

Get high on Lesotho lodge

The Maliba Mountain Lodge offers five-star comfort in the peace of a mountain wilderness, writes **John Bishop**

HANDS up those who have been to Lesotho. One, two... just two... no, no, over there in the corner, three. That's it, then, not too many.

And that is funny, not funny ha-ha but funny peculiar. The landlocked Royal Kingdom of Lesotho, entirely surrounded by South Africa and offering stunning scenery and the most peaceful of retreats, is largely ignored by those on its doorstep.

Lesotho, scenically, climatically and financially, has much to offer the traveller. It is one of the most mountainous countries in the world, the only one that lies entirely above 1 400m, with 80 percent of the country over 1 800m. The purpose of our trip was to take a peep at the new and ambitious Maliba Mountain Lodge in the highlands of northern Lesotho, but much of the fun was getting there.

The leisurely five-hour drive from Joburg can take you through the impressive Golden Gate National Park, one of the country's most scenic drives. This park in the Maluti Mountains is home to an assortment of wildlife but most spectacular are the colours, the brilliant and varying shades of gold and yellow on the sandstone cliffs, and the lushness of the vegetation.

Hurrying past the arty, crafty village of Clarens – and this might depend on who is driving – it is but a short drive to the border post at Caledonspoort. The formalities are quick and painless and it is then just a 45-minute trip to Tsehlanyane National Park and our destination at Maliba Mountain Lodge. The trip should take four hours but if you have a photographer (or a shopper) in the car, it could stretch over days.

This five-star luxury lodge, the first in Lesotho, is in a pristine valley, sandwiched between high mountains. Two Australians with business interests in South Africa, Nick King and Chris McEvoy, with Lesotho engineer Stephen Phakisi, hatched the plan to build a luxury lodge in 2003 but negotiations were protracted and the two-year construction started only in 2006.

Determined to provide a boost for the villages in the area, the directors used local Basotho in the construction of Maliba ("an abundance of water") and taught them skills.

"We now employ 33 staff and 75 percent of them helped build the lodge," says lodge manager Andrew Mostert. "They have been with us from the start and feel it is their lodge."

Their pride is obvious. Warm and friendly, they are desperate that visitors return and that reports of "our lodge" are spread far and wide.

The stone and thatch main lodge is spacious and exquisitely furnished and yet comprises only six separate luxury chalets. That's just 12 guests when it is chockablock. Crowding is never a problem.

Rich in indigenous fauna and flora, the area is a botanist's dream. There are more than 220 flowering plant species present, while the vegetation is dominated by mature che trees. The lodge has also established the highest sub-alpine botanical garden in the world, designed by world-renowned South African botanist Elisa Pooley.

The weather in this sub-alpine



Situated in a pristine valley, sandwiched between soaring mountains, the Maliba Mountain Lodge in Lesotho has stunning views.



The lodge consists of six luxury chalets, which means crowds are never a problem.

wilderness valley is comfortably cool but the winters can be cold, with snow often falling between May and September.

There is a heavy emphasis on guests keeping toasty with open fireplaces, electric blankets and under-floor heating in all the chalets.

The main lodge features a gourmet restaurant and head chef Elayni Prinsloo, who has a battle keeping the resident eland away from the spinach in her veggie garden, provides three high-quality meals a day and the accent is on nouvelle cuisine. We didn't know whether to photograph the culinary delights or eat them – so we did both.

The rugged mountains and paths

are a challenge for the hiker. Picnic breakfasts or lunches are provided for ambitious ones planning a day's hike or a ride into the mountains.

You can pick your way over a number of trails, some going up into the Maluti mountains, others dropping down into the recesses of the valley, where there are waterfalls and clear pools to refresh the achy bits.

My hiking days ended in an undignified heap while scaling the dizzy heights of Bot Gardens. A conspicuously displayed bulky knee guard and strapped ankle served as the most convenient of doctor's notes and we spent much of our time sipping cocktails on the lodge's deck.

But the serene emptiness and quiet of the valley, surrounded by 5 600 hectares of protected wilderness mountain terrain, is the most remarkable feature and you do not have to venture far to savour it.

In-house spa treatments will be introduced once the local staff have been trained. They also hope to make Afriski, Africa's highest ski resort (seasonal between June-September), and nearly two hours' drive away, more accessible to their guests by providing luxury overnight accommodation en route.

The tariff of R1 370 a night is good value, particularly when you consider the style, the food, the attention to detail, the pampering – and that equivalent five-star lodges in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana charge two to three times more for similar service. And Maliba does offer a cheaper alternative. The nearby Maliba River Lodge provides self-catering accommodation on the river and guests can stay for R230 a night if they book out one of four large, self-contained chalets.

The visitors' book at the main complex is laced with glowing tributes, with the staff, the food, the comfort and the peacefulness of Maliba Mountain Lodge earning the highest marks. Most of the comments are posted by European and American visitors, who seem surprised to have stumbled on such luxury in a remote mountain wilderness.

Indeed, Maliba Mountain Lodge, described as "beautiful and smart", was voted one of UK Tatler magazine's top travel picks for 2010 and was included in its list of "101 best hotels in the world".

Now (as Michael Caine might have remarked), there are not many South Africans who know that.

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THE MALIBA TRUST

"We came to teach and ended up learning."

That was the comment of two Australian teachers, Lydia Mancini and Kaye Young, who travelled to the highlands of Lesotho to help with the education of local youngsters.

The directors at Maliba Lodge, Australians Nick King and Chris McEvoy, and Lesotho engineer Stephen Phakisi, have established a community trust in the area both to improve and protect the environment in the Tsehlanyane National Park and to improve the living conditions of local villagers.

Lesotho's literacy rate of 85 percent is one of the highest in Africa but this small country has major problems, with high levels of HIV, poverty and malnutrition. It is estimated that 60 percent of the population live below the poverty line.

The Maliba community trust sponsors a work programme for the five local schools and experienced teachers are being flown in from Australia to help with tuition and to improve the skills of local teachers. Mancini and Young, who are from Peninsular Grammar in Melbourne, have spent a month at Maliba Lodge, running workshops and helping teachers and pupils at the schools.

"We hope this programme will continue, with at least two groups of teachers travelling to Lesotho from Australia each year," said McEvoy. Both teachers described their experiences as "amazing".



Maliba Lodge has set up a trust which has seen teachers flown from Australia to help in local schools.

"We thought we were going over on this noble quest to teach all these poor people but we ended up learning so much about ourselves," said music teacher Mancini.

"The children and teachers were very accepting and warm. The musical experience was phenomenal and

really moving. They are in their element when they are singing and I am so excited that I can now sing in Sesotho."

Young was taken with the enthusiasm of the children and their ability to work in the most demanding conditions. "The children were so affectionate

and love school and learning. Honestly, the whole experience exceeded our expectations and it has changed the way I teach."

Young said one of the best ways to learn something was to teach it to others. "That is one of the great things about

our job. In teaching the students in Lesotho, and working with the teachers to provide them with ideas to improve their teaching methods, I found that I was also learning myself and improving my teaching skills."

Young said she had to produce creative ideas and activities for teaching students in their second language – English – and under difficult circumstances. The classes were large and there was a lack of resources and equipment.

"I have added to my teaching repertoire, which I believe will make me a better teacher when I return to Australia."

"Also, in running workshops for the teachers on a variety of topics, I have furthered my own knowledge and understanding of these areas and will therefore be a more effective teacher myself."

While the two teachers are quick to acknowledge that they have benefited from the experience, they did feel they had made an impact. They both immersed themselves in the culture, attending church and spending the days with the children.

"We now eat pap and veg with our hands," said Mancini.

Both were astonished at the beauty of the area around Maliba Lodge.

"The scenery was simply spectacular," said Young. "It brought tears to our eyes – it sounds corny, I know, but neither words nor pictures can adequately describe the beauty of this part of the world."