

The big empty

South Africa's Karoo is 30,000 square miles of unforgiving, unsparing and aching lonely landscape. It is also one of the most serene and beautiful places on the African continent, as Brian Jackman discovers.

The invitation sounded too good to ignore: "Come and meet Sibella, our South African television superstar." And what a glamourpuss she turned out to be: every inch a catwalk queen, from her amber eyes to the black-and-white tip of her elegant tail.



Beethoven and Mozart appreciate an audience

The story of Sibella the cheetah, now a resident of Samara private game reserve in the Eastern Cape, has been widely reported in the South African media.

Born seven years ago, she roamed free in the Northern Province until her capture in 2003. Badly hamstrung and mauled by dogs, she was tied up in a cage and left for dead.

Luckily, word of her plight got out. She was rescued by the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust, underwent life-saving surgery and was brought to Samara with two male cheetahs.

Together they made history - the first cheetahs to be seen on the Plains of Camdeboo for nearly 125 years.

But Sibella wasn't finished yet. A year later she produced a litter of five cubs and, in 2006, went one better and gave birth to six, putting Samara on track to achieve its ambition of becoming the country's top cheetah reserve.

Just before my visit, Sibella had been darted and taken to a holding pen to be fitted with a new radio collar. It was time to release her and I was invited to set her free. Quietly, I opened the gate of her enclosure, then stepped aside as she strode past with barely a glance to rejoin her new life in the Great Karoo.

It was the long-vanished Khoisan people who called it the Karoo - the "Dry Place where there is Nothing". This is South Africa's Empty Quarter, a vast upland desert stretching for 30,000 square miles.

Across the plains, framed by huge skies of burning blue, stark mountains sprawl like sleeping lions, shutting out the rest of the world.

To the south, only a couple of hours' drive away, lies the Garden Route, the tourist highway that hugs the coast from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth.

But the Great Karoo - that ancient land of dinosaur bones, Stone-Age hand axes and Khoisan cave paintings of extinct Cape lions - is passed by as though it never existed.

Among the most remarkable adventurers to explore this wild land were the naturalist William Burchell, the first European to discover the white rhino, and the French ornithologist François Le Vaillant, who dressed in an ostrich-plume hat and shoes with silver buckles and travelled everywhere with 16 guns, a scimitar and a tame baboon.

As for the early settlers who trekked here by wagon, only the hardiest and toughest survived. Most became sheep farmers, moulding their own bullets, fashioning shoes from springbok hides, living off biltong and even eating their donkeys when times were hard.

To this day, the Karoo remains unforgiving, unsparing and aching lonely. And yet it has

always had its devotees, people who are passionate about its sun-struck plains and boundless space.

Among them are Mark and Sarah Tompkins. He is an English physicist; Sarah, his South African wife, was a marketing product manager. Together, they have demonstrated how hands-on conservation can transform 70,000 acres of clapped-out farmland into a hugely successful born-again wilderness.

"Ten years ago," says Sarah, "we were staying at Rorke's Drift Lodge in Zululand.

There we met a man who filled our heads with magical tales of the Great Karoo, of the vanished creatures of the bushveld, the wandering cheetahs and the millions of springbok that once migrated across the Plains of Camdeboo in such numbers that the dust raised took two weeks to settle.

"He told us there was a farm for sale and we went to see it. At first the land seemed desolate and devoid of life, but then we entered the Milk River Valley. We saw the buffalo grass and the indigenous trees, the vistas of mountains above and beyond, and were humbled by its beauty.

"It was a kind of madness, like a love affair. We were living in Paris at the time and buying a farm in Africa made no practical sense whatsoever. But we went ahead and bought it." That farm became the nucleus of Samara, and today their crazy dream has become a reality.

Since that first visit they have bought 10 more farms, pulling down the fences to create one of the largest private game reserves in the country, restocked with species that roamed here before the settlers arrived: not only cheetahs, but also white rhinos, highly endangered Cape Mountain zebras and 15 kinds of antelope.

The original farmhouse has been converted into a luxury lodge so visitors can enjoy a malaria-free safari in a part of Africa that has never been on the tourist map before.

A week or so before my arrival a storm had swept across the Karoo, dumping four inches of

rain in the mountains and causing flash floods on the plains. Samara is buried in grass, its red earth stippled with desert flowers. We drive from the airstrip through the green desert scrub, its thick, aromatic scent travelling with us, past flowering acacias with six-inch thorns and shepherds' trees with paper-white trunks.

The hillsides bristle with tall mountain aloes - strange plants that look as if they belong to another planet. Meerkats watch us with beady eyes, standing like ninepins around their burrows, and above us loom dolerite rim-rocks where black eagles breed.

Then we enter a kloof, a pass leading towards the pyramidal summit of the Spitzkop, splash across the stony shallows of the Milk River and there stands the lodge, an oasis of gracious living with swallows swooping over manicured lawns.

The original farmstead - a low, single-storey building in the colonial style of the last century - has been immaculately restored. Easy chairs are set out on the stoep under a blue-green corrugated tin roof.

There are three suites in the main lodge and three bungalow suites in the grounds, decorated with zebra-skin rugs and lithographs by Cornwallis Harris. Close by is a swimming pool, a tennis court and a boma (enclosure) for dinners under the stars.

In the golden hour before sundown we go out on a game drive. We pass a lake where blue cranes are resting and, as we watch, more fly in, gracious birds the colour of wood-smoke filling the air with sweet-throated cries. A herd of gemsbok canters past, spear-like horns held aloft, like a squadron of lancers on patrol.

To the north, the 7,000ft crests of the Sneeuberg mountains stand out sharply against the sky as the sun sinks through red reefs of cloud. Time for a beer. We pull out the coolbox and watch the valleys fill with purple shadows. Then, our sundowners finished, we drive slowly back under the stars, shining a spotlight to search for the nocturnal animals of the plains.

Night in the Karoo belongs to the quick little bat-eared foxes, to the keening jackals whose feet

hardly seem to touch the ground as they trot across the desert, and the armadillo or earth-pig, whose powerful claws can dig a hole three metres deep in the hardest soil to obtain its nightly feast of termites.

Next morning, woken at sunrise with a tray of fresh-baked rusks and coffee in a silver pot, I draw back the curtains to see two male waterbuck sparring outside my window.

The dew is still heavy on the grass as we set off up the kloof, heading deeper into the hills where the elusive Cape leopard - smaller than its low-veld cousin - clings on like a legend. We're on our way to a mountain called Kondoa, zig-zagging in bottom gear towards the summit 2,500 feet above.

Chacma baboons bark a warning and two male kudu with corkscrew horns go crashing off through the spekboom thickets. Their arrow-shaped tracks are everywhere.

When at last we reach the summit we find ourselves on a high plateau of open savannah, a miniature Serengeti marooned in the sky along with its grassveld pipits and wild herbivores. Wherever I look there are animals: blesbok with their bold white blaze; black wildebeest cavorting over the grassy slopes; herds of eland with suede coats and swinging dewlaps; and, most exciting of all, two family groups of highly endangered Cape mountain zebras trotting along the skyline.

The comparison with the plains of East Africa is uncanny. Even the oat grass spilling in green waves around us is the species that grows in the Masai Mara. "You're right," says Sarah proudly. "That's why we call this our Samara Mara." It also reminds me of the Grandes Causses, the limestone tablelands of the Cévennes in southern France. Islands of silence, the French call them, and the same profound hush enfolds Kondoa.

But listen closer and what you hear is pure unadulterated Africa: the whistling cries of redwing starlings; the curious yapping of the black wildebeest - so different from their Serengeti cousins - and the song of the wind running over the land.

Here, close to a viewpoint called Eagle's Rock, a picnic lunch has been arranged, with tables set out in the shade of a canvas pavilion. The food is exquisite: smoked duck and ginger consommé; carpaccio of eland. Even the sandwiches have been individually wrapped in brown paper and tied with blue ribbon.

A glass of chilled Sauvignon in hand, I watch the cloud shadows on the plains below, crawling towards the horizon as though to the edge of the world.

On returning from the mountain, we go looking for two male cheetahs, called Mozart and Beethoven. Both have been fitted with radio collars to make it easier to find them in the dense scrub; even so, if they lie down in a donga (ditch) the signal is lost.

By now the temperature is soaring. Seen through the trembling desert air, the summits of the Sneeuberg range dissolve into shimmering swirls of burnt sienna and iceberg blue. A secretary bird strides across the middle distance, its quills bouncing in time with each slow-marching step. In all the immense heat-hazy space it is the only thing that moves.

All afternoon we search in vain for the cheetahs, until the sun is almost down. Its last rays reach out across the grass, igniting the mountains until they glow like embers. And only then, in the dying light, do we pick up a strong signal and find Mozart and Beethoven playfully stalking ostrich chicks on the darkening plain.

Karoo basics

Safari arranged by Cazenove and Loyd (020 7384 2332, www.cazloyd.com). A fully inclusive four-night stay in a lodge suite at Samara with BA economy-class return flights to Johannesburg and all domestic flights and transfers costs from £1,334 per person. For an overnight stay in Johannesburg, try the Westcliff, a five-star Orient-Express hotel 30 minutes from the airport (00 27 11481 6000, www.westcliff.co.za).