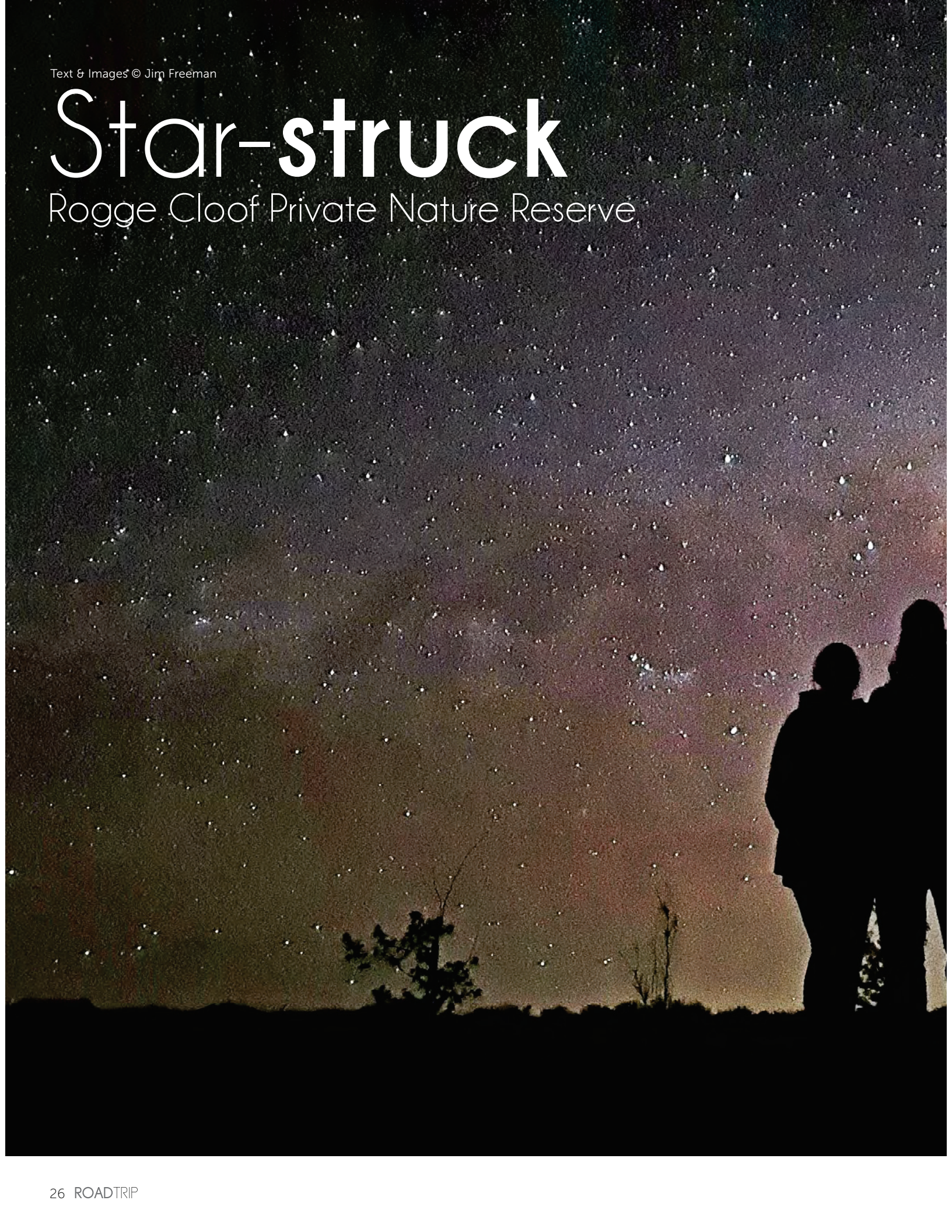
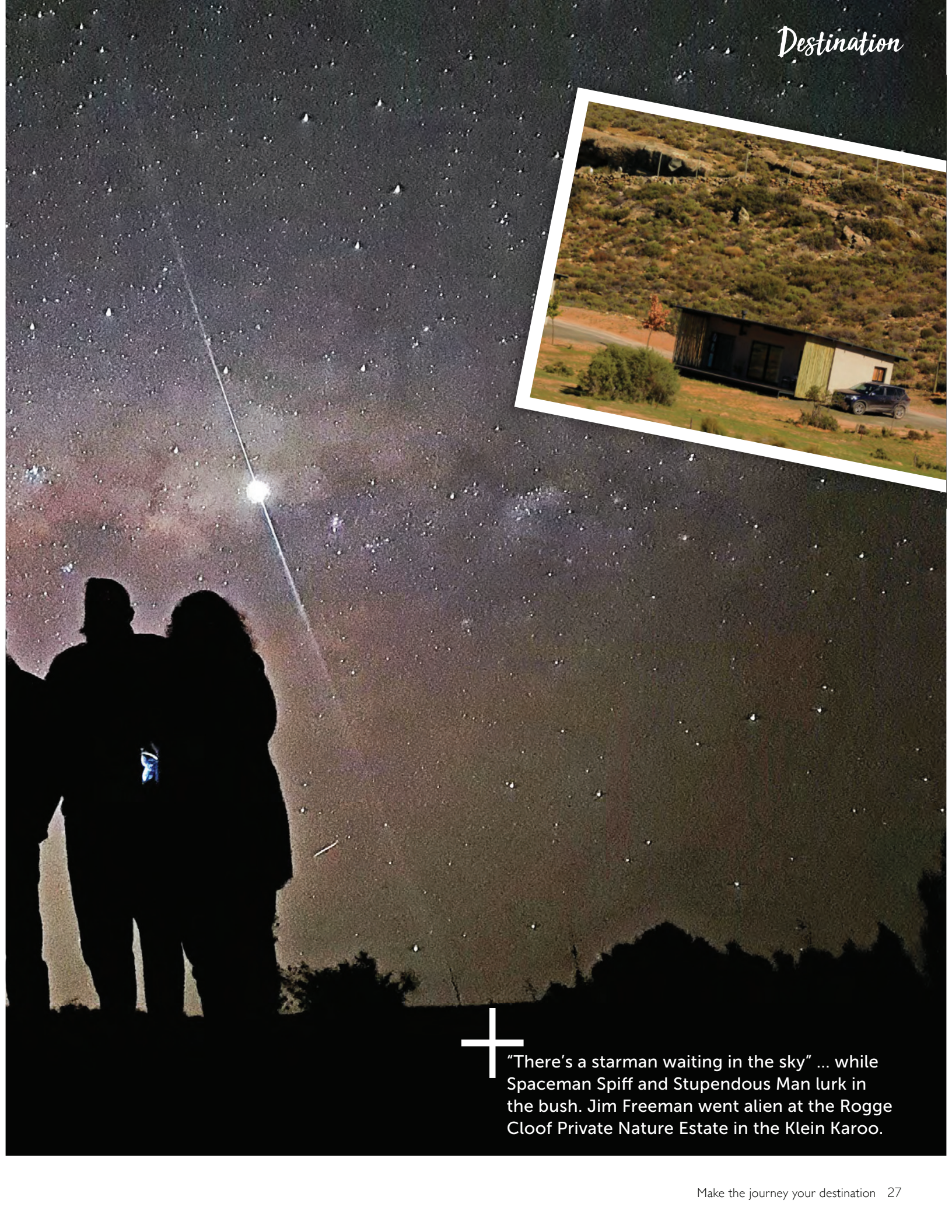


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Star-struck

Rogge Cloof Private Nature Reserve





"There's a starman waiting in the sky" ... while Spaceman Spiff and Stupendous Man lurk in the bush. Jim Freeman went alien at the Rogge Cloof Private Nature Estate in the Klein Karoo.



Most South Africans know the small Northern Cape town of Sutherland as one of the consistently coldest spots in South Africa, with mid-winter minimum temperatures averaging at around -9°C . Others know it as home to the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) as well as the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT), the biggest optical telescope in the Southern hemisphere.

The town draws stargazers from around the world – it is said to be the best place to study the Southern night skies – and it is almost inevitable that they take one look at the bleak Karoo landscape and compare it with Roswell in New Mexico, North America. Locals quip that if aliens chose to land surreptitiously on Earth, South of the equator, it would probably be in the Karoo.

Fifteen kilometres South of the town, you will encounter an imposing blue wall and gate. On the one side, it bears the faintly ominous (for alien conspiracy theory believers, anyway) name: Spaceport Karoo – Sutherland Dark Sky Reserve. On the other, however, it proclaims the place is the Rogge Cloof Private Nature Reserve (www.roggecloof.com).

Few people know that tourism rival agriculture in importance to the Sutherland economy as amateur astronomers from around the world stream to the Klein Karoo to gawk at the Milky Way,

constellations, planets, stars, nebulae, and giants of the Southern skies. This is especially the case in Winter when viewing conditions are prime.

Rogge Cloof is a recent addition to the Cape Country Routes stable of more independently owned and run hotels, lodges, and guesthouses in the Western and Eastern Cape. It covers 20 000 hectares, most of which is enclosed by electric fence to prevent the free-ranging cheetah population of the reserve from straying onto neighbouring farms.

Rogge Cloof (“Rye Ravine”) dates back to 1756. It was bought by the Gertholtz family of Melkbosstrand as a holiday farm in 1992 and the process of converting the property into a commercial lodge began in 2014. Accommodation is offered on a self-catering as well as dinner, bed, and breakfast basis, with “inclusive” guests staying in the Orion suites, eight luxurious off-grid chalets overlooking a small plain to which herds of springbok come down to graze. In Winter it is regularly carpeted with snow.

Instead of just stargazing with a powerful telescope and informed commentary, Rogge Cloof offers a range of activities to provide guests with a more comprehensive African experience. These includes hikes and guided tours, a presentation on dinosaur fossils found on the property, wine tasting, (Rogge Cloof has its own range of wines from grapes grown on the reserve as well as other of the

owners’ properties and made in Franschhoek) and cheetah-tracking.

Most people, when they hear the words “nature reserve”, assume that animals are the name of the game. This is only true to a very limited extent on Rogge Cloof because most of the Big Five are not indigenous to the Klein Karoo ... no more than they could legitimately appear on the set of *Star Wars*.

Cheetah might not be one of the Big Five but they are certainly native to the area. Tracking is done through telemetry with the animals fitted with collars that emit an electronic signal that broadcasts their locations to satellites. This, however, provides trackers with only a general location and finding them involves using equipment that picks up acoustic signals: when “ping” turns to “ping-ping-ping!”, you are getting close.

Cheetah, however, are notoriously difficult to spot in the Karoo and an encounter often only happens when you literally almost stumble over the animals. That is just about what happened in our case: despite being accompanied by experienced guides Cara and Heinrich, it was up to my girlfriend to spot the flick of an ear a mere 10 m away.

The two resident males are nicknamed Stupi and Spiffy – short for the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip characters Stupendous Man and Spaceman Spiff – both names rather apt for the area, don’t you think?

