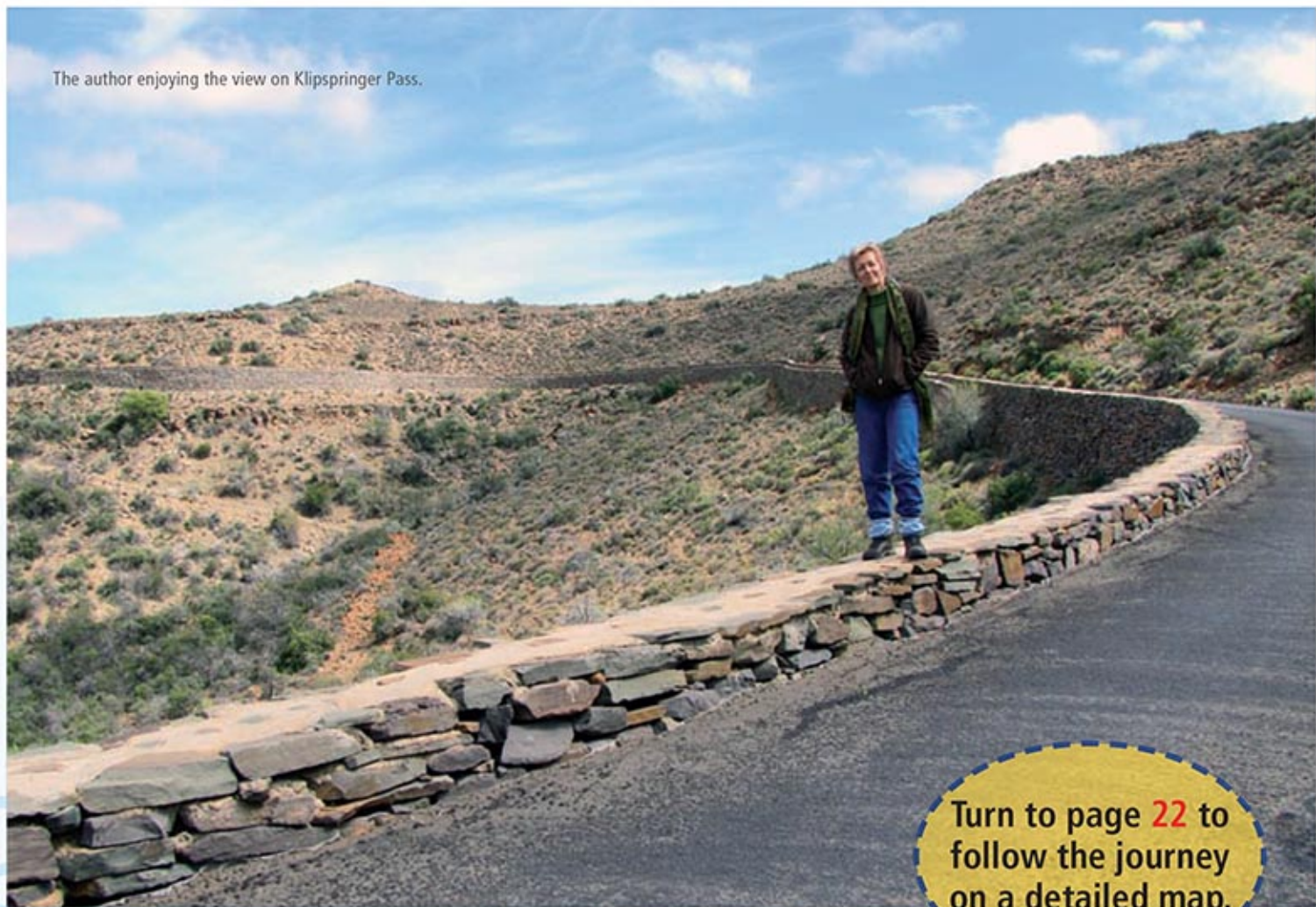


The author enjoying the view on Klipspringer Pass.



Turn to page **22** to follow the journey on a detailed map.

Cape to Nelspruit Meander

By Jane Goodfellow

A SLOW SAUNTER ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Armed with a small car, tent, camping gear and a good dose of adventurousness, Jane Goodfellow chose to travel a mellow route across the country, rather than hare along on the fastest path. Follow her journey to discover some lovely, little-known overnight spots.

Pastel hills as far as the eye can see.



The farmyard at Miss Chrissie's, Chrissiesmeen.



So there I was, subediting *Caravan and Outdoor Life*, when a midlife crisis hit me. Two of my friends had recently died of cancer, and suddenly it was chillingly clear to me how short life really is. And then someone told me about courses that one could do, that entail living in game reserves for a year, studying everything from astronomy to zoology to bush survival, and my heart did a huge leap. I thought – yes! This is what I need to do: fulfil a childhood dream of living among wildlife. A quick calculation had me realising that if ever I was going to do something daft, now was the time.

So, throwing caution to the winds (heck, I hurled it with force!) I paid the deposit on a one-year field guide course before I could have second thoughts.

Then I got to thinking about getting from Cape Town to Nelspruit, where this incredible adventure starts: the N1 and N4 east didn't appeal, so I spread out a map and planned a route visiting as many places of interest as I

would have time for along the way. During long school holidays many of our Cape-based readers head off to Kruger, so I thought you might be interested in an alternative route with unusual stopovers.

I did the trip in a Daihatsu Sirion 1300, and travelled roughly 2300 km. Note that this trip is for the mildly adventurous – don't expect five-star accommodation everywhere, and be prepared to rough it a little.

DAY 1 & 2 Cape Town to Karoo National Park

I left Cape Town on the N1 after lunch on a Friday, planning to spend my first two nights at the Karoo National Park. The beautiful Cape mountains soon gave way to the arid, flatter Karoo, where the pastel landscape and huge, endless skies had their usual soothing effect on my psyche.

Geological Journeys by Nick Norman and Gavin Whitfield (Struik, 2006), a book that always accompanies me on road trips as it

describes geological features along our major routes, mentions a geosite on the left of the road as you pass Dwyka siding. I kept my eyes open, and it was truly mind-boggling: dark, stripey layers of rock that looked as if they'd once been as easy to fold as material.

Entering the Karoo National Park I saw zebra, red hartebeest, springbok, grey rhebuck and leopard tortoises before I'd even reached the campsite. Darkness descended as I pitched my little tent, and I happened to look up. And kept looking. The stars – oh my goodness, the stars. Were there always so many? I was entranced.

Cheeky birds awoke me early; they were all over the picnic table, and even perched on my stove's wind-shield while the stove was lit. But they got nothing from me: feeding wild birds compromises their survival in the long run as they lose foraging skills, so I told them that they were cute but they should please beg elsewhere.

The park's very knowledgeable People and Conservation Officer, Jan Jacobs, spent the morning with me and we drove



IN BRIEF Karoo National Park

- Grassed, shaded stands
- Excellent ablutions
- Wheelchair access
- Separate scullery with sinks & electric hobs
- Laundry with washing machine & tumble dryers
- Access to swimming pool
- Restaurant

Things to do

- 4x4 trails
- Swimming
- Mountain biking
- Bossie Trail & Karoo Fossil Trail (hiking trails)



Woolsack-weathered dolomite, a feature of the hills outside Colesberg.

up Klipspringer Pass to look at the spectacular views.

I later visited the Interpretive Centre and spent so much time strolling around enjoying the outdoors that I didn't even go for a dip in the swimming pool.

DAY 3 To Oviston

It was drizzling next morning when I headed for Colesberg and on to Oviston, where I'd arranged to overnight in the Oviston Nature Reserve. I'd wanted an adventure, but not quite as much of one as I soon found myself having.

Firstly, the reserve covers a vast area and there are many signs indicating that you've found it, but none indicating where the actual entrance is. I tried a couple of muddy roads, one of which ended up in the dam; the waters were rising as I watched. Panicky U-turn in the mud. I eventually found the campsite – the road was bad, there were no facilities and no-one was on duty. It felt isolated and derelict, so I did another U-turn and decided to find somewhere else to camp. But it was getting late and I was anxious. Be warned – don't try to stay in small, out-of-the-way nature reserves unless they've been recommended by someone you trust!



My nose led me to the Lake !Gariep Resort. No bells and whistles here, but it is clean and has everything you could possibly need. By now the weather was appalling and a strong north-westerly gale made pitching a tent impossible, so I chickened out and stayed in a comfortable chalet, listening to the wind screaming through the rafters while rain pelted the windows. The following morning the owner of the resort, Lappies Labuschagne, told me he'd once offered to help a doctor erect his tent in a gale. The response? 'Don't tell me what to do, I'm not a child!' Two hours later the doctor demanded a refund because his tent had blown into the dam.

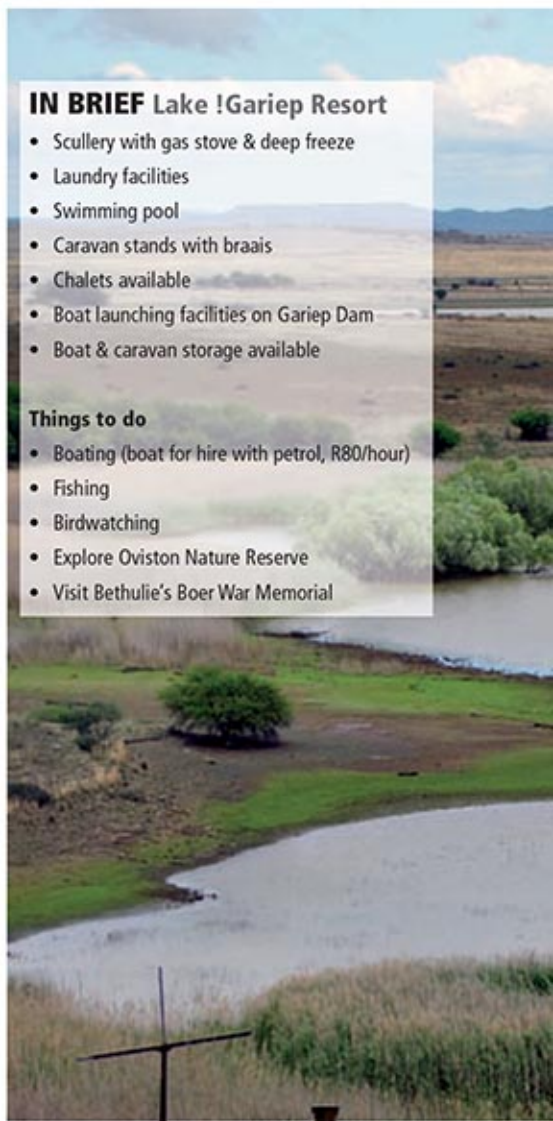
Early next morning I explored the fascinating geology on the shore of the dam and wished I had time to hunt for fossils, but the road was calling. As I left, I saw that the road I'd driven on the day before, next to the lake, was completely submerged.

IN BRIEF Lake !Gariep Resort

- Scullery with gas stove & deep freeze
- Laundry facilities
- Swimming pool
- Caravan stands with braais
- Chalets available
- Boat launching facilities on Gariep Dam
- Boat & caravan storage available

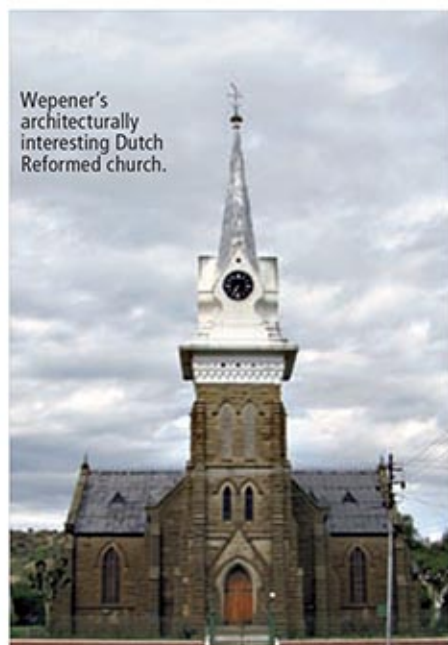
Things to do

- Boating (boat for hire with petrol, R80/hour)
- Fishing
- Birdwatching
- Explore Oviston Nature Reserve
- Visit Bethulie's Boer War Memorial





Part of the Orange River (now !Gariep River) as it flows into the dam.



Wepener's architecturally interesting Dutch Reformed church.

IN BRIEF Things to do around Wepener

- Visit Caledon Nature Reserve for game viewing & birdwatching
- Fishing
- Canoeing
- Hiking
- Visit Basotho War battle sites
- Visit Boer War battle sites
- See San rock art on Ventershoek Farm

Beautiful scenery en route to Clarens.



DAY 4 To Wepener

I drove to Bethulie, where I was told that the previous evening's wind had blown off part of a roof. I visited the Pellissier Museum, which contains Anglo-Boer War artefacts, and was deeply shocked to see the iron *duiweltjie* dorings with spikes about four inches long that the British had strewn in the veld to cripple the Boers' horses.

Then I visited the site of the concentration camp and Kampkerkhof (camp cemetery) memorial, where the remains of the 1700 women and children who had died of cold, starvation and disease were reburied when the dam threatened to flood their original burial ground. I found it hard to imagine, looking at the serenity of the undulating landscape, that two bands of men in different-coloured uniforms had once set about killing each other here, at the behest of power-hungry politicians, and that one of those bands had burnt the farms and incarcerated the women and

children of the other.

On a lighter note: while in Bethulie I had to slow down for sheep that were strolling around, nibbling people's lawns and generally acting as if they owned the place. I asked a passing man about them, and he shook his head and said, '*Dis die nuwe regering.*' His unintentional double meaning got me chuckling.

I'd already heard that I had been let down by the Caledon River Nature Reserve near Wepener, where I was originally booked to camp, but they had arranged alternative accommodation for me outside Clocolan, some distance further than Wepener. Now there was another hitch: the Clocolan farmer phoned to say that the rain had made the road to his farm impassable, so I was to have another last-minute hunt for alternative accommodation. I'd spent so long pottering around Bethulie that I only reached Wepener by mid-afternoon, with nowhere to spend the night. A sign pointed to the Fleetwood Caravan Park, but the road was badly corrugated and ▶

I was exhausted, so I rented a room at the Lord Fraser Guest House.

I really enjoyed the slap-up breakfast the next morning. A delightful Zambian man named Chance works there, who has a rare depth of wisdom and gentle kindness, and he lifted not only my heavy baggage but my spirits too. The next day I saw several caravan park signs near Ladybrand, so I could have camped if I'd driven a bit further.



Soaring cliffs at Golden Gate National Park.



The stands at the beautiful Golden Gate caravan park are generally well shaded.



DAY 5 To Golden Gate National Park

A crystal-clear morning dawned, with the landscape washed sparkling clean. My route north skirted the left of the Maloti, necessitating frequent stops to gaze in wonder at the mountains, the gambolling lambs, the beautiful reddish-brown cattle, the termite mounds and the birdlife: Black-shouldered Kites on telephone wires, African Spoonbills wading in a swampy area, and Paradise Whydahs, the males flamboyantly swishing their beautiful tails.

I refuelled at Clocolan, which I'd been told had won a Free State Tourism award. I couldn't imagine why: its charm was not immediately apparent, so I drove on, picnicking by the road. People had warned me not to stop as I was travelling alone, but I did so frequently, often getting out of the car to take photographs, and at no time did I feel unsafe. Without exception, the people I encountered were friendly and kind.

Ficksburg has several attractive old sandstone buildings, as well as some rock art nearby, which

I was keen to see. Unfortunately I couldn't find a guide or directions (the tourism info lady wasn't helpful), so I continued on to Clarens.

Take it from me, nothing you've heard about Golden Gate can quite prepare you for its beauty. After pitching my tent I went for a short hike, then next morning I enjoyed the best outdrive of my life. That is, until my steed dumped me ignominiously in the dirt on returning (fruity dirt it was too, as some 65 horses frequent this stable yard), when something startled the horses.

IN BRIEF Golden Gate National Park

- Shaded stands
- Scullery facilities
- Filling station in the park
- Shop, on-site
- Restaurant (reopening in March after renovations)

Things to do

- Variety of hiking trails
- Horse riding



Controlled burning behind the campsite at Golden Gate – thankfully after I'd packed up my tent.



A welcoming schuur with a fully equipped kitchen at Cedar Caravan Park.



Marie Harris having a look at the view from the overnight huts on the two-day Sediba Hiking Trail outside Memel.

DAY 6 To Memel

The drive to Harrismith was beautiful, and the long stretch to Vrede featured endless grassy, cattle-dotted hills. From Vrede to Memel I encountered the worst potholes of the trip, but they were being repaired, and as there was no traffic I easily negotiated my way around them.

Memel was a perfect haven. The Cedar Caravan Park is a private garden surrounding Marie and Jan Harris's house, and the manicured lawn and many trees make it a stunning place to camp. Marie cooked me a delicious lunch, which was very welcome after six days of camp fare. This is a very well-priced place to camp.

IN BRIEF Cedar Caravan Park

- 5 caravan stands, 5 tent stands
- 2 B&B rooms
- Schuur (barn)
- Shade
- Portable braais
- Sites don't have taps, but there are several in the garden
- Meals by arrangement

Things to do

- Sediba Hiking Trail: 058 924 0246 or 082 437 3532 (Bes Human)
- Mountain biking & other activities, Memel Tourist Info at Memel Adventures: 078 127 0714, email wurth.memel@gmail.com
- Horse riding, fishing, rowing on a dam & birdwatching, Taai te Nik: 058 924 0667 or 082 929 9352

DAY 7 To Chrissiesmeer

Roadworks made the drive unpleasant, but Chrissiesmeer, 'place of lakes and legends', is so interesting that it was really worth the getting there. Miss Chrissie's campsite is in a forest and, while rustic, at R35 per person per night it's still very inexpensive. As this is a working farm, city children will enjoy seeing cows being milked,

patting the horses, and visiting the farm's mushroom-growing enterprise.

I had to drag myself away from here – this is another place that I'd like to revisit; it was very peaceful and there is so much to explore in the area.

IN BRIEF Miss Chrissie's

- Very basic, but a gas geyser supplies hot water
- Ablutions: One shower, one bath, two loos & handbasins
- Scullery comprises a zinc bath with two taps
- No electricity, taps or braais at stands; water can be fetched at the ablution block
- Dense shade, but no grass
- Luxurious self-catering accommodation in the lodge

Things to do

- Watch cows being milked
- See the farm's mushroom-growing enterprise
- Birdwatching (Aretha conducts water bird tours by arrangement, or grab your binoculars and stroll to the lake.)



These intrepid bikers had a good night's rest at peaceful Cedar Caravan Park, on their way to the Drakensberg.

- Visit maker of dolls' houses in the village
- Frogging – the area is home to many species
- Fishing
- View rock art at Florence Guest Farm, contact Ane: 082 804 1771
- Watch wool being made into duvets at McCloud's Wool Duvets: 082 801 4158
- Horse riding, ask Aretha for contact details

DAY 8 To Badplaas

The drive to Badplaas via Carolina was short and uneventful, and the views just kept getting better and better. I stayed at the very popular – for good reason – Forever Resorts Badplaas.

If you're travelling with children, by this stage they will be fed up with being cooped up in a car, and this is a great place for them to let off steam. Believe me, you will have to drag them away. Mom might need a little pampering too, and once she's soaked her travel-weary body in one of the hot pools, she will enjoy a treatment in the superb spa.



Badplaas is just the place to let your kids have a ball!



Some people have an unusual choice of camping companion!

IN BRIEF Forever Resorts Badplaas

- Caravan stands grassed & shaded
- Wide variety of accommodation: chalets & hotel
- Thermal pools, cold pool
- Restaurant & hotel dining room
- Supermarket & liquor store
- Children's playground

Things to do

- Supertubes, speed slides & 'Rinkhals' tube rapids
- Horse riding
- Game viewing
- Tennis
- Putt-putt, foefie slide
- Beauty salon & spa
- Saunas

DAY 9 To Nelspruit

My final day's drive down to the Lowveld was scenic and interesting, although the heat and humidity made me long for a fresh sea breeze. I camped at Nature's Gate, which, while alongside the highway with its traffic noise, is very well appointed, and the little self-contained bathrooms were the best ablution facilities I'd found so far. This is a lovely park and it's hard to believe you're close to what is becoming a big city.

I was sad to have reached the end of my trip. I'd thoroughly enjoyed exploring new places, and my only regret was that I hadn't spent longer at each stopover. But my year-long bush adventure was about to begin ...



Campers Des and Charlotte Weber and their daughter Charlene enjoyed a few days at Nature's Gate.

IN BRIEF Nature's Gate

- Showers & baths
- Washtubs for laundry (no washing machines or tumble dryers yet)
- Grassed, shaded stands
- Portable braais on request
- Firewood & ice available
- Fully licensed bar facility
- Swimming pool
- Kids' playground
- Luxury self-catering chalets

Things to do

- Visit Kruger National Park
- Explore Sudwala Caves
- Paintball on site
- Birdwatching on site
- Follow Panorama Route via God's Window, Pilgrim's Rest and many waterfalls
- Visit Nelspruit Botanical Gardens
- Visit Chimpanzee Eden just outside Nelspruit:

013 745 7406

Nature's Gate is surrounded by some lovely scenery.



KAROO NATIONAL PARK, BEAUFORT WEST

Take the N1 from Cape Town. The park is 10 km before Beaufort West.
Tel: 023 415 2828/9
Fax: 023 415 1671
Email: karooreservations@sanparks.org
www.sanparks.org
GPS: S32°19.836' E022°30.004'
Rates: R150 per night (2 people), R58/adult & R24/child extra (max 6). Pensioner discount during certain periods. Daily conservation fee: R22 pppd (with a South African ID).

DAY 1 & 2

Follow the journey!

FOREVER RESORTS BADPLAAS, BADPLAAS

Head back to Carolina, then take the R38 towards Barberton. The resort is signposted on this road, near Badplaas.

Tel: 017 844 8000
Email: badplaas@foreversa.co.za
www.foreversa.co.za
GPS: S25°57.401' E030°33.773'
Please call for rates.

NATURE'S GATE, NELSPRUIT

Follow the R38 and then the R40 to Nelspruit. Nature's Gate is on the N4, 6 km on the Joburg side of Nelspruit at the Burnside Road turn-off, 60 km from Kruger National Park.

Tel: 013 755 6173
Cell: 078 649 4972
Email: sales@naturesgate.co.za
www.naturesgate.co.za
GPS: S25°26.820' E030°54.078'

Rates: R200 per night for 2 people, R50/adult & R25/child extra (children under 5 free). Please note that different World Cup rates apply for June and July 2010. Pensioner's discount available.

LAKE GARIEP RESORT, OVISTON

Follow the N1 to Colesburg, then take the R58 to Oviston. Follow the signboards from Oviston to the resort.

Tel/fax: 051 655 0124
Email: lakergar@interx.co.za
Rates: R80 per night (2 people), R15 pp extra. Pensioner and club discounts available.

LORD FRASER GUEST HOUSE, WEPENER

Take the R390 to Bethulie, R701 to Smithfield, N6 to Rouxville and R26 to Zastron and Wepener. It would have been shorter to take the R701 to Jammerrid, but I avoided gravel roads entirely.

Tel: 051 583 1480/1

GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL PARK

Follow the R26 from Wepener past Hobhouse, Ladybrand, Clocolan and Ficksburg to Fouriesburg, then the R711 to Clarens and the R712 to Golden Gate.

Tel: 058 255 0000
Email: reservations@sanparks.org.za
GPS: S28°30.075' E028°34.723'
Rates: R145 (2 people);
R48/adult & R24/child extra (max 6)
Daily conservation fee: R22 pppd (with a South African ID)

CEDAR CARAVAN PARK, MEMEL

Take the R712 to Harrismith, the N3 to Warden and then 6 km beyond Warden turn right onto the R103. Take the turn-off to Vrede, then the R34 to Memel. If you have a 4x4, the shorter route is Harrismith to Verkyerskop to Memel on the R722. Note that the approach to Memel on the R34 had many potholes, but repairs were under way.

Tel: 058 924 0089 (Marie & Jan Harris)
Cell: 072 940 9478
23 General De Wet Road
www.memel.getaways.co.za
Rates: R45 pppn

MISS CHRISSIE'S, CHRISSIESMEER

From Memel take the R34 to Newcastle, then the N11 past Volksrust and Amersfoort to Ermelo, the R36 towards Carolina and the R33 to Chrissiesmeer. The R517 from Ermelo would have been shorter, but the road sign wasn't there and I missed the turning. Follow 'Miss Chrissie' signs from the main road in Chrissiesmeer; the campsite is roughly 4.5 km from the village on a gravel road.

Tel: 082 821 3081 or 086 512 2130 (Aretha & Pieter Strydom)
Email: strydom.aretha@gmail.com
GPS: S26°18.807' E030°14.100'
Rates: R35 pppn

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