

Sweet ‘Matat’ and beyond – a thrill for adventure-seekers

Curious travellers find world of wonder begins from EC town, going inland across into Lesotho

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MATATIELE or “Sweet Matat” has not been all that well known as a tourism destination, but things are changing for the little town located at the point where the Eastern Cape meets KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho.

Regular travellers to KZN who use the viable and scenic R56 as an alternative to the busy N2 may regularly pass through the quaint town half-way between Underberg and Rhodes.

But anyone who takes time to stop over will discover relatively pristine terrain and an enormous amount on offer – including possibly the cleanest air in SA.

With its spectacular surrounds, the region running west from Matatiele along the Eastern Cape border to Lesotho – and indeed over the border in Lesotho – is spectacular, offering top-of-the-world mountain views, remote rural villages, sparkling streams, indigenous forests and rock art.

It’s also a perfect destination for outdoors enthusiasts, art lovers, 4x4 adventurers, hikers, mountain bikers, fly fishing enthusiasts, bird watchers and city-slickers wanting an authentic cultural experience.

For off-road bikers, Matatiele also offers some of the world’s best adventure biking terrain, complete with organised rides that can be custom designed across all terrain.

And come September there is even a famous horse-race.

For those wanting to explore the lesser known but nevertheless, spectacular parts of the southern Drakensberg and the Maloti’s by foot, Matatiele is the gateway to the Mehlooding hiking trail.

It’s a trail with two options – hikers can walk it on their own or go on a four-day tour with local guides who know the route and are well-informed about the indigenous plant life and cultural life.

But there is far more to offer, as a Dispatch team recently found out.

We were taken by the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Programme (MDTP) – a collaborative initiative between the Lesotho government and South Africa to develop the area and stimulate the local economy – through this mountainous region and across the border into Lesotho.

It opened our eyes to the rich offerings right on our doorstep.

After spending night one at the Resthaven Guesthouse in Matatiele, we set off in 10 sponsored VW Amarok bakkies, heading west, passing the Mariazell mission station and going through the Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve



ON TOP OF THE WORLD: Venturing out to the edge of one of the dramatic rock formations in Lesotho’s Sehlabathebe Park

Pictures: BONGANI FUZILE

towards the Lesotho border.

At Ongeluksnek we were welcomed by Lesotho and SA government officials who highlighted how important tourism development was for both countries.

We then crossed into Lesotho at the Ongeluksnek border post, which with its efficient officials, was quick and easy. From there we travelled into a misty Lesotho along the scenic Ongeluksnek pass heading for Lake Letsie .

Along the way, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, we saw many young men herding livestock.

One was Lesala Masenyane who told us he had never been to school as he had been chosen to tend the family cattle.

Heading down the pass we reached Lake Letsie, a freshwater lake set against a mountainous backdrop. It had us all clicking away with our cameras and drones.

We then joined the tar road at

Mphaki heading for our next destination – Semonkong where we were to spend our second night at Semonkong Lodge on the banks of the Malestunyane River.

Semonkong means “place of smoke” – a name derived from the “smoke” from the Maletsunyane Falls – the highest single-drop waterfall in southern Africa.

No surprise then it is also the site of the longest single drop commercial abseil in the world – a distance of 204m – a Guinness record.

At Semonkong thirsty journalists headed for the rustic bar. The lodge put us all up in comfortable private rooms with cold and hot water. Next day we headed for the spectacular Christ the King gorge, making our way to the rural Thamathu village in the south eastern reaches of the Mountain Kingdom.

Access is mostly on horseback and donkeys and the village has no

internet connection or electricity.

Villager Liau Mohasoa told us they were used to this life, but having tourists was a blessing as they brought information about the outside world. “This is a life of the 1960s where there was no electricity in most part of the southern African villages here in Lesotho and South Africa,” said Mohasoa.

In the village we benefited from the Thamathu Community Village Homestay initiative which gave us a night in a village rondavel – a new experience for some of us.

The rondavels were scattered across the village and we joined up in the evening to drink homebrewed beer and enjoy a hearty meal of lamb and pap cooked over a fire.

The next day we headed back to SA via the Sehlabathebe Pass, stopping off at what was once the home of Leabua Jonathan, the second Prime Minister of Lesotho.

Our last night was at the

Mehlooding chalets, concluding a magnificent trip that proved without doubt that Matatiele is a splendid gateway to Lesotho, and that much adventure lies across the border in the Kingdom in the Sky.

Rabson Dhlodhlo, the MDTP director, said they had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Maloti Drakensberg route in 2011 aiming to facilitate tourism development in the region.

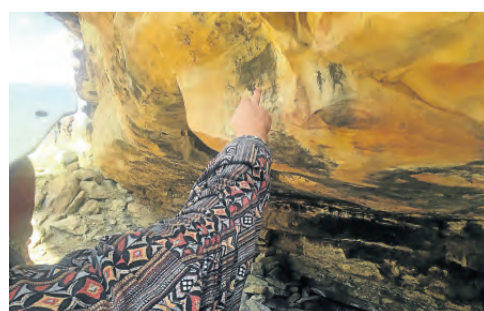
The MDTP area had significant untapped potential and the objective was to create a cross-border itinerary linking the various diverse tourism highlights, he said.

Matatiele Local Municipality manager Dr Tsepang Nakin said tourism in their area could grow by up to 10% annually. Sports tourism was also key for their area and there were plans for a heritage marathon from Qacha’s neck to Matatiele in the near future.

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EASY ACCESS INTO LESOTHO: The Ongeluksnek border post



ART FORMATIONS: Rock art near the Bob Phillips camp site in the Mathibeng area



VILLAGE LIFE: Thamathu village where accommodation is available in local homes



COMFY LODGINGS: Despite the remote area Semonkong Lodge offers hot and cold water