

# Desert theatre – enjoy French cabaret in the Karoo

Forget TV soaps or flying to Joburg for *The Lion King*. Now platteland dwellers can enjoy top-rate live entertainment in the middle of South Africa's own outback – the Great Karoo. Roelof Bezuidenhout reports.



Steytlerville  
EASTERN CAPE

**W**HEN MARK HINDS CLAIMS his Karoo Theatrical Hotel outside the tiny hamlet of Steytlerville is the first of its kind in South Africa, and one of only a handful in the world, you'd better believe him. Having worked in Europe as a concert musician, white-face clown and dinner show host, he knows show business well. The best-known theatrical hotels, he says, are in Paris and Zurich. These cities, by the way, have only one each.

Steytlerville, already on the map for its desert bowling green and golf course made from oil, rubber-chip and soil, is very happy to get a theatre, too. Grimaldi's Theatre Hall has a properly rigged stage, professional lighting and great acoustics and ambience. Mark's partner Jacques Rabie has a good singing voice, and the two of them can conjure up their own cabaret act every night of the week – even if it's only for a party of two. Not bad for any establishment out in the sticks.

Culture lovers from big centres such as Port Elizabeth enjoy the novelty of travelling 200km into the hinterland to see a show without fear of getting

mugged in the parking lot or having their cars stolen – something that happens regularly in the vicinity of Nelson Mandela Bay's opera house.

It's even better for locals starved of live entertainment. Over the past 30 years the only attractions to hit town, tucked away in the dry, south-eastern corner of the Great Karoo as it is, were a circus so bad even the children fell asleep during the funny part; a young Patricia Lewis; and the late Tolla van der Merwe.

My wife dragged me along to hear Danièle Pascal's French café songs. Accompanied by her brilliant pianist, Pieter du Plessis, a boy from even more arid Calvinia, the ageing star enthralled an audience of 80, mostly from out of town. French cabaret in the middle of nowhere? Who would believe it? Soon there'll be posh Viennese balls as well.

## More than just a show

But a theatrical hotel isn't only about watching shows, says Mark. "It's a full theatrical experience from the moment you book in to the time you leave. We see a visit here as a 24-hour play enacted by guests and staff – all of us, from hosts to waitresses,

play a role. After a few hours here guests find themselves getting actively involved. We want to build on this and offer more – murder mystery weekends, for example. So expect the unexpected – we do things with passion, and not so much for money."

The hotel, which has had several owners in recent years, was built in



- The fully-equipped theatre is 200km from Port Elizabeth.
- It offers a variety of shows and guests are encouraged to get involved.
- A multicultural Rainbow Festival is planned for September next year.

1943 – 3km outside the municipal boundary, because the church elders were against liquor being sold in town.

Amenities include Oscar's bar – based on a typical gentlemen's pub – and a swimming pool that once ranked as the biggest non-competitive private pool in the southern hemisphere. It provides a real oasis in a district that gets 250mm rain a year and where 40°C in summer is a nice day.

## More ideas for 2008

Mark and Jacques are planning a Rainbow Festival for September next year. "We've already got a multicultural committee working on some great ideas, including stage shows and a diamond rush and treasure hunt. That's part of the Steytlerville heritage – there actually was a diamond mine in the vicinity 100 years ago."

They're expecting at least 4 000 visitors over the three-day festival, which promises to be the biggest happening in the town's history since the inauguration of the 1 200-seat NG Kerw way back in the days of ox wagons and pedal organs.

• Visit [www.karooexperience.com](http://www.karooexperience.com). |fw

Mark Hinds (left) and Jacques Rabie at the entrance to their Karoo Theatrical Hotel in Steytlerville.

COURTESY OF MARK HINDS

