

Back in the SWEET SPOT

Former international corporate bigwig Derek Carstens has hardly been happier since returning to the arms of his boyhood love – the Karoo

□ Derek and his beloved border collies, Bapsie, DJ and Jessica.

FIFTY-FIVE YEARS AGO IN JOHANNESBURG a father put his 7-year-old boy on a train bound for Merriman Station between De Aar and Three Sisters. It was July, shearing season on a farm belonging to family friends, the Cilliers. There this little city boy, Derek Carstens, fell headlong in love with Karoo life. He rolled around in freshly sheared wool. He learnt to hunt dassies and springbok. The foreman taught him how to ride a horse. He cajoled roosterkoeks out of the farmworkers and sat enthralled listening to their ghost stories.

Derek never missed a year; going back to Excelsior farm every July until he was 20 years old and the farm was sold. "That kind of thing stays with you," he says.

In time Derek went on to become a big time player in advertising, rising to the position of group MD of Ogilvy & Mather in South Africa, followed by heading up their operations in Sydney and Chicago.

After that he joined FirstRand, becoming their marketing director until seconded to head the marketing and commercial side of the 2010 FIFA World Cup Local Organising Committee.

By 2009 Derek had begun to hanker for the Karoo again. Decades before, he and a friend, Peter Flack, had talked about finding a piece of land in the Karoo that could be turned into a private game reserve. In the 1980s, when Derek was in Sydney, Peter called him and said he'd found their dream property, a farm named Agter-Sneeuberg between Cradock and Graaff-Reinet. Derek didn't hesitate to

buy in. And when, just before the World Cup, Peter decided to sell his section, the beautiful Bankfontein farm, Derek bought that too.

"It coincided with a thought at the back of my head that I might eventually want to move my centre of gravity to the Karoo. And I'd always loved Bankfontein. It's a beautiful piece of land. I recently discovered that it was originally called Springbokfontein because there were so many springbok here centuries ago, probably because of the perennial springs, and I'm seriously considering restoring its original name."

From Bankfontein, Derek and his children, Tyghe and Emma, have started a whole new business. Called Taste of the Karoo, it delivers the region's best venison, lamb and other produce to some of the top

restaurants and delicatessens in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

After a life of managing and delegating in a corporate environment, Derek is now immersed in something completely different. He calls it "From the Executive Floor to the Delivery Door", and so vivid has the experience been that he's contemplating writing a book about it.

The trigger for Taste of the Karoo came when he was travelling in the USA and learnt about media mogul Ted Turner's commitment to saving the American bison (he now has 50 000) and reviving a taste for bison meat in that country. "I'd always loved venison and I started wondering why, with so much game around, South Africans seldom ate it," he explains.

Part of the reason, Derek thinks, lay in the way antelope were often hunted. In grassland areas they would be herded together by men on horseback and chased towards the hunters. "By the time they were shot, their bodies were full of adrenalin and lactic acid from the stress. That kind of meat is tough and has a strong gamey taste. But if an animal is stalked and shot cleanly, the meat is beautiful.

"To me, venison is the perfect protein. The animals suffer no stress – no feedlots, no antibiotics, no hormones or steroids, no cattle trucks and abattoirs. Venison is naturally the most organic, leanest meat there is. It's homegrown and it's healthy, and if it's 'farmed' right, it's sustainable. There's no trade-off. >>

□ Agter-Sneeuberg Game Reserve lies in the mountainous karroid grasslands between Cradock and Graaff-Reinet.

□ The upper Fish River runs through the Agter-Sneeuberg Game Reserve.





□ Derek Carstens and partner, Renee Silverstone, at home in the Karoo with their dogs, Bapsie, DJ, Jessica, Skye, Hutch and Shongie.

□ Bankfontein farmhouse in the early morning.

>> "In the past, venison was only occasionally available in restaurants because chefs couldn't get hold of a consistently high-quality source. And that's where Taste of the Karoo comes in."

Derek now supplies top eateries such as Le Quartier Français and La Motte in Franschhoek, Melissa's in Cape Town, Tokara in Stellenbosch, Olympia Cafe in Kalk Bay, the Butcher Shop and Grill and the Local Grill in Johannesburg, among an expanding list of others.

He rates springbok, blesbok and black wildebeest as some of the best red meat you can get – with excellent flavour and a fine grain.

His lamb is sourced from farmers in the Eastern

in Graaff-Reinet who makes addictive kudu salami.

Although it's still a new business, the benefits are already showing – not only for the suppliers, but also for the staff on Bankfontein. The workers have all doubled their salaries and are acquiring new skills, from knifework to driving. Derek has a long-term vision that one day, as the market for venison and Karoo products grows, there will be similar set-ups on other farms, which in turn will help uplift more farmworkers.

Derek often feels the most uplifted of all. From a cerebral, corporate, citified lifestyle, he's now discovering the satisfaction of physically creating a business from the ground up – from the hunting of the game to the preparation, marketing, taking of orders and delivering game with his boxy little refrigerated truck.

All this with the singular challenge of absolutely no Internet connection. There's also less than a square metre next to a window in the kitchen where he can get a cellphone signal. It's fondly known as 'the window of opportunity'.

"I'm learning to adapt to a different lifestyle, one that's completely down to earth. When something goes wrong – and things do – you can't get upset. How will it help? Your plans can be changed by floods, snakes, punctures. There's no one to complain to, and no one to fix it for

you. So you have to work things out yourself.

"I've learnt that the most satisfying thing is to be close to what you are creating. I've developed enormous respect for the self-sufficiency and innovation of farmers. I've learnt that you'd better get on with your neighbours because you all need one another. I've met the most incredible people who work with their hands – a woman who fixes Aga stoves, a man who makes saddles; Christo, who creates anything out of wrought iron; Bernard, who can fix any windpump.

"I depend on people like our foreman, Alfie Borens. He can't read but he was the one who rescued me when my bakkie got stuck in the river with floodwaters rising. And he knows the land. He taught me to see when early summer rains are coming because the leguaans and tortoises are out."

The downside of this post-corporate career, he says, has been realising that, despite all the big talk, the Government has prioritised tax collection over job creation.

"Small businesses like mine are punted as the way forward for job creation, but the Government gives us nothing. There are no incentives, no tax breaks, even when you're just starting out. There are just more and more levies and administrative hurdles. You're treated as if you're a big profitable corporation from the word go. That's been pretty disheartening."

Still, it's a great life – in many ways a return to his idyllic childhood memories of the Karoo.

He wakes up to see eland and lechwe grazing in the veld in front of his house. There's a large dam of crystal clear water where he swims in summer. The Aga stove warms the house in winter. He and his partner, Renee Silverstone, go on long walks with their dogs – a happy mishmash of Border collies, pugs and a spaniel.

Renee only recently left the corporate world herself. She was co-founder and CEO of The Jupiter Drawing Room, one of the country's best-known advertising agencies.

"Well, I really know I'm in the countryside now – Derek gave me a tractor-lawnmower for my birthday. I'm loving being in nature. I love the dog walks, I love the quiet. I used to define myself through my business and now I wonder why.

"I feel more whole here than I've ever done before." □

**Map reference F5
see inside back cover**

Taste of the Karoo www.tasteofthekaroo.co.za



THE STATIONARY ZOO

Peter Flack, former CEO of RandGold, is one of the most celebrated hunters in South Africa. People have even been known to seek his autograph.

Of Africa's 139 huntable species, he has shot 129, and he adapted and extended an old sheep-shed at Bankfontein to accommodate the trophies. In it are many Rowland Ward records, including a mountain nyala and the largest bongo ever hunted.

When he left Bankfontein, the enormous 'stationary zoo' stayed behind. But this world-class collection will soon be moving to a museum in Cape Town.

Flack, meanwhile, has dedicated his life to promoting conservation, producing a DVD and an educational book on South Africa's successful wildlife initiatives. He notes that in 1964 a head-count of wild game in South Africa yielded a number of 557 000 animals.

The latest survey revealed a jaw-dropping count of 18,6 million individuals divided among 40 species, a remarkable success story he ascribes to government efforts, private game ranches and the economic value placed on wildlife.

For more information visit www.peterflack.co.za



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□ The Taste of the Karoo team with Derek Carstens (far right).

Karoo who allow their sheep to graze on the fragrant veld (not lucerne). And Derek travels around the region sourcing jams, preserves and other produce. There's a lady outside Nieu-Bethesda who makes the best quince jelly, a tannie in Prince Albert who delivers the tastiest green fig preserves, and a guy