



Piket Bo-Berg: A true community



Article by Riëtte Bryant
Photographs supplied

Because of, or in spite of, living in one of the most beautiful areas in the world, the people of Piket-Bo-Berg are a unique blend of souls who live with a spirit of true community as seldom seen. Generations of people have come and gone and come back again, new “lifestyle esquires” have moved in to share in the beauty and spirit of the surroundings. They compete, they rival, they struggle and overcome, together, yet they are all here to either form or serve this unique community that is giving renewed meaning to human relationships.

Although essentially a farming community, it encompasses all types and facets of life; one experiences an almost cosmopolitan feel about a gathering with the inhabitants of the area. True to life, the mountain has a way of spitting you out if you do not embrace your community.

A good example of the exceptional community is the team effort that goes into putting the annual Piket-Bo-Berg Cycle Challenge together.



Above: A full moon rising over a mountain dam and (right) mountain flowers on sale at the Farmer's Market. Opposite page: View from Versfeld Pass, access to Piket-Bo-Berg, over the valley towards Porterville and (below left) lupins in full bloom during October.

Farmers, farm workers and the rest of the community all work together to ensure a highly professional event which traverses some of the most pristine fynbos areas and mountain paths found around the area. The 130 marshals doing duty on the day voluntarily give their time and effort. Although a very tough race, feedback received from cyclists taking part in this event has always been on the community spirit that is present and the well organized manner in which the event is run. The event is an effort by the Piket-Bo-Berg Residents Association to raise funds for a local school hall that can double as a community hall.

The Piket-Bo-Berg Residents Association, the umbrella organization for the community, challenges members to take control of their own destiny by becoming involved in their community, in an organized fashion. After twelve years of involvement, the community of the Piket-Bo-Berg manages their own Fire Prevention Association, locally manned Farm watch, can slot in with government driven programs by being positioned to take the advantage, organise a yearly Women's Day, a Farmworkers Competition in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, have an





Above: Setting out on the Piket-Bo-Berg Cycle Challenge - at this stage still smiling! Above right: Trying to kit out all the kids on the cycling project took some serious fitting! Top: Kids from the cycling project getting ready to set out on the Piket-Bo-Berg Cycle Challenge.

internal communication system, manage the Farmers Association and infra-structure, co-ordinate the local crèches, do a yearly garden competition and many more. All of this ensures a truly committed community working to the benefit of all. The history is kept alive by an annual story evening Alistair Duncan, one of the retired farmers, organises for the Residence Association. On this occasion young and old get together to share in the stories of days gone by and to remember where we come from, what we have learnt and what we should not forget. The synergy from the combined community effort ensures that goals are achieved.

The best place to experience the heart and soul of the people is at the monthly Farmers Market held every last Saturday of the month on the farm Kruisementvlei. Here people of the area come together to spend some time with their neighbours more than wanting to sell their wares! It is the monthly meeting ground of the neighbourhood with the added advantage of sharing, bartering and trading the things they enjoy making, growing and producing. Visitors come in to share in the contagious country hospitality that exists here and return again and again.

Various forms of accommodation that worked mostly by word of mouth in the past has become so popular that people are now booking way
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ahead to ensure they get their share in this piece of paradise. Accommodation varies from luxury tented camps, camping, self-catering accommodation and some luxury stays. The website, run locally and updated regularly, keeps anyone informed of all the possibilities. Even the locals share their knowledge and information this way – what flowers have been spotted to the latest bird list of who has seen what where. Horse riding, hiking trails, San Koi caves and paintings, bass fishing, star gazing and some good old chilling out opportunities are the tourist attractions to the area. The Piket-Bo-Berg Tea garden and nursery can surprise visitors with some amazing cakes and true Dutch kroketten.

Like any exceptional community, characters abound on Piket-Bo-Berg. From the rough diamond with the heart of gold to the polished diamond with the edge of glass and a community that has overcome the divide between Boer and Brit, you experience a sense of balance that makes it a great place to spend your days.

Bert Smit, one of the oldest local farmers, has now become famous for his home made sausage, kassler chops and venison pies which he and his wife, Nellie, sell at the market. Kobus Eigelaar, fisherman turned successful export farmer, shakes the world in their boots with his booming voice and short clipped temper behind which he hides the



Above: Picking waterblommetjies (Aponogeton distachyos), also known as Cape pondweed or Cape asparagus, on the mountain. The buds are used in a popular traditional stew cooked with lamb and wild sorrel (suurings).

heart of a teddy bear. Young, second generation farmers, are showing their competence in successfully continuing in the footsteps of their fathers and the women are actively involved in the business of farming, as is evident on a farm such as Buglar's Post, a deciduous export fruit farm. Patrick Carter from Excelsior Farm ensures that the cowboy in all of us stays alive.

And then there is Jeremy Bryant who has a contagious passion for life and an unstoppable quest for sustainable living. Having said good bye to corporate life with the motto: "Even if you win the rat race, you stay a rat", he still makes his main form of living from computer work in and around the Piketberg area, yet he spends as much time as he possibly can on the farm trying to improve the quality of the soil. Guests to this farm have been met with compost toilets and compost powered showers as ways of fulfilling Jeremy's quest for true sustainable living. If you don't have your own, you will be issued with working clothes to help dig, carry or build whatever takes Jeremy's fancy at the time of your visit. If you can't contribute physically, he will make you contribute to the farming activities by using his composting toilets! You leave this farm cured of any form of fecophobia.

His sense of community also stretches to running a bicycle project where he, along with his two sons, try to instill a cycling culture in the

local kids and making cycling the preferred means of transport. Most of all, they try to create a maintenance culture where the kids learn that their bicycles can only stay on the road if they look after it. Bicycles with tubes fixed looking like nipples tied off with rope and still running on the road have come in for repairs. So please, any spare parts will do!

A community library, doubling as a house of safety, is also run on Kruisementvlei, where the children of the area are given the opportunity to broaden their horizons while getting closer to the joy of reading: again, a community project where desks were donated by a neighbouring farmer and local women facilitate in reading and maths classes. Old readers (preferably Afrikaans), magazines, pens, toys and puzzles are always welcome. "Children represent the future of our country. Training tomorrow's adults and teaching them to appreciate reading is to preserve them from a hollow existence by increasing their choices in life, thus securing a solid foundation for our country," says Vanessa Beutement, one of the facilitators at the library.

Almost 10 years ago Henry Leslie, a retired Denel Aviation employee, agreed to act as mentor for a group of previously disadvantaged South Africans in starting a jam factory here on the mountain. Intaba now produces outstanding jams and preserves which can compare to the best in the world.



Clockwise from above, left: Staying warm on a cold market morning in the mountains; some spectacular mountain flowers on sale; Bert Smith and customers at his meat stall; Geoffrey Bryant testing the dirt jumps on Kruistementvlei; dogs also welcome; delicious home-made olive and herb breads on sale; more customers at Bert's meat boxes.



Colin Tedder, who retired from criss-crossing the continent for his job and now produces old fashioned mead in his garage, puts it in a nutshell. "Moving from the commercial hurly burly to country living was an eye opener. We were agog at the community's willingness to help our townies. They found no problem on the farm too large or too small to be solved.

"When I finally arrived it was hilarious, every neighbour within miles found an excuse to visit, either to find out if the pumps were working or if the gardener was doing his job or to warn about fires, etc. In reality it was to see who this character was who had descended on their community and, of course, to drink a glass or two of wine. None of this was with bad intent at all, but was from genuine interest. One became part of an eccentric bunch of lovely human beings, who really cared.

"Through the Farmers' Market, we were embroiled in the community. If a disaster occurred in any manner or form, the warmth and comfort that was extended from most folk was really heart-warming. I had not realized that this warmth and caring still existed in the general rat-race of human survival that has become the modern world.

"In our 3 year or so sojourn on the mountain retreat, we have made more genuine friends than we have ever thought possible. The sense of belonging is amazing, but it is in no way invasive; one's privacy is respected.

"The sheer beauty of the surroundings, whether storms, gales or perfect days, makes each morning more entertaining and something different to look forward to with anticipation.

"We have both become rather different human beings for the better, we think, because of being part of this community."

This is no Utopia, but you will go far to even come close to a place where the sense of community is so strong and where people are still genuinely interested in what their neighbours are doing.



Right: Patrick Carter from Excelsior Farm and a friend trotting along.

For more information on this amazing place, visit their website at www.piket-bo-berg.co.za.

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