

Meandering through history

South Africa's road less travelled has important link to national hero Mandela

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SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

When there's the more familiar Cape or Kruger to explore, the hilly garden province of KwaZulu-Natal may not readily roll off the tongue when planning a trip to South Africa.

But in its southeastern region just an hour drive out of Durban sprawls the Midlands; its beauty inspiring the rolling prose of Alan Paton in his world renowned anti-apartheid novel, *Cry the Beloved Country*.

If Paton were alive today, he would deem what is now on this land to be quite remarkable.

The Midlands Meander is a collection of five routes that are easy to follow and all offer something unique at every turn: Wineries, craft breweries, cheese farms, jewelry shops, shoes, chocolate, lavender, lodgings and restaurants — all beginning with a powerful piece of history.

It is here where Nelson Mandela was captured in 1962 after running from Apartheid police for almost two years.

It marks the end of his freedom for 27 years and a sobering look at South Africa's volatile past.

Only recently has a breathtaking memorial been erected at the capture site. The sculpture comprises 50 steel columns of different lengths, echoing the 50-year anniversary of the fateful day.

Artist Marco Cianfanelli reflects on the symbolic nature of his work; he says the columns "also suggest the idea of many making the whole; of solidarity."

It points to an irony as the political act of Mandela's incarceration cemented his status as an icon of struggle, which helped ferment the groundswell of resistance, solidarity and uprising, bringing about political change and democracy.

The approach to the sculpture is a path meant to represent Mandela's long walk to freedom.

The result of the walk is dramatic as the steel columns at the 35-metre mark suddenly come into focus and transform into a portrait of Mandela, looking west to the landscape of the Midlands.

There is currently a makeshift museum that details the legendary story, but by fall the site will have a full interactive facility that will make the memorial a must-see destination (thecaptureite.co.za).

Other recommended stops along the Midlands Meander:

ST. IVES LODGE

The estate offers a comfortable stay and picturesque waterfront deck dining.



The Midlands is where Nelson Mandela was captured more than 50 years ago. The sculpture comprises 50 steel columns to commemorate the 50-year anniversary of his capture and depicts Mandela looking west across the landscape. SHANNON MELNYK/SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

Activities include a bike park and trout fishing. Prior to the 1800s, the Midlands of Natal was used by Zulu royals as a hunting reserve, abundant with elephants and lions.

The last lion to be killed was shot on St. Ives Hill, resulting in the river below being known as Lions River.

Today, if you visit the estate, you'll be delighted by the sight of zebras, wildebeests and blesboks running free amidst the unique setting of deciduous trees and foliage reminiscent of Northern Europe (stives.co.za).

ARDMORE CERAMIC GALLERY

The internationally renowned work born of a long ago synergy between artist Fee Halsted and her housekeeper's daughter, Bonnie Nshalintshali, who due to polio was unable to work the fields. Collectibles for sale are exuberant and exotic.

Ship a one-of-a-kind piece home or visit the Bonnie Nshalintshali Museum, created to hon-



Retail finds in the Midlands include leather shoes and handbags in the Tsonga tradition. SHANNON MELNYK/SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

our Halsted's friend who tragically died of HIV/AIDS in 1999 (ardmoreceramics.co.za).

TUMBLE DOWNS CAFE

Lunch here for the lazy vibe and rambling view.

The tranquil outdoor countryside pairs perfectly with the grilled king-clip and sweet potato-pear soup.

The charming pet hog that grazes the grounds delights the guests and welcomes belly rubs (tumbledowns.co.za).

ABINGDON WINE ESTATE

It's rare to have wineries in this region; the province is a meteorological melting pot with some storm action in the summer, not to mention it's the highest lightning strike zone in the country.

But passion and vigilance produced Abingdon's maiden vintage, the Cabernet Sauvignon Shiraz 2007. It was the first certified estate wine made in KwaZulu-Natal and since then they've produced 35 swift-selling varieties to date (abingdonestate.co.za).

TSONGA SHOE OUTLET

The popular brand known for "hand-stitched comfort with a conscience" offers discounted leather shoes and handbags in the Tsonga tradition — kept alive in the Drakensberg foothills by local Zulu women, who craft each piece with a spirit of their heritage (tsonga.co.za).

Go to midlandsmeander.co.za for many more stops along the Midland Meander.