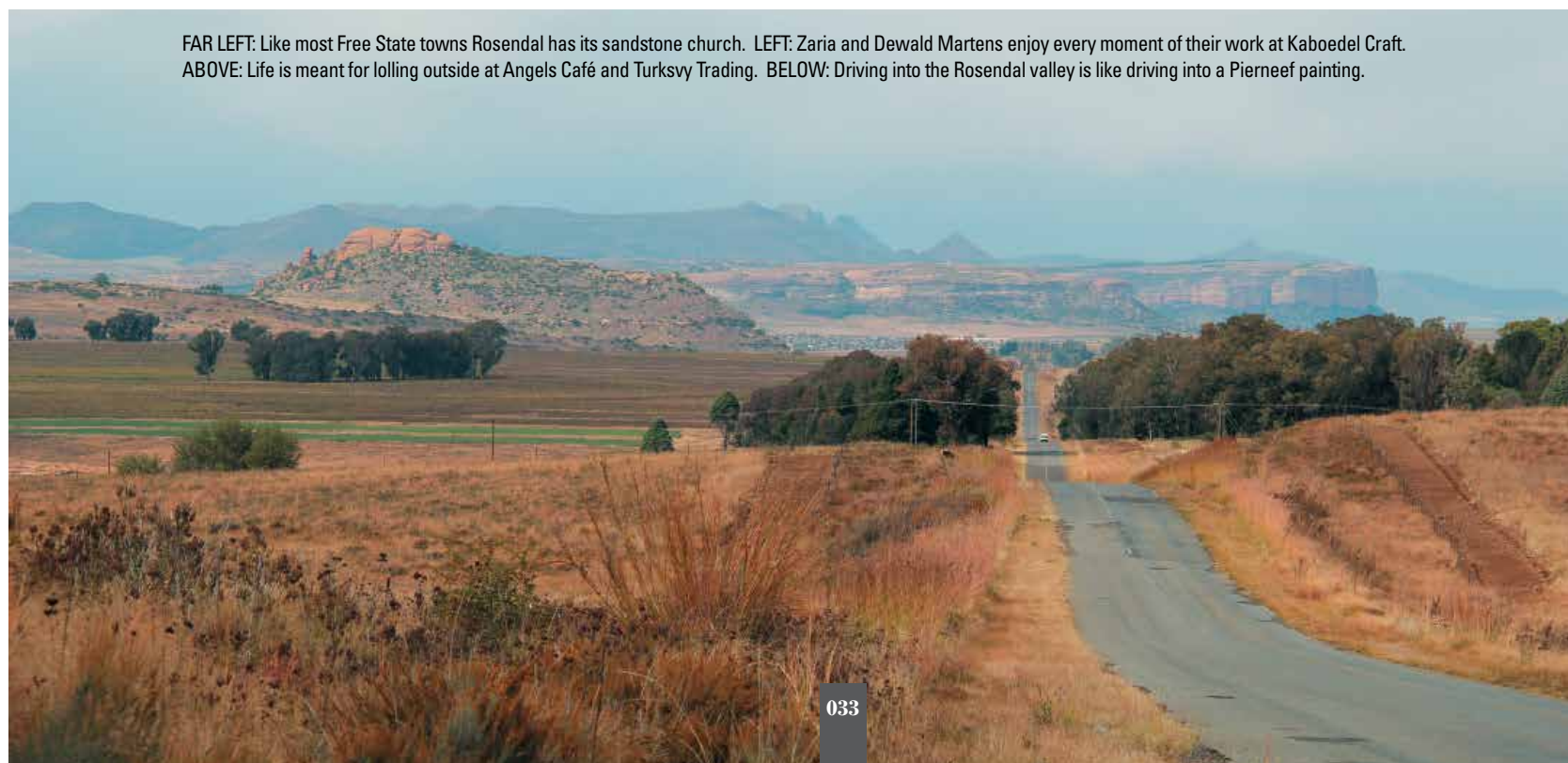


Little Big Town

The Eastern Free State town of Rosendal is tiny, with about a hundred residents. SUE ADAMS gets to know its huge heart



FAR LEFT: Like most Free State towns Rosendal has its sandstone church. LEFT: Zaria and Dewald Martens enjoy every moment of their work at Kaboedel Craft. ABOVE: Life is meant for lolling outside at Angels Café and Turksvy Trading. BELOW: Driving into the Rosendal valley is like driving into a Pieterneef painting.

As we drive into the Rosendal valley just north of Ficksburg, after the 300km trip from Johannesburg, the sun is low in the sky and it feels like we are stepping into a Pierneef painting.

The block-like mountains with honey-gold sandstone cliffs were created two million years ago when lava was deposited over sandstone and erosion began. Now they are called the Witteberge and are part of the Maluti Mountains that makes the Eastern Free State so famous. The sight of the ubiquitous small-town steeple announces that we are almost there.

A quirky collection of tree stumps, with signs indicating the delights of Rosendal, greets us at the turn-off – much more effective than tired info boards. With one tar road and only about 100 permanent residents, traffic is not an issue here and, in fact, this little town is better explored on foot or bicycle.

We had been looking forward to a gin and tonic on the stoep of our weekend cottage but the town streets beckon. “Come and join in,” calls one of the boule players on the extra-wide dirt road outside Angels Café. They raise their glasses and welcome us but we choose to explore further. The local dogs are out in full force and a cow chews the cud as she rests under a deep-yellow poplar.

Rosendal was founded in 1911 when the local farming population felt the need to have a church and a central market place. Farmer Philip Botha donated the land and two names were suggested – Rosendal and Leliesfontein. There was an abundance of roses in the area and the name Rosendal

(Rose Valley) won the day, and now the town has a Love Rosendal festival in February, the month of love.

“Roses are not indigenous so where did they come from?” I ask the locals sitting in the pub at the Hound and Rose, a newly renovated hotel built in the classic Free State sandstone style. They argue amicably over the possibilities.

Artist Michele Nigrini says, “I heard that hay and feed imported from South America by the British during the Anglo-Boer War contained seeds of the dog rose.” Someone else pipes up that they were told missionaries had brought in the plants to use the rosehip

fruit to make a powder rich in vitamin C for the locals. Whatever the reason, the roses now grow wild.

We pop in to see sculptural artist Dahla Hulme and discover she had made the signs at the entrance to Rosendal. “I am a bit nutty,” says Dahla, her long blonde hair spattered with paint. “I have done many things in my life from becoming an Olympic javelin thrower to photographer to pilot. Now I give old farm implements a new lease on life, using them in pieces of furniture.”

Situated in an old sandstone building many shades of gold, Dahla’s workshop, display area and garden are a testament to

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: The Hound and Rose Hotel has a great view of the surrounding mountains. ● Dahla Hulme in her Van Der Hulme studio. ● Artist Michele Nigrini is one of the original creative artists to base themselves in Rosendal. ● Rosendal’s unique info board.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Artist Willem Pretorius works in the kitchen at night after his childrens’ bedtime. ● Antoinette Goosen from Angels Café serves the best cake and coffee in town. ● Turksvy Trading has a wonderful yard for rummaging in. ● Artist Willem Pretorius’ metal cow keeps watch at Turksvy.



creative design, and I battle to decide whether to buy an industrial-looking coffee table or a stunning lamp.

Dahla tells us we’ll love Turksvy Trading in Kriek Street, set in a series of dilapidated rusting sheds beside a windmill. Owner Sandra Lemmer bought the complete contents of an old Lesotho trading store and it has been lovingly recreated down to the medicines in paper packets, jars of sweets (sadly no humbugs) and knick-knacks in glass display cabinets.

Boniswa Joyce Lephoto, who has lived all her life in this area, serves behind the counter and joins in with great glee when I ask to have a look around. “I remember them from my mother,” she says, her face creasing as

she holds up a pair of bloomers. We spend the morning wandering from room to room, with much ‘Do you remember this?’ conversation. Enamel pots and pans jostle with prams, radiograms and melamine cupboards filled with old china.

After some serious nostalgia and dust we need a break, and Angels Café tucked into the edge of Turksvy Trading is the perfect spot. The way to my heart is food and the café certainly meets the need for coffee and cake.

In her dashing hat and shawl, Antoinette Goosen greets us with a smile. Inside is cosy but we sit outside in the lush, sunny garden, lolling in comfortable chairs and watching the passing parade, with a life-size metal cow made by artist Willem Pretorius watching

over us. “You have to book for Sunday lunch. It’s incredible,” Dahla tells us but sadly they are already fully booked.

What Antoinette does not advertise is her little perfumery tucked away in a corner of her café. Here she makes a range of delicate scents using natural herbs, oils and flower essences. What to choose? I ask Antoinette for advice and, after looking at me long and hard in deep silence, she gives me what turns out to be the perfect choice from her Africa range, aptly named Africa Divine.

One thing leads to another and we are told to go and see André Loots at Studio Ben. “She’s a textile weaver, soap maker and bird-watching fanatic,” Dahla tells us. A quick phone call and André enthusiastically



leads us past trays of drying soap down to her bright studio where there are many wooden looms at different stages of production. "I make carpets, rugs and all sorts of things. Unfortunately wool is so pricey now," she says, as she bustles between looms and baskets stuffed with multi-coloured wool.

On the way to look at her soap making I trip over what I think is a weird dome-like doorstep and she laughs. "Those are the wooden moulds I use to make felt hats," she says. "Touch them. Everyone wants to stroke the smooth wood."

André's soaps are made with essential oils such as geranium and the scent fills the room. "Soap needs to cure. These are fresh so you need to wait a few weeks before you use them. The tea-tree soap is excellent for people with skin conditions. People keep coming back and ordering more."

As we leave, laden with soaps, André's husband Henk appears from his book-lined study. Henk's expertise is military medals and he spends his days in contact with people across the world, collecting medals and the stories that go with them. His strongroom is filled with drawers of medals. "Each one has a story and one thread of history leads to another," says Henk.

Rosendal lends itself to artists. As artist Michele Nigrini says, "It has wonderful light and the energy here works for me." Michele was one of the first artists to set up a gallery here, about 12 years ago. "I like to activate the canvas with chance markings and notes.

I don't like to work with a blank canvas. The result can be a happy accident," she says. The birds in her present theme seem to flutter across the bright canvases with the energy that Michele speaks of.

Many artists have moved to Rosendal, all seeking something slightly different. Willem Pretorius came to seek a good place for his family. "It's been so good that my family has expanded and now we really crowd into the Kombi when we travel," he says, laughing. "Kids are demanding and we home-school so I often paint at night in my kitchen." He paints countryside and small-town scenes evocative of the places we drove through on the way to the sea when I was a child.

In this kind of town one visit leads to another, and someone mentions 'The Knifeman'. Simon Streicher looks like he should be someone's retired grandfather but he's a busy man. In a shed in his garden, his Black Anvil workshop is filled with machines, benches and stacks of old metal. The domain of a craftsman.

"I make the knife blades but also carve the handles from bone or wood. I design each one individually and then make the case or sheath," he says. We move from table to table discussing all the pieces he is busy with and then he unexpectedly leads me out a back door to show me his other passion.

"Come! Come!" he calls over the fence. "I have these miniature horses and sometimes on Saturday I give people cart rides." He strokes and pats them, and I see



ABOVE: Zaria de Villiers Martens decorates her walls with glass and tiles. ABOVE RIGHT: Boniswa Joyce Lephoto giggles over some of the items she sells in Turksvy Trading. RIGHT: There is always time in Rosendal to just stand and stare.



the other, less sharp side to The Knifeman.

We stroll down the road to Kaboedel Craft, where prayer flags and a metal angel greet us. This is where one of the self-confessed nuts of Rosendal, Zaria de Villiers Martens, has covered her walls in glass bottles. A bundle of enthusiasm, Zaria buzzes around showing us the glass and tiles that cover her walls, the curtain screen made of glass bottles and her hand-dyed jewel-coloured wool from which she weaves her textiles.

It seems that sheds in the back garden are part of Rosendal culture. Zaria's partner, Dewald Martens, has one of his own where he makes glass platters out of old bottles.

For a small town of about 100 inhabitants, Rosendal leaves us surprised that we have barely touched its sides. I still want to stroll to the local dam, we haven't explored the surrounding countryside and there's much to see in town. We'll just have to return and dig deeper. ■

Map reference D6 see inside back cover

Property Peep

Local estate agent Zaria de Villiers Martens says there are still stands available in town for as little as R50 000. You can pick up a bargain 'fixer-upper' for about R600 000 but house prices have risen steadily as Rosendal is a popular country getaway. A modern sandstone house with four bedrooms on a big stand goes for about R1.4 million. 083 725 2080

Love Rosendal Festival 10-12 February

Always celebrated on the weekend closest to Valentine's Day, this is the seventh celebration of the dorpie's special people and their creativity. It's a fun weekend of good food, fun entertainment and a peek behind the scenes to see people at home and artists at work. www.rosendalinfo.co.za



TOP: André Loots weaves magic on her looms. ABOVE LEFT: Henk Loots collects military medals. LEFT: Wooden hat shapers for making felt hats in André's studio. RIGHT: Knifemaker, Simon Streicher, has a secret passion for miniature horses.



Where to Play

- **Van der Hulme** in Van der Merwe Street www.vanderhulme.co.za or Dahla on 082 458 0996
- To see more of **Michele Nigrini's** work www.michelenigrini.co.za or 082 423 1970
- **Turksvy Trading**, Sandra Lemmer 082 371 2137
- **Kaboedel Craft** in Botha Street – Zaria de Villiers Martens 083 725 2080
- Simon Streicher at **Black Anvil**. Handmade knives 084 603 1538
- André Loots (weaver and soap maker) **Studio Ben** by appointment 058 211 0629
- **Willem Pretorius**, artist www.facebook.com/Willem-Pretorius
- For more art by husband and wife team Kobus and Joe Kotze visit **Kotze Kuns** in Van der Merwe Street. www.kotzekuns.co.za
- Take your bicycle and head out on the gravel roads to explore or contact Sybrandus Adema on 084 660 4252 for info about hiking.

Where to Eat

- **Angels Café** in Kriek Street. Book for Sunday lunch. 072 134 9872
- The **Hound and Rose Hotel** 076 132 7954
- Die **Koshuis Kroeg** in the old school boarding house. 082 660 5443

Where to Stay

- The Rosendal website offers a wide array of accommodation in the town and a few suggestions for rural stays. We stayed at Yvonne's House on the edge of town with lovely views. www.rosendalinfo.co.za

Tips

- There is no ATM in this little town so bring enough cash.
- The **Rosendal Bakkerij en Slaghuys** as you come into town serves delicious fresh bread and vetkoek.

For more on the perfume angel of Rosendal

Go to www.countrylife.co.za