

Ganora - the Karoo's paradisaical garden of light

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Although South Africa is renowned for its warm hospitality, there is little to beat the hearty welcome you'll get at Ganora Guest Farm, a remote working sheep farm situated in the triangle between Graaf Reinet, Cradock and Middleburg just seven kilometres from Nieu Bethesda in the Eastern Cape's Karoo.

It is a tranquil setting with woolly sheep and bleating lambs in a string of lush green pastures situated along a willow-lined river in a sheltered valley, unexpectedly protected from the harsh Karoo climate. It is a paradisaical oasis where time seems to stand still.

Hester and JP Steynberg sold their original sheep farm and moved to Ganora (which means GARDEN WITH LIGHT in Hebrew) about 10 years ago, and they offer the warmest of South African welcomes, complete with a roaring fire in a rustic farm style dining room, delicious home cooked meals of sweet and tender Karoo lamb and the most delicious biltong soup.

You can expect to feel part of the family and be regaled by fascinating tales of baboons and interesting Anglo-Boer war history and if your timing is right you could be entertained by the antics of meerkats that Hester rehabilitates and releases into the wild. JP is a self-taught paleontologist and has been an avid fossil hunter since his childhood. He has created an interesting private fossil museum at Ganora that contains finds from Ganora and elsewhere, including the only complete fossil of the fish *Kompasia de la harpi* in the world. The tour of the museum is fascinating and JP's personal tales of discovery and really ancient history certainly gave pause for thought. One of the highlights of a visit to Ganora is joining JP on a fossil dig excursion, where he takes you on a short drive around the farm to literally uncover fossils that have been preserved in situ. Our group started off intrigued by JP's stories and found it even more fascinating to see the fossils where they were found. Almost all of us ended up stopping to turn over a stone here, and scratch a patch there, with newfound wonder and curiosity about our natural world. When they moved to Ganora JP and Hester had no idea of the rich heritage lying a scratch or brush beneath Ganora's surface, but it did not take long for the family to discover even more historical treasures. There are several bushman caves with rock art, overlooking the secluded farm valley. Hester, an avid amateur anthropologist, was delighted when her young boys, Louis and Renier, returned home with the exciting news that they had discovered caves on the farm. She conducts guided tours to the rock art sites near the farm and others with bushman engravings, and delights in telling guests about the rich history of the area. A young Afrikaner boy from the Davel family also used one of the caves as a hideout during the Anglo-Boer war. He managed to escape undetected while the rest of his family were captured and sent to a concentration camp. Several engravings bear testimony to his lonely vigil after his family was taken away during a raid. Hester shares the museum with JP and has several interesting bushman artifacts including bows and arrows, skin bags, arrowheads and a variety of implements as well as the healing stone of a bushman shaman. The Steynbergs work closely with the Wits university to preserve the 240 million years of history to be found on their farm and all tours to historic sites are conducted by an experienced guide. Ganora's rustic accommodation options are full of charm and attention to detail and visitors can stay in single or double rooms each with the most intriguing showers and the Khoisan cottage for larger groups or families accommodates up to six people, either self catering or catered. Activities at Ganora include a 10 km and 35 km trail, which is great as a 4x4 or mountain biking trail. There are short walks around the farm, a stiff hike up the nearby promontory of Kompassberg and good birding in the area. The canyon walk along the river is relaxing and pools are all the more inviting on a hot Karoo day. Children love the farm animals and activities and just about everyone tries a dip in the farm reservoir the traditional Karoo swimming pool. Although it is well worth spending a few days exploring Ganora, it is close to Nieu Bethesda and the intriguing artwork at the Owl House, home of recluse Helen Martin. It is also great to use as a base to explore the surrounding Karoo particularly Graaff-Reinet, the Valley of desolation and the historic town of Cradock. Despite the fact that we visited Ganora after the five-star luxury of a private game farm, it was far more satisfying and fulfilling. It was South African and had that elusive something that made it more than just a five star experience. For more about Ganora go to http://south-africa-travel.suite101.com/article.cfm/ganora_guest_farm

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