

Winter wonderland

Winter in Gauteng brings gorgeous sunny days, blue skies with crisp fresh (read freezing) breezes – perfect weather if you can keep out the wind. With the Cape shrouded in gloomy clouds and persistent rain there are some great attractions up north to tempt intrepid sun-starved travellers to head upcountry. **By Karen Green**

One of the joys of living in the thriving metropolis of Gauteng is that there are wonderful getaways within a few hours drive. Some offer cultural experiences, others are great for outdoor activities and then there are wonderful wildlife reserves all with options to match every budget.

For those culture vultures there are little towns like Clarens that have become havens for artists and only about 300 kilometres from Johannesburg, it's an ideal weekend retreat. Situated in the foothills of the Maluti Mountains, this quaint little town makes for a wonderful winter getaway and offers a host of activities for all ages. For those who like a more sedate pace there are numerous galleries to browse around and lovely little eateries where you can sit back and relax. The active and adventurous can venture to the beautiful Golden Gate Highlands National Park a few kilometres away. It offers wonderful nature trails, horse riding and abseiling to mention some of the more vigorous activities.

A little closer to home are havens like Parys, about 100 kilometres south of Joburg and close enough to do as a day trip. It's situated on the banks of the Vaal River so boating and fishing are a big attraction, but for those looking for a little culture and retail therapy there are wonderful antique and gift shops, art galleries and lovely restaurants to visit.

Another place worth a visit in the Vaal Triangle is Stonehaven on Vaal. This estate boasts an impressive garden and river frontage. It's a great place to escape to with lots of space for kids to

play and relaxing river cruises. For those looking for something flashier, the five-star Riviera on Vaal and Country Club is a good option. This resort offers a selection of restaurants, including a cellar stocked with an impressive collection of Zorgvliet wines as the resort has a close association with that estate.

To the west lies the beautiful and ever-popular Magaliesberg, one of the highlights of which is the tranquil Mountain Sanctuary Park. This privately owned reserve is considered to be one of the most peaceful and quiet places in the country. There is strict control over the number of visitors and noise pollution to ensure that it remains a haven for relaxation. It offers the ideal tonic to stressful city life with over 1000 hectares of unspoiled land through which to hike and get back to nature. It is just over a 100km from Joburg so it can be enjoyed as a day trip or you can make a weekend and stay in log cabins or camp on the property.

If you are not interested in travelling too far there are fantastic places in and around Gauteng - one being the Walter Sisulu Botanical Gardens in Roodepoort, the jewel of which is its dramatic Witpoortjie waterfall. The garden also offers secluded picnic areas, wonderful walks including a hike to see breeding pair of Verreaux's Eagles and outdoor concerts held fortnightly from May till September.

With so much on offer, it is easy to while away the sunny winter days in new and exciting places and for those overnighting there is sure to be a warm log fire to keep the chill at bay!