





CAPE ADVENTURES

**Touring South Africa's Cape Peninsula,
big game country and winelands**



STORY AND PHOTOS:
CHRISTOPHER BAKER

Arriving at Bucklands Private Game Reserve conjured *Jurassic Park* déjà vu. An electric fence loomed overhead and the massive metal gate wore a huge sign: WARNING! WILD ANIMALS CROSSING AND NO FENCE. I pushed the gate closed behind me, slammed shut the bolt, then hauled myself back into the saddle. The 2015 Indian Roadmaster is a rhino of a bike, but the chance of encountering a real rhino lumbering out of the bush had me spooked. My nerves tingled as I eased out the silk-smooth clutch for the 3km run to the lodge.

"Many of our visitors come by motorcycle," owner Michele Stewart had assured me. She must have been speaking of BMW GSAs and other dual sports. Barely 100m along the track I hit pools of gravel and sand. Soon I was crawling the behemoth uphill over scree-covered rock ledges. The suspension sponged up the hammering. And the controls proved perfectly calibrated, light and fluid, as I feathered the throttle and clutch to maintain momentum. But I sensed I was riding the full-dress tourer close to its off-asphalt limits. Slow and steady: "If I go down here, I'm in trouble!" I was soaked in sweat when I finally pulled up to the quaint



◆ A black rhino at Kwardwe Private Game Reserve



◆ Vineyards outside the Grand Roche, Paarl



↑ Above Cape Town

the cape is shrouded with endemic heath fynbos. A hartebeest sprang across my path. Then I passed a troop of baboons in the road and signs warning: **BABOONS ARE DANGEROUS**. With long dog-like snouts, they looked far from benign. Still, I couldn't resist the photo op. I dismounted, shot a few frames of bike-with-baboons, and roared off before a surly simian could leap onto the passenger seat.

THE GARDEN ROUTE

The encounter prompted a taste for more serious game, so I turned the bike east for Port Elizabeth — gateway to East Cape Province — with its dozens of national parks and game reserves sprinkled with deluxe lodges and safari camps.

“Clouds poured over a scalloped coastal massif towering above wind-scoured beaches and fishing harbours roiled by mists”

I ran hard along the so-called Garden Route, an anomalous name for the well-paved, fast-paced N2 highway, which unfurled via Swellendam through pastoral landscapes framed dramatically to the north by the Langeberg Mountains. Then I was virtually run off the road as a Mercedes SUV swept past in my lane. South Africans are dodgy at overtaking — they expect you to move into the hard shoulder as they pass. A bully-boy habit that kept me alert.

The Roadmaster soaked up the miles,

delivering me by sundown at Phantom Forest Eco-Reserve, a thatched nature lodge cocooned in misty dwarf montane forest outside Krysna, 500km east of Cape Town. Vervet monkeys scampered among the branches as I headed to the rustic restaurant, lit by lanterns. “I like to combine creativity and sensation,” chef Robyn Stein told me, explaining her menu of “rainbow cuisine” merging multicultural influences with quintessential South African produce.

I relished my Moroccan-spiced ostrich



↑ This has a different meaning if you are on a motorcycle ...



↑ Dawn safari at Gorah Bephang Camp



↑ Old-world luxury at Gorah Elephant Camp



↑ The food is as good as the accommodation at Gorah

carpaccio with griddled eggplant, followed by seafood curry in aromatic coconut broth, and a divine pistachio chocolate tartlet with pomegranate white chocolate sauce. Three days into my trip, South Africa was proving a gourmand's delight.

Firing up the big V-twin, I continued east to Plettenberg Bay. Beyond, the N2 curled uphill, inland, to slingshot through a flat wilderness of dense subtropical thicket. No towns, nor petrol stations, for hours. When the fuel warning light came on, I grew nervous. I'd ridden 345km (well beyond the Roadmaster's expected range) when I finally gassed up in Humansdorp. I had few peevishes with the bike ... but a mere 2-litre tank on a fully rigged long-distance tourer topping 400kg?

BIG GAME COUNTRY

Beyond Port Elizabeth — a desultory industrial port city — I cut north along the N10 and turned west for Addo Elephant National Park. South Africa's third-largest national park is pachyderm paradise, with the world's densest population of tuskers. Barely a mile up the sloping dirt road I spotted jumbos, plus giraffe, ostrich and zebras.

Then a warthog with fearsome tusks dashed across my path. I'd been coaxing the bike around potholes and hollows, keeping the narrow front tyre free of deep furrows. The warthog spooked me. A momentary loss of concentration and I ran myself into a rut. On the GSA I'd have shifted my weight onto the pegs. Instinctively I tried to stand up, but couldn't (that's the trouble with a bagger's

legs-forward posture). Fortunately, ample torque and judicious steering saved the day.

"Yesterday two lions chased off a cheetah," said the gatekeeper at the entrance to Gorah Elephant Camp. "Right here, by the gate!" Was he joking? Nearby, a sign read: "The use of motorcycles is strongly discouraged as motorcyclists may be exposed to dangerous animals." Sounds reasonable. So I parked the bike beneath a heavy tarp (to keep the vervet monkeys from scratching the paintwork) and transferred by 4x4 vehicle to the deluxe tented camp, centred on a converted Victorian farmstead adorned with animal heads and antiques. My opulent walk-in tent-suite was as sumptuously appointed as any city hotel, with a vast shower and free-



↑ Elephant spotting at Kwandwe Private Game Reserve



↑ There are lots of roads like this!

RATING THE ROADMASTER

The 2015 Indian Roadmaster is a paean to the Chief Roadmaster. Introduced in 1947, it was considered the most luxurious American motorcycle of its day before Indian Motorcycle went bust in 1953. Polaris Industries resurrected the iconic marque in 2013 with the Chief and Chieftain. The all-new 2015 Roadmaster is the pride of Indian's retro pack, reinvented with keyless ignition, electronic cruise control, and smartphone audio system. Offering top-of-its-class comfort, it's designed to muscle the Harley-Davidson Ultra Limited aside as the ultimate long-distance tourer.

Manhandling the mastodon around the gravel lot at Swartberg Country Manor left me in need of the hotel's masseuse. But once rolling, the Roadmaster's graceful handling belies its weight. The electronic ride-by-wire throttle and other controls are sublimely calibrated and responsive. A little rev, relax the one-finger clutch, and the bike eases into motion. It's superbly balanced thanks to a low centre of gravity. A relatively short wheelbase, steep front rake and precise steering ensure effortless U-turns. The engine unleashes masses of power and torque, propelling the bike to freeway speeds with virtually no vibration. The ride is smooth and solid, courtesy of a cast-aluminium frame and perfectly synced suspension that soaks up the bumps. And the six-speed shift is seamless, although I found it impossible to shift up to second when the gearbox was cold. Wind-buffeting is virtually nil thanks to the vast fairing and half-moon windshield, electronically adjusted by a handlebar push-button switch. The air was so still inside the cockpit I could have smoked a cigar. Quiet, too. The cockpit ergonomics are perfect. And the wide, deep-cushioned leather saddle guarantees all-day, butt-pleasing comfort.

The lack of factory GPS navigation (an inexcusable omission) obligated me to fit an after-market tank bag with map display. Alas, the bag didn't sit well atop the tank's raised chrome spine console; it also obscured, and occasionally activated, the console's heated grips and luggage lock buttons. Otherwise, the Roadmaster's 132 litres of weatherproof storage — including huge rear trunk with chrome luggage rack plus side trunks with soft liner bags — proved ample for my camera gear and clothing for all weather. I particularly appreciated the twin knee-guard cubbies, perfect for quick-access items.

Add oodles of chrome and luxury automobile-style details (like the illuminated Indian chieftain accent light on the fender) to the Roadmaster's irresistibly sensual retro looks, and I was enthralled by this spectacularly impressive ride.



Underwear adorns the roof at Ronnie's

standing bathtub to wash off the dust after sunrise and sunset safaris.

"No walking alone after dusk," my guide, Werner LeRoux, told me with deadly earnest. I soon learned why. Come dawn, I cracked open my door to see three hyenas creep by. They were followed by a thunderous growl — a lion? — that made my hair stand on end as I hurried to the lodge for my daybreak safari.

After two days I left Gorah and rode through a veil of cold rain to Grahamstown. I barely felt a drop thanks to the electronic

windshield, vast fairing and leg shields. Beyond, the R67 zigzagged up and over the Edda Pass, delivering me in brilliant sunshine at Kwande Private Game Reserve and the sumptuous Great Fish River Lodge. With nowhere to park the bike at the entrance, I was escorted at high speed by jeep along the corrugated dirt road that led to reception.

"Are there lions?" I asked. "Oh, yes. Of course," the guide replied. "Don't stop!" No kidding! Adrenalin fuelled my ride.

On safari I was sobered by two lionesses





↑ Hout Bay

lying in a pool of shade on the road. "Motorcyclists must mimic antelope to apex predators," I mused that afternoon as I watched three young lions rip apart an unlucky eland against a blood-soaked sunset fit for a Hollywood epic. No road ever felt as lonely as the dirt track that next day led me to neighbouring Bucklands, where I completed my Big Five viewing with up-close-and-personal safari encounters with rhinos. I slept fitfully, unable to get the big cats out of my mind.

"Don't worry, we don't have lions," noted 25-year-old guide Owen Ackjeran. "Michele feels sentimental about her antelopes. She even gives them names." My sense of relief was short-lived. "We have jaguars, though!" Departing Bucklands, I asked Owen to accompany me back down the track to the gate.

LITTLE KAROO AND WINELANDS

Throttle open, I retraced my route via Port Elizabeth to Oudtshoorn — ostrich capital of the world — then turned north and corkscrewed up through the fog-bound Schoemanshoek Pass for a night at Swartberg Country Manor. After my 620km day I arrived still feeling fresh, testament to the bike's ideal ergonomics.

Westward, I ran along the R62 through the semi-arid Little Karoo. Talk about jaw-dropping grandeur! Clouds tumbled over the plum-purple Swartberg Mountains that cupped the vale, studded with thatched Cape Dutch farmsteads incandescent amid fields gilded by yellowing poplars.

A small remote pub scrawled with the words "Ronnie's Sex Shop" pulled me up sharp outside Barrydale. Many a weary

biker has done the same at this desert pit stop. "I opened it as a grocery in 1989," owner Ronnie Price told me through his long Gandalf-like beard. Then his jokester ▶

"I relished my Moroccan-spiced ostrich carpaccio with griddled eggplant, followed by seafood curry in aromatic coconut broth, and a divine pistachio chocolate tartlet with pomegranate white chocolate sauce. Three days into my trip, South Africa was proving a gourmand's delight"



↑ Little Karoo

pals painted 'sex' between the words 'Ronnie's Shop', he explained. The coup drew curious passers-by, so Ronnie turned his nowheresville food store into a now-world-famous pub. Women's panties and bras festooned the bar.

At Montagu I diverted onto the R60, then headed south for Villiersdorp. Beyond, I skirted the Theewaterskloof reservoir and turned north for the Franschhoek Pass. Clawing up the switchbacks, it was hard to imagine that in colonial times this pass was known as Oliphantshoek for the elephant herds that seasonally crossed these mountains. They resembled the whisky-brown Scottish Highlands. Beyond the summit, the R45 unspooled steeply

to tight hairpins, offering astounding views over a sprawling patchwork of vineyards. I spiralled down to Franschhoek, the chicest town in Cape Winelands with its trendy restaurants and bars and old-world wine estates characterised by centenary Cape Dutch buildings.

I continued to Paarl (the third-oldest town in South Africa) for a final night of luxury at the venerable Grand Roche Hotel, set amid rows of grapevines. Next morning, I rode the Roadmaster into the vineyard to photograph it bathed in the golden sunlight of dawn. Then I hit the electronic ignition, aimed the bike west on the N1, and savoured the self-assured lion's growl of the big-twin engine as I headed back to cloud-draped Cape Town and the end of a perfect Cape Province adventure. *ARR*

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↑ Ronnie of Ronnie's Sex Shop fame

