

Uniondale

A JEWEL IN THE MAKING

Gerhard Cloete takes a journey through the Little Karoo and rediscovers a special treasure at the foothills of the Kammanassie Mountain

The charming town of Uniondale is often called the Little Karoo's 'best-kept secret'. It is known for its salt of the earth people, village atmosphere, tranquillity, pleasant climate and the spectacular Kammanassie Mountain ('Mountain of Water' as the Khoisan called it), to name but a few of its treasures.

It is somewhat tucked away from the tourist hubs of Oudtshoorn, Knysna and Plettenberg Bay, but nevertheless forms part of the Little Karoo's stretch of the well-known Cape Route 62. It is connected by the N9 and R339 and is about 100km from George, and 80km from Knysna and Plettenberg Bay. The little town was established in 1856 by the merging of two villages – Hopedale and Lyons – and the area was originally known for its wagon-building and ostrich-feather industries. When these died out, agriculture became its primary economic activity.

Standing proudly above the village, the beautiful Dutch Reformed Church harks back to a lost era of exceptional stone masonry and craftsmanship. In addition to this 19th century church, the town is blessed with a number of national monuments, chief amongst them a water mill built in 1852 and a restored British fort dating back to the Anglo-Boer War.

The town is located in an unexpectedly green valley amidst typical Karoo landscape and is surrounded by the Kammanassie and Kouga mountain ranges, which seem to guard the treasures of the valley and the small community. The town is the starting point of the Karoo2Coast – one of the oldest and most popular races on the mountain-biking calendar.

Natural Treasures

One of the main features is the nearby Kammanassie Nature Reserve. This



MAIN: The scenic town of Uniondale.
INSET: The tower of the beautiful Dutch Reformed Church, built in 1886, can be seen from all corners of town.

conservation area of 50 000 hectares falls with the Cape Floral Kingdom and is home to the endangered Cape mountain zebra. Historically they were found in the Cape mountains south of the Orange River, but now they are limited to a handful of nature reserves. Some zebra managed to survive in the rugged hinterland of the Kammanassie where they bred and, over the years, the population of the species has grown. The zebra co-exist with kudu, klipspringer, common duiker, grey rhebuck and mountain reedbuck, amongst others. This remote wilderness is also home to a growing population of Cape mountain leopard which, as a larger predator, fulfils an important function within the ecology.

The dominant vegetation types surrounding Uniondale are Langkloof Shale Renosterveld, Succulent Karoo and a grading transitional vegetation type comprising varying quantities of the two main types. Other plant species include spring flowers and unique bulbous plants, which once served as food for prehistoric hunter-gatherers and for the herds of game that frequented the area.

Uniondale has a moderate climate, due to it being located between the

Langkloof mountain range and the dry expanses of the Great Karoo, causing a transitional climatic zone. The rainfall is non-seasonal, with frequent thunderstorms occurring in summer and cold ownpours in winter. Heavy snowfalls periodically occur on the high peaks of the Kammanassie and the nearby Outeniqua Mountains.

A Gautenger in Uniondale

The agricultural focus in Uniondale is on deciduous fruit production and extensive stock farming in the drier Karoo areas.

Project and construction manager in civil engineering, Laurie Smit and his wife Santie became interested in farming and made their way from Gauteng to Knysna in 1995 and ultimately ended up in Uniondale. Laurie bought some land to develop the farm Potjeskraal, where he introduced Nguni cattle farming and started a business producing wooden furniture.

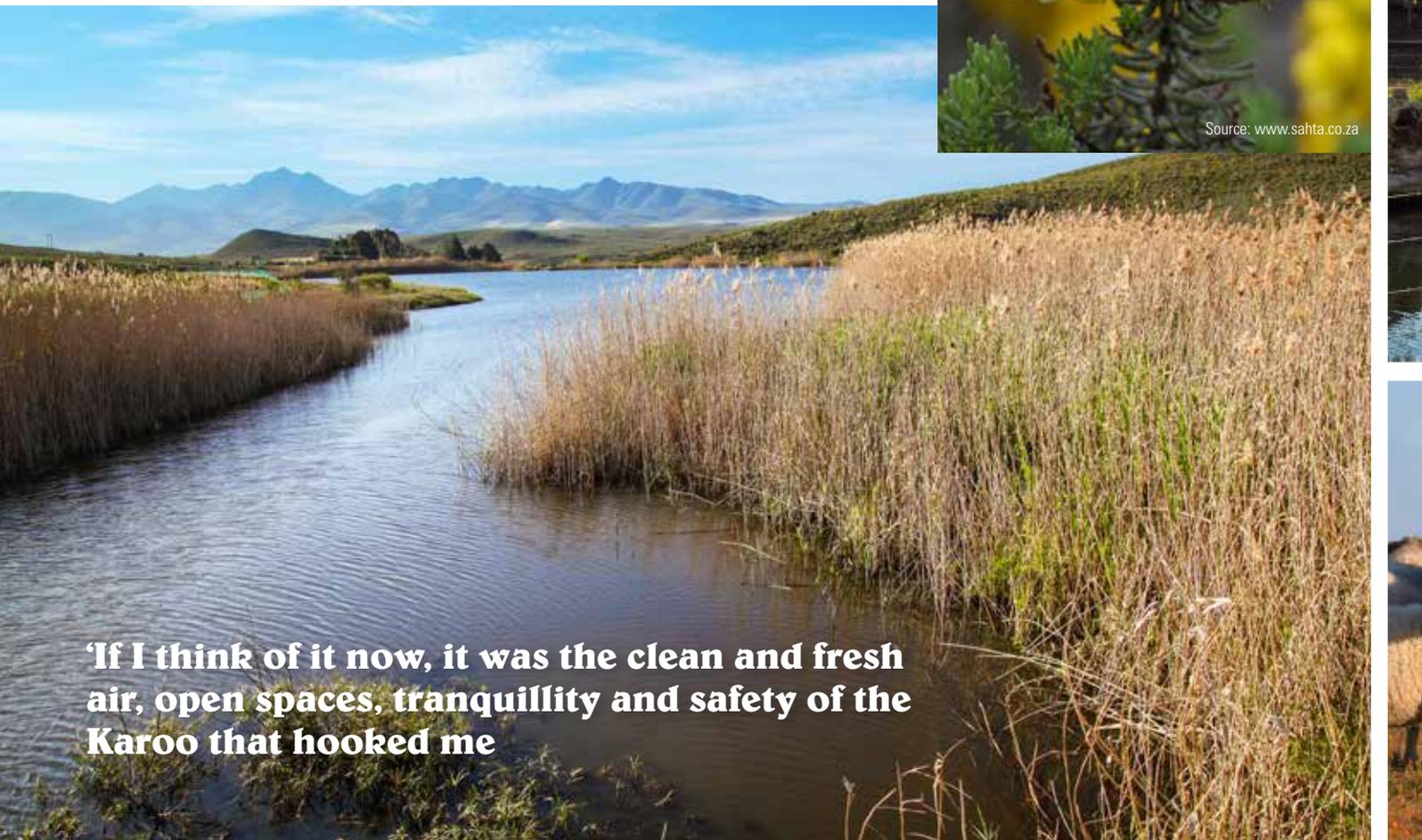
“The furniture business was for Santie after our paths crossed with Howard Jones, a master craftsman with an exceptional skill for woodwork. We also saw the small business as an upliftment initiative for the area,” says Laurie. Additionally Santie is

responsible for the private old-age home in the town, which she affectionately calls a ‘house of friends’. Sections of it are named Klaasvaak Huis, Santa Klaas and Poshuisie.

“If I think of it now, it was the clean and fresh air, open spaces, tranquillity and safety of the Karoo that hooked me,” says Laurie. “Not only did my physical health improve, but my spiritual and emotional well-being received a major boost. I found myself not amongst wealthy people with big bank balances, but people rich in humanity and integrity.”



Source: www.sahta.co.za



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Growth and Business Opportunities

The Uniondale area has huge potential for further growth. “Social upliftment and development are of major importance in small Karoo towns such as Uniondale, Laurie says. “But I believe that this should be done in harmony with nature and conservation and in a sustainable manner. The future of the town depends on it.” He adds that Uniondale needs a good dose of entrepreneurship. “We should not wait for the economy to develop, but develop it ourselves. Development and conservation must go hand in hand. In this way much can also be done to alleviate poverty in the area and get economic development going.”

Uniondale has the basic infrastructure, the land and the talent of its people. While there is a need for a small-scale industrial park, what is needed most is a dentist,

a private doctor, pharmacist, veterinarian, more retail activities and a private school. This demand presents opportunities for those who want to get away from the hustle and bustle of life in the city. The town also needs competent and qualified entrepreneurs, artisans, technicians for electrical and mechanical work, welders, builders and maintenance teams. Many such opportunities exist not only in Uniondale but in the entire region.

Available business opportunities include liquidised juices, cultivation and processing of honeybush into a popular herbal tea of the area and the cultivation of

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP TO BOTTOM: The leaves of the honeybush plant are used to make herbal teas. BOTTOM: Looking over a dam with the Kammanassie Mountain in the distance. THIS PAGE TOP: A reminder of times past – the renovated Anglo-Boer War fort boasts a bird’s eye view of Uniondale. LEFT: Laurie and Santie Smit of Uniondale. BOTTOM: Dorper sheep are farmed extensively in the area.

the wildflowers, which are found on the slopes of the Kammanassie. Aloes grow in the region and are known for their medicinal properties. Uniondale has its own aloe factory, African Aloe, which is a producer and supplier of *Aloe ferox* raw materials, such as aloe gel and aloe health drinks, to local and international markets.

Wine is also produced nearby. World-renowned golfer, Retief Goosen or 'The Goose', as he is affectionately known on the international golf circuit, owns The Goose Wine Estate, on the farm Ganzekraal, which is situated in the Upper-Langkloof valley.

Specialists in the vegetable and flower seeds industry, Starke Ayres, operate in the area supplying innovative, premium seed and associated products to the professional grower and home gardener throughout South Africa and internationally.

There is also more than enough room for game farming and for the development of lodges to boost tourism.

Unpolished Gem

So, put aside the stereotypical perceptions of the Karoo as dry, flat and never-ending. Here, like a book that willingly opens its pages to those who want to read its story, Uniondale invites you in and captures your imagination with its endearing people, rolling landscapes and leisurely way of life, leaving you wanting just one more page. Uniondale is less of a secret and more of a revelation – a real gem waiting to be polished to reveal her beauty.

TOP: Beautiful architecture on Voortrekker Street.

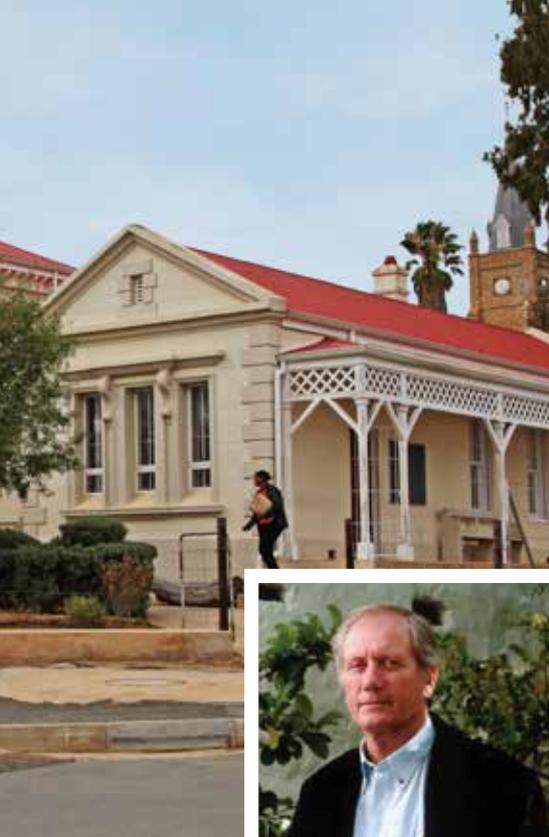
INSET: Dennis Moss, chairperson of the Dennis Moss Partnership in Stellenbosch. RIGHT TOP: Like many small towns, Uniondale is in need of social upliftment and community projects. RIGHT BELOW: It is not uncommon to catch a glimpse of the majestic kudu in the reserve. FAR RIGHT: The Kammanassie Nature Reserve is an inselberg – an isolated hill or small mountain that rises abruptly from the surrounding plain.



IF YOU'RE FROM THE CITY why live in a small Karoo town like Uniondale?

- Uniondale is only about an hour's drive from George and 80km from Knysna and Plettenberg Bay.
- You don't have to travel far for a change of scenery or a holiday. Follow the N9 via Graaff-Reinet to Nieu-Bethesda and the T62 to Port Elizabeth.
- The cost of living drops radically, from that of living in a city, along with insurance rates.
- No traffic jams.
- Uniondale is a haven for creative and entrepreneurial types.
- Friendly, welcoming locals help you settle in quickly.
- Nature, scenic drives and the great outdoors are minutes away.
- Country living means less crime.
- Beautiful old architecture.
- There's the possibility to live completely off the electricity grid, thanks to solar and wind energy.





Achieving Development and Sustainability in Uniondale

Dennis Moss, chairperson of the architecture, urban design, regional and environmental planning company Dennis Moss Partnership in Stellenbosch, says all the internationally linked governmental, provincial and local policies and plans, to give effect to sustainable development in an integrated manner, are in place. The people in the Uniondale region only have to make use of it.

“The National Development Plan (NDP) calls on South Africans to write a new story. It also concludes that the slow progress in delivering on the development expectations of the country since 1994 has been caused by a failure to implement policies and the absence of broad partnerships,” Dennis says. “In considering how regional and local development and conservation are to be approached, it is important to recognise that the NDP promotes a plan-led system to bring focus and allow long-term public interest to guide the development of places.”

He explains that it calls for planning to happen on all levels from international to local. “We, as South Africans, cannot

continue with a business-as-usual approach. We need to change the way we do things – the sooner we do this, the better.”

Dennis says that at international, national and provincial level, agreement has been reached to promote the United Nations Environment Scientific and Cultural Organization’s Man and the Biosphere programme. This programme is given effect by a network of biosphere reserves across the globe. These are areas that are internationally considered as unique, and comprise core conservation areas, buffer areas, (to help protect the core), and areas of transition within which sustainable development is encouraged.

Globally there are currently 621 biosphere reserves, three of which are located in the Western Cape. He further explains that a vision has been promoted by the Western Cape government for the past two decades, to establish a cluster system of biosphere reserves for the fynbos biome. This proposed cluster system of biosphere reserves runs through the Uniondale region.

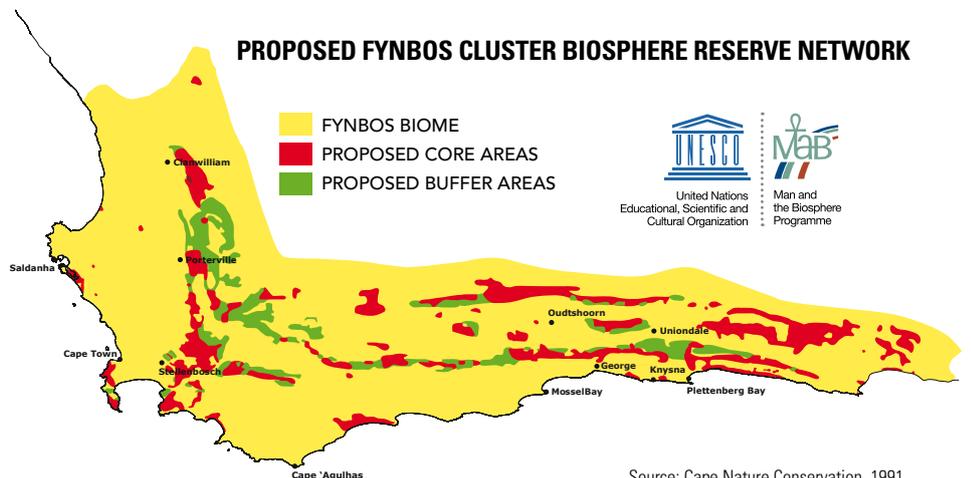
“On a provincial planning and development scale, the Western Cape government prepared a bespoke regional planning and development policy and a spatial development framework, which promotes sustainable development and which is rooted in the concept of the ecological footprint. Those

interested in promoting development and sustainability in the region will receive valuable guidance when consulting their local municipalities and their district municipalities about these policies.

“Broad guidelines that can help individuals to make informed decisions pertaining to sustainable and qualitative development are provided in the provincial bioregional planning framework and manual. These relate to promoting and conserving a region’s key qualitative characteristics, namely its sense of place, history, craft, nature and developmental limits. Any new development must be planned and designed with the above-mentioned in mind and care should be taken to enhance the character of the region and its sustainability,” he says.



Uniondale has much to offer travellers crossing the Eastern Cape and the Karoo. It is often referred to as the Little Karoo’s ‘best-kept secret’



Source: Cape Nature Conservation, 1991