

# The Princess and the *Spirit of the Wild*

Our wild, open landscapes inspired Princess Irene van Lippe of the Netherlands to start Spirit of the Wild at Bergplaas, her nature reserve in the Karoo

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“**B**ergplaas and I found each other 17 years ago,” says Princess Irene van Lippe – or simply Irene, as she prefers – while we chat on the veranda of Bergplaas, the nature reserve she owns near Nieu-Bethesda in the Sneeuwberg mountains of the Karoo.

Her journey here started many years before this, when her father, Prince Bernard, first brought her to a game reserve in South Africa. “I clearly remember lying on my back watching the Southern Cross lower towards the horizon until it disappeared and the sun started rising. In that moment I fell in love with this country.”

It’s a long story but the short version is that once Irene’s children had grown up, she had time to explore more of South Africa and this led her to the Karoo. “I experienced the wildness, the vastness and the harshness of the Karoo, and I felt a deep connection to this place, and invested here.” She bought three farms spanning a total of 5 000 hectares and removed all the livestock and internal fences. Next she reintroduced eland, red

hartebeest, zebra, springbuck and black wildebeest.

Spending extended periods alone here, far from the public life of a princess, she walked the land, climbed the mountains and explored the streams. “The vast, wild landscape forces you to face yourself. There’s nowhere to hide here, and I started becoming more comfortable with being alone and even enjoying my own silence. It strengthened me and I became aware of the contribution I wanted to make in this world. It was a profound change as I had always been very shy and unable to articulate or act on what I believed in.”

In 2006, the princess started The Spirit of the Wild certificate programme. “I was 59 at the time and most people don’t think of starting something new at that age, but I needed to do this,” she continues. “I wanted to bring people here and offer programmes that would give them a deep and personal experience of the wild. “I wanted people to feel first-hand how the development of our inner strength is directly connected to our awareness that we are not in any way separate from the plant and animal world; that we are inherently



ABOVE: Vast migrations of springbok once passed through Bergplaas, where indigenous Karoo game has been reintroduced to create a nature reserve.



ABOVE: Bergplaas is not far from the legendary Compassberg, one of South Africa's natural treasures that towers 2 500m above sea level. LEFT: Princess Irene (in green) accompanies a group on a Spirit of the Wild tracking trail. BELOW LEFT: The discussion circle back at Bergplaas where students gather after their walks. BELOW: Bergplaas co-manager Cindy Maspero (in the hat) on a morning walk with students.





ABOVE: An old stone fence post and one of the Bergplaas horses. This is ideal horse country and most of the local farmers round up livestock on horseback. LEFT: Cindy Maspero discusses drawing on the techniques used by traditional cultures to release the burdens we carry. BELOW: Eland on Bergplaas – they are regarded as a source of supernatural potency by the Bushmen shamans.



part of it and that it is the source of our survival.”

She believes that many people the world over, rich and poor, have never really immersed themselves in wild places, and because of this they have lost this connection. “It has led to decision-making that too often overlooks the risk to the natural environment. It puts our survival on this planet in jeopardy,” says Irene, who has been speaking about this publicly for the past seventeen years. “When I was invited to address gatherings and conferences, people would think I was a bit strange when I spoke about environmental sustainability and what we are trying to achieve at Bergplaas.”

Bergplaas now runs one- to three-week programmes throughout the year, with up to 20 participants at a time. In addition to the Spirit of the Wild programme, Irene and her team, headed by Cindy and Wayne Maspero – who previously worked on reserves in the Lowveld – offer a range of leadership programmes and retreats, all focused on reconnecting people to the wild.

“On the Spirit of the Wild programme, participants are trained as intuitive guides, where the skills they acquire are less about facts and figures and more about deepening their connection with the natural environment, and exploring their role and purpose in life,” Cindy explains.

In 2012, the programme was endorsed by the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA) as a specialist training provider. The range of participants is remarkable: from conservation students who grew up in squatter camps with no previous experience of the natural environment, to the CEO of FGASA.

The first group that photographer Mathieu Dasnois and I join includes a diverse set of South Africans, ranging from a commercial lawyer to Groen Sebenza interns. Groen Sebenza is a national job-creation initiative in the conservation sector for young South Africans from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, spearheaded by the South African National Biodiversity Institute and the Development Bank of South Africa. Bergplaas partners with this and other conservation organisations and initiatives.



This is the third day of the group’s Spirit of the Wild programme and we experience several group sessions with them, led by Cindy and Wayne. On our first session we head into the reserve on a three-hour walk. The reserve has small predators, including jackal and caracal, but they pose no risk to us.

Our first exercise is to stop and smell the dung. It’s fresh eland dung and we learn how the condition of the dung indicates whether the animal is experiencing a harsh season (if the dung is hard) or an abundant season (if it is soft). Wayne uses this as a catalyst to discuss the need for stamina and endurance through all of life’s seasons.

While he’s talking, as if on cue, a number of eland come into view some 50 metres away. He describes how South Africa’s first people, the Bushmen, once roamed these mountains, and that the Bushmen shamans regarded the eland as a source of supernatural potency. The animal has large quantities of fat, which the shamans used as a balm to help them on their journeys between this world and the spirit world.

We continue our walk and come across a wildebeest carcass, which deeply affects students who have never seen a dead

animal in the wild. Wayne draws on the opportunity to discuss vulnerability.

“It’s a direct reminder of mortality and the need to face our own, and our vulnerability. It’s the age-old reality of dust to dust and we need to be both strong and humble in this aspect of self-knowledge, and draw on it as a balancing measure in positions of leadership,” he says.

The exercises in the wild and the

reflective group discussions form the backbone of the programme, and several of the participants comment on its effect on them.

“I feel more grounded. It’s like getting back to my roots; experiencing nature in a very personal way in my heart rather than in my head,” says Luthando Crab, a horticulturist who works in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality.

ABOVE: A wildebeest carcass on one of the Bergplaas walks raises issues of mortality. BELOW: All creatures great and small. The programme emphasises the need to recognise our place in the plant and animal world. RIGHT: MBA student Romboud Siegmund chose a ‘smiling’ rock to symbolise his ‘pleaser personality’.





ABOVE: The Tracker Academy trains 16 young men from disadvantaged, rural backgrounds each year. RIGHT: The homestead and garden at Bergplaas where the Spirit of the Wild programme is held. LEFT: Tracker Academy students study spoor. BELOW: The view as you descend towards Nieu-Bethesda, the closest village.



The second group that Mat I join on Bergplaas is a group of MBA students from the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, who are spending a week here on a leadership elective. These students live and work in Holland and are from across the world in a range of professions – from pharmacists to brand managers. Several have never been in the wild before.

Cindy asks us to pick up a small rock and carry it in silence as we walk alone on the reserve. She says we should contemplate the personal burdens we are carrying as we walk with our rock. When we feel ready, we need to let go of these by releasing the rock.

“Traditional cultures used rituals like this to heal people and help them to release emotional and psychological problems,” she explains. “In the same way, if or when your particular issues start surfacing again when you are back home, you can remember how you used this simple but highly effective technique to release issues, back in the Karoo.”

After the exercise, the operations manager of a software company, Romboud Siegmund, describes it as “a revelation” for him. “My burden is that I am a pleaser to my own detriment,” he explains. “When



sponsored certificate training course for students from disadvantaged, rural backgrounds. On the course they acquire the traditional skills of game tracking and animal behaviour. As part of their training, Tracker Academy students participate in the Spirit of the Wild programme at Bergplaas each year.

Ivan Buregoo, a student from the Tracker Academy, says of the Bergplaas programme: “I’m acquiring knowledge about myself and about other people that I will use when I become a professional tracker and guide. For me, it’s life changing because where I come from – the rural Colesberg district – we were never taught anything like this.” He also has the highest praise for the Tracker Academy: “It has given me purpose in life, which I never thought I would find as my family did not have the money for me to study after I completed my matric.”

André Killan, SACT’s executive director, explains, “The Tracker Academy trains 16 young men each year, who spend six months at Samara Private Game Reserve outside Graaff-Reinet and six months at Londolozi Game Reserve

in the Lowveld to acquire skills in both semi-desert and savannah environments.” To date, more than 90 per cent of the Tracker Academy graduates have found employment in South Africa’s conservation/eco-tourism industry.

Similar statistics are achieved by the annual intake of 90 young South African women from disadvantaged, rural backgrounds, who undergo a one-year, fully sponsored hospitality training course at the SA College for Tourism, followed by internships or permanent placements. Two of these students are now working at Bergplaas in this positive coming together of heritage, employment and hope in the Karoo. ■

**Map reference E5 see inside back cover**

**Bergplaas also offers self-catering accommodation for individuals or small groups.**

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my boss asks me to do something that I know he will never use, I do it to please him instead of suggesting what would be valuable and useful. I released this with my rock as it has been blocking me. I’m very curious to see how this plays out when I am back at work.”

The third group we join is from the Tracker Academy in Graaff-Reinet, a non-profit organisation founded in 2010 by Gaynor Rupert. The Tracker Academy is a division of the Graaff-Reinet-based SA College for Tourism (SACT), founded in 2001 by the late Dr Anton Rupert and the Rupert Family Foundation. It operates under the auspices of the Peace Parks Foundation and offers a one-year, fully

BELOW: The ever-mesmerising and crowded Great Karoo night sky over Bergplaas. RIGHT: The Sneeuberg mountain streams – a key source of water in a water-scarce region. It was by climbing Bergplaas mountains and exploring the streams that Irene became more comfortable being alone.

