



Saturday Citizen

TRAVEL

Destination next



FIVE-STAR EXPERIENCE AWAY FROM THE CITY

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FREE RANGING

Jim Freeman



High drama in the Karoo bushveld

Alone on the range with killers on the loose

What's that sound?" Rose-mariè asked from somewhere deep beneath the covers. I'd been awake for nearly an hour, listening to a plaintive animal yipping as it circled our camp but, due to the sub-zero Karoo winter temperatures, hadn't bothered to open the tent flaps to investigate.

"Probably a jackal smelling the remains of our dinner last night," I ventured.

Half an hour later, as we gathered for pre-game drive coffee in the mess tent, ranger Roelof Wiesner told a different story.

"It's a cheetah in distress," he said. "Yesterday we saw a female with cubs in this area and it possibly means they've been separated... probably by lions."

Neither Rose-mariè, me, nor our two fellow guests said anything. If this was true, then it was almost certainly *very* bad news for the cubs.

With the four-tent Plains Camp at Samara Karoo Reserve having opened less than a week before our visit, none of us wanted to be its first witnesses of tragedy.

We piled into the game-viewing vehicle and, with Wiesner behind the wheel and Rowin Benade in the tracker's seat, went looking.

We initially went in the wrong direction until a radio call from the camp staff said they had a lone cheetah visual and quickly steered us in the right direction. It wasn't long before we were about 50m behind the animal, still mew-yipping piteously.

It was a sound I'd never heard before but one I will never forget.



With the lions down-wind of him, he was unaware of the danger behind him

It's absolutely heart-wrenching.

Our guides soon established it was not the mother but a young male cheetah who had recently been introduced to the reserve from the Kalahari – the staff call them The Kalahari Boys – with his brother.

The two young cheetahs had formed a coalition and were successful hunters, but were still new

to the dangers of Samara.

The missing male wore a telemetry collar and Benade soon had the tracking equipment in his hands and began scanning the area. After a few minutes, he received a faint *ping* from a thick grove of acacias and scrub on the banks of a drainage line a couple of kilometres away.

The echoes grew stronger as we

approached.

The tension mounted – not only were the electronic signals static, which meant the animal wasn't moving, but they seemed to come from a spot that was surrounded by a herd of giraffes all staring fixedly towards a central point.

"They usually do that when they've spotted lions," said Wiesner grimly.

I noted Rose-mariè's eyes closed and lips moving in silent prayer. The expressions of the Ecuadorean father and daughter who were sharing camp and the drive with us were equally fraught.

Suddenly we heard another cheetah distress call. It was the missing male, he was standing outside the circle of giraffes and was calling for his brother. With the lions down-wind of him, he was unaware of the danger 100m behind him.

He began to move up the slope in the direction of his sibling. The giraffes remained in place, still staring, which meant the lions had given up the stalk and were laying up for the day.

That afternoon, we encountered the reunited brothers lolling in long grass as they basked in the weak sun. They seemed unperturbed about their close call, allowing us to get to within 20m of them on foot.

Our relief, however, was immense.

"People think that when one member of a coalition like this dies, the chances of survival of the other are halved," said Wiesner.

"In fact, the odds drop much further.

"Not only does the survivor not have a partner in the hunt but he also doesn't have someone to watch his back... especially when he's feeding on a kill.

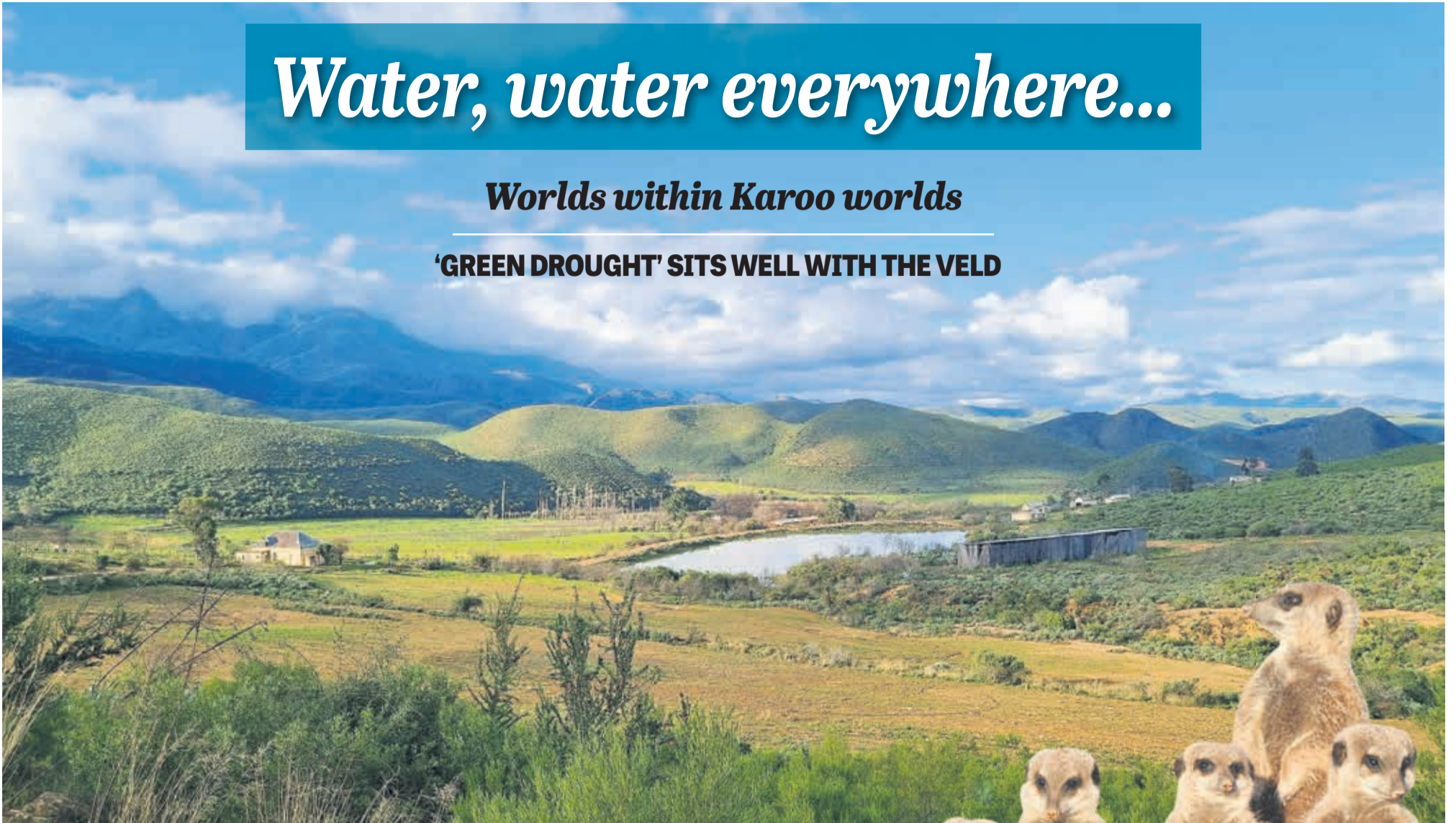
"That's when cheetahs are most vulnerable to lion attacks," added Wiesner.

► www.samara.co.za

Water, water everywhere...

Worlds within Karoo worlds

'GREEN DROUGHT' SITS WELL WITH THE VELD



JIM
FREEMAN

I learned an interesting phrase during my travels through the Karoo this past fortnight: "green drought".

The condition occurs when there is just enough rain to saturate upper layers of the soil, causing plant species with shallow root systems – such as fynbos – to flourish but without recharging aquifers (underground bodies of rock or sediment holding water) or allowing surface runoff to rivers.

Heading south down the N9 from Graaff-Reinet to Willowmore and beyond to De Rust, the countryside appears lush but, despite good rains in July, rivers and streams are dry and dams are generally less than half full. Here, the green drought has the Karoo firmly in its grip.

The Klein (Little) Karoo is only marginally greener than the Groot (Great) Karoo but, say my farming friends, the decade-long drought has definitely been broken.



"We've had as much rain in the past three months as we would typically have in a good year," says Morne Jonker, who farms in the Kammanassie between Oudts-

hoorn and Uniondale.

"The Gamkapoort Dam is full, while the Kammanassie is at 75% and still rising. Farm dams are all full and the mountain streams are still flowing. This is proving to be an exceptional year in every regard."

How does one differentiate between the Little and Great Karoo? The former is 11 800km² in extent and runs from Montagu in the west to (more or less) Uniondale and Willowmore in the east.

It is bounded south and north by the Outeniqua-Langeberg and Swartberg ranges respectively.

The Great Karoo measures 395 000km² and makes up about a third of South Africa's total surface area.

It, too, is sub-divided; the "Low-

er" (western) and "Upper" (eastern) sections, which are split by the escarpment being the main ones.

There are further sub-divisions – just to make things complicated – and the elevation-challenged Lower Karoo comprises such areas as the Koue Bokkeveld, Hantam, Tankwa and Moordenaars.

This is the ideal time of year to visit the Klein Karoo (I prefer the Afrikaans as it's the most commonly spoken language throughout the region). It's cold but liveable and the light has a clarity that is an Instagrammer's dream.

My latest visit had Oudtshoorn as its epicentre and two distinct components... the first, north of the town, was grey and wet, while the second – split by a space

of three days – was crisp but sunny.

For the last, my girlfriend and I were based at the ever-popular De Zeekoe Guest Farm* (www.dezeekoe.co.za) just outside town on the road to Calitzdorp.

Owner Paula Potgieter says De Zeekoe remains a working farm, notwithstanding the expansion of the accommodation facilities over the past two decades.

"It started when I converted two rooms in the farmhouse into guest accommodation when the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival started getting popular. It grew organically from there... we'd take out a loan from the bank, build a few rooms, pay off the loan and start all over again,"

De Zeekoe currently consists of





Pictures: Jim Freeman



The area is also home to the 'Shy Five' mammals

21 hotel-style rooms that carry a four-star Tourism Grading Council status and three self-catering cottages (each of which sleeps two adults). The main property lies on the northern bank of the Olifants River and guests are regularly wakened by the call of a resident African fish eagle that perches on a tree stump in the hotel garden.

More than 160 bird species have been recorded on the property, says Potgieter. The area is also home to the "Shy Five" mammals: armadillo, armadillo, bat-eared fox, porcupine and meerkat.

Early morning trips into the veld to watch the antics of the latter have become a popular tourist activity in Oudtshoorn.

Five Shy Meerkats founder JD Glinister has been researching the little mongoose species since 2008 and greets tourists with coffee and rusks about eight kilometres from De Zeekoe, before taking them on a short walk into the veld to one of several dens to await their emergence for the day.

Meerkats, also known as suricates, have darker fur on their bellies to the rest of their bodies and this absorbs the morning's warmth to provide the get-up-and-go for a day spent grubbing for insects.

Interestingly, the collective noun for meerkats is a "mob".

Drive from De Zeekoe towards Calitzdorp and almost immediately you'll encounter Grundheim, one of the quirkiest distilleries along the so-called R62 Brandy Route.

Apart from some delectable potstill products, Grundheim also produces a delightful golden rum. Beware, however, of the *Brand-slang* witblits with its infused chillies!

Not much further down the road is a road sign indicating "Kruisrivier".

The Kruis River-Groenfontein gravel road is in fine condition and, in my opinion, one of the prettiest in South Africa.

We drove it in reverse, first having a hearty trinchado lunch at Die Bakhuis (not licensed, so take your own wine) restaurant in Calitzdorp, before taking the road that leads first to Axe Hill winery (one of seven around the town) and then past the Nel's River Dam. Completed in 1918, it is the country's oldest concrete gravity dam and was built entirely by Calitzdorp's farmers.

There's a gorgeous lookout spot above the dam, which is particularly popular on the blisteringly hot summer weekends.

Beyond the dam lies Groenfontein - I guess you could call it a hamlet, despite the fact that it extends over nearly 10km - which has become the hidey-hole of any number of quirky and arty characters.

One of these is Peter Coe, a 70-something year old New Zealander who describes himself as an art collector.

I encountered Peter a couple of months ago during a trip to Calitzdorp. I'd stopped to take some pictures when he approached me and invited me into his home-cum-gallery for a cup of coffee. I demurred but said I would return.

I actually took a bag of coffee and, to his glee, left it with him. Peter shares his living room with a gigantic crow sculpture and elderly dogs... his wife having returned to Cape Town because, she said, living in the *gramadoelas* was too lonely.

Every turn in the road offers new delights and an afternoon flashes by within what feels like mere moments. Highlights includ-

ed fording streams over and over again in order to secure pictures for a motoring publication - much to the bemusement of a pair of adorable alpaca.

I also stopped to shoot the *Oude Postkantoor* only to have an exceptionally friendly cat hop into the car for love and cuddles.

Definitely my kind of a Karoo world.

* *De Zeekoe Guest Farm* is a member of Cape Country Routes, a group of more than 20 privately owned and managed hotels, lodges and guest houses located on scenic and historic routes in the Western and Eastern Cape.





Bonginkosi Tiwane

As someone born and bred in the city, I tend to be awestruck whenever in nature. A jacaranda tree is part of nature, but I never get awestruck when driving around the Capital City.

The awe I'm referring to is the kind I instantly get when I'm at the beach, taking in the vastness of the ocean or being surrounded by secluded mountains.

The smaller I feel in nature, the more beautiful the experience. These were some of the feelings when I visited RockFig Madikwe Game Reserve in the North West.

After acquiring a lease at Madikwe game reserve in 2000, Andrew Walker built a family home there and in 2013. Walker decided to turn it into a private commercial lodge and was officially opened for business in 2018. Walker passed away in 2021 and his family has kept the business going since.

Located just a stone's throw away from Gaborone, Botswana, RockFig provides guests an equal sense of privacy, luxury and being in the wild.

Each lodge was provided a max occupancy to ensure that there are not too many lodges and people in the park. RockFig can accommodate a maximum of 14 guests.

Seeing an animal in its natural habitat is unlike spotting it inside

a cage at a zoo. On our first drive in the afternoon we were welcomed by the smell of dung as we approached a dam where an elephant quenched its thirst.

"Bull elephants usually want to be by themselves," Honest, our guide on the drive explains to us. I felt minuscule as our bakkie parked a few metres away from the large, intimidating mammal.

It's a humbling feeling one gets when in the presence of the largest mammals on earth, which can squash us within minutes.

It was particularly interesting that the elephant was the most significant animal we spotted on our first drive. The villa that was my abode during my stay is named Tlou, which means elephant in Setswana. There are four villas in the whole lodge, each named after an animal.

"The villas are called Inkwe (leopard), Nare (buffalo), Tshukudu (Rhino) and Tlou. The main lodge building is called Tau (lion)," explains Diana Prins from the marketing department of the lodge.

At first I didn't understand why we needed to go on two game drives twice a day, one early in the morning and later in the afternoon. The animals can be quite elusive and spotting your favourite requires some patience.

It helped having an experienced guide like Honest, who has been working at RockFig Madikwe for four years but has previously worked at the Kruger National Park for more than five years.



Five-star experience away from the city

RockFig Madikwe's natural beauty

SENSE OF PRIVACY, LUXURY AND BEING IN THE WILD



Honest spotted lion footprints on the ground and followed them until we arrived at a place where a mother and her two cubs were unwinding just after sunset.

Before then, we gate-crashed a wild-dogs dinner as they were enjoying a kill. The pungent smell of animal blood made the whole experience more palpable.

There are other lodges in the area and it's normal for the guides

from the different lodges to share information on sighting animals.

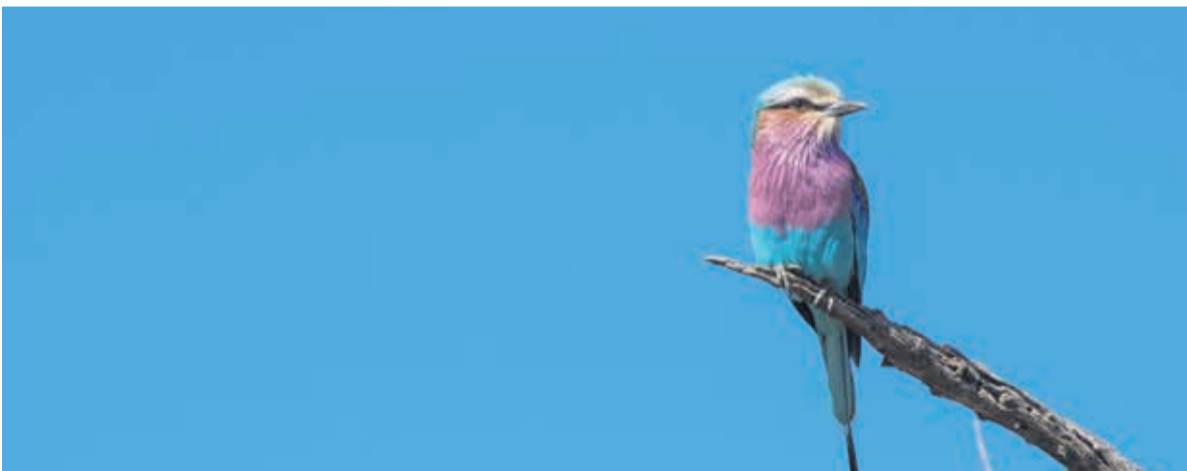
Throughout our drives, Honest kept communicating with the other guides about which animals are located.

"We do neighbour other lodges, but there is a fairly large distance between each of them. We do share some services like electricity and a borehole which was quite

challenging initially but this has been running smoothly for a few years now," says Prins.

"We do see other vehicles on our game drives, however, we have a great relationship with all lodges in the area and chat with other lodges' guides often regarding sightings (this actually improves the opportunities of great sightings).

"There are strict rules in the



reserve regarding how many vehicles can be on various sightings, so we stay in touch to ensure we give our guests the opportunity to see these animals, while also adhering to the rules of the reserve.”

This was evident as we parked near one of the biggest dams, named Tlou dam, where only four vehicles were permitted near the animals.

The sunsets by Tlou dam are

gorgeous, especially when a variety of animals are there enjoying a sip.

Seeing rhinos that aren't dehorned has become a luxury in recent years due to the high number of rhino poachers.

The rhinos at RockFig Madikwe have their horns intact, which makes for a beautiful site. The lodge has invested largely in technology that fends off poachers.

“Madikwe has put a lot of effort to preservation of rhinos. State of the art security systems have been deployed throughout the park and the park has a very good anti-poaching unit,” Prins says.

They can't speak extensively about the anti-poaching operations they have due to security concerns. “There are camera and sensors all over,” says Honest, who admits that they as guides aren't

aware of where these security measures are placed.

RockFig Madikwe is quite pricey but well-worth it when you look at the experience of the guides, the privacy it offers and high standard in catering and comfort.

“It is fairly balanced between internationals and South Africans. We saw a large increase in South African interest after Covid lockdowns,” says Prins about the guest they attract. She says RockFig gets busier from October to January.

I visited in winter when the temperatures were quite chilly, especially during the morning game drives.

If visiting during winter, make

sure you request a lodge that has a fireplace inside as I stayed in a lodge that felt like a freezer – the air-con wasn't sufficient for the icy morning and evening temperatures.

The lodge's isolation from a big city wasn't an issue for us as guests, but Prins says it presents a challenge for the business itself at times.

“Our staff has to live on-site which can be hard on their personal lives. We need to ensure we get good quality fresh food, fresh drinking water, provide constant electricity; basically, we need to provide a five-star experience while being far from any major towns,” she says.





EXQUISITE . Sunset over the canal in the historic centre.

Bruges city hits red line

Grappling with tourists

Bruges

Inhabitants of Belgium's cobblestone-and-canal city of Bruges are clear: summertime tourism has hit capacity.

"It's really reached a red line now," says one, 55-year-old architect Arnout Goegebuer, as he sits inside a cafe, peering out a window across a packed outside terrace.

"We don't need more tourists anymore, it's enough – maybe a little bit less" is needed, he says.

It's a sentiment reiterated by other residents of the western city, population 119 000, which each year hosts eight million visitors – most of them concentrated in the summer months, and most of them on day trips.

Residents are not against tourism, which brings money and prestige and provides jobs.

But they say it needs to be balanced, to stop the city turning into a Disneyfied open-air museum.

With Bruges crowds back to pre-Covid levels, including from cruise ships docking in nearby Zeebrugge port and disgorging passengers who spend just a few

hours, "there's a lot of trouble" for locals, says Kurt van der Pieter, a 62-year-old retiree who lived his whole life in the city.

"People of Bruges say it's too much, it's too much – very too much some days," he says.

The situation is not unique to Bruges. Europe's other top historical canal cities of Venice and Amsterdam have both taken steps to bar cruise ships calling.

Venice received a wake-up call in July when Unesco recommended the city be put on its endangered list because of over-tourism and other problems.

An August 2022 ranking published by an Airbnb competitor called Holidu put Venice, Bruges and the Greek island of Rhodes in equal second place in its list of the most overcrowded European destinations based on the number of tourists versus inhabitants.

The Croatian walled city of Dubrovnik – famed as the backdrop for much of The Game of Thrones fantasy TV series – came first on the list.

Bruges's tourist authority, Visit Bruges, disputes Holidu's ranking and says its own figures, based on usage of mobile devices while in



TOURIST ATTRACTIONS. Street cafes in Grote Markt, a meeting place of the Brugelings and tourists in Brugge, West Flanders. Pictures: iStock



EXOTIC. A view of the Spiegelrei canal at dusk.



CROWD-PULLER. The Jan Breydel and Pieter de Coninck Monument on the Market Square with traditional tenement houses in the background.

Bruges, show that daily there are 131 visitors per 100 inhabitants.

"Bruges is often referred to as a mass tourism destination, but it isn't," says spokesperson Ann Plovie.

"This is like a bit (of a) misconception that the city is overcrowded. Indeed, I can't deny that there are many tourists, but you should come on different periods and then you would see also the difference," adds another spokesperson Anne de Meerleer.

In 2019, Bruges implemented a five-year strategy to boost overnight stays, spread the tourist numbers around geographically and over each year, and to lure visitors more interested in cultural and gastronomic deep-dives than selfies and waffles.

"Our aim is to get not more visitors, not the volume is important,

but the kind of visitors we get," De Meerleer says as she guides a visitor to stunning spots that are almost empty and are just a couple of streets from the main market square.

The results of the strategy are unclear, torpedoed by the 2020-2021 collapse in tourism caused by Covid travel restrictions around



GOOD TIME. A group of people in Bruges, Belgium, gathered in a city square surrounded by tall, historical buildings.

the world.

Bruges's city centre also faces tensions over accommodation options for overnight stays, with a halt to buildings being converted to hotels to ensure locals aren't squeezed out.

Unlike cities like Milan, Bruges has not banned private vehicles from its historic district, though the railway station is a short walk away. Car registration plates come from all over Europe.

The Belgian city is already at work on its next five-year strategy, this one with an emphasis on sustainability.

The mix of tourists walking around in Bruges is even broader, as is their verdict as to whether they found the place overcrowded or not.

"I didn't think there would be this much people," says Lee Hotae, a South Korean tourist admiring the city architecture in a guided group visit.

"It's not that busy actually. It's like going to somewhere that's as nice as Amsterdam or Florence or Venice, but not as overrun," says a Scottish tourist, Ross Henderson.

A 59-year-old French tourist, Ariele Delattre, who had made the short trip to Bruges from her hometown of Lille, near the Belgian border, says a canal boat ride revealed the tourist diversity.

The boat's driver "asked what nationalities were present on the boat, and it's true that we had Asians, Germans, Britons, French, Indians – people from everywhere", she says.

Diego Rodriguez, a 41-year-old Venezuelan tourist walking around in a Spanish-speaking guided tour, said he found the tourist numbers "fine like this, especially as we're in the summer months, the vacation months".

He added that he had visited Bruges a couple of months earlier "and it was emptier, but it was spring and it was colder, people weren't on holiday". – AFP