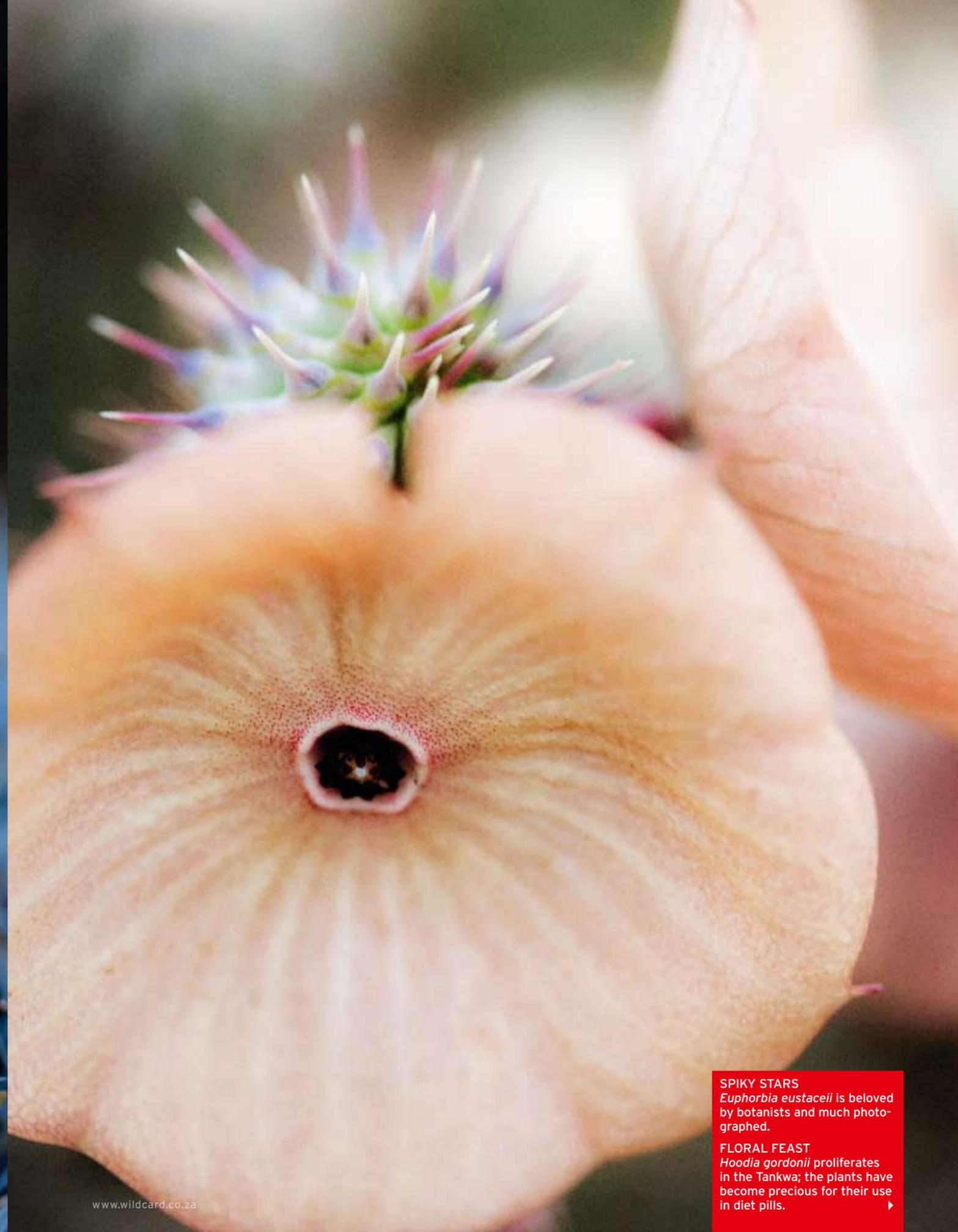
*When trekboere moved in from the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Tankwa became something of a Wild West frontier.*

**ICONS OF THE KAROO**  
In this arid region windmills draw water to surface dams.



**WEIRD AND WONDERFUL**  
Nearly three quarters of the park's plants are endemic.

*Nearly 70 per cent of the park's plants are found nowhere else and its Succulent Karoo Biome has been named one of the world's biodiversity hotspots.*



**SPIKY STARS**  
*Euphorbia eustaceii* is beloved by botanists and much photographed.

**FLORAL FEAST**  
*Hoodia gordonii* proliferates in the Tankwa; the plants have become precious for their use in diet pills. ▶

# TRIP PLANNER

**GO-GETTER**  
Our Pajero Sport tackled the rocks and elephant grass at the top of the Roggeveld with ease.



With a Wild Card you don't have to pay daily conservation fees at Tankwa - or any of the more than 80 parks in the programme. Turn to page 45 for more information and an application form.

### GETTING THERE

Tankwa Karoo National Park is under five hours' drive from Cape Town, going through Ceres and taking the R355 towards Calvinia. The park is clearly signposted off the R355, then it's a dirt road for about 80 km before you reach the information centre, where you must check in. You can also approach the park from Middelpos, Sutherland and Calvinia.

### WHEN TO GO

Park manager Conrad Strauss recommends visiting between April and October, with flower season falling in August/September depending on the rains. In summer, it gets extremely hot during the day and remains very warm in the evenings. The heat curbs movement during the day - both yours and the animals' - but you could witness dramatic thunderstorms.

### ACTIVITIES

Many people go to the Tankwa to 'do nothing'. But driving around the park, admiring the varied vistas, walking, birding, stargazing and searching for the park's flora and fauna are the main things to do. There are no hiking trails at present: visitors are allowed to walk wherever they wish.

The park is all self-drive, but park staff might take you out if they are available. It's not essential to have a 4x4, though definitely advised, especially to take in views from the Watervlei 4x4 trail on top of the Roggeveld, the Leeuberg 4x4 route, the Gannaga Pass and the top of the Elandsberg. The information centre at Roodewerf can give you directions to all these places. Park roads are all dirt.

For birders, Burchell's courser seems to be the main draw; we saw a Verreaux's eagle, secretarybird, spike-heeled lark, lots of chats and a spotted eagle owl.

### ACCOMMODATION

**Couples:** The cottages at Elandsberg are built of traditional materials - mud, straw and stone - and stylishly decorated. Each has a plunge pool and stoep where you can sit and contemplate life. R736 a night.

**Families:** The restored homesteads, sleeping between six and nine people, are great for getting a sense of the area's past. The houses are fully equipped with braais outside and fireplaces or wooden stoves inside. Some have a small dam for swimming. From R425 a night.

**Camping:** Self-sufficient campers have a choice of seven spots around the park. There are no ablution blocks, so be sure to leave only footprints! R75 a night for two, R31 an additional adult, R13 an additional child.

**Upmarket:** Gannaga Lodge at the top of Gannaga Pass is privately owned and is for visitors who want a restaurant and bar. 079-922-1688 agterkop@hantam.co.za

### BE PREPARED

Bring all your food, water and some extra fuel. There is water, but it's brackish. There aren't any shops in the park and the nearest petrol station is 50km away at Middelpos, with limited supply. The park office sells braai wood.

There is no cellphone reception anywhere in the park, and no electricity in the houses (fridges run on gas) but lots of matches and candles are provided. Bring mosquito coils/repellent in the warm weather, sunblock, binoculars to see across the vast distances, lots of drinks to keep you cool in the heat of the day, a good book or three, and a good friend or two.

Go slowly on the roads as they can be treacherous. The park hands out driving guidelines at the office, as well as simple maps.

### CONTACT

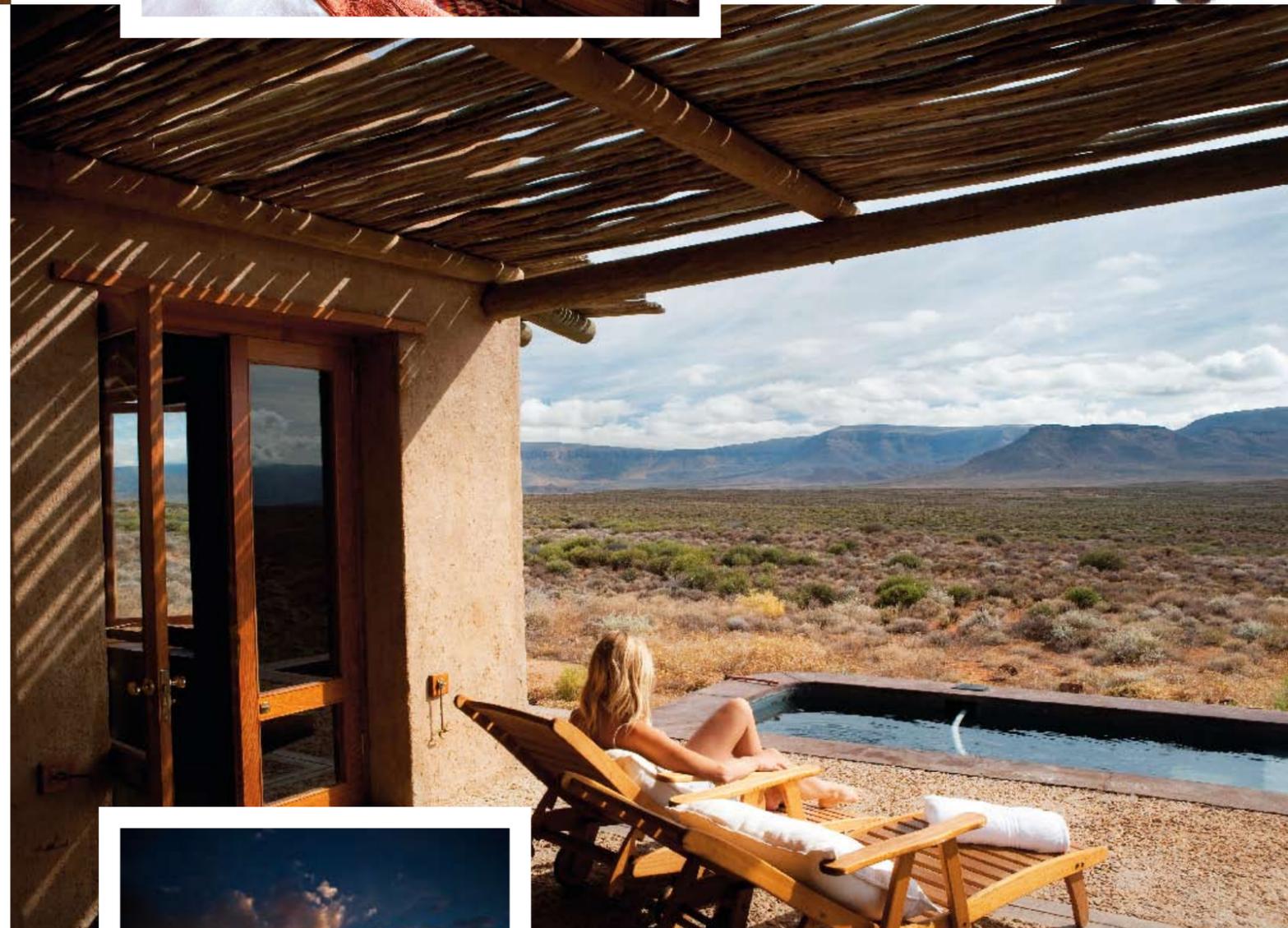
Park information 027-341-1927 tankwa@sanparks.org 🐾



The earth-coloured rooms in the Elandsberg cottages open right onto the veld, with glorious views.

Martial eagles count under the park's impressive raptors.

'Doing nothing' is not always easy, but relaxing is the obvious thing to do in this place.



Sunsets in the Tankwa are spectacular.

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