



Riding the Bull

Latest drawcard at Thabaphaswa in Limpopo is the mountain-bike trails but FIONA MCINTOSH discovers it's a sanctuary for everyone

PICTURES SHAEN ADEY

“**N**ow you see why it's called Thabaphaswa, the Mountain of the Black and White

Bull,” says Deon Richter with a laugh, as shadows play across the face of the towering granite peak on the far side of the valley.

We sit there on the equally bald dome of The Lookout, the high point of our mountain-bike ride, massaging our weary legs and gulping down water. When we planned the day's activities the night before, the 14km loop appeared perfect for a pre-breakfast spin. But, as usual, I've overestimated my abilities – the sustained climb from the valley floor has done me in. Our young 'guide', Jenny Osborn, who farms the neighbouring property we have just ridden through, and her friends, are forced to wait on several occasions.

The youthful members of the party ride boldly across the granite boulders to the viewpoint. I pick my way across on foot, panting like a Labrador. In truth it's been a stunning ride that, had I been mountain-bike fit, I'd have revelled in. But I haven't been in the saddle for a year. Not the best preparation for mountain terrain.

Anticipating that the route would take us longer than we hoped, Deon had packed snacks and driven up in his bakkie, so we linger, orientating ourselves and learning a bit about the area.

In 1994, Deon and his wife Ankie bought the farm at the foot of the iconic local landmark of Thabaphaswa in Limpopo, developing it as an Nguni stud farm, then as Thabaphaswa Mountain Sanctuary, a family- and pet-friendly mountain retreat.

“We fell so in love with the valley that we saw it through rose-tinted spectacles, and underestimated how difficult the conditions were,” Deon admits. “Sandy soils mean the nutritional value of the grass is low. But fortunately Nguni cattle are like mountain goats and survive here

by eating leaves and seed pods.”

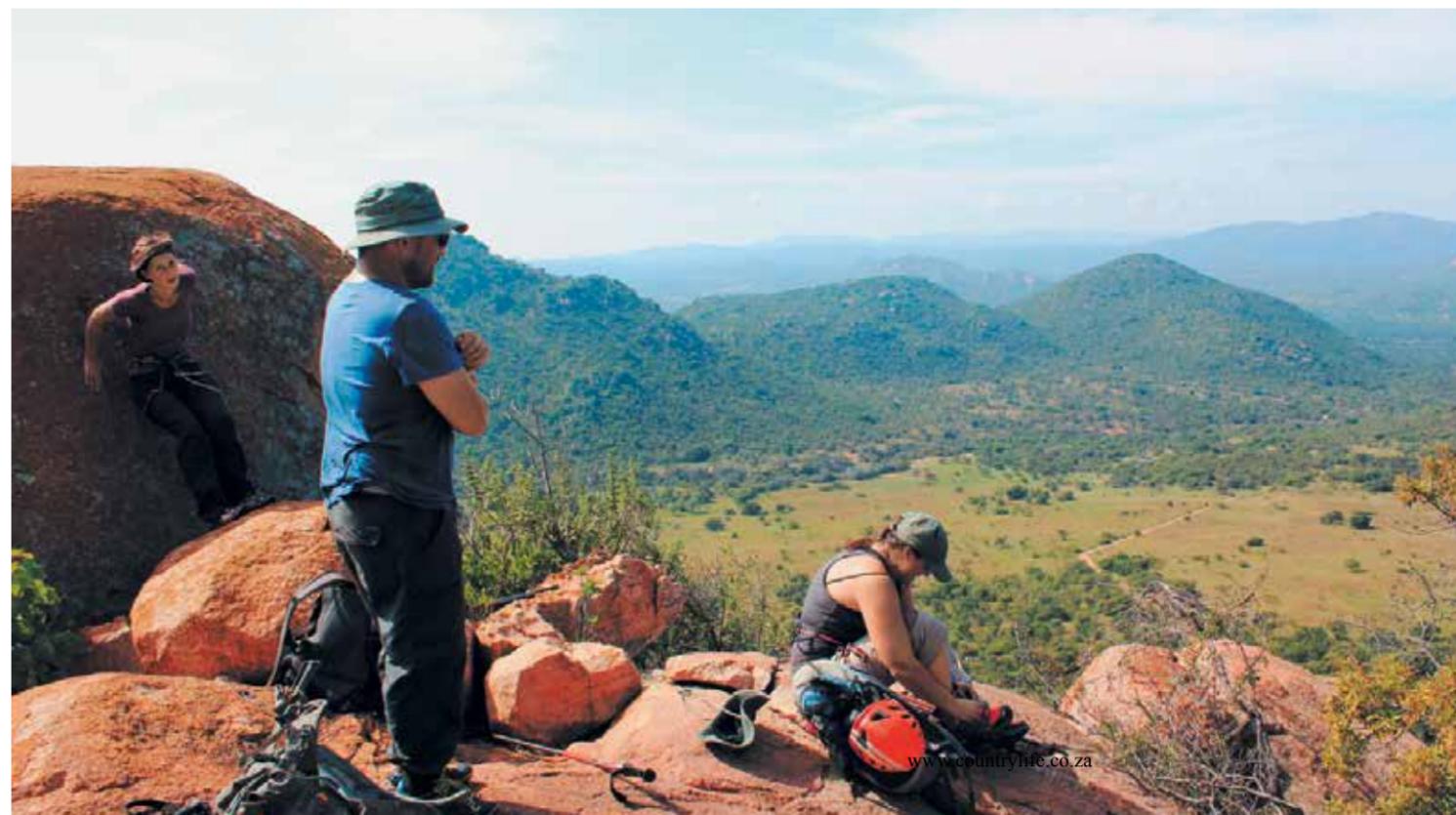
Avid hikers themselves, Deon and Ankie wanted to share the rugged farm with other mountain walkers. Initially they built some rustic, eco-friendly bush camps linked by paths. More quirky accommodation followed and before long they had a network of rugged day and overnight (including slackpacking) trails of varying difficulty.

Soon Thabaphaswa was well established as a hiking and birdwatching destination, and, thanks to its location at the crossroads of the N1 and N11, as a convenient stop on the way to Botswana and the north. Dedicated hikers and 4x4 owners are still the bulk of their visitors – along with city folk who come to de-stress, appreciate the silence or wander through the distinctive mountain

RIGHT: Jenny Osborn showing the way to The Lookout, the highest point on the trail network. BELOW RIGHT: Thabaphaswa is a haven for dogs. They even host Labrador weekends.



TOP: The Lookout, with the great granite dome of Thabaphaswa in the background. ABOVE: Hiking is still one of the most popular activities at this mountain retreat. RIGHT: If you're really determined you can bushwhack to the summit of Thabaphaswa. If you're a climber the easiest way to the top is up one of the excellent bolted routes.





(the Richters have had a lot of fun with their place names and detail), then it's on to a great section of narrow single track that weaves along the river to Dome Rock camp, our home for the weekend. Throwing down our bikes we jump into the dam to cool off.

Later on we head to the big mountain and connect with a couple of regulars. Johan Moelich and his wife Sharon have

been coming here almost every month for as long as they can remember. It's their escape from the stress of the city.

Keen hikers and trail runners, they've spent much of the last year developing some bolted sport climbing routes: some easy, some epic. "The face of Thabaphaswa is very impressive and alluring to climbers," Johan explains. "There are very few places where you can climb on granite in South Africa. And, unlike many rock-climbing areas, it's safe."

The following day we take a spin to inspect Deon's prized Nguni cattle. They're beautiful and extremely curious. Each of the animals has its own character and unique markings, he informs us – part of the reason that all Nguni farmers are so passionate about their animals. But the breed also makes good economic sense due to its high fertility and

resistance to ticks and disease.

"We learnt some hard lessons in the early days," Deon reflects, as we join him and Ankie for tea in their boma, before our departure for the Big Smoke. "Since most of the grazing is up in the mountain we used to lose a lot of calves to leopard. Now we've gone back to the traditional practice of sending them out with herders, and the losses are very occasional."

It has been an action-packed weekend that's left me refreshed and ready for the week ahead. As we sit there laughing at Deon's wicked jokes, and exchanging stories, I realise that despite the brevity of the visit I feel very at home. Erik summed Thabaphaswa up perfectly. It is unpretentious and good for the soul. It's also fabulously good fun. ■

Map reference B7 see inside back cover

bushveld of *kanniedood* (*Aloe variegata*), wild figs and paperbark corkwood trees and swim in the pristine dams.

But increasingly they're catering to a broader market. "Our guests are diverse in their interests," says Deon. "Nowadays people participate in all sorts of endurance activities, particularly trail running and mountain biking. So in 2014 we started developing mountain-bike trails. We now have two main routes, the short but steep Lookout Trail and the longer Lunsclip Loop, each with variants off them. And there are more in the pipeline."

They had a head start with their MTB trail development. Their son Heinrich is co-owner of the website BuyCycle, and the events company Advendurance, whose professional expertise in trail design they were able to draw on. Heinrich, his wife Carina and their cousin Erik Smuts are enthusiastic and competitive mountain bikers that come up regularly from Joburg to ride.

"We've no intention of becoming a specialist MTB venue," Deon assures me. "The trails are largely along existing cattle paths, and farm and district roads rather than purpose-built, groomed track." Erik, who has ridden many of the top stage races both in South Africa and overseas, concurs. "For me the trails at Thabaphaswa are similar to the people I expect to see here – unpretentious. Riding the trails and smelling the peculiar mix of marulas, *beesmis* (manure) and bushveld is food for my soul."

As I sit on the rock talking to these down-to-earth farmers I relate to them. In the late nineties, when I lived in Joburg, I was one of a loyal following that found solace in this special place.

It's getting hot and the youngsters are chomping at the bit. Time to get back in the saddle. Despite warnings that we should keep our wits about us, we let go of the brakes and fly down the jeep tracks. We regroup at the amusingly named Drunken Parrot Camp

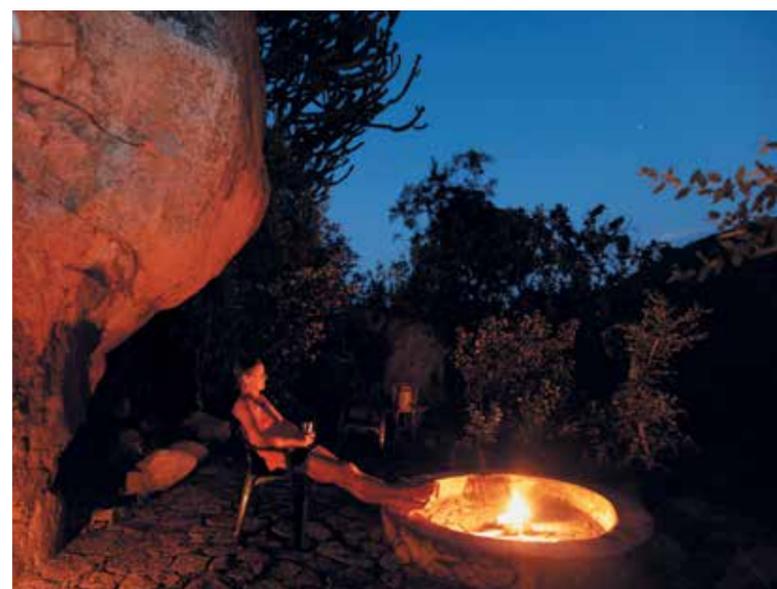


TOP LEFT: You can make up your own routes utilising mountain and cattle paths but you might have to carry your bike for short sections. TOP RIGHT: Accommodation on the farm includes bush campsites such as Drunken Parrot Camp. ABOVE: The glass-fronted shelters of Dome Rock camp are set among great granite boulders.

BELOW: Owners Ankie and Deon Richter. BOTTOM: Nguni cattle, full of character.



BELOW: Long-time visitors Johan and Sharon Moelich, who recently introduced rock climbing on the farm. RIGHT: Bush camps don't come better than this. Sitting around the fire at Dome Rock camp.



Up to It?

- Although the trails are not particularly technical, the rugged mountain terrain is challenging. You'll enjoy it more if you're reasonably fit. The 41km Lunsclip Loop, which includes sections of quiet district roads, is perfect for those in training and wanting to get mileage under their belts.
- Kids and novices can ride the mellow, gently contouring farm roads and the lovely single track down the mountain stream, stopping off at various dams, two of which have foefie slides.

When to Go?

This is a year-round destination. Winters are pleasant and the altitude means it never gets too hot in summer. Most rain falls November to April.

While You're There

The pet-friendly retreat also has great 4x4 and hiking trails popular with trail runners, plus fishing and rock climbing.

Where to Stay

- The very affordable, and quirky, accommodation options include campsites in the bush. The Pump House is a romantic, self-contained cottage (in a renovated building that was once used for the artificial insemination of the cattle) and three funky bush camps. All are cleverly integrated into their environment and have an outdoor shower, great braai area and loo with a view.
- Dome Rock camp, which consists of colourful glass units ingeniously built between dramatic granite boulders, is really evocative. Designed by Heinrich Kammeyer, who was also involved in constructing the award-winning Mapungubwe Interpretation Centre, it takes account of the fact that, in the local Tswana culture, shelters should be integrated into their surroundings, but built a little distance away from the rock rather than touching it.

Contact

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