



Sitting on the deck of Maliba Mountain Lodge looking onto a towering snow capped mountain complete with mist swirling around the neck of the mountain I felt I was in a far away land even though we had passed through the South African border about an hour before. It felt all so different - the pristine high altitude sub-alpine wilderness area of this 5 600 ha park, the deep valleys, the towering mountains.



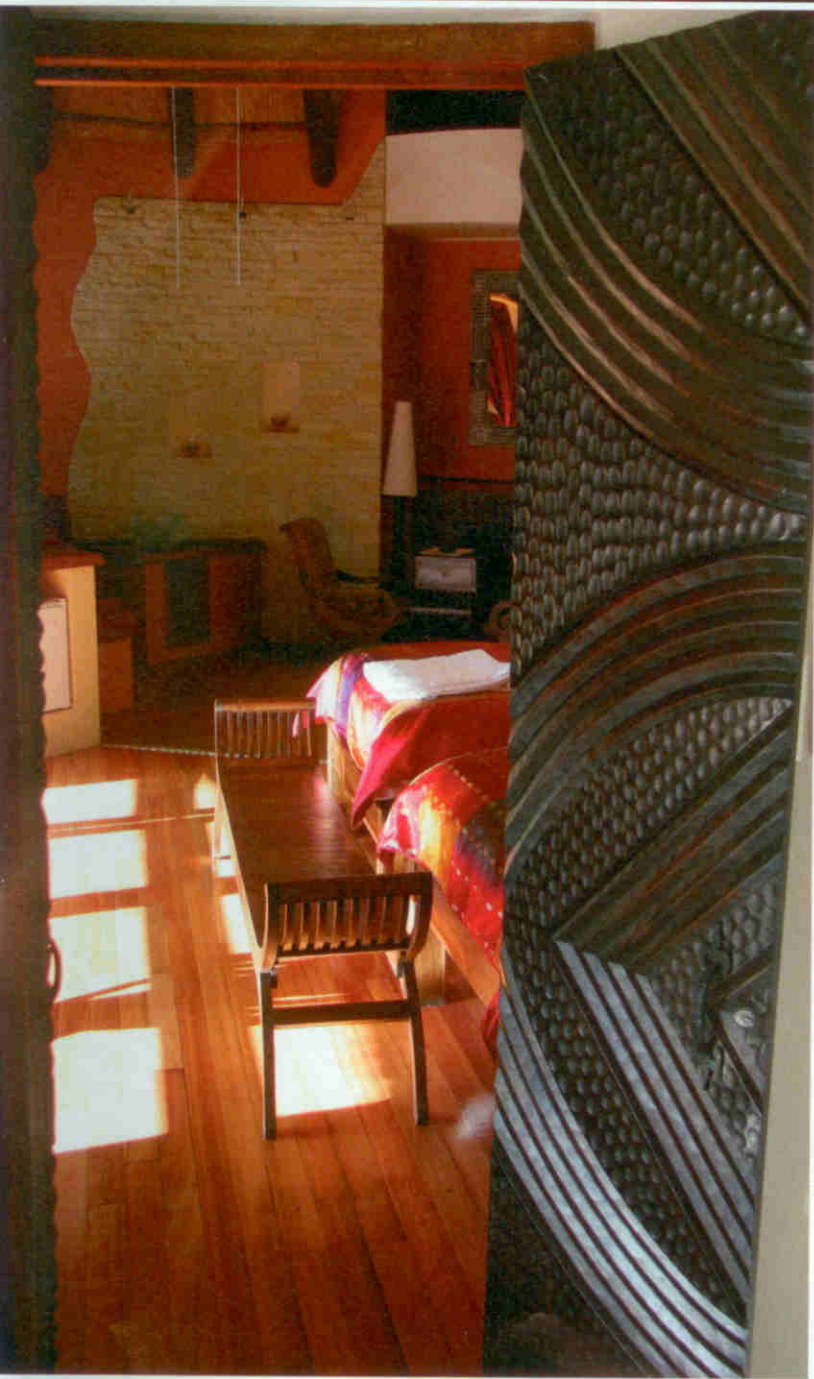
Barely half an hour before arriving at the lodge just short of sunset we had travelled on a gravel road that parallels the Hlotse River valley stopping to take photographs of the beautiful Basotho people – some walking, some on donkeys, some with their cattle, goats and sheep. The tinkle of the bells on their goats added to the magic of this rural wonderland, where homesteads are neat and organised, where the people have big smiles and friendly waves.

The Basotho people are by far the majority at approximately 80% while the Nguni people account for almost 20% and interestingly 91% of people in Lesotho are Christians. The population sits at around 2 million people.

Back to the retreat, ahem, lodge. I say retreat because it is far from the madding crowds, it doesn't boast 101 activities, and nor are there any nearby places to go or things to do. If you want to be entertained, don't go to Maliba Mountain Lodge, nor if you want to do a lot. But, if you want to get away from people and things to do, then head to Maliba.

Left: The luxurious bedrooms.



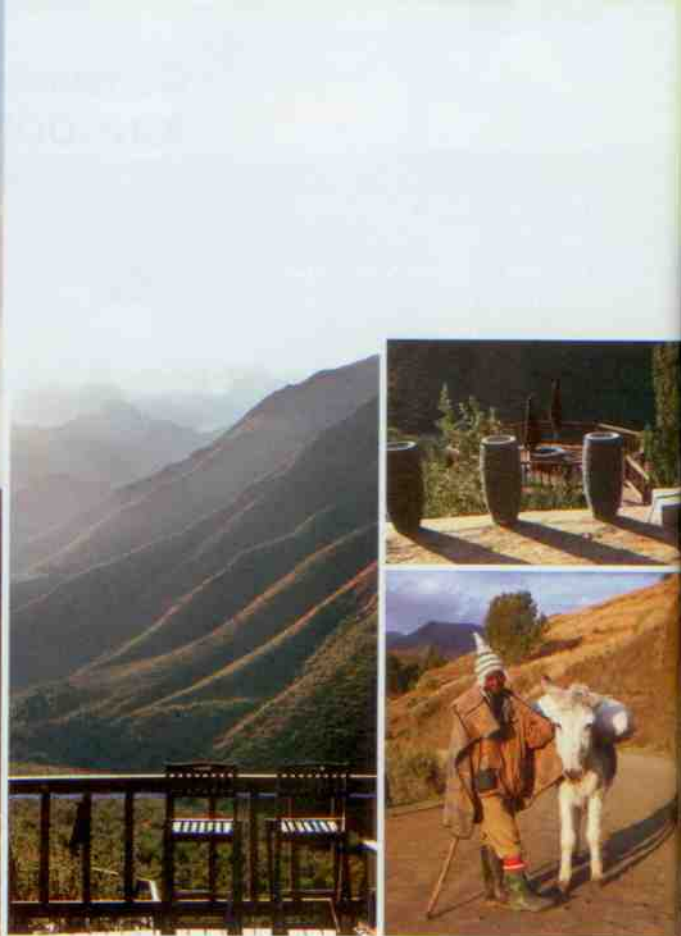


Unfortunately for me I knew I would have to report on something on my return. I considered reporting on how much I enjoyed staring vacantly from my private deck onto the mountains, lapping up the luxury of my room, enjoying superb food and wine, and feeling rather special with the attentive service – all of course surrounded by eclectic and gorgeous decor. Nope, I suspected that wouldn't be enough. So despite the high altitude - Tsehlanyane National Park has an altitude ranging from 1940 to 3112 – and plunging temperatures in winter, we headed off for a brisk walk into the mountains. Nothing quite like high altitude to remind you that your fitness levels are not at their peak. However the magnificent surrounds are enough to distract you and soon you find the fresh air exhilarating.

Most of the terrain of the Park is rugged mountain, but it does include one of the few remaining indigenous woodlands in Lesotho, and some of the finest examples of the Che-Che tree which is of cultural significance to the Basotho people, as well as rare mountain fynbos.

Small to medium sized mammalian species have been recorded in the highlands area including the African wild cat, black-backed jackal, rock hyrax cat, while some 70 bird species have been recorded including the bearded and cape Vultures, and the orange-breasted rock jumper. Tsehlanyane National Park is only one of two national parks in Lesotho, and makes up an integral part of the greater Maluti/Drakensberg Transfrontier Park. Numerous hiking paths have been established within the Park, one of which is a 39km trail linking the Park with the Bokong Nature Reserve.

One of the owners of maliba, Nick King, says that they plan to offer a few activities such as pony trekking, or trekking up the mountain and staying in a cave for the night. At these temperatures, and with past experience of staying in a cave in the mountains in the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg, I swiftly moved away from chatting about this little activity with Nick for fear of having to give up my magnificent secluded chalet. The other owners of Maliba along with Nick are Chris McEvoy and Stephen Phakisi.



And, with such glorious chalets at Maliba Mountain Lodge, complete with seriously comfortable beds, heated blankets, a superb main en-suite boasting heated towel rails – to my mind the ultimate in luxury when you are miles from anywhere – I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to stay in a nearby cave. Be that as it may, there apparently are such crazy folk out there and as the local community members will be operating and benefitting from these activities it is just as well.

The lodge has a grand triple-volume reception area, with swathes of fabric draped from the ceiling that holds a dramatic chandelier. The reception area forms part of the central lodge with its spectacular mountain views and includes a dining room, lounge area, a wrap-round deck, with a sunken Jacuzzi, and bar. Maliba is fit for a King, and as Lesotho is after all correctly titled the Kingdom of Lesotho, the lodge is a perfect fit. **W**



WILDSIDE FACT TRACKER

MALIBA MOUNTAIN LODGE

Where: In the Tsehlanyane National Park, 1hr from SA border of Caledonspoort which is 20 minutes from Clarens and about 5 hours from Jhb. The Park is reached by a good 32km gravel road that leaves the Lesotho A1 route, 5km south west of Butha Buthe.

Cost: R1 400 pppns including all meals. Ask about opening specials. There are 6 luxury stone and thatched suites.

To book: Tel 031 266 1344, Email admin@maliba-lodge.com.

MAP TO GET YOU THERE

