



LEANING TOWER: The NG Church with its slightly skew, sky-scraping spire, left; and Pagel House, an excellent example of an "Ostrich Palace" that resulted from the boom in ostrich feathers at the end of the 19th Century

Layers of HISTORY

At the launch point for a Karoo road trip, **Nick Yell** considers the changing faces of Aberdeen

THERE'S a dangerous blind corner on the dirt track from Miller to Aberdeen in the Great Karoo. My adventure-motorcycling friend, Dirk Ackerman, had gone ahead "to blow the cobwebs out his engine" and I was hoping he'd seen it in time. As I crested the rise I was greeted by two welcoming sights: his dust trail in the distance and the Sleeping Giant formation, which marks the western edge of the Camdeboo Mountain range. Whenever I see the Sleeping Giant from this vantage point, I'm reminded that I'm only about 40km from my old hometown of Aberdeen and that this juncture marks the start of the plains of Camdeboo. It's also a landmark that Ensign Schryver (Simon van der Stel's trade emissary, on a mission to barter with the local, cattle-rich Inqua tribe) must have been very pleased to see when he passed this way in 1689.

Schryver's route from Beervlei, and then along the banks of the Kariega River to the section of the Camdeboo Mountains he called the "Vervallen Kasteel", would have taken him past the Sleeping Giant. The Inqua stronghold is thought to have been hidden up a kloof in the Camdeboo Mountains, about 25-30km north-northeast of present-day Aberdeen. It must have been with some trepidation that Schryver and his party waited a short distance away as Chief Hykon prepared for his first audience with white people. According to early historian GM Theal, the trading expedition was a great success as Schryver returned to the Cape with "over a thousand head of horned cattle". Apparently, Schryver's contingent only made one *finz pas* while there. Theal explains: "It was a law of Hykon's tribe that anyone killing game was not to eat it until a present had been made to the chief. In ignorance of this custom, one of Schryver's party shot a bird and cooked it, upon which Hykon expressed his displeasure. However, as soon as the ensign was made aware of the circumstance and of the law of the tribe, he sent the chief a present of beads, which was received as ample atonement for the mistake."



FEELING FLORAL: Lyn Dugmore, the owner of Pagel House in Aberdeen, in her garden



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years after Schryver's first visit. Ancient pastoralists had given way to European farmers from the Cape, numbers of whom were cashing in on the worldwide demand for ostrich feathers and building themselves the large residences that were later to become known as Ostrich Palaces. Just after Dirk and I had settled into our respective Victorian chambers, the third member of our Karoo motorcycling group, local farmer Jaco Loots, arrived and we made for the formal lounge, where our host, Lyn Dugmore, had laid out ice-cold beer. Following an early dinner of delicious Karoo-lamb cutlets, we walked towards the local pub adjacent to Villeria, another guesthouse in yet another Victorian building, to watch the Springboks take on Ireland.

En route, we passed the imposing NG Church with its slightly skew, sky-scraping spire and then happened across an unassuming, cairn-like memorial. It marks the spot where Commandant Carel van Heerden was shot while attempting to steal horses from the British, who held Aberdeen during the Anglo-Boer War.

The bar was full of burly Karoo farmers, cigarette smoke and expletives. Clearly the game wasn't going well. But at half-time, Jaco introduced us to some of his countrymen and they quickly morphed into the genial and hospitable beings they are when their team is not being put to the sword on the rugby field. Dirk and I probably learnt more about the condition of the local mohair industry than was necessary and, of course, that perennial favourite topic of farmers' countrywide — the vagaries of the local rain cycle.

As with the founding of most Karoo towns, Aberdeen was established around the regional congregation's church, the epicentre around which other services and facilities soon flourished. Richard Logie, a canny local trader, provided one such service. Having traded successfully in ostrich feathers from his outlet in Aberdeen, he decided to invest some of his profits in bricks and mortar and built a large Victorian home, then known as Claremont House. But it was to be renamed Pagel House by its new owner, Frank Wilke, in the 1850s.

Apparently, Wilke — who owned a zoo in Aberdeen, the largest private zoo in South Africa at the time — greatly admired the strongman Wilhelm Pagel, whose feats included lion taming and holding apart two young elephants. When Pagel died, Wilke persuaded his widow to part with the marble Pagel House plaques that had belonged to his hero and placed them on his house in Aberdeen.

Why Wilke chose to start a zoo in Aberdeen is unclear but his animals and daily circus routine became a popular local tourist attraction. One couple even got married in the lion enclosure with seven lionesses as bridesmaids; whereas others preferred to have their photos taken with the lions "safely" behind glass. Having walked around the town the next morning and noted the "lei-water" gurgling down furrows to many a proud resident's vegetable patch, I enjoyed a coffee on the wraparound verandah at Pagel House. I chuckled as I pictured the scene here in Wilke's time, when chimpanzees apparently jumped on the tables and stole

IF YOU GO . . .
WHERE IT IS: Aberdeen is in the Eastern Cape, 56km southwest of Graaff-Reinet on the N9.
WHAT IT HAS: The town offers a number of accommodation options plus various sorts of eateries and coffee shops and is a veritable treasure trove of well-preserved, period architecture. There are also many historical points of interest, which include memorials in and around town and in the local cemetery, plus biblical art panels in the NG Church hall.
WHY GO THERE: For the architecture, the history, the open spaces and the peace.
CONTACT: The Aberdeen Publicity and Tourism Office on 049 846 0067 or 076 885 6659 or see aberdeencape.org.

your biscuits when you weren't looking. Then I felt something tugging at my trouser leg and thought I had conjured up the spirits of chimpanzees past, but it was only a Siamese cat pawing me for attention. — © Nick Yell

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