

'It's amazing. There's absolutely nothing to do! Every day feels like a Sunday'



Tourism and development along the Garden Route continue to increase at a heady rate, which is why you're likely to let out a deep, slow sigh of appreciation as the gravel road corners atop a hillside viewpoint, with the handful of historic farmhouses that make up Vermaaklikheid scattered below. The denim-blue Duiwenhoks River slinks furtively through the valley, its Indian Ocean destination five kilometres away. 'This is it?' I exclaim incredulously to my travel companions, none of us having expected such a sparsely populated village scene.

Sixty years ago, Vermaaklikheid was a thriving farming settlement 300 km south-east of Cape Town, with grapes and vegetables vying for top spot. It had all the makings of a sustainable rural outpost – two schools, a post office and police station, and a butchery. The land was owned predominantly by white farmers whose smallholdings housed the local coloured labourers. But when the government introduced grape quotas, Vermaaklikheid was left out of the equation and most of the farmers moved to nearby towns in search of greener pastures. The schools and butchery (which didn't comply with new health regulations) closed their doors. Only the labourers remained on the land.

(Above:)
Dream home:
some of the old,
weathered
cottages – with
peeling plaster,
sun-bleached
paint and faded tin
roofs – have
escaped the
renovators' rush

Then, in the mid-Eighties, city dwellers looking for a retreat stumbled upon Vermaaklikheid and started buying up cottages and land, and building new houses. Although this stimulated economic growth, it also created a housing shortage as landowners were only too happy to sell off their land, as well as the farm workers' cottages. A low-cost housing project has been implemented in the last decade to make provision for the dispossessed locals, but poverty and unemployment are still keenly felt.

Change in any community is inevitably met with mixed reviews. While the locals need industry and development in order to survive, out-of-towners want to preserve the status quo. The new managers of Duiwenhoks Restaurant (the only restaurant in the village) chat excitedly about their plans for expansion, which include opening stalls offering local produce and creating more rooms to let out in season. But for

'When the westerly wind blows you can hear the rumble of the sea, and on a still night the hooting of eagle owls'



(Above:) The beautifully crafted House of Eels, a soothing spot to spend some quiet time with friends and family

holidaymakers such as Irene Solomons, owner of the innovatively designed House of Eels, the village is fine the way it is: 'It's amazing. There's absolutely nothing to do! Every day feels like a Sunday.' Irene's kids can play to their hearts' content, without concern for speeding traffic and safely away from the grip of Xbox.

Josie Borain, the iconic face of Calvin Klein in the Eighties, has been coming to the village since she was 10 years old. For her 'the appeal lies in the fact that it is still untouched by the mayhem of my real world'. The isolation experienced here seems to be the greatest drawcard, as another long-time visitor concurs: 'Even in season it doesn't get busy,' says Andy Wright, who has a share in a house here and comes down with his wife and dogs as often as he can. 'Nothing happens too fast in Vermaaklikheid. We always bring a puzzle and a stack of books and that's how we spend our days. The dogs chase the cows, they love it (the dogs, that is). When the westerly wind blows you can hear the rumble of the sea in the distance, and on a still night the hooting of eagle owls.'

In the evenings, spent drinking good wine with great friends, Andy regales his listeners with legends of the valley, such as the acrobatic snakes found here. 'If you chance across a puff adder in the veld, the puffy is more scared of you and bites its own tail, rolling off in a cartwheel,' he says in all seriousness. But maybe that only holds true for the locals. I vow to wear shoes everywhere.

For those without a title deed or property share, accommodation can be found along the river as well as in the old farming areas slightly inland. We hop into a rowing boat to scout out Glory Be, one of River Magic's self-catering cottages, accessible only from the water. Its lush riverside setting and cosy ambience are hard to beat, but as it's been partially flooded after heavy rains a few days before our arrival, we are compelled to seek out drier land.

Our plucky Tazz navigates the steep road down to Oshoek, a family-run farm with a choice of three secluded self-catering holiday homes. Josie Borain's father, Peter, bought the smallholding in 1972 and is a gregarious authority on the area. He tells us that the name Vermaaklikheid, the Afrikaans word for