

a mindful MEANDER

BY JACQUI ZURCHER

I AM DRAWN up a steep hill by the promise of chevre, pecorino and brie, but when I arrive I fall in love with a herd of Saanen goats. Cheese-tasting has to wait as I feed the jostling white goats that look like angels with demon eyes.

The Swissland Cheese farm is my first stop, as I travel through the

Midlands, and already the region has started to work its magic on me. The quiet miracle of the Midlands is that enjoying quality time isn't an indulgence; it's a way of life. Even if you're a stressed-out city type, you constantly find yourself distracted by the view of a cow-heavy pasture or delighted by the taste of home-brewed beer. Before you know it, you begin to relax.



Demon-eyed goats at Marrakesh Cheese Farm

Set in countryside straight out of a Beatrix Potter story, but with a distinctly African soul, you will run into many attractions both along the Midlands Meander route itself or even if you find yourself wandering a little further. The Meander boasts 160 distinct attractions—originally conceived as an arts and craft route in the eighties, the Meander has evolved into a lifestyle experience

*Jacqui Zurcher meanders through the Midlands, where the many things on offer—
including rest and relaxation, distract her*



Lots to slip into at Groundcover Leather Company

where creative people make a living at a gentle pace in harmony with the environment. Crafters, foodies, outdoorsy types, organic farmers and wellness gurus beckon visitors into their stately homes and country hotels, their roadside stalls and village shops as the route meanders from Mooi River towards Pietermartizburg.

My particular passion on my first day of exploring the Midlands is cheese. After our visit with the Swissland goats, my travel companions and I get down to tasting the farm's award-winning selection. The goat brie and the cut-off pyramid of the Drakensberg earn a place in our car along with some of the farm's home made ice-cream. Cheese enthusiasts can also stop off at **BELIVIGNE CHEESE** and the rustic **MARRAKESH CHEESE FARM** for cheese tasting and sales. For something a bit more continental pop into **LA PETITE FRANCE** when you're in the Hilton area to enjoy the local farm-made Camembert and browse the local

and imported produce.

The unhurried pace of the Midlands ushers one at leisure along its country roads, which are thoroughly mapped out in the useful Midlands Meander guide booklet from Midlands Tourism. Lavender farms, honey shops and pottery studios nestle into charmed corners and bends in the roads drift lazily through the villages of the Midlands. Each attraction has been catalogued with directions, pictures and a brief summary in the guide, which is a constant companion as we explore the region.

At Curry's Post, we stop off at the **GROUNDCOVER LEATHER COMPANY** to buy orange fur-lined slippers. A friend has a pair that I covet and I am not going to leave the Midlands without having brightly shod my night-time feet. As you step into the restored settler's cottage showroom of this family business you are overcome by the smell of leather and the obvious

quality of the handmade products on display. Like so many outlets selling products, the connection of the product with its craftsmen and women gives the Midlands shopping experience a soulful twist. As I leave Groundcover, slippers in hand, I don't feel the guilty twinge that often follows a decadent purchase. Instead I feel grateful to be able to support a worthy enterprise—while satisfying my craving for fluffy orange feet.

Our next stop is the **BISTRO AND PANCAKE PLACE @ MULBERRY HILL** for tea. With a wide range of sweet and savoury pancakes from Beef Stroganoff to Coronation Chicken and Brandy Peaches to Banana & Butterscotch, it is difficult to decide what would be appropriate mid-morning fare. Sitting on the wide veranda, we take in the views of green hills and endless fields. A few pancakes and pots of tea later, our strength restored, we head to Howick.

Country village charm and natural



The Midlands is fly-fishing heaven. These enthusiasts are at Rawdons Hotel and Fly-Fishing Estate

splendour collide in Howick. Water plunges 300 ft over **HOWICK FALLS** like Rapunzel's hair tumbling in torrents from a tower's high window. Standing clutching the handrail on the viewing deck overlooking the falls, my thoughts wonder to the legend of cruel Inkanyamba. This serpent-like creature is said to inhabit the pool at the foot of the waterfall and dine on anyone unfortunate enough to fall into his clutches. Over the years, Inkanyamba has claimed over 40 victims, many of them suicides, but some of them murdered or betrayed by unsteady footing.

As if intent on lifting my dark thoughts, I am distracted by a colourful fluttering in the corner of my eye. The greens, reds and yellows of laundry on makeshift washing lines near the top of the falls seem determined to prevent the falls and its legend from taking itself too seriously. Just in time this typical South African scene came to the rescue—you really



Weddings come standard with chapel and idyllic views at Greenfields Manor House

can't shop with focus when you're dwelling on the murderous intentions of water serpents.

Howick invites visitors to browse its antique and second hand bookshops, pottery studios and weaving outlets as if they have all the time in the world to explore. For a city girl used to the fast-paced hard sell of celluloid malls, Howick's bric-a-brac was like a chill pill in a very pretty wrapper. Having eyed out a carpet and increased our second-hand book collection by a few classics and an old *Life* magazine, we head to Rawdons for lunch.

RAWDONS is a fly-fishing estate and country emporium all rolled into one. There's the main hotel with restaurant, a British pub, Austrian tavern, brewery, fly-fishing shop and trail all within the estate's generous grounds.

Just down the gravel drive, set into the main hotel is **THE BOARS PUB**, a best-of-British drinking hole of dark wood panelling, padded booths and coats of arms. Outside at the **RESTAURANT TERRACE** we got stuck into homemade steak and pickled pig pie and made friends with a Jack Russell who seemed more interested in our pies than our affection.

Before we leave, we pop in to what our fishing enthusiast waiter had informed us was a fly-fisherman's paradise. The Midlands is fly-fishing country and **THE HOME OF THE FISHERMAN** at Rawdons is a one-stop-shop for anyone intending to patronise the estate's **ALE TRAIL**, a fly-fishing adventure trail of sorts, ending up at the convivial Bierfassl.

An Austrian Tavern serving freshly made German sausages and 700g Eisbein, the **BIERFASSL** also serves beer from the estate's **NOTTINGHAM ROAD BREWERY**—with local brews like Pickled Pig Porter, Tidley Toad Light Lager, Pye-eyed Possum Pilsner or Whistling Weasel Pale Ale.

The Midlands has no shortage of country estates and gracious homes. As you explore the region they can be spotted at the end of tree-lined avenues and announced by gabled arches. Once the homes of the landed gentry of the region, many of these grand old estates have been reinvented as boutique

hotels and lodges.

HARTFORD HOUSE is one of these impossibly romantic places. Now a five-star hotel on a famous stud farm, the estate was once the home of Sir Frederick Moor, prime minister of the colony of Natal. As you explore its sculpted gardens and creeper-covered buildings you can't help but wish you were wearing more lace and a good hat.

In the food department, prodigiously talented young chef Jacqueline Cameron has transformed Hartford House restaurant into more of a phenomenon than a dinner venue. Her carefully balanced flavours and youthful inventiveness have won the restaurant numerous accolades among them recognition by the Federation of Hoteliers of South Africa as KwaZulu-Natal's top fine-dining venue.

With rest and relaxation a golden thread running through the Midlands experience, many of the estates in the area offer spa and wellness facilities. **HILTON COUNTRY ESTATE AND SPA, INDIGO FIELDS, BROOKDALE HEALTH HYDRO and FORDOUN SPA, HOTEL AND RESTAURANT** all offer day spa options for visitors wanting to indulge in some serious time out.

Weddings are another hallmark of the Midlands. With wedding bells chiming in my ears and a Cape Town venue signed and sealed after much legwork, I am impressed by the one-stop offerings of the Midlands estates. Typically, a chapel, manor house,

exclusive eatery, idyllic views and honeymoon suite come standard.

CRANFORD COUNTRY LODGE, GRANNY MOUSE COUNTRY HOUSE, HAAWKLEE COUNTRY HOUSE, GASUTA LODGE, GREENFIELDS MANOR HOUSE and WOODRIDGE COUNTRY ESTATE are just some of a host of picture perfect destinations to say, "I do".

On our last evening in the Midlands, we drive carefully down the winding gravel drive of **GREENFIELDS MANOR HOUSE**. A bat-eared fox darts away from our headlights and the shadows of cattle—the boast of this working beef farm—move slowly in the distance. Our destination is **GREENFIELDS GRILL**, renowned for its warm atmosphere and excellent homegrown beef.

On the side of the manor house we find the grill and discover it is the perfect place to spend our last evening in the region—enjoying the

cosy atmosphere and unpretentious but seriously good food and wine. The quirky Boer war paraphernalia on the walls of the lounge above the restaurant have us trying to

resurrect our rather paltry knowledge of local history over a glass of sherry before we are shown to our table. Later, as the wine flows and the candlelight from wrought iron candlesticks slants across the portraits of Nguni cattle on the red walls, we all agree the Midlands is definitely a place to be regularly revisited. I have no doubt this

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A QUIET MEANDERING

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will happen—each time I slip into my fluffy orange slippers. **GT**

The Weekend Witness Midlands Meander Slow Food Festival is a 10-day event created around the theme of local, wholesome food and its enjoyment in a country setting. The festival runs from 27 April – 6 May 2007, for more details call Janis on (033) 330-8195.