

The Cape Photographers 3 in 1 Event – Prince Albert 2016

The Swartberg Pass/Meringspoort Circular Route

(approx. 160 kms)

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This approximately 160 km circular route can be done from Prince Albert in either direction, but this guide follows the route in an anti-clockwise direction from Prince Albert over the Swartberg Pass then past the Cango Caves and the Rust en Vrede waterfall to De Rust. From De Rust the route continues through Meiringspoort and Klaarstroom and then via the R407 over the Kareedouw Pass returning to Prince Albert. To appreciate this circular route it is really a day trip from Prince Albert, taking lunch in one of the restaurants in De Rust.

Prince Albert

In 1703, Matthys de Beer, a Swedish agriculturist and wagonmaker of Dutch origin and the forebear of all De Beer families in southern Africa, landed in Cape Town. He married Hilletjie Smit two years later and settled in Stellenbosch. His sons, Zacharias, Mattys and Johannes came to the harsh Roggeveld Karoo in 1757 where they farmed with cattle and horses, but when Dutch East India Company loan farms became available in 1762 they all moved to the present Prince Albert area. The farm Kweekvallei was granted to Zacharias which, with the help of a strong perennial spring coming out of the Swartberg, he transformed from a barren wilderness into a fertile productive unit. The farm stayed in the De Beer family till the late 1790s when Zacharias' eldest son Samuel sold the farm to the Bothma brothers.

The community living in the lee of the Swartberg decided to break away from the distant Beaufort West congregation and, after negotiations with the Bothmas, a church and a parsonage were completed and the first minister appointed by 1844. The town elders applied to the British monarchy to name the town after the husband of Queen Victoria and this was granted in 1846. By 1879 a new railway line had been completed as far as Prince Albert Road station (44 km away on the present N1) and the opening of Thomas Bain's Swartberg Pass in 1887 created further economic potential for the town's inhabitants.

The Town acquired municipal status in 1902 and its rich architectural heritage reflects its social history. Building styles range from the modest Karoo cottage (now called 'Karoostyle') to high Victorian and even Georgian buildings, impressive in their refinement and detail. The older grand houses are situated on De Beer street (east of the main Church street), towards the Dorps River, on extensive plots with large water reservoirs. Also don't miss the 'smallest house in town', which is a tiny thatch building on De Beer street which is used as an office for a thatching company.

Leaving Prince Albert, we drive back east along the R407, pass the old water mill and after about 4 km we turn right (33°15.69'S, 22°02.88'E) on to the sand road (R328) leading to the Swartberg Pass. Just before we enter the pass we can see on the right a covered water channel transporting water from the Dorps River to the water works just outside the town. It is this perennial stream that allowed the establishment of the farm Kweekvallei in 1762 which ultimately became Prince Albert.

The Swartberg Pass

The Swartberg Pass between Prince Albert and Oudtshoorn is regarded as one of the most spectacular and best known passes in South Africa. The pass is the creation of that remarkable road builder Thomas Charles Bain (1830 – 1893). This is the last of the seventeen passes built by Bain in the Cape and is considered to be his masterpiece. Originally the routes through Meiringspoort and Seweweekspoort were the only links between the coast and the Great Karoo. Meiringspoort was constructed by Thomas Bain's brother in law, Adam de Smidt, in 1858, but these routes were very often closed by flooding and rock falls. In 1879 Bain was commissioned to plan a new route over the Swartberg which was approved by the Government in 1880. Bain started construction in 1883 with about 220 convicts and work was completed in 1887 at a total cost of £14,500, which in today's money is nearly £1 million or about R24 million. The present day road is very much as originally constructed and traverses land owned and administered by Cape Nature.

At Eerstewater the draught animals could be outspanned and watered before the long tiring journey over the Swartberg. Bain's first convict base camp was situated here and the remains are still visible on slightly raised ground to the right of the road. Amazing contortions of the Table Mountain sandstone are seen here and at Tweedewater where the Dorps River is crossed and further on at Malvadraai many geraniums (*Pelargonium icillatum*) are seen close to the road. On the right are the remains of Blikstasie 'the jail' where the convicts were confined at night.

Then, to your left, the famous Bain ziz-zag road climbs up the apparently impossible slope of the mountainside. It is amazing to think that when Bain did his initial surveys of the pass, on foot, without modern instruments, he must have looked at this mountainside and came to the conclusion that his road could traverse it. The dry-stone walls climb like parts of a giant snake up the steep

slope. His packed dry-stone technique for building the retaining walls uses no cement yet has held these huge rocks in place for over 120 years, using the principles of friction and cohesion. The longest wall on the southern side of the pass stretches for 2.4 kilometres and the highest reaches 13 metres. He learned the technique from his road-building father, Andrew Geddes Bain, and trained his men to trim the stones into wedges and then lay them down, narrow end on top of wider end, with the wall sloping inward to the mountain. As the retaining wall was raised, rock fill was used between the wall and the mountain, and when the road was laid the pressure of the total weight simply increased the rigidity of the wall.

From the top of the zig-zags a gentle climb takes you to the Teeberg viewpoint around which the honey tea bush can be found. From this vantage point we can look ahead at the Otto du Plessis road going to Gamkaskloof (Die Hell) which branches off the main road in a westerly direction. Gamkaskloof is about 39 km away but the journey takes about 2 hours. Below, and back to the north, a great gorge opens up and we have a glimpse of the road at Malvadraai (geranium bend) which we negotiated earlier many hundreds of metres below.

Past the Gamkaskloof turning (33°20.37'S, 22°02.31'E), a little further down the road at 'Fonteintjie' the date 1884 can be seen near the top of the dry stone walling on the left side of the road. Further on to the left is the site of the original tollhouse where now only the old foundations remain. This was also the position of the road-builders camp, where a roof caved in after a heavy snowfall one winter, killing many of the convict labourers inside. It is worth remembering that snow can fall on the Swartberg in any month of the year and Bain himself was caught out in a snow storm one Christmas. It was here that the official opening of the pass in 1888 and the centenary celebrations of 1988 took place. Further on several restored buildings can be seen to the right representing a cafe and overnight accommodation which occasionally operate under a private concession granted by Cape Nature.

Soon several hair pin bends take you up to Die Top at an elevation of 1585 metres. It is almost always windy here and on a clear day you can see, to the north-east, the Nuweveld Mountains, above the Karoo National Park near Beaufort West, over 120 km away. To the south and below lies the beautiful cultivated valley of Matjiesrivier. For the birders, look out for the Cape Rockjumper which is often seen here. As we descend the Table Mountain sandstone dips steeply away to the south and klipspringers can sometimes be seen standing tip-toe on the outcrops.

On the impressive high dry-stone walling on the right of the road at Boegoekloof (Buchu Kloof) the date 1886 can be seen carved into a rock near the water culvert. Various species of medicinal buchu grow here and the plant was usually put in brandy or vinegar and the extract used as medicine for stomach and many other ailments. Halfway down this descent, the ruins of the Hotelletjie are seen. After the completion of the pass a postal service was instituted between Oudtshoorn and Prince Albert and to offer overnight accommodation, a modest hotel, was erected here. Some old maps refer to this inn as the Victoria Hotel. Further down at the ruins of Stalletjie the mail coach horses were rested, watered and fed.

By the time the gravel road gives way to tarmac you have completed the approximately 20 km traverse of probably the most spectacular mountain pass in South Africa which still stands today as a magnificent monument to the work of that brilliant engineer and road builder Thomas Charles Bain.

South of the Swartberg

There is now a scenic drive eastwards along the R328. Before the left turn off to the world famous Cango Caves ($33^{\circ}22.27'S$, $22^{\circ}10.59'E$), discovered in 1780 by the farmer Jacobus van Zyl, another limestone cave can be seen to the left above the Grobbelaars River on private farm land. This is Boomplaas Cave and is a very important site for South African archaeologists as the deposits found there represent human occupation from 1,500 to 70,000 years ago.

After beautiful views of farms nestling in the southern slopes of the Swartberg the road enters the scenic Schoemanspoort, carved out by the Grobbelaars River. If you continue with the R328 it will take you south past the settlement of Schoemanshoek, Buffelsdrift Game Lodge and Cango Wildlife Ranch into the town of Oudtshoorn, where you turn left on the N12 north-east to De Rust. However, a short way through Schoemanspoort, a road appears to the left ($33^{\circ}25.64'S$, $22^{\circ}15.10'E$) indicating Cango Mountain Resort and Rust en Vrede waterfall. This is a beautiful, highly recommended, 34 km sand back road, running along the southern flanks of the Swartberg and ultimately coming out on the N12 just south of De Rust.

The road starts as tarmac but becomes gravel as it passes the Cango Mountain Resort where magnificent views of the Koos Raubenheimer Dam, an important water source for Oudtshoorn, can be seen on the left, cradled in the foothills of the Swartberg. The gravel road continues through farmland till a sign to the left ($33^{\circ}24.63'S$, $22^{\circ}20.29'E$) indicates the entry to the Rust en Vrede waterfall. Danie Nel, of Rust en Vrede farm, was persuaded to sell his water rights to the Oudtshoorn Municipality and a pipeline was completed in 1900. The waterfall, adjacent land and 35 km pipeline is still managed by the Municipality who sometimes closes the approach road, but if the gates are open the 6 km return detour to the waterfall is really worth it.

There is a small charge that has to be paid and then the drive takes you to a small car park close to the southern slopes of the main Swartberg. From there a short walk along a specially constructed walkway takes you into a cool shaded gorge where at the end the beautiful Rust en Verde waterfall tumbles down from the heights above into a deep pool. Being in a steep narrow valley on the southern slopes of the Swartberg, the waterfall is mainly in shade, even in summer. The Groot River has luxuriant vegetation along its banks and as you walk back look out for the two manhole covers over the pipeline near the weir, that are both cast with the words 'Oudtshoorn Municipality 1901'.

Return to the main gravel road and turn left in an easterly direction. The road can be a little muddy after rain, but the farmers generally keep it in good condition as it is the road that services most of the farms in the area. The shapely peak of Spitskop (2,039 metres) is visible to the immediate north and later you will see the turning to Oudemuragie Guest Farm to the left ($33^{\circ}27.61'S$, $22^{\circ}26.24'E$). Oudemuragie offers very reasonable self catering accommodation in a series of lovely cottages set in the foothills of the mountains. Soon The Red Hills will appear on your right and you will join the N12 just 4km south of De Rust ($33^{\circ}30.19'S$, $22^{\circ}30.08'E$).

De Rust

The name of this town literally means 'The Rest' and is an indication of how it came about. In the early 19th century a farmer Petrus Johannes Meiring found a pass through the Swartberg Mountains

(Meiringspoort), and travellers, before tackling the daunting route, used to outspan at a favourite spot near a mountain spring. In 1900 this outspan, which was situated on Meiring's farm, was proclaimed a town and retained its traditional name of De Rust. It is a serene, little Victorian village scarcely touched by the passage of time and as yet undiscovered by rapacious developers. Considered to be the gateway between the Klein Karoo and the Great Karoo, De Rust has a typical Karoo atmosphere steeped in history, hospitality and time, time for well-being and time for community. This slow pace of life and clean fresh air has an appeal to those who seldom have time to quiet their minds. Its people breed ostriches and grow olives, fruit, and grapes from which wines are made. De Rust boasts quite a few historical buildings, of which the Dutch Reformed Church is but one and it was at the church hall in April 2014 that the 16th annual Cape Photographers Congress was held.

Meiringspoort

Going north out of De Rust on the N12 you enter the incredible scenic spectacle of Meiringspoort. The pass is named after the above mentioned Petrus Johannes Meiring, the farmer who lived south of the pass on De Rust farm and who campaigned tirelessly for the construction of a wagon route to link Great Karoo farmers to new southern markets. Adam de Smidt, Thomas Bain's brother in law, was put in charge of upgrading the existing bridle path in 1856 and completed the task two years later. Early doubts about the route were justified for in 1859, 1861, 1875 and 1885 severe floods forced the closure of the road for periods up to a month. While Thomas Bain was building the Swartberg Pass in 1866 he was asked to assist in the reconstruction of the road. He re-directed the road to a higher line and reduced on the number of crossings of the Groot River. Meiringspoort has been upgraded many times and the road was tarred and upgraded for modern traffic in 1971. However, the floods of 1996 were particularly bad, destroying many of the concrete causeways and much of the road. Full restoration took three years and the 25 low water crossings over the river are now designed to allow floods to pass over them. The South African National Roads Agency Ltd. (SANRAL) have constructed several excellent paved parking areas, braai facilities, toilets and an information centre as part of the upgrade.

As you drive north through Meiringspoort you can see Herrieklip on your left. This is where the Afrikaans poet C.J. Langehove chiselled the name of his imaginary pet elephant 'Herrie' into the rock in 1929. He was also a campaigner for official recognition of the Afrikaans language and he finally achieved his goal when it became an official language in 1925. He wrote the words of the Afrikaans portion of the South African National Anthem and many believe that Meiringspoort was the inspiration for the lines "Over everlasting mountains, where the echoing crags resound". His former home in Oudtshoorn, Arbeitsgenot, is now a museum and is preserved as it was at the time of his death in 1932.

The main information centre on the right is worth a visit with displays covering the history, natural history and geology of Meiringspoort. A short walk up a path from the information centre will take you to the 60 metre high perennial Great Waterfall. It plunges into a deep pool which for many years was believed to be the bottomless home of a mermaid. However, in 1987, divers established the depth at 9 metres and although you are unlikely to see a mermaid you probably will see the younger generation leaping from high ledges on the rocks into the pool.

Klaarstroom

As we leave Meringspoort we see the hamlet of Klaarstroom and if we take the signposted left turn (33°20.14'S, 22°32.45'E) we will be able to drive through the little settlement. The permit for a farm called 'Klaare Stroom' was issued in 1763 but the settlement was only established in 1860 and named after the clear streams flowing north from the Swartberg. The little village soon prospered as a stopover for farmers travelling from the Karoo, via Meiringspoort, to Mossel Bay and a hotel was built in 1868. The farmers would wash their cargos of wool in the clear mountain streams. The first wool washery in South Africa was opened here in 1874 by Percy Alport, a Canadian, who also had business interests in Prince Albert and Beaufort West. The village consists of a single street with about a dozen buildings in typical Victorian style. The police station was built in 1897 and housed the circuit court. At the back were stables as police patrolled the area on horseback up till the 1950s. The Anglican church of the Good Shepherd was built in 1880 and the small Dutch Reform church in 1926. Behind the Anglican church are the Anglo-Boer War graves of Corporal Boyd of the Imperial Yeomanry and Trooper Hirschford of Brabant's Horse who were killed in action on 2nd February 1901 in a skirmish near Klaarstroom. It is a quite place now with electricity only connected as recently as 1996. Situated in the middle of the village is the charming Klaarstroom Guest House.

Die Gang (the Passage) - between Klaarstroom and Prince Albert.

Driving through Klaarstroom and past the township, we rejoin the N12 going north (33°19.55'S, 22°31.89'E) and after about 6km take the R407 left to Prince Albert (33°18.41'S, 22°28.78'E). This road runs west along a valley with the Swartberg Mountains to the south and the Witteberg Mountains to the north and was called Die Gang or the Passage.

It is an interesting and little-known fact that South Africa's first natural essential oils were extracted in this valley. In 1894 a Dane called Frederick Nielsen built a little plant on a farm in the valley where he extracted essential and volatile oils from blossoms and citrus rinds. He also cultivated aniseed, peppermint and fennel, which were snapped up by buyers in Cape Town, as formerly, all such products had been imported from Europe. However, he married a widow who had no time for his work and he simply vanished never to be heard of again.

Further west, after crossing over the Karedouw Pass, we descend into the beautiful Prince Albert valley and discover Bergwater Wines. The estate is owned by two brothers, Heimie and Stephan Schoeman. The winemaker is Jacques Kruger, who joined Bergwater Wines in January 2013 after starting his winemaking career at a well-known wine producer in Stellenbosch in 1981. During 2002 the official status 'Wine of Origin Prince Albert Valley' was announced by the Wine and Spirits Board. The wines have won various medals and awards and were also served in the Business Class of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines as well as the Royal wedding of Prince Albert of Monaco. The cultivars include; Merlot, Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc.

A moderate climate prevails throughout the growing season, with a southerly wind cooling down the valley at night. This sharp drop in temperatures enables the grapes to preserve the rich aromas naturally embodied during the sunny days. The average annual rainfall is only 200mm with a result the vineyards are irrigated with quality spring mountain water good enough to bottle or drink. From the planting of the first vineyards in 1999, the owners aimed to farm in harmony with nature and to

minimize all impacts on the natural environment. Vineyards were only planted according to the availability of irrigation water. After harvest, in winter, dorper sheep graze between the vineyards to eliminate the weeds to instead of spraying chemicals.

As we return Prince Albert we pass through the Oukloofberg cliffs. Green lichens grow on the cool south facing rock faces. Lichens are formed by a symbiotic association between fungi and algae and grow in exposed localities where few other plants would survive. They have no roots, stems or leaves to trap water and survive predominantly from moisture in the air. The fungus contains the thallus, or main structure, which houses the algae and attaches the lichen to the rocks. The fungus dominates the entrapped algae to benefit nutritionally from the algae's photosynthesis. Lichens are permeable, allowing the effortless passage of fluids through their surfaces. When exposed to moist air, they promptly absorb water and photosynthesise for as long as they are moist.

Returning to Prince Albert completes the Swartberg Pass/Meiringspoort circular route. In only about 160 km we have been able to marvel at the immense tectonic forces which have given rise to the Swartberg mountains and we have also touched on the history of the settlements and stories about the people that give this area such a rich cultural heritage.

During the Anglo-Boer War (1899 – 1902) Rudyard Kipling was stationed at a British blockhouse, guarding a railway bridge near Antjieskraal station, close to the present N1. In 1901 he wrote a poem which he called 'Bridge-guard in the Karoo' in which he describes the darkness and sounds of a Karoo night, broken by the passage of a train. However, in the first three verses of the poem he describes the sunset on the distant Swartberg Mountains near Prince Albert.

**"Sudden the desert changes,
The raw glare softens and clings,
Till the aching Oudtshoorn ranges
Stand up like the thrones of kings.**

**Ramparts of slaughter and peril,
Blazing, amazing, aglow,
Twixt the sky-line's belting beryl
And the wine-dark flats below.**

**Royal the pageant closes,
Lit by the last of the sun,
Opal and ash-of-roses,
Cinnamon, umber and dun.**

Let's hope that during our congress in Prince Albert we can capture photographically some of these colours in the sunset on the magnificent Swartberg Mountains.