



CAMELS

Don't let the names fool you

Neither rhyme nor reason

ROAD TRIP: EXPLORING MONTAGU AND MCGREGOR IN THE LANGEBERG



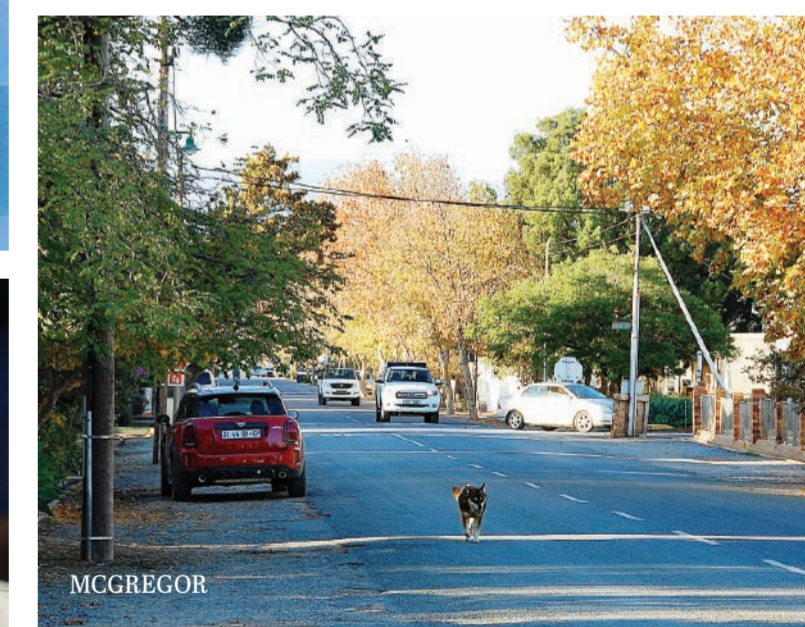
MONTAGU



MONTAGU



MONTAGU COUNTRY HOTEL



MCGREGOR

Jim Freeman

Hey diddle diddle, the cat was a flapper and a cow jumped off of the truck ... it's not just a mangled nursery rhyme but actual elements of a recent midweek bimbles to Montagu and McGregor in the Langeberg.

Situated less than two hours from Cape Town, the Langeberg local municipality for the most part straddles the western end of Route 62 (regarded, at 850km, to be the longest wine route in the world) that links Ashton to Humansdorp in the Eastern Cape.

It falls within the larger Cape Winelands District Municipality and its major population centres are Ashton, Robertson, McGregor, Montagu and Bonnievale.

While the Langeberg is not a "secret" wine-producing region – the names Klipdrift, Roodeberg, Van Loveren and Zandvliet are not exactly unknown – it is certainly the least visited. Two of the towns (Montagu and McGregor) are, however, worth a trip from the Mother City.

Spend a night or two in the area and, I can almost guarantee, you'll want to return.

I made the journey in a new all-wheel-drive Mini Countryman whose bright scarlet livery the manufacturers would probably call "postbox" or "London bus" but which I dubbed *rooinek* red.

One of the incongruities of the Langeberg is that, while the current and historical *lingua franca* is overwhelmingly Afrikaans, place names are mainly of Scottish origin.

Robertson and McGregor were Scottish ministers of local Dutch Reformed Church congregations, while Bonnievale speaks for itself.

Montagu is named after a hard-working and outspoken former colonial secretary of the Cape.

The adventure started just outside the Langeberg ... at Overhex Winery near Worcester where, a few years ago, I heard about the cow that cheated death, not once but twice, and gave name to the winery's flagship Survivor label.

Overhex sources some of its best grapes from a farm outside Malmesbury in the Swartland. Wandering the vineyards is an Nguni cow that was on its way to

the Cape Town abattoir when it made a break for freedom from a moving cattle truck.

It landed unscathed and fled into the veld.

I bought a bottle of the delightfully robust Survivor syrah (shiraz) and drove the remaining 70km to the Montagu Country Hotel (www.montagucountryhotel.co.za) and asked owner Pierré-Jacques ("PJ") Basson whether he'd care to share it at dinner in the hotel's Charleston restaurant. It wasn't a wine with which he was familiar and he was happy to oblige.

Dinner was a three-course set menu prepared by executive chef Werner Blom and, being in the Karoo, naturally I opted for the lamb pie as a main. Perhaps it's true that hunger is the best spice but, on a decidedly chilly early winter evening, it was a heavenly match.

We passed up on dessert (malva pudding) and repaired to the bar which, during the day, doubles as a coffee shop.

Armed with homemade *sachertorte* and a KWV 10-year-old potstill brandy each, he told me the story of what might be South Africa's most authentic Art Deco hotel.

The original edifice was built in 1875 with a Victorian façade. The current Art Deco hotel – Russel's New Montagu Hotel – was built behind it in 1932, whereupon the old structure was demolished.

The hotel went through numerous ownership changes until it was bought by Gert Lubbe, creator of d'Ouwe Werf Boutique Hotel in Stellenbosch, in 1996.

He was joined by Basson as general manager and right-hand man three years later.

Basson and his wife Colene purchased the place after Lubbe's death last year.

"We've spent much of lockdown repurposing the hotel, transforming it from something exclusively for guests to a facility that welcomed locals as well as people walking or driving past.

"We called in a team of architects, shared our vision and let them go to work.

"We didn't plan for lockdown; we planned for when business returned to normal."

The Art Deco motif was maintained assiduously, down to restored period pieces in the bedrooms ("The only things truly modern in the hotel are the elec-



PJ BASSON



SURVIVOR AND LAMB PIE



TALAMANCA CHURCH



GHOST TOURS



KINGNA DISTILLERY



CLINTON DRAKE

trics and plumbing," says Basson). Even the resident cat, an elderly Maine Coon that welcomes guests from her perch on the half-landing above reception, is named after style icon and 1920s "flapper" (short-haired party girls wearing shorter skirts) Coco Chanel.

The other is an activity centre where visitors can book rock-climbing excursions, mountain biking and bicycle tours (including a very popular ghost tour, tractor

rides on a local protea farm, hikes, hop on-hop off wine safaris or a sedate drive through the town in a classic Cadillac.

The latter is called American Dream Cars and is run by Basson – one of his vehicles is a 6-litre 1956 Sedan de Ville – as part of the Cape Country Routes (www.capecountryroutes.com) group of properties and tourism-related

activities between Cape Town and Gqeberha.

Accommodation comprises more than 20 privately owned hotels, lodges and guest houses – all of which, says Basson, must be owner-operated and managed – which are selected for their character, charm and romance.

"The Montagu Country Hotel is essentially a one-stop-shop if you

want to explore Montagu: you can park your car safely on the premises on arrival and leave it until you're ready to depart."

This was one attraction I could not put to the test because I specifically wanted to journey to McGregor, a well-maintained village I used to visit frequently about 25 years ago but which, unfortunately, slipped through the cracks

of my life.

While it shares some of Montagu's "arty" characteristics, McGregor is quaint, more rustic and laid back. It's at the end of a country road (21km from Robertson) rather than on the busy R62 thoroughfare, so it's more of a planned destination than a place you discover by chance.

Bucking the small town trend

of opening for business only over weekends is restaurateur Clinton Drake who opened *Magazzi Osteria* at the beginning of May.

"I'd been working on a private island in Madagascar when the pandemic struck.

"After six months with no guests and a reduced salary, I figured I was wasting my time.

"I decided to come and chill out in McGregor where my late father had owned a house – which I inherited – for about 25 years.

"I chilled out too long and began to feel the need to do something again. Luckily, these premises became available."

The name, says Drake, translates to "The Dudes' Tavern" and

harks back to the friend with whom he opened the business "but we parted ways after two weeks".

"Here you're not going to get art on a plate.

"I've been doing French fine-dining my entire life and I hate it with a passion: I don't want to cook it and I *certainly* don't want to eat it!"

"The portions here are not big but they're reasonably priced so you can eat as an Italian would ... which is to have an *antipasti* followed by a starter, main course with sides and dessert.

"If you want a big plate of food, there are plenty of other places to go..."