

FREE STATE

ART OF THE AGES

MA Farquharson discovers that, for art lovers, the province blooms with all sorts of works that tell our various histories

TO the rest of the country, the term "Free State" may conjure images of mile fields and conservative folk, but those who venture there will find a much more cosmopolitan air — at least in the southwestern part that we visited. Exhibitions in Bloemfontein and surrounds reveal that art is blossoming in the province, from the decorative and serious to the mystical and tourist-minded. Each piece added to the story of the procession of invaders who settled here before being ousted by the next conqueror in line.

The latest invaders are the tourists, for them and the Gaities, who spend long weekends here, the shops along the border burst with items involving windmills, flowers, animals and, most often, paintings of rustic types and middle-class nudes.

At the same time, artist Johnny Selesho celebrates the ordinary person with, for example, his large sculpture of a ragged mother and her children, all burdened with parcels and bags, ponderously struggling onwards.

Take a step back in time and it's the turn of the political propagandists to plant their flags: a gigantic statue — unveiled by President Jacob Zuma in 2012

— of Nelson Mandela has been put on top of Naval Hill. Another example is one of the statues at the National Women's Monument of a noble Boer being seen off to fight the British by his heroic wife, who is calmly holding her baby.

On the other side of the artistic divide, and from another era of occupation, the



STRUGGLING ON: 'Mother and Three Children' by Johnny Selesho

Oliewenhuis Art Museum's excellent permanent collection includes landscapes by Gregoire Boonzaier and Pieter van der Merwe of two striking rock formations nearby, which we immediately recognised when we drove past them the following day.

We also took in the folk art of the Basotho at the beautifully situated cultural village adjoining the Golden Gate Highlands National Park.

And our last trip into the past led us to about 1650, to some San rock art in the Tandijsberg between Coccolan and Bloemfontein. This site is on the farm of John Liguori, whose father, Angelo, rediscovered the paintings in the '40s. John drove ahead of us to the foot of the hills, gave us the keys and a guide by JHN Louber of the Bloemfontein National Museum and left us to it.

A short walk up the hill led us to a rock overhang, protected by a sort of cage. Once we had unlocked the gate, we were alone with the paintings. The only sounds were birds, the clicking of the camera and our occasional comments as we tried to sort out all the images packed together on the overhang. The closer we looked, the more of the small figures — mostly in a blood red — we could make out.

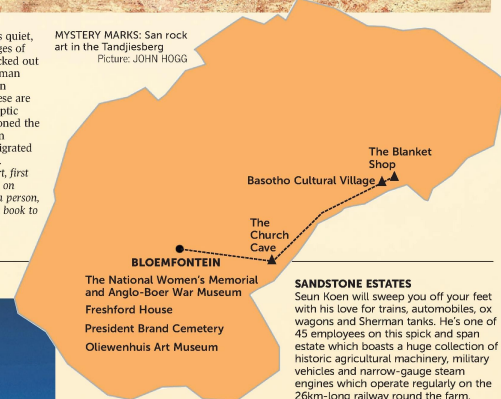
Information boards were helpful in teasing out some of the images, but in general no one is sure what these delicate, precise little paintings signify. For some reason, this was a sad place. Maybe it was because of the veil of leaves which only allowed a dappled light into the mouth of the



cave, or because it was quiet, or because of the images of nasty, spiky beasts, picked out in white, attacking human beings. According to an information board, these are depictions of "apocalyptic dogs". The San abandoned the area around 1650 when herdsmen who had migrated from up north arrived.

● To see the rock art, first book with John Liguori on 051 924 2475, pay R40 a person, and return the key and book to the farmhouse.

MYSTERY MARKS: San rock art in the Tandijsberg
Picture: JOHN HOGG



THE ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S MEMORIAL AND ANGLO-BOER WAR MUSEUM

To make the depiction of the suffering of the Boers more relevant to the South Africa of today, a little more information on, for example, the black casualties of the second Anglo-Boer War has been added. So, amid the black granite slabs listing the names of the tens of thousands of white women and children who died in British concentration camps, is one engraved: "April... M", or "Kind/Child/Ngwana", or "90 Africa" — presumably the number of blacks named Africa who died. In addition to a war museum and various statues, the memorial boasts two rectangles of cement celebrating re-enactments of the Great Trek. The first was laid down in 1938, and contains the impressions of wagon wheels, the cloven hooves of oxen, and shod feet. In contrast, the 2015 slab bears footprints and the tracks of a Toyota 4x4. — MAF

DETAILS: Monument Avenue, Founasig, Bloemfontein, phone 051 447 3447 or 051 447 0079 or see www.wmbr.org.za.

FRESHFORD HOUSE, BLOEMFONTEIN

IF you think your juicers, designer pods of ground coffee and Le Creuset pots and pans are the last word in modern kitchen chic, visit this recreation of life for Bloemfontein's well-off in the 1890s and early 20th century. There you'll find a waffle iron so heavy it could fell an ox: it has the simple recipe — in German — cast in the outside of the top half. There is also a peach-peeling device that DIY expert Suzelle must surely have got her apple-and-drill idea from. The house was designed by John Edwin Harrison shortly before the Anglo-Boer War for his bride. Learn about not being allowed to lie on your bed for an afternoon nap (you'd upset the feather mattress) and how to spruce up a bed with fake linen. The museum won't blow your socks off, but it is fun. — MAF

DETAILS: 31 Kellner Street, phone 051 447 9609 to book a guided tour.



AT HOME: Clockwise, the Basotho Cultural Village, near Golden Gate National Park. The memorial to the Anglo-Boer war at The National Women's Memorial and Anglo-Boer War Museum. The African Carousell in the Oliewenhuis Art Museum garden
Pictures: JOHN HOGG



one: for presidents of the Boer republic of the Orange Free State, for the ordinary (white) citizens of Bloemfontein, for Jews — although the separate entrance is now a ruin — for those who died in the concentration

style ride. The 16 mythical beings range from winged horses to colourful chameleons, and were made by seven artists as part of a nationwide project that aimed to show how art could be fun and physical, yet still aesthetically



the art dotted around the lovely lawns of the museum's sculpture garden.

DETAILS: Oliewenhuis Art Museum, 16 Harry Smith Street, Bloemfontein, phone 051 447 9609. Open daily except Good Friday and Christmas Day.

THE CHURCH CAVE

Near Ladybrand, close to the Lesotho border and set against a sandstone mountain, is St Augustines. Originally a mission station established at the turn of the last century, today the pretty chapel and outbuildings operate as a conference centre with bed-and-breakfast facilities. But it's the cave behind the buildings that's worth seeing. There has been life in the cave since the Stone Age. You can still see ancient San paintings on the walls between a plethora of more recent graffiti. In the late 1800s the cave provided the first Anglican missionaries a place to shelter and worship. Legend has it that it was also the hiding place of the great Basotho prophetess

as a progressive timeline that represents the cultural, social and architectural lifestyles of the Basotho people from the 16th century to modern day. It's a carefully constructed piece of living theatre through which you are not only gently guided but often given a starring role, as I discovered when I was dressed for my wedding with the chief by one of his senior wives.

The tour starts in the chief's homestead with a sip of traditional beer and permission to continue your tour, followed by a visit to the chief's bone thrower who gave the bravest of us a reading. Each tableau is more absorbing than the next, usually accompanied by an engagement of all the senses, whether it be touching household objects, tasting local food or listening to traditional instruments. Sadly we missed the chance to have a traditional meal of motoho (porridge made of sorghum) or dipadi (toasted ground maize) at the premises restaurant. Booking is essential. — SS

DETAILS: The village is 55km from Harrismith. R70 adults (R40 children) for a 45-minute guided tour, available on the hour between 9am and 3.30pm. Book in advance through Mmasi Mosikatsana on 072 340 1277 — SS

THE BLANKET SHOP, CLARENS

The most engaging experience we had in Clarens was the time spent in the Blanket Shop run by octogenarians Gertie de Jager and her sister Minnie di Mezza. Their father began what was then a general trading store in 1946 and from the outset he traded in the famous Basotho blankets. The sisters took over in 1970. Gertie, whose patter is worthy of a comedy award, will

SANDSTONE ESTATES

Seun Koen will sweep you off your feet with his love for trains, automobiles, ox wagons and Sherman tanks. He's one of 45 employees on this spick and span estate which boasts a huge collection of historic agricultural machinery, military vehicles and narrow-gauge steam engines which operate regularly on the 26km-long railway round the farm. Seun seems to know the story of every machine stored in the eight giant sheds and, like most of the employees, he needs to be able to yoke up a different team of oxen every day to make sure the beasts stay in training.

The various collections are a magnet for enthusiasts from around the world, and it all comes together in the Stars of Sandstone festival during which dozens of locomotives are steamed-up and tractors and tanks roam the fields.

DETAILS: On the R26, between Ficksburg and Fouriesburg, eastern Free State. The next Stars of Sandstone will take place from March 30-April 7 2017. See www.sandstone-estates.com — PA

EATING ON THE RUN



Seven on Kellner Restaurant and Bar, Corner Kloof and Kellner streets, Bloemfontein, 051 447 7928. Open Monday-Saturday.

A lovely old Bloemfontein house which has been restored — with a dash of unusual but surprisingly appropriate décor choices — is home to this upmarket restaurant. But more important than the working fireplaces and nankin tiles is the menu. It's