

# THE INN THING

It takes a certain kind of person to be an innkeeper. In a world where things – including hotels – just get bigger, a good inn remains true to old-world qualities of bonhomie, comfort and personal service. Here's to the innkeepers, who keep tradition alive

Text: Janine Stephen, Images: Supplied

Ghost Mountain Inn



**A GOOD INN**, these days, is hard to find. They are casualties of our shrinking world: every town is now within an easy day's drive of another, and one no longer needs to stop at the only spot along the way with a warm bed, grub and a chatty owner to give you news of bandits.

'An inn is good old, simple, friendly hospitality, owned and run by an often larger-than-life "Mine Host" type,' says Christopher Harvie. He should know: he's an innkeeper to his very bones, owner-manager of the Rissington Inn in Hazyview, a rather wonderful example of this rare genre of accommodation option. 'It is possibly vaguely Dickensian, with blazing fires in winter, pies on the menu (homemade), pubs with blousy barmaids bearing frothing pints, and somewhere to tie up and feed your horse or nowadays, park and have your 4x4 cleaned. Not to be confused with motels or country lodges. And avoid anyone who fools with the name (Duck Inn, Drop Inn).'

Inns of Zimbabwe founder Gordon Addams concurs with Harvie's core definition. 'An inn is a small, personalised and often owner-managed establishment,' he says. 'It's often found on routes in the country that afford an overnight stay for business and holiday travellers. Management should be hands-on.' Quite. Owner-managers make an establishment a living, breathing creature, with its own personality and quirks. And vitally, stories. Meet the innkeepers.



**INNIT:  
THE REAL DEAL**

*Christopher Harvie of  
Rissington Inn, Hazyview*

**INN THING  
CHECKLIST**

- Mine Host ✓
- Roadside haven ✓
- Small ✓
- Stories ✓

**THE SETTING** Near Hazyview, Mpumalanga, and just ten minutes from the Kruger Park's Phabeni Gate. Sixteen rooms and suites, with expansive bushveld views and gardens. Informal, homey, stylish. Library with books from Harvie's childhood onwards, and a convivial bar full of maps and games, with a jigsaw on the go.

**MINI-BIO** After school, Harvie fell into a bar job at Cybele Forest Lodge in White River (since closed due to a land claim). Within three years, he ran Cybele. At 30, he decided to open a roadside hostelry.

**SCARCE SKILLS** 'An innkeeper is a storyteller, and probably a chef. And a plumber, a mechanic, an electrician, and an internet technician as well. He must be the soul of discretion, as there will be secret

trysts and assignments which he must keep to himself. He also needs to have patience. The number of times I have heard the "joke" about God's Window being closed! Or had to look at someone's lion photos! But we just have to smile, impressed as if it was the first time.'

**A STORY (OR TEN)** 'I was wondering around Hazyview after a boozy lunch and I got lost, and ended up at an abandoned farmhouse, with a collapsing tobacco barn, and bush – loads of it. It was for sale. I offered 10 per cent of the asking price and disappeared, only to get a phone call that night to say the offer had been accepted. Except that the guy wanted to meet me, because he was very into auras, and if I didn't have the right aura, he wasn't going to sell. Goodness, I thought, I'm going to have to invent an aura overnight. Well, he decided that he'd sell to me as long as I didn't move the driveway – the god of auras and feng shui or something had dictated the line of the road and if I moved that, it would be a total disaster. He sent me a picture of his aura, taken in the Rosebank Mall. It was a photo of him covered in what looked like pink, yellow and green *spookasem* (candy floss).

'We started building in June and put an advert in a national paper to say we'd open our first five rooms for Heritage Day, 24 September 1995. After that first night, a guy in the downstairs room came to tell us that he'd descended inches towards the centre of the Earth – his bed had sunken into still-wet concrete. Our single biggest item of expenditure was when we built the first honeymoon suite and moved an electricity pylon. There was one of those big, Eiffel Tower-like monsters right in front of the view. We paid Eskom about R50,000 for that.

'No interior designer has been anywhere near Rissington. It's cobbled together; when I see something I buy it. When out in the sticks like we are, you need to set yourself targets that you and your staff can achieve. We put our emphasis on hospitality because we ➤

# Departures

know we can provide it every day. I devised the menu and cooked for the first ten years or so. In the early days, we had a braai every day for lunch (attended Bosman-style by the lawyer, the doctor, the bank manager and the schoolmaster) and butternut soup and bobotie for supper. Gradually we had to move to dishes that overseas visitors understood. We still do good home food. I always reckon that once you tie your beans up with a chive, you have kind-of lost the plot, inn-wise.'

**LOOK OUT FOR** Winter is top game viewing time.

*rissington.co.za; christopherharvie.com;*  
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## INN-TERLUDE: THE ROADSIDE ATTRACTION

*Carey Peterson and Pasquale  
Scaturro of Solitaire Desert  
Farm, Namibia*

### INN THING CHECKLIST

Roadside haven ✓  
Small ✓  
Stories ✓

**THE SETTING** There is a very long and gritty road that stretches through rusk-dry Namibia from Sesriem to Swakopmund. There's just one petrol stop en route: Solitaire, a historical settlement at the junction of the C14 and the C19, on the edge of the Namib-Naukluft National Park and in the middle of the 18,211ha Solitaire Land Trust.

**MINI-BIO** All this bounty (i.e. the Land Trust and the entire settlement of Solitaire, which also has an airstrip and church) is managed by US-born Carey Peterson, Pasquale Scaturro and other trustees. Meeting the pair is not a given (they have a marvellous lodge manager), but if around, prod them for stories.

**SCARCE SKILLS** Here, besides gas and (thank you) tyre repair, there's the Tsondab General Dealer, a bakery sending the scent of meat pies and fresh bread wafting over the desert, a bistro and the Solitaire Lodge. We recommend pushing on a teeny bit further (7km) to Solitaire Desert Farm, a perfect inn by nature and position, if not name.

**THE GLOBAL STORIES** 'Pasquale is well-known as a modern-day explorer,' says Peterson. 'He and a small support crew rafted the length of the Nile River, a 5,246km descent, from Ethiopia to the Mediterranean, a journey that took months and was the subject of an IMAX film, *The Mystery of the Nile*. He has also climbed Everest three times, once leading an expedition with Erik Weihenmayer, the only blind man to ever summit Everest.' ➔



# Departures

Peterson, a conservationist, has also travelled widely and is the author of *The Tongass: Alaska's Vanishing Rainforest*.

Famous guests include Dutch author and documentary filmmaker Ton van der Lee, who stayed for three years. 'He later wrote a book called *Solitaire*, which became an international best seller. Dutch tourists frequently turn up on pilgrimage, clutching a copy.' But the most famous resident was a Scotsman, Percy 'Moose' McGregor. 'He was larger than life, both literally and in his huge personality, and we miss him every day. He started the Solitaire bakery and made "world famous" apple pie. Ewan McGregor (no relation) stopped by once on a motorcycle trip down the length of Africa and enjoyed a slice.'

The settlement itself is worth preserving. 'In the past, farmers set up small storefronts to trade with and supply their neighbours, plus the occasional traveller,' says Peterson. The original family were sheep farmers, one of whom added 'a hand-cranked petrol pump' to the store. 'Out here in the middle of nowhere, people built with what was on hand, often ingeniously. Much of that we are now preserving. We all treasure the old General Dealer, and the church is slowly being restored. We have the best staff, but it takes a certain type of personality to stick around. Some of our people have been here



'ONE GUY WAS BANNED FROM THE HOTEL A RECORD NUMBER OF TIMES. HE ONCE DROVE A SCOOTER THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR AND INTO THE BAR BECAUSE HE DIDN'T WANT TO MISS HAPPY HOUR. AND HE SHOT A FEW HOLES THROUGH THE WATER TANK'



for more than 15 years. You either love it or are eventually drawn away to the bright lights of Windhoek.'

**LOOK OUT FOR** Oryx and cheetah (there are nature drives on offer). It's a pilot's delight: bring an aircraft. In July, the Delta Aquariid meteor shower put on a fabulous show for southern hemisphere dwellers. 'We pride ourselves on our dark skies.'

PS: There is often no room at this inn, so book in advance.

[solitairenambibia.com](http://solitairenambibia.com); +264 63 29 3621



## INN-INGS: THE FAMILY AFFAIR

Craig Rutherford of Ghost Mountain Inn, Mkuze

### INN THING CHECKLIST

- Mine Host ✓
- Roadside haven ✓
- Stories ✓

**THE SETTING** An oasis of gardens and rooms in Mkuze, northern KwaZulu-Natal. Like the town, it's no longer the tiny place it was in 1962; the latest additions will bring rooms to 70. But it's run by the same family, who built it for traders and travellers to this once remote area. The rugged cliffs and prominent peak of Ghost Mountain, part of the Lebombo range, loom in the distance. There's a hippo in the dam, and a warthog was once found escaping at speed from the kitchen.

**MINI-BIO** Four generations of Rutherfords have lived in northern KwaZulu-Natal. Craig escaped briefly to attend hotel school in Switzerland; he also worked for the Four Seasons in California and Toronto before coming home to take over the family inn.

**SCARCE SKILLS** 'A hotelier is like a priest: you either are one or you aren't one. You have to have this ridiculous need to keep people happy and entertained.'

**THE FAMILY STORY** 'I come from a family of strong women and fairly relaxed men. People always called my great-grandmother when there was a snake in the area and she'd arrive with a rifle to shoot it. My great-grandfather moved up to Ndumo in about 1918. He had a trading store up there – incredible days, we've got family pictures up around the hotel. The goods would come all the way from Mozambique on dhows...'

'My grandfather Roy extended the company, and they settled in Ubombo, in the cooler mountains where there were no mosquitos and

tsetse flies. Then in the late 1950s the railway came through Mkuze. Gradually more people started travelling up, and they'd often need somewhere to stay – traders and government people. My grandfather would always invite them to stay because he loved the stories – he could catch up with the news, have a couple of beers... and my grandmother, Maureen, struggled to make toast! So they decided best to build a little inn in Mkuze. It was on the side of the old main road, with eight rooms and communal bathrooms. It became the epicentre of the community. It eventually had two pubs – the ladies bar where you had to wear a tie and jacket, never mind that Mkuze hits over 40° in December. And then the bar behind that, where farmers would come for pie and chips and a couple of beers before they'd head back to work. The Mkuze cricket club was next door, so it really was a centre for the whole community. Now of course we've moved the bar and rebuilt.

'One guy was banned from the hotel a record number of times. He once drove a scooter through the front door and into the bar because he didn't want to miss happy hour. And he shot a few holes through the water tank... and he wasn't selected for the cricket team, so he flew his crop sprayer really low over the field. Real Wild West stories.'

'The area used to be all cattle farms and sugar cane. Now we have some incredible wildlife and rehabilitated areas. We sell ourselves as more of a destination, a base to explore the game



reserves and Lake Jozini and Zulu culture. Our demographic has changed to a much more international clientele, but we still get an interesting mix. King Goodwill Zwelithini comes by every now and then, and Prince Harry stopped by last year. It's this constant mix of interesting people.'

**LOOK OUT FOR** The new iSimangaliso Trail Challenge takes place from 7-9 July. Plus it's prime game viewing time. [ghostmountaininn.co.za](http://ghostmountaininn.co.za); +27 (0)35 573 1025



## INN-STINCT: TRADITIONAL TURF

David Graham of *White Horse Inn, Bvumba, Zimbabwe*

### INN THING CHECKLIST

- Mine Host ✓
- Roadside haven ✓
- Small ✓
- Bygone values ✓

**THE SETTING** The 13-roomed White Horse started life as a cottage in the mid-1930s. In the 1950s it was a family home; a leopard used to drink from the swimming pool. It's now a bit worn around the edges, but remains a bastion of good form – the kind espoused by gentle, genial English expats of a certain kind. The setting is special: views of the smudgy Bvumba mountain range, surrounded by indigenous trees. The terraced gardens have rare samango monkeys and a resident bird guide is available for guided walks.

**MINI-BIO** Graham, now 80, bought the White Horse in 1980, at Independence and 'had ten good years of business until the Zimbabwe problems slumped us'. He describes his inn as 'old-worldly, old-fashioned, comfortable'; a 'magical world, frozen in time'.

**SCARCE SKILLS** Graham has been super-hands-on over the years: he's worked as a cook, barperson and receptionist when needed, keeping a sharp eye on standards, and he still does his rounds of rooms and hospitality areas when on duty. (He has help from business partner Frank Marembo and travels more regularly.)

**THE (HI)STORIES** It is a bit of a time warp (think florals and chintzes), adhering to old-world values. From 1980 to 2006, The White Horse Inn had 'house rules'. Guests were asked to wear smart casual dress at all times. After 6:30pm, long trousers were required, and ties appreciated. 'We've slacked on impressing the rules since the economic tide changed in this country. However, for



posterity, we still hang the rules on the wall,' Graham says.

Yet stiff it's not. Graham remembers splashing fully clad into the swimming pool with an English army general one raucous New Year's eve...

**LOOK OUT FOR** The Moongate, a spot in the gardens from where you can see the enormous Cross Kopje, erected above Mutare for African soldiers who died in WWI. Off-season rates apply from May to August. [whitehorseinn.co.zw](http://whitehorseinn.co.zw); +263 20 60325 or +263 20 60138 ■



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